

ERIC
MARGOLIS



Afghan folly

Eighty-four years ago the great British geopolitician, Sir Halford MacKinder, made a startling prediction. Russia would become the dominant world power, he prophesized, when it succeeded in expanding its southern border to the Arabian Sea. Today, in Afghanistan, Russia appears well on the way to realizing this historical goal.

While the U.S. is embroiled in the Levant's endless squabbles, the Russians are relentlessly absorbing strategic Afghanistan into the Soviet Union. Roads and rail lines are being driven south from the Soviet border; Afghan minerals and gas are diverted northward; and a new generation of Afghans is being schooled in Marxism and Russian language.

Western hopes that Russia would encounter its own Vietnam in the mountains of Afghanistan have proven illusory. Soviet occupation forces are waging a slow, patient and relentless war of attrition whose successful outcome seems inevitable.

Almost 40% of Afghanistan's rural population, upon whom the anti-communist guerrillas must rely for food and shelter, has fled into exile in Pakistan or has been driven into government-controlled camps by a campaign of terror bombing, shelling and the poisoning of wells. Large portions of Afghanistan are now free-fire zones for Soviet tactical aviation.

The lightly armed Afghan freedom fighters are now routinely hunted across the barren mountains by helicopter gunships, strike aircraft and paratrooper units. They must also face scatter mines, napalm, cluster bombs and booby traps.

The mujihadin are unable to counter Soviet military technology. Basic military necessities, such as radios, gas masks, ammunition and first aid kits, are in pitifully short supply.

Reports of occasional small victories by the mujihadin have tended to lull Western opinion into thinking that the Russians are bogged down in Afghanistan. A growing number of Western military analysts believe, to the contrary, that the Afghans are slowly but surely being ground down by Soviet firepower. The guerrillas may still be able to harass the Russians, but they cannot break the growing Soviet grip on their nation.

Far from being another Vietnam, Afghanistan is proving, for the Russians, a highly useful, low budget war. At a cost of some 5,000 dead and 10,000 wounded, the Russians are deriving invaluable combat experience in Afghanistan and the opportunity to test and perfect new weapons and tactics. A large portion of the war's cost is being offset by the diversion to Russia of Afghan natural resources and produce.

Afghanistan will remain a low-budget war for the Soviets unless the mujihadin receive large quantities of Western anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, radios, mines, and chemical gear.

Shameful policy of neglect

Afghanistan could, of course, be turned into a true Russian Vietnam if the West would abandon its shameful policy of neglect and begin supplying the Afghans — just as Moscow armed Hanoi — with modern, effective weapons. But a timorous U.S. government, after lavishing billions on Egypt and Israel in the name of "containing communism," has, so far, provided the Afghans with merely \$80 million in small arms. The Arabs have supplied a similar amount; China is selling arms to the Afghans. In Europe, only Britain has given the mujihadin any support.

President Reagan has utterly failed to seize this superb opportunity to embroil Russia in a debilitating, protracted war. Congress has been even more guilty of timidity and the failure to face unpleasant reality. Both also fear, with good reason, that should the trickle of arms that now goes through Pakistan to the mujihadin be increased, Russia will invade Pakistan and thus confront Washington with a dangerous crisis.

The thought of defending Pakistan against a Soviet invasion is unpleasant. Yet the only method of preventing Russia from absorbing Afghanistan, and then turning its attention southward, is for the West to draw a protective cordon around Pakistan, just as Russia and China did around North Vietnam. The West must make clear to Russia that invading Pakistan means war.

If the West does not act now, it appears inevitable that Russia, after subduing Afghanistan and making it into another Outer Mongolia, will then turn its attention to Pakistan. This process has already begun: Soviet and East German agents are already stirring up secessionist movements in Pakistan's strategic maritime province of Baluchistan — the last remaining barrier between the Red Army and the Arabian Sea.

Will Baluchistan, which lies at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, become another Latvia? Will Russia and its increasingly close ally, India, dismember and partition Pakistan between them? Many Pakistanis believe this threat to be very real.

The fall of Afghanistan and Pakistan into Soviet hands would be an event of immense historical importance. Russia will have reached the warm waters of the south, Iran and the Middle East will be exposed to Russian strategic ambitions.

As frightening as this scenario may be, the West continues to ignore it, hoping somehow that the Afghans will unaided stop Russia's southward march. Military reality tells us that they cannot. The West appears content to fight to the last Afghan in order to postpone the day when Russia moves against Pakistan.

Our failure to support the Afghans — who are, after all, fighting our battle as well as their own — is a shameful act of moral cowardice. It is also a geopolitical folly of historical proportion. A similar collapse of Western will allowed the Axis to occupy unchallenged Albania, Ethiopia and the Rhineland, the prelude to World War II. Abandoning Afghanistan could well be the tragic opening act of the next world conflict.