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Soviet Short-Term Options in South Asia

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SOVIET SHORT-TERM OPTIONS IN SOUTH ASIA

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
KEY JUDGMENTS	1
THE CURRENT STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH ASIA	3
SOVIET POLICIES IN SOUTH ASIA	3
Afghanistan	3
Pakistan	4
India	5
POSSIBLE SOVIET OPTIONS	6
Afghanistan	6
Increased Pressure on Pakistan via Afghanistan	7
Attempts To Manipulate Indian Policies	8
CONCLUSIONS	9



KEY JUDGMENTS

Over the next six to 12 months, the situation in Afghanistan will remain the Soviet Union's most pressing problem in South Asia.

The Soviet military intervention has demonstrated Moscow's willingness to use force in support of even a fragile ally—the Karmal regime—and has improved the Soviets' military potential in the region. On the other hand, the Soviets continue to pay a political price for this intervention, including Pakistan's pursuit of closer ties with the United States and China and China's campaign to improve relations with India.

Moscow's military presence has preserved the Kabul regime and enabled it to keep tenuous control of major cities. However, the popular base of that regime is narrower than it was in December 1979, Afghan Army capabilities have declined, and the security situation is worse.

In September, the Soviets sent a high-level mission to Kabul to take stock of the situation and, in November, they began sending in additional forces, now numbering about 5,000. Most, if not all, of these men probably will perform security functions, thus freeing maneuver elements already in the country for combat operations. The Soviets simultaneously have improved their air defense and communications capabilities in eastern Afghanistan.

We are not certain if the Soviets have completed their reinforcement, but we do not believe that it will exceed 10,000 to 15,000 men—bringing the total Soviet force level in Afghanistan to some 100,000. If they combine this augmentation with increases in Soviet combat operations—which could include some increased use of chemical weapons—they may improve the security of their own supply lines and somewhat reduce insurgent capabilities near the cities.

Moscow will accompany these military efforts with attempts to create a more effective Afghan leadership, but no Soviet-backed alterations are likely to improve the regime's standing with the people. The Soviets will also continue to feign interest in international negotiations largely as a tactic to obtain recognition of the Karmal government, but will remain unwilling to create a genuinely autonomous government or withdraw their forces.

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The Soviets continue to consider Pakistan's support for the Afghan insurgents a major factor in sustaining the resistance. They are likely to intensify pressure on Pakistan during the next year, stepping up cross-border operations and, possibly, increasing assistance to internal Pakistani groups opposed to President Zia. They simultaneously will hold out inducements to Islamabad to demonstrate the advantages of accommodation.

The Soviets will continue their attempts to manipulate India's historical enmity toward Pakistan and its concern about Pakistan's improving military capabilities. They might urge India to strengthen further its forces along the Indo-Pakistan frontier and initiate intermittent border incidents to distract Pakistan and prevent it from strengthening its forces along the Afghan-Pakistani border. Soviet encouragement will have little impact, however, unless the Indians, for their own reasons, decide to move against Pakistan.

We believe that none of the USSR's probable actions, either alone or in combination, will significantly improve its overall position in Afghanistan. Therefore, within the year, we expect the Soviets again to face the difficult choice of further augmenting their forces in Afghanistan. Their decision then, as now, will be determined not only by the situation within Afghanistan, but also by Soviet domestic developments and the international environment—especially the situation in Poland.

1. This paper examines possible Soviet options in South Asia over the next six to 12 months. It focuses on Soviet policy toward Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; the situations that might prompt new Soviet tactics toward them; Soviet options; and Soviet capabilities and constraints.¹

THE CURRENT STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

2. The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan has created a new strategic situation that affects the entire region and other powers having interests in the region. Aside from Afghanistan, the most obvious impact has been on Pakistan, which now faces Soviet military power on its western border as well as its traditional enemy, India, on the east.

3. The Pakistanis, believing themselves vulnerable both to subversion and external military pressures, have responded by supporting the Afghan insurgents in order to hamper consolidation of Soviet power in Afghanistan. They also have sought a closer security relationship with the United States and strengthened ties to China and their Islamic World allies. The Soviets, who have tried to pressure and entice Pakistan into acceptance of their presence, must be particularly distressed by the enhanced US position in Islamabad and the potential for closer US-Chinese cooperation in support of Pakistan.

4. The Indians remain ambivalent about the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan:

— They are concerned by the removal of the traditional Afghan buffer between the USSR and South Asia. The Soviet intervention also has provided an incentive for the United States to supply arms to Pakistan and, in their view, heightens the risk of superpower confrontation in

the region. In addition they believe that their own credibility in the nonaligned movement has suffered because of their identification with the USSR.

— Despite these concerns, the Indians have expressed only muted opposition to the Soviet presence, primarily because they prefer it to some of the possible alternatives, for example, the emergence of a fundamentalist Islamic state in Afghanistan or a pro-US Afghan-Pakistani Alliance. The Indians also want to preserve their close ties to the USSR, particularly their access to sophisticated military hardware and weapons production technology provided by the Soviets.

5. Moscow's military presence in Afghanistan has become another major irritant in Sino-Soviet relations, thus reinforcing Beijing's inclination to strengthen ties to the United States and weakening Moscow's position in the US-Sino-Soviet triangle. China has also embarked on a campaign to improve relations with India, hoping to undermine Indo-Soviet relations.

6. Renewed US aid to Pakistan and support of the Muslim Afghan insurgents have received the general approval of the Arab world. At the same time this US policy has created a benchmark against which to judge US reliability as an ally in the long run—particularly if Pakistan should face a threat to its sovereignty and integrity. Western Europe and Japan, while condemning the Soviet invasion, have remained leery of getting too directly involved in the struggle.

SOVIET POLICIES IN SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan

7. The Soviets initially believed that their military intervention into Afghanistan in December 1979 and the accession of the Babrak Karmal regime would quickly bolster the Afghan Army, counter the resistance, and lead to the consolidation of the Marxist,

¹ For a discussion of Iran and Soviet policy toward it, see NI IIM 81-10017, 2 September 1981, *Prospects for Iran*.

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pro-Soviet regime. They probably expected quicker progress in counterinsurgency operations. They also may have hoped that the consolidation of their control in Afghanistan would reduce Western and Chinese influence in South Asia and promote Soviet goals in the area stretching from India to Egypt.

8. The intensity of international opposition to the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan has diminished over time, but the Soviets still suffer some political liabilities. Another UN resolution calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan was adopted overwhelmingly in November 1981, and the issue continues to impede Soviet efforts to identify broadly with Third World, particularly Muslim state, positions.

9. The Soviets underestimated the problems they would encounter in Afghanistan. Although they have managed to preserve a pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, the popular base of that regime is narrower than it was in December 1979 and the security situation is worse. The insurgents have taken many more casualties than the Soviets, but they appear as numerous as ever and their morale is high. Although the Soviet military presence is not threatened, the insurgents are increasingly better armed and more effective militarily than they were a year ago. Recent Afghan Ministry of Defense statistics indicate that insurgent control of the countryside has been growing rather than diminishing.

The Soviet commitment in Afghanistan is relatively small, however, and the Soviets can continue to absorb the political, economic, and military costs of their occupation.

11. The Soviets have experimented with a variety of tactics to control the Afghan situation. On the political side, they have tried to convince a skeptical populace that the government respects Islam and to persuade it to join mass popular organizations. Such Soviet efforts to broaden the popular base of the regime have failed. The Kabul leadership remains factionalized and has been ineffective.

12. On the military side, the Soviets have made a concerted effort to have the Afghan military bear the

brunt of the war against the insurgents. The continuing decline in Afghan Army capabilities has meant that the Soviets have had to become more involved in the fighting, but many of their operations have been ineffective. Kabul's inability last summer to recall an estimated 300,000 reservists was a blow to Soviet hopes of rebuilding the Afghan Army.

13. In the last few months, Soviet officials have increasingly acknowledged that the USSR faces major problems in Afghanistan. And, for the first time, the Soviet press has begun to acknowledge the extent of the resistance effort and indicate that there have been Soviet fatalities. This belated candor coincides with the return to Kabul of Soviet First Deputy Defense Minister Sokolov and other senior Soviet military officials. Their almost continuous presence in Afghanistan since September suggests consideration of a shift in Soviet tactics.

14. In November, the Soviets began sending additional forces to Afghanistan. These number about 5,000 men and include eight independent security battalions, two independent motorized rifle battalions, and an SA-8 regiment. Evidence suggests that most, if not all, of the newly arrived battalions are intended to perform installation and route security, thus freeing maneuver elements already in the country for combat operations.

15. The SA-8, a short-range air defense missile system, was brought into western Afghanistan shortly after the invasion. The SA-8 unit recently deployed to eastern Afghanistan replaces an existing anti-aircraft unit and suggests Soviet concern about an increased air threat, possibly from Pakistan.

Pakistan

16. Moscow has long successfully exploited Indo-Pakistani hostility as a vehicle for forging closer ties to New Delhi. The Soviets have generally backed India on the issue of Kashmir, and they gave strong backing

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to India during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war that led to the secession of East Pakistan and its transformation into Bangladesh. After the war, Pakistan's drift away from the West increased as did its efforts to strengthen already good relations with China.

17. In the immediate aftermath of the intervention, the Soviets sought to reassure Pakistan that its security was not threatened. They hoped to draw Pakistan into direct dialogue with Kabul and recognition of the Babrak regime. Soviet policy hardened, however, when Islamabad condemned the invasion and sought Islamic and Third World support for its position. The Soviets have been particularly concerned by Pakistan's support and sheltering of the Afghan insurgents, which they consider a major factor sustaining the resistance.

18. Throughout 1980 and most of 1981, the Soviets combined threats and blandishments in an effort to move Islamabad toward acceptance of the status quo and a halt in its support for the insurgents. Soviet threats ranged from increased military pressure to stepped-up support for Pakistani dissident groups. Foreign Minister Gromyko went so far as to warn in February 1980 that continued Pakistani support for the resistance threatened to jeopardize Pakistan's existence.

19. Threats of internal subversion were given substance by Moscow's decision in mid-1980 to allow the Afghan regime to give sanctuary and a base of operations to Al Zulfikar, the organization headed by one of former Pakistani Prime Minister Bhutto's sons and dedicated to the overthrow of Zia. The Soviets have maintained contact with Baluchi and Pushtun dissidents and have suggested to Islamabad that the USSR could support separatist movements. Soviet threats of military pressure were reinforced by incidents along the border, some of which appear to have been deliberate.

20. Moscow simultaneously offered Pakistan inducements, including economic assistance and possibly eventual military aid. In a letter to Zia, the Kremlin suggested in September 1981 that Pakistani recognition of the Babrak regime might lead to settlement of the disputed Pakistan-Afghanistan border which no Kabul government has ever recognized. These overtures met with no success.

21. Moscow's frustration over Pakistan's arms deal with the United States as well as increased pressure from the insurgents may be behind the recent increase in attacks on Pakistani border posts and refugee camps. Zia, in turn, has used these attacks to strengthen his position domestically, to secure an anti-Soviet Afghan resolution at the UN this year, and to lobby for the sale of F-16s by the US Congress.

India

22. The Soviets consider India their main ally in efforts to contain China and block US advancement in South Asia. India's strategic location, regional preeminence, powerful armed forces, and leadership status in the nonaligned world are also factors motivating the USSR to pursue close bilateral ties, as symbolized by the 1971 Friendship and Cooperation Treaty. To maintain close ties to India, the USSR has been generous in extending military assistance and has allowed the Indians to produce Soviet weaponry.

23. Events in Afghanistan have intensified Moscow's interest in close ties to India. The Soviet Union has looked to the Indians to dampen international criticism of Soviet behavior and restore the credibility of Moscow's claims to be the "natural ally" of the nonaligned nations. The Soviets also want Indian help in preventing Pakistani support of the Afghan insurgents and in undermining cooperation among China, Pakistan, and the United States.

24. The Soviets were pleased by Gandhi's return to power in January 1980. Gandhi has not forgotten the USSR's shabby treatment of her when she was out of power, however, and remains annoyed that Moscow has not forced India's pro-Soviet Communists to support her domestic programs. But she wants Soviet cooperation and support and will continue to seek the best possible terms for economic and military assistance.

25. Moscow has tried to cement relations with Gandhi by scheduling high-level exchanges and offering increased assistance. In May 1980 the two nations signed an arms pact estimated at \$2.5 billion; the sophisticated military equipment to be supplied India will further strengthen its undisputed military superiority in South Asia.

26. In December 1980, Brezhnev made a second state visit to India, the only Third World nation he has visited since assuming power in 1964. The visit resulted in a Soviet pledge of \$800 million in new economic aid, offers of additional arms, and a larger guaranteed supply of Soviet oil at a time when most Soviet aid recipients were facing smaller future Soviet deliveries.

27. The Soviets clearly see benefit accruing from continuing tensions between India and Pakistan. These tensions, including those stemming from Islamabad's nuclear weapons program and the US-Pakistan arms relationship, have given Moscow a means of increasing its ties to New Delhi.

28. Several high-level military exchanges in 1981 reflected Soviet efforts to strengthen the military relationship as well as to head off India's arms diversification efforts with the West; these include an agreement to purchase West German submarines and negotiations for purchases of French fighter aircraft. The Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Ogarkov, visited India in April, and Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy Gorshkov visited in November and December. Numerous other military missions have negotiated details of the 1980 arms accord; they have offered more naval equipment and MIG-27 aircraft, which the Soviets have advanced as their answer to the F-16. The Indians consistently have rejected Soviet requests for access to Indian military facilities, although they have allowed naval ship visits.

POSSIBLE SOVIET OPTIONS

29. A variety of circumstances could cause further changes in Soviet behavior in South Asia.

30. Should the Soviets perceive that the current augmentation, apparently modest, is inadequate and that they still are losing ground in Afghanistan, they might consider a radical change in course. A basic change also could be prompted by jockeying within the Soviet leadership or by a significant increase in insurgent effectiveness. Soviet decisions in Afghanistan will also be affected by worldwide developments, particularly in Poland, and possibly in Korea, the Middle East, and Central America.

31. The Soviets are already exploiting Indian concern about Pakistan's improved military capabilities.

While India's overall military superiority will not be challenged by Pakistan for the foreseeable future, the F-16s will give Pakistan improved capability to launch deep penetration raids into India. This concern as well as Pakistan's nuclear program could spark Indian military action, which could work to Soviet advantage in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan

32. Theoretically, the Soviets have a range of options in Afghanistan. These include unlikely policies, such as unilateral or even negotiated withdrawal on the one hand and massive escalation on the other. More likely prospects include reliance on the modest augmentation and shift in tactics currently in train or, should this fail, a more significant buildup.

33. The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan would lead to the fall of the Afghan regime. Given the high price already paid, the likely repercussions within the Soviet leadership, the severe damage such a move would inflict on Soviet credibility, and concern that a new Afghan regime might be fundamentalist Islamic or possibly pro-US or pro-Chinese in orientation, it is highly unlikely that any Soviet leadership would seriously contemplate such action in the near future. Similar considerations would also argue against a negotiated withdrawal within the next 12 months.

34. Alternatively, the Soviets also have the military capability to massively augment their forces in Afghanistan. Such an augmentation would be designed primarily to crush the insurgency, but it would also enable them to put more military pressure on Pakistan and Iran and thus more effectively limit insurgent movements across the borders. But to accomplish that, the Soviets probably would need at least 300,000 additional men. Escalation on this scale would be enormously costly, engender international repercussions, and cause extreme logistics problems; it is highly unlikely, therefore, during the next year.

35. It is clear, however, that the Soviets are proceeding with at least a limited adjustment in the numbers and composition of their forces in Afghanistan. Even if the current reinforcement reaches 10,000 to 15,000 men, bringing the total Soviet force level to some 100,000, it is unlikely that it will be sufficient to

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bring about a meaningful change in the military situation. Possible increases in Soviet combat operations and a greater use of chemical weapons, designed to compensate for the continuing ineffectiveness of more conventional tactics, will still have only limited impact. They may, however, enable the Soviets to improve the security of their own supply lines and somewhat reduce insurgent capabilities in and near the cities.

36. If the Soviets have decided on a more significant augmentation, some 20,000 to 30,000 men, they presumably would implement it gradually to ease logistics problems and minimize international reaction. In addition to improving security, this would enable them to extend the Afghan regime's control into the countryside.

37. The Soviets will continue to tinker with Afghan internal politics in the hope of obtaining a more effective leadership. They have been particularly concerned with continued disputes between the Parcham (Babrak) and Khalqi factions of the Afghan People's Democratic Party. Rumors of imminent leadership changes are frequent enough to suggest that the Soviets are actively seeking a new government alignment. Although such a development might reduce interne-cine fighting at the top, it is unlikely to improve the regime's standing with the people or increase governmental control.

38. The Soviets also will continue to express interest in international negotiations but will seek to focus attention on alleged US, Pakistani, and Chinese support of the insurgency. Actual negotiations probably will never start because the Soviets are unlikely to respond to Western demands to broaden the base of the regime and withdraw their own forces. However, by fostering an image of reasonableness and willingness to talk, the Soviets hope to deflect some of the criticism directed at their uncompromising position. Such a development would be especially valuable if Moscow simultaneously chose to increase its pressure on the Afghan resistance as well as Pakistan.

Increased Pressure on Pakistan via Afghanistan

39. The Soviets, frustrated by the failure of their efforts to persuade Pakistan to accept the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, are taking a more aggressive

approach toward Islamabad. They still may hope to shake Zia's policies of support for the Afghan insurgents and close security ties to the United States. The options available to them include greater support for Pakistani dissidents, support for tribal minorities, and cross-border attacks.

40. The Soviets might well increase aid to a variety of political and ethnic groups in opposition to Zia. They already maintain contact with the Pakistan People's Party and Al Zulfikar, Pakistani Pushtun and Baluchi separatist groups, and pro-Soviet Pakistani Communists. None of these groups has demonstrated the capability to mount significant domestic opposition to Zia, and there might be little rapid payoff for the Soviets; such support could even push Pakistan closer to the United States and China. The Soviets probably calculate, however, that putting internal pressure on Zia serves to restrain his active opposition to their policies in Afghanistan and is therefore worthwhile.

41. The Soviets also have a variety of military options for pressuring Pakistan, which are currently within the capabilities of their forces in Afghanistan. These include:

- Artillery barrages.
- Air attacks against refugee camps and Pakistani border posts.
- Cross-border raids by small, air-assault teams supported by helicopters and fighter-bombers.
- Air or ground attacks against Pakistani military installations.
- Regimental-size operations to seize and occupy small segments of Pakistani territory.⁴

Most of these options could be executed by Afghan forces to blunt the international reaction.

42. The air and ground attacks undertaken by the Afghans and Soviets in recent months may be only the first phase in a more assertive military approach to Pakistan. Such raids disrupt insurgent activity only temporarily, however, and they serve some Pakistani

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Soviet military options vis-a-vis Pakistan, see SNIE 11/32-81, 12 August 1981, *The Soviet Threat to Pakistan*.

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interests by keeping international attention focused on the Soviet threat.

43. Prolonged continuation or escalation of such tactics depends on several factors, including their assessed effectiveness, how well the Soviets are doing in Afghanistan, and the extent of Pakistan's resistance. Pakistan's reaction to the recent spate of incidents reportedly has been to liberalize its rules to permit engagements with intruding aircraft closer to the border.

44. Intentional attacks on regular Pakistani forces (as opposed to strikes on border posts) might prove effective in intimidating Pakistan and could become part of an intensified Soviet campaign against Pakistan. There is a good chance that Pakistan would respond by strengthening its defenses on the border, however, and seeking closer ties to the United States and China. There also would be adverse international reaction to such a course. Major attacks therefore are considered unlikely in the next year.

45. Occupation of even a small part of Pakistan would be difficult logistically and would involve substantial risks for the Soviets. Troops would have to be resupplied across a mountainous frontier that is rugged and constricted. In addition, the international costs would be high; greater Sino-US cooperation would probably ensue, and there might be increased regional support for US military presence in the region. Pakistan might invoke its 1959 Executive Agreement with the United States, calling for the latter, in accordance with constitutional procedures, to come to Pakistan's aid in the event of Communist aggression. Thus, such an occupation would involve the risk of confrontation with the United States. Given these negative implications and the uncertain benefits, it is unlikely that the Soviets would consider such action in the next year.

46. [REDACTED] a large-scale invasion of Pakistan in the last year. We have no evidence of actual preparations for such an operation. In fact, the Soviets have insufficient forces in Afghanistan to carry it out. Nor does such action seem an effective way for the USSR to solve its Afghan problem. The military effort required would be far greater than that of significantly expanding Soviet operations in Afghanistan. And the international costs, including the risk of

confrontation with the United States, make this a highly unlikely option for the Soviets in the next 12 months.

Attempts To Manipulate Indian Policies

47. Faced with a continuing unsatisfactory situation in Afghanistan, the Soviets may further intensify their efforts to manipulate India's historical enmity toward Pakistan. They might urge India to increase pressure—including military action—against Pakistan, anticipating that this would help undermine Islamabad's support for the Afghan insurgency; lead to Zia's ouster; create strains in US-Pakistani relations by creating doubt in Washington about the appropriate response; and derail any possibility of a Sino-Indian rapprochement. Soviet encouragement will have little impact, however, unless the Indians have decided to take action against Pakistan.

48. The Soviets also could encourage a coordinated Indo-Soviet effort to strengthen the Pakistan People's Party, an opposition party headed by Bhutto's widow. The Indians, for their own reasons, may already be channeling support to the PPP.

49. Moscow would like Indian pressure on Pakistan to keep the latter's forces concentrated near India and thus prevent Islamabad from strengthening its troops along the Pakistani-Afghan border. To ensure this, the Soviets could urge India to strengthen further its forces along the Indo-Pakistani frontier as well as to initiate intermittent border incidents. Such incidents might occur in conjunction with Soviet-backed Afghan raids across the Afghan-Pakistani border. Pakistani officials already believe that recent simultaneous incidents along Pakistan's borders with Afghanistan and India indicate Indo-Soviet collusion to pressure Pakistan militarily.

50. The Soviets could calculate that a large-scale military clash between India and Pakistan would divert Pakistan from supporting the Afghan insurgents. They might hope that a Pakistani defeat would produce a more pliable regime in Islamabad and be a major setback for the United States and China. Moscow might believe that the United States would not become involved if the fighting involved only the Indians and the Pakistanis. On the other hand, the Soviets might be concerned that a large-scale Indo-Pakistani clash could lead to Chinese pressure on

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India, a better climate for the US presence in the region, and an increase in superpower tensions.

51. Even if Moscow wanted to encourage a large-scale Indian attack on Pakistan, the Indians would not be responsive unless Gandhi perceived an intolerable Pakistani threat to India's security, in either a nuclear or a conventional military context.

52. India might launch a large-scale attack against Pakistan without forewarning Moscow. Nonetheless, it would expect Moscow to give political and diplomatic support and to rapidly replace lost or damaged equipment. New Delhi would risk alienating China, but, given China's current military capability in the Himalayas, would not expect a two-front war to develop.

53. The Soviets might not encourage such Indian action, but their desire to maintain close relations with India probably would keep them from trying to prevent it. They probably would feel compelled to support India rhetorically and through resupply.

54. If there is no major conflict in the region, the Soviets will remain concerned about and continue to try to stall Sino-Indian normalization in order to keep India more amenable to Soviet foreign policy objectives. Soviet efforts have had little success because both China and India see advantages in normalization; however, little progress has been made and any normalization is likely to be slow. Even if normalization were to accelerate, Moscow's policy toward India would not change because India remains the most significant Soviet ally in Asia and an important counterweight to China.

CONCLUSIONS

55. Since mid-November, the Soviets have increased their total forces in Afghanistan to about

90,000 and adjusted the composition of those forces. They also have upgraded and improved their air defense and communications capability. We are not certain that all of the adjustments have been completed, but we do not believe that the adjustment currently in train will lead to force levels that greatly exceed 100,000 men.

56. With these increases, in the next six to 12 months, we expect the Soviets to:

- Increase their combat activity in Afghanistan; promote changes in the Afghan leadership to make it more cohesive and effective; and make some pro forma diplomatic gestures.

- Increase pressure on Pakistan through border actions; support Zia's opponents to create political problems inside Pakistan; and hold out continued inducements for Pakistani accommodation.

- Encourage India to apply military pressure on Pakistan to dampen Zia's support for the Afghan insurgents.

57. We believe that these moves may marginally improve the security of Soviet supply lines and the Afghan regime's control near the cities, but that they will not significantly affect the USSR's overall security position in Afghanistan. Therefore, we expect that, within the next year, the Soviets again will face the difficult option of reinforcing even further. That decision, as with the present changes, will be determined not only by the situation within Afghanistan, but also by Soviet domestic developments and the international environment—especially the situation in Poland.

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