

Gorbachov plays hardball in Afghanistan

The recent troop withdrawal proposal is no white flag. writes Ramtanu Maitra from New Delhi. It is a calculated move to put Pakistan to the wall.

On Feb. 8, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov stated that Moscow would begin to withdraw its 115,000 troops from Afghanistan on May 15 and complete the pullout in 10 months—provided a settlement is achieved by March 15 in the U.N.-sponsored Geneva “proximity talks” between Pakistan and Afghanistan. No spectacular capitulation to Western pressure, the proposal is aimed squarely at forcing Pakistan to sign an agreement in Geneva with Dr. Najibullah’s Afghan government, trading recognition of the Soviet puppet regime in Kabul for a troop pull-out, or suffer the consequences of being branded the betrayer of carefully cultivated hopes for a quick settlement.

Whether this maneuver works or not remains to be seen. But the logic of developments in Asia, where a process of Sino-Soviet accommodation is now a reality and a credible U.S. presence palpably diminished, is in its favor. In the event an agreement which leaves the Najib regime intact issues forth from Geneva on the appointed day, the détente-iks in Washington and elsewhere can bathe comfortably in the aura of victory. The victims of such a peace accord will be Pakistan and Afghanistan, the ones who most urgently need a real solution.

A new game of hardball

The Gorbachov proposition, transmitted by the Soviet news agency TASS, came at a time when U.S. mediator Diego Cordovez had been shuttling between Kabul and Islamabad for more than two weeks in a vain search for a date for the eighth round of talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan in Geneva. The Kremlin’s gambit worked like a charm. Nearly simultaneous with the Gorbachov announcement, the March 2 date was set for what was pre-advertised as “the last” round in Geneva, and a cloud of euphoria that an Afghanistan settlement was all but signed went up.

But for any who cared to notice, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov’s Feb. 10-11 trip to Islamabad was a sharp reminder that the Kremlin was not exactly crying uncle. Following talks with Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq, Prime Minister Junejo, and acting Foreign Minister Zain

Noorani, Vorontsov warned that if Pakistan maintained its insistence that an agreement include building a new coalition government in Kabul, this would lead to “the derailing of the entire Afghanistan settlement.”

TASS followed this up with a warning of “unforeseeable consequences” should Pakistan fail to reach an agreement with Najibullah’s regime. TASS emphasized that there was “no rapprochement” between the Soviet Union and Pakistan during Vorontsov’s visit. Instead, said TASS, the talks led to a “sharpening of differences” on the question of how to solve the crisis. TASS charged Pakistani officials with “illogic” in insisting that there is a connection between “removing external factors” and an “internal Afghan settlement.” The Geneva talks, Moscow now claims, are concerned only with “external aspects” of the situation.

Pravda threatened that if Pakistan refuses to sign on Soviet terms, “the already tense situation” in Afghanistan will “further intensify.” *Pravda* concluded with an attack on Pakistan that stands truth on its head, charging that any attempt to block a settlement is “a crime not only against the people of Afghanistan, but against all of humanity.”

What’s in the fine print?

The Soviet interest in hermetically sealing “external” and “internal” factors is only the most obvious aspect of the Gorbachov maneuver, but it points to the importance of the fine print in the negotiations whose official agenda is deceptively simple. The reputed agreement on three of the four “instruments” involved in the proximity talks thus far—namely, self-determination for the Afghan people; return of all the refugees; and establishment of a neutral and non-aligned Afghanistan—helped to create the impression that once a date and timetable was set for withdrawal of Soviet troops, the fourth and most contentious “instrument,” the case could be neatly closed.

Hammering out a real solution is a bit more complicated. For example, the Soviet demand that arms supplies to Afghanistan from Pakistan, China, Iran, and the United States must come to a halt has been accepted in principle, but it

needs to be signed and ratified. One might expect that Afghanistan's neighbors—Pakistan, Iran, and China—would insist on a similar hard assurance from the Soviet Union that no arms supplies, adviser corps, or bases be allowed in Afghanistan. So far, one has heard no discussion of this point, but it is obvious that such considerations have a material bearing on both the self-determination and non-aligned status of Afghanistan that are official subjects of the Geneva agenda.

The issue of the return of the more than 5 million Afghan refugees is another where reality imposes certain preconditions the Kremlin has so far refused to acknowledge—namely, removal of the minority Marxist government which owes its existence to Soviet troops. Largely concentrated in Pakistan (3 million) and Iran (2 million), the Afghan refugees began to stream out of their homeland following the 1978 Marxist takeover, the so-called Saur Revolution. The stream turned into a torrent when the Red Army marched into Afghanistan in December 1979 to prop up the minority regime.

Now after 10 years of Marxist experiments which have led to the annihilation of more than a million Afghan civilians, 5 million Afghan men, women, and children fleeing their homes to seek shelter from the Kabul ruling clique and invasion by the mightiest military power in the world, it is certainly time that the Afghans, however insignificant they may be in the eyes of the world community, install a government with which they can live, a government that will allow the refugees to return and the country to conduct its foreign and domestic policies as a sovereign nation-state.

Since it is also true that the Soviet troop withdrawal cannot be delayed until such time as an elected government is established in Kabul—indeed the idea is a contradiction by definition—establishment of a transitional coalition government, satisfactory to all the main Afghan forces, to preside over the Soviet withdrawal, safe passage of the returning refugees, and fresh elections is a clear requirement. In the absence of a suitable replacement for the traitorous Najibullah regime, as a leading daily here put it, a Soviet withdrawal will deliver Afghanistan “to God and anarchy.”

What doesn't work

The Shevardnadze remark that Dr. Najibullah could come to Moscow for a few years notwithstanding, there is as yet no indication that the Soviet Union is interested in an interim set-up based on real power sharing. The Najibullah regime's “national reconciliation” campaign and related efforts beginning January 1987 attempted to paper over this fact.

The “national reconciliation” campaign was ostensibly aimed at broadening the base of the regime, bringing the resistance fighters and PDPA rulers together to share power and lay the basis for the refugees to come home. It involved such initiatives as removal of the Marxist ideologue Shah Mohammad Dost as foreign minister and appointment of Hazi Mohammad Tsamkani, vice chairman of the Revolu-

tionary Council but not a member of the ruling Marxist party, as Acting President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Dropping “Democratic” from the ruling party's name, the “People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan,” to make it sound less Marxist and more popular was part of the act. Efforts to gain admission to the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was another aspect of the same campaign.

But Najibullah's power-sharing concept, even as late as November, gave the game away. He agreed to open up the cabinet provided that the portfolios of President, prime minister, and ministers of defense, interior, finance, and foreign affairs, were retained with the ruling party! On the ground, meanwhile, the “national reconciliation” was utterly still-born. Though the pro-Soviet crowd and the Soviet front organizations in South Asia are still clinging to the corpse, even TASS admitted late last year that “despite the obvious successes of the reconciliation policy—its principal goal, the termination of the war, has not been attained.” The most exaggerated figures indicate that not more than 80,000 out of 5 million refugees have so far returned. Figures for the resisters who have laid down their arms and resistance groups negotiating terms of accommodation are also insignificant.

The highly visible battle for control of the Khost-Gardez Road and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's sudden visit to Kabul early this year are other indications that very few are reconciled to the “national reconciliation” policy. The fact remains that the present Kabul government has failed to either consolidate or broaden its base; it has merely survived, and that too, only by virtue of the direct backing of Soviet troops.

The Zahir Shah option

That does not, however, mean that the alternative is obvious. The going superpower candidate for titular head of an interim coalition government consisting of various Afghan factions is the former monarch, Mohammad Zahir Shah, who since his ouster in 1973 has lived in luxury in Rome. It is not a new proposal, but until recently the former king had refrained from lending support to the idea. The scheme only resurfaced as a distinct possibility following Zahir Shah's meeting with the American businessman and Soviet back-channel Armand Hammer, and the subsequent involvement of Henry Kissinger.

If media hype is any gauge, Zahir Shah appears to be a shoo-in for the job. It is impossible at this time to evaluate to what extent the Afghan resistance groups inside and outside of Afghanistan would accept the king. Some resistance leaders have openly reminded the news media that it was the corrupt rule of King Zahir Shah that brought in the Marxist regime and the country's ensuing calamities. Afghan resistance fighters might be expected to wonder what the ex-king was doing all these years as his countrymen were being slaughtered by PDPA and Soviet troops.

Moreover, the resistance is highly fragmented, with at least 1,200 groups separately operating within Afghanistan. Though some are reportedly inclined to trust the Najibullah regime if the latter were genuinely willing to share real power, many others are simply interested in keeping control over their territory and being left alone. Since these groups are actively involved in defying the Soviet occupiers, however disparate their views, they must be heard. The seven major resistance groups outside of Afghanistan, the Mujahiddin, flush with money, arms, and foreign publicity, do not see eye to eye on the settlement terms, and at least two are interested in establishing an Islamic Republic à la Iran. Nominally representing 3 million Afghans, and having been puffed and paraded by the U.S. State Department, the Western media, and elements in Pakistan, these forces will also demand a say.

China's card and other interests

These things are rather obvious. Yet the distorted lens of superpower politics has almost completely obscured the fact that anyone other than the United States or U.S.S.R. has a material interest in Afghanistan. This is strikingly demonstrated by the absence of serious discussion of the stakes for Pakistan, and virtually no mention of either Iran or China in commentaries on the settlement prospect. But the fact is that no agreement can be real without involvement of these three parties, each of which has been affected to a different degree by the Soviet invasion and occupation, and each of which has its own interests and orientation to the superpowers.

Iran, for example, has given shelter to 2 million Afghan refugees but refuses to have direct talks with the Soviet Union. The Soviets, for their part, have long been trying to drag Iran into the proximity talks. As recently as January, the Soviet Ambassador in Iran, Vladimir Gurev, issued an invitation to Iran at a press conference in Teheran to participate in the talks and use its influence with the insurgents to come to an agreement. Iran's hatred of the United States is the common denominator here.

Although Iran has assisted the refugees in Pakistan, its relationship with the "big seven" Mujahiddin leaders based there is strained. Since Iran views the U.S. as the "great Satan," the U.S.-financed Mujahiddin in Pakistan are naturally suspect.

But, Iran has its own designs. Last February, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati floated a proposal for a conference on the solution to the Afghanistan imbroglio to be attended by Iran, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, and the Mujahiddin. "The Soviet leaders heard us with interest," Velayati later told the press, and since the proposal has not been officially buried to this day, it may be a candidate for revival by Iran and the Soviets if the Geneva talks fail.

China's interest in Afghanistan is a historical fact. As recently as 1978, China tried to set up a Muslim Republic of Pamir in the Wakham corridor and Badakshan region of

Afghanistan. Had the gambit succeeded, the republic would have been established in an area adjoining both Sinkiang Province and the Pakistan-held part of India's Jammu and Kashmir—giving China a very neat strategic footing in the subcontinent itself.

Given the close relationship between China and Pakistan militarily, it has long been suspected that despite its recognition of the Kabul regime, China was contributing arms to the Mujahiddin through Pakistan. President Zia confirmed this suspicion in a recent interview with the *Washington Post*, stating that China's help during the period following the Soviet invasion was as important as that of the United States. Even if President Zia's statement reflected a bit of gamesmanship in light of his increasing difficulty with Washington on the nuclear issue, it is unlikely that China would fail to take advantage of its assets on the ground in Afghanistan and stake its claim for a say in the settlement involving its former enemy number one.

Interestingly, on Feb. 12 the official Chinese news service Xinhua aired its disapproval of Moscow's troop withdrawal proposition. Xinhua criticized the Soviet conditions for withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan. Russia has not changed its goal of "organizing" a future Kabul government, Xinhua said, and much blood will be spilled before the Afghan resistance allows that to happen.

Pakistan against the wall

But it is without doubt Pakistan that continues to bear the brunt of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It has accommodated 3 million refugees, most of whom pay scant respect to the laws of the land. Many are involved deeply in gun-smuggling and narcotics-trafficking. They have branched out across the country from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), where they have taken over trucking and other industries. Some, flush with arms and cash, have settled as far south as Karachi, and in the process helped turn the port city into a hotbed of ethnic tension.

Along with the refugees also came a significant number of Afghan Secret Service agents, well-organized by Dr. Najibullah during his earlier political incarnation as head of the Afghan secret police. These agents have turned the frontier areas into a snakepit of intrigue and violence. In the process, local Pakistanis have turned bitter and helpless. The presence of active guerrilla bands, controlled by the "big seven" Mujahiddin organizations has also invited misery to local inhabitants in the form of deadly air attacks by the Afghan Air Force.

Surprisingly, the Afghan refugees apparently have scant regard for their hosts and benefactors. One indication is the refusal of any Mujahiddin organization to recognize the validity of the Durand Line (the present line of actual control) as the common border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This has been a troublesome bone of contention since 1944, when Afghan negotiations with the British rulers laid the

basis for the still-existing claim to parts of the NWFP and Baluchistan.

At the same time, in return for welcoming the Mujahiddin, Washington designated Pakistan a "frontline state," a title whose benefits in terms of arms aid are much better known than its price in terms of policy independence and real security. As a former Pakistani diplomat, Sajjad Hyder, pointed out in 1984, Pakistan has carefully held back from giving the Mujahiddin the kind of assistance which could have really made a difference—for instance, infiltrating a major part of its army and paramilitary forces that are ethnically indistinguishable from the Afghans—for fear of provoking an actual military assault on Pakistan, an assault which would doubtless expose the hollowness of the U.S. tie.

The Soviets have had little trouble seeing through Pakistan's terrible dilemma. Hence, the carrot-and-stick policy that is lately so evident. On the one hand, intense pressure has been kept on via Afghan refugees through infiltration and sabotage. Frequent strafing of border areas by the Afghan Air Force is a reminder of what could come. On the other hand, the Soviets hold out a hand to the beleaguered Pakistan government. According to Pakistani press reports, the olive branch includes the offer of a secure, legitimized Durand Line; 300 industrial projects, including as many joint projects as Pakistan can come up with; better relations with India; and non-objection to Pakistan's bilateral military relations with the paper tiger in Washington.

A geopolitical victory

It is an offer a poor nation like Pakistan cannot be expected to reject out of hand, and otherwise points to the fact that the Soviets are dealing from a position of strength—both militarily and diplomatically. While it is true that they do not expect to gain much more militarily in Afghanistan in the coming days, it would be utter folly to conclude that they have been *defeated* by what can at best be described as the half-hearted effort by Pakistan and the Mujahiddin.

Soviet strategy in Afghanistan has been pretty much a carbon-copy of British colonial policy: Control the tribal areas at a minimum cost by seizing the high ground, communications centers, and urban areas. On the ground, follow a two-track policy: Aggressively develop socialist institutions and indoctrinate students, military, and political cadre in the urban areas on the one hand; and on the other, position yourself as the protector of tribal customs in the rural areas.

In fact, the Soviets have gained significantly in their handling of Afghanistan. Iran, whose chief enemy is the United States, will not allow any government in Kabul which even faintly smells pro-West. China, no doubt, will play its hand close to the chest, but a pro-Soviet government in Kabul in 1988 or 1989 has an altogether different connotation to the Chinese than it would have had in 1980. And Pakistan? It is already evident that Pakistan has very little leverage to shape things its own way. Apart from the dangerous boil the Afghan

refugees have come to be on the body politic of Pakistan, Pakistan is becoming increasingly close to both China and Iran, a diplomatic closeness which mirrors geographic proximity. Under such constraints, it will be virtually impossible for Pakistan to set up an independent government in Kabul.

The disposition of a future Afghan government will certainly also be dependent to some extent upon the disunities among the Afghans themselves. But the bottom line under the present circumstances is that the Soviets have enough leverage to bar any truly non-aligned government in Kabul. Therein lies the total victory of Soviet policy, and conversely, the total bankruptcy of the illusions and delusions of those who promoted the "Vietnam analogy" for the Soviets' Afghan adventure.

Perhaps most important, it is evident in South Asia that the geopolitical backdrop for Moscow's recent Afghanistan initiative is the reality of a process of Sino-Soviet accommodation—and its corollary of U.S. withdrawal, Moscow's overriding strategy priority—in Asia. One Soviet expert on Sino-Soviet relations, Dr. Sergei Goncharov, told a pro-Moscow Indian daily that China has already taken the Afghanistan solution into account and does not consider it a major difficulty between the two nations. For example, he said, the Najibullah government was earlier called a "puppet government," but it is now called the "Kabul government."

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