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REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOVIET
INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN

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REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN

The Soviet commitment of ground forces to Afghanistan was designed to achieve at least three fundamental objectives.

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- The suppression of the insurgency and the restoration of political stability.

- The reassertion of Afghan authority and the rebuilding of the Afghan military into an effective fighting force loyal to that authority.

- The establishment of a government capable of winning at least grudging support from the Muslim population.

These objectives are interdependent; none can be secured without the others. And while the Soviets certainly are committed to rebuilding the political and military structures in Afghanistan, they have demonstrated a lesser commitment to playing a dominant role in crushing the insurgency.

Maintaining the current Afghan government in power and rebuilding the Afghan military will require a long-term Soviet military presence in the country at current or even greater force levels. A decision to move decisively against the insurgents would require a massive increase in the Soviet presence--a move Moscow clearly is not prepared to make. Thus, the current situation is likely to prevail for a prolonged period of time.

Moscow's preoccupation with its problems and basic objectives within Afghanistan has presumably left little time or incentive to consider the impact of its position there on its interests in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The Soviets undoubtedly want to expand their influence in this broader region, and their decision to invade Afghanistan may have reflected, in part, their long-term regional objectives. The invasion, however, has thus far undermined the USSR's position in the immediate region and could leave a permanent scar on Soviet relations in the area generally. This could limit Moscow's ability both to capitalize on its projection of force and to arrange a favorable and enduring shift in the regional balance of power.

The Soviet Invasion and the Third World

Most Third World states, while physically and psychologically far removed from Afghanistan, were negatively impressed by the brutality of the Soviet takeover--particularly the execution of Prime Minister Amin. A prolonged and ruthless Soviet effort to destroy the Islamic insurgency in Afghanistan will have continuing repercussions on the perceptions of these states, particularly those that are Muslim. Soviet clients, particularly those that have accommodated a Soviet military presence and concluded a friendship treaty with the U.S.S.R., must now have deeper doubts about the desirability and risks of their involvement with Moscow. And the states bordering the USSR and/or Afghanistan, specifically Iran and Pakistan, clearly are

suspicious of future Soviet objectives with respect to the region.

Impact on Immediate Neighbors

Iran

The Soviet presence in Afghanistan is a source of major friction in Soviet-Iranian relations, hampering dialogue and feeding mutual suspicions. The Shah opposed the Communist takeover in Kabul in April 1978, and the Khomeini regime has consistently condemned both the Soviet intervention of December 1979 and its continuing presence. Iran has taken in over a million Afghan refugees and has called for an Islamic solution in Afghanistan and a Soviet withdrawal. Tehran has voiced strong support for the insurgents, permits insurgent groups to operate from Iranian territory, and, according to Soviet media commentary, trains and equips some of these groups.

Soviet media frequently criticize Iran's attitude and argue that the insurgency is a creature of the United States, which is alleged to be simultaneously supporting counterrevolution in Iran. In late May 1983, for the first time, Izvestia charged that Iran was allowing insurgents to use its territory as a base of operations. An Izvestia article in late July contained a more detailed indictment of Iranian support for the insurgents and claimed these activities had been steadily increasing.

Moscow has responded to its perceptions of Iran's activity by stepping up its own military operations on the Afghan-Iranian

border. A major incursion of Soviet forces into Iranian territory occurred in April 1982, the same month that Moscow signed an arms agreement with Iraq and a month after an article in Pravda revealed Soviet frustration with Iran. While the incursion itself may have been inadvertent, the Soviet willingness to operate in close proximity to the border and risk antagonizing Tehran revealed an increasing sensitivity to the actions of Iranian-supported insurgents and a decreasing concern about potential damage to bilateral relations.

Prior to the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviets had used the crisis in U.S.-Iranian relations to strengthen their ties to the Khomeini regime and to improve their image as a defender of "anti-imperialist" revolutionary causes. Although bilateral ties never became close, the invasion and occupation aroused latent anti-Sovietism in Iran's new leadership and triggered a protracted deterioration in relations.

Iranians are well aware of the history of Soviet intervention in their country in this century. In 1920 Soviet forces occupied Gilan--the northernmost province of Persia--in an effort to rid the area of British forces. The following year, however, when Soviet policy shifted from active promotion of revolution to collaboration with national governments, the Soviets withdrew their forces. During the Second World War, the Soviets occupied all of northern Iran and, along with British forces, secured Iran and the Persian Gulf corridor as an important supply line to the U.S.S.R. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic was formed in 1945 with Soviet support, but heavy

pressure from both the U.S. and U.K. compelled Soviet forces to withdraw the following year. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic collapsed when Iranian troops re-entered the area on the pretext of supervising national elections.

. The Soviets invoked the 1921 Russian-Persian Treaty to justify their occupation of Iran during the Second World War, and they would undoubtedly cite it again if they elected to intervene militarily. Article six of that agreement gives the U.S.S.R. the right to introduce troops into Iran if a third party should try to carry out a policy of usurpation through armed intervention in Persia or should seek to use Persian territory as a base of operations against the Soviet Union. The article provides, however, that the Soviets would withdraw such troops when the danger to the U.S.S.R. was removed. Article five of the treaty commits both sides to prevent the presence on their territory of forces or organizations that might be regarded as a menace to the other side.

Immediately after the seizure of the United States Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, the Iranian government announced the unilateral abrogation of articles five and six of the treaty. The Soviets have not formally responded to the Iranian action, but Moscow's continuing public affirmation of articles five and six provides the U.S.S.R. a plausible rationale should it choose to intervene militarily in Iran.

The Soviets could persuade themselves of the need to take military action against Iran in order to pre-empt or respond to U.S. military action, in response to a request from a leftist

government, or in reaction to fragmentation within Iran. There are substantial incentives for such a move--access to energy resources, the ability to pressure the Gulf states, the control of security problems on its border, the means to end Iran's aid to the Afghan insurgents. But the disincentives are more impressive--the possibility of confrontation with the United States, the problems of occupying and pacifying Iran, the promotion of US-West European-Chinese cohesion.

Pakistan

Moscow's policy in Afghanistan has also undermined its relations with Pakistan, which has moved closer to both the United States and China. Pakistan has provided refuge to over two million Afghan refugees, serves as the main staging area for insurgent operations, and is in the forefront of those Islamic nations demanding the withdrawal of Soviet forces. The Soviet invasion has increased Islamabad's fear of the U.S.S.R., and the Soviets have tried to play on this fear, as well as on Pakistan's internal difficulties, to pull that country into accommodation with the new Afghan regime.

The Soviets have combined blandishment and pressure to encourage Pakistan to limit assistance to the Afghan insurgents. They have tried to persuade Islamabad that it is "not too late" to cease all aid to the rebels. They have begun to increase their economic assistance to Pakistan despite Islamabad's continued refusal to consider a settlement to the Afghan problem without an early withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The Soviets simultaneously have put pressure on Pakistan, taking advantage of the weak central authority in Pakistan. Soviet commentary implies that Pakistan's security position will be difficult if it does not stop supporting the insurgents. The USSR has threatened to exercise "hot pursuit" against the Afghan rebels, and there have been numerous reports of violations of Pakistani airspace and bombing of refugee camps by Afghan and Soviet aircraft. Soviet rhetoric supports anti-regime elements within Pakistan, particularly the Movement for Restoration of Democracy.

Moscow could also try to intimidate Islamabad by encouraging the Afghans to heat up the campaign for an independent Pushtunistan or by encouraging the ambitions of such anti-Pakistani tribal groups as the Baluchis. Pakistani Baluchistan has been in periodic rebellion against the central government for decades, and some Baluchis are probably willing to probe for signs of Soviet willingness to support their efforts to secure an independent Baluchistan. A long-term Soviet military presence in Afghanistan will mean greater tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which will in turn increase the Soviet temptation to use the Baluchi and Pushtun issues against the Islamabad government.

The Broader Region

India

India has long been one of the most important targets of

Soviet attention in the Third World, both as a partner in containing China and as a cornerstone of Soviet influence with the nonaligned movement. The return of Indira Gandhi to power was reassuring to the Soviets who are confident of her continued interest in close ties with the Soviet Union and opposition to US policies. The quick rescheduling of Defense Minister Ustinov's trip to India this month, which was postponed during Andropov's final illness, testified to Moscow's interest in protecting its New Delhi connection. Indian dependence on the Soviets for economic and military aid remains considerable and reinforces this inclination. Although not entirely comfortable with the Soviet position in Afghanistan, India has thus far muted its criticism.

India is far more sensitive to any signs of change in United States-Pakistan relations as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan than in the Soviet occupation itself. India opposes greater superpower involvement in the region and is particularly concerned that significant U.S. arms sales to Pakistan will increase prospects for regional instability and conflict. Indian media have expressed consistent opposition to US arms deliveries to Islamabad and their potential use against India. Moscow has played to this concern by highlighting US sales of "sophisticated" arms to Islamabad and by charging Pakistan with a build up of forces on the Indian border and the exacerbation of tension along that border.

Over the long run, however, the removal of Afghanistan as a buffer between the U.S.S.R. and South Asia could cause some

segments of the Indian political elite to explore alternatives to dependence on the Soviet Union. The Soviet presence at the Khyber Pass has to be worrisome to India as well as Pakistan. Some Indians may even want to reexamine the Soviet-Indian friendship treaty in view of Moscow's use of a similar treaty with Afghanistan to justify the invasion. Although increased concern with the Soviets will not drive New Delhi into the arms of the United States, even Indira Gandhi's government might be moved to improve relations with the United States or intensify the dialogue with China. The Indian government might also recognize the importance of reducing tensions with both Pakistan and Bangladesh as a result of a protracted Soviet presence in Afghanistan and increased superpower involvement in the Indian Ocean.

Saudi Arabia

Whatever Moscow's ultimate intentions toward the Persian Gulf in the wake of the Afghan invasion, Saudi Arabia appears to believe that the USSR's objective is to encircle the conservative oil producing nations and to gain access to oil. For the Saudis, this is the essential explanation for Soviet activities in Ethiopia, South Yemen, and North Yemen; for Moscow's readiness to take advantage of discord in Iran; and for the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The war on the Horn of Africa, the Camp David accords, the ouster of the Shah, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque several years ago have added to Riyadh's anxiety.

The USSR and Saudi Arabia have not had diplomatic ties since the late 1930s. The Soviets have long been eager to reestablish their diplomatic presence in Riyadh, but all past efforts have been rebuffed. Since the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973, the Soviets frequently have signalled a willingness to resume a diplomatic dialogue. Soviet press commentaries occasionally contain long and sympathetic accounts of Saudi policies and often play upon Saudi disenchantment with the Camp David accords. Both Pravda and Izvestia have emphasized that the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia have never had any "irreconcilable" conflicts.

The Afghan invasion certainly set back whatever hopes the Kremlin may have had about establishing diplomatic and commercial relations with Saudi Arabia. Moscow presumably was not surprised at Saudi Arabia's vehemently hostile response to the invasion, including Riyadh's willingness to strengthen its security relationship with the United States. The Soviets probably did not anticipate, however, Saudi ingenuity in organizing the Islamic Conferences which have condemned the U.S.S.R., called for assistance to the insurgents, and stamped the current regime in Kabul as unacceptable. As a result, Riyadh now appears to the U.S.S.R. as a more competent opponent of Soviet interests. The Soviets may have to cope with a Saudi Arabia that is even more willing to counter the spread of Soviet-supported radical regimes in the Arabian peninsula and more anxious to cement a "special relationship" with the U.S. Soviet concern is reflected in its frequently expressed view that the United States is seeking to create a new alliance including Pakistan and the conservative

Gulf states.

The Islamic Community

The Islamic community has been almost unanimous in its continuing opposition to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Most Arab states either signed the initial request for an urgent Security Council meeting to condemn the Soviet presence or have expressed indignation in some other form. Each year the Islamic Conference Organization condemns the Soviet presence in Afghanistan and demands the unconditional withdrawal of Soviet forces. At this year's conference in Casablanca, only Libya, South Yemen and Syria refused to support the resolution, and only the latter two have deigned to recognize the government in Kabul.

Moscow's oppression of Islamic forces in Afghanistan has reinforced fears of communism in the region and has done considerable damage to the image of the U.S.S.R. The invasion and occupation also have drawn international attention to the drama in Southwest Asia, thereby distracting some attention from the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Soviets over the long-term are probably counting on Arab opposition to the US-Israeli alliance to limit opposition to the invasion. Regional tensions and the acquisition of Soviet arms are more important to many Islamic nations than events in Southwest Asia, and Moscow's Arab clients have been reluctant to risk alienating the Soviets when other issues preoccupy them.

- Syria's isolation, involvement in Lebanon, and dependence on Soviet military support has tempered its reaction to Afghanistan.

- -- While the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reinforced Iraq's mistrust of Moscow and further strained an already cool relationship, the war between Iraq and Iran forced Baghdad to moderate its opposition.

- Libya's preoccupation with the U.S. "threat" offset what might have been a natural empathy for the Islamic insurgents in Afghanistan.

Despite the pull of more pressing problems, however, the suspicions of these nations regarding Soviet intentions have been fortified and could work to limit Moscow's ability to expand its influence with them.

The long-term Soviet military presence in Afghanistan will reinforce Moscow's inclination to take advantage of regional tensions by aggressively blocking any US-based peace process-- whether in Lebanon or in the broader Arab-Israeli context. This posture enables the Soviets to focus on US-Israeli "perfidy" and to distract attention from Afghanistan.

The Third World

One of the most striking developments in the past several

years has been the overwhelming nature of the votes at the United Nations against the intervention and in favor of a "total withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan." More than 100 states have opposed Moscow's actions; except for Grenada and Laos, the Soviets have only been able to rally votes against the resolution from their Warsaw Pact and friendship treaty partners.

The most recent session of the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly for a resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of "foreign forces" from Afghanistan. The resolution was cosponsored by 45 nations with Pakistan leading the way. While the Soviets were not mentioned specifically in the text of the resolution, speakers in the debate did name them. The vote itself constituted a gain of two affirmative and a decrease of one negative compared with last year. Continued Afghan military resistance and civil disobedience as well as the presence of Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan may make nonaligned states reluctant to accept the Soviet Union as a "natural ally in the future." As a result, the Soviets may face increased resistance to port visits by their warships and even to the expansion of Soviet diplomatic staffs. The nonaligned states may be more suspicious of nearby Soviet military activities and less susceptible to Soviet propaganda and demarches urging condemnation of the United States and other Western nations.

Chernenko and Afghanistan

Konstantin Chernenko enters the scene as the new general secretary with major liabilities in the area of national security decisionmaking. In the first place, he will be viewed as a

transitional figure, the oldest Soviet leader at the time of accession and in uncertain health in view of his unexplained absences from public view last year. Moreover, the strength of Foreign Minister Gromyko and Defense Minister Ustinov--as well as the promotion of Yuriy Andropov's "people" at the plenum in December--would seem to leave Chernenko limited room to maneuver in such sensitive areas as policy toward Afghanistan. Indeed, a comparison of the congratulatory messages for Chernenko in last month's Pravda, Izvestia, and Krasnaya Zvezda suggests that the military is not enamored of his selection. An Ustinov article in Pravda last month had one reference to Chernenko, suggesting that the defense ministry has reservations about the new party leader. Moreover, there is nothing in the public record that suggests Chernenko ever sought to curry favor with the military by stressing the need to counter U.S. military outlays.

In any event, Chernenko's experience in foreign affairs is limited to his relationship with Leonid Brezhnev with whom he travelled abroad with increasing frequency in Brezhnev's last years. This public exposure did not seem to lead to any significant substantive foreign affairs responsibilities beyond Warsaw Pact matters. It is noteworthy that he never appeared with Brezhnev in Moscow during summit meetings--only in out-of-town settings--which suggested a mere liaison relationship between Chernenko and Brezhnev's Politburo colleagues.

Very few clues exist to his views on foreign policy matters regarding the Third World, although it is interesting that Chernenko has always been the Politburo's most vocal supporter of

detente and possibly the most skeptical leader with regard to the invasion of Afghanistan--at least at the outset. Unlike Andropov in 1982, however, Chernenko chose not to meet with Pakistan's President Zia following the funeral ceremonies in Moscow in 1984 and is not hinting a more conciliatory policy on Afghanistan.

The virtual absence of high-level Soviet statements as well as Soviet media emphasis on the power and pervasiveness of the insurgency indicate that Moscow is planning to continue its current tactics in Afghanistan and is not interested in seeking a way out through a political solution. Andropov rarely referred to Afghanistan and, in his most heavily publicized remarks, he stressed that the USSR would not withdraw its forces until "outside interference in the affairs of Afghanistan had been terminated and nonresumption of such interference guaranteed." Other Soviet statements, such as the annual Soviet survey of the international scene delivered last fall before the United Nations by Ambassador Troyanovsky, have either ignored Afghanistan altogether or treated it very briefly.

Nevertheless, the Soviets recognize the problem associated with their protracted presence in Afghanistan, particularly the morale problems for the Soviet military. The youth newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda recently published an angry letter from a Soviet soldier, complaining that the Soviet media and citizenry pay insufficient attention to those "risking their lives" in fulfilling their "international duty." The letter writer specifically attacked the sons of the Soviet elite and implied that the burden of military service had fallen on the sons of the

working class. Several years ago, an Izvestia article charged that influential parents had tried to obtain special treatment for their children and thus avoid service in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the readership of Soviet media presumably believe that Afghan opposition forces are sufficiently powerful to require a substantial, prolonged Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. Soviet audiences have been informed over the past several months that the insurgents are well armed, that rebel attacks have hit Kabul itself, that communication lines between Kabul and the Soviet Union are not secure, and that Afghanistan's infrastructure has been severely damaged. Earlier this year, the Defense Ministry newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda even recorded several Soviet combat casualties, which is an extremely sensitive subject for a Soviet audience. (Soviet media have now acknowledged 19 casualties over the past four years.)

Indeed, the increased Soviet media coverage of Afghanistan-- particularly the attacks on Third country assistance to the insurgents--does not suggest Soviet interest in scaling back the USSR's role in Afghanistan. A series of articles in December portrayed conditions in Afghanistan as difficult but improving. Soviet accounts of the improvement in the Afghan military forces seem unrealistic, but there is no reason to believe that developments in Afghanistan are going so badly that a new leadership would be looking for a way out. On balance, the Afghanistan situation does not appear to be one from which Moscow would like to extricate itself under an international formula.