

Afghanistan

October 1981

Background: Following the April 1978 Marxist coup in Afghanistan, internal opposition developed almost immediately and later evolved into a countrywide insurgency. Soviet military assistance increased, and Soviet military equipment and advisers became critical to the new regime's survival. In December 1979, the Soviets invaded the country, engineered a coup against the existing Marxist government, and installed the puppet regime of Babrak Karmal. After nearly 2 years of brutal occupation, however, the Soviets and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan have been unable to establish the authority of the Babrak government.

Failure of Soviet occupation: The Soviets have failed to win over a significant number of Afghan collaborators. Babrak's narrow political base has shrunk even further over the past 18 months, and the Afghan Army continues to hemorrhage. Failure to reconstruct a viable Afghan Army means that the Soviets must bear almost the entire burden of providing security. The dearth of Afghan civilians willing to participate in civilian administration requires the Soviets to play an even more dominant role in the government. Politically and militarily, the Soviets control less of the country today than a year ago, and prospects for reversing this situation are not good.

Without Afghan institutions to which they can turn over responsibility, the Soviets face an open-ended military occupation of the country. Partly because of the absence of Afghans to administer and hold territory, the Soviets already have been forced to cede most of the countryside to the nationalists, engaging largely in sweep actions but not able to hold territory. Paradoxically, the lack of any resistance leader with a broad national following is a source of strength in the present stage of armed resistance. Since their opponent is the Afghan people themselves, the Soviets cannot hope to capture or defeat such a decentralized enemy.

As the fighting continues in their country, Afghans continue to flee Soviet oppression. More than 2 million Afghan refugees registered in Pakistan make them the largest refugee group in the world today.

Soviet position on a settlement: The Soviets have endorsed the August 24, 1981 Kabul statement on conditions for a political settlement. That statement is essentially a rehash of Kabul's previous (May 14, 1980) proposals and shows no change in matters of substance. Essential elements remain cessation of outside interference, with international guarantees, and separate bilateral talks by the Kabul regime with Pakistan and with Iran. The August 24 announcement was designed to demonstrate ostensible reasonableness and movement just before the opening of the UN General Assembly, in an apparent effort by Kabul and the Soviets to undercut widespread support for another strong Afghanistan resolution.

Implications of the Soviet position: The Soviet proposals do not address the central requirements for a settlement acceptable to the Afghan people, including the total and expeditious withdrawal of Soviet troops. They are based on the assumption that Pakistan and Iran, aided by China and the West, are the source of "international interference" in Afghanistan and ignore the crux of the matter: that the "international interference" is from the 85,000 members of the Soviet occupying army who are opposed by virtually the entire population of Afghanistan. Implementation of the May 14/August 24 proposals might be seen as international recognition of the Soviets' puppet regime in Kabul. This would place the international community in the position of imposing an unpopular and illegitimate government on the Afghan people--something the Soviets have been unable to do. Even if Soviet conditions for an "external" settlement were met, withdrawal of their forces would take place only with the Kabul regime's "agreement." Given the extent of the insurgency, that regime could not survive without a continuing Soviet presence. Significantly, Moscow has never pledged the total withdrawal of its forces or provided a timetable for even a partial withdrawal.

International initiatives: The international community has refused to accept the Soviet proposals.

- The UN General Assembly has passed overwhelmingly (by 104 and 111 votes) two resolutions in January and November 1980 calling for withdrawal of foreign forces and the restoration of Afghanistan as a neutral, nonaligned nation. The Soviets opposed both resolutions.
- The Organization of Islamic Countries representing more than 40 Islamic nations has on four occasions passed resolutions calling for withdrawal of foreign troops and restoration of Afghanistan as a nonaligned, Islamic nation.
- In February 1981, the nonaligned movement meeting in New Delhi strongly condemned the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan.
- In January 1981, France proposed a conference to discuss international interference in Afghanistan. Moscow rejected the proposal on the grounds that the Kabul regime would not be invited to participate as the sole legitimate representative of the Afghan people.
- At its June 1981 meeting, the European Community's Council of Ministers put forth a proposal elaborating upon the earlier French initiative. It called for a two-stage conference. The first stage, involving the permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as Pakistan, Iran, India, and representatives of the UN and the Islamic Conference, would determine ways of preventing external interference in Afghanistan. A second stage, to which representatives of Afghan opinion would be invited, would decide on how to implement agreements worked out during the first stage and on all other matters designed to assure Afghanistan's independence and nonalignment. The Soviets have also rejected this proposal.

US views: In our exchanges with the Soviets, both public and private, the US has stressed its desire to arrive at an acceptable political solution involving troop withdrawal. We have told the Soviets that their presence in Afghanistan is a major impediment to the improvement of East-West and US-Soviet relations. However, there is as yet no evidence that the Soviet Union is prepared seriously to discuss an Afghanistan settlement involving total withdrawal of Soviet troops under conditions acceptable to the international community.