

Soviet pullout too good to be true

Hope is fast mounting that the Soviets may be poised to begin pulling their 120,000 troops out of Afghanistan. Last week the Soviet foreign minister said Moscow "hoped" to withdraw its army during 1988. Significantly, he added that the pullout did not depend on the fate of the communist regime in Kabul. So far, so good.

Next came an official statement that a withdrawal could begin on May 1, provided that the U.S. and Pakistan stopped supplying and arming the Afghan resistance forces by the beginning of March.

Not surprisingly, much of the world media reacted with optimism. To those who do not follow the labyrinthine complexities of this eight-year-old war, all that seemed important were headlines like: "Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan."

But as you plunge deeper into the current diplomatic whirlpool over Afghanistan, disturbing elements begin to appear.

The Soviets might pull out beginning in May, said Moscow, but then came the small print. Yes, provided that "Pakistan liquidate *dushman* ('bandit'—the Soviet term for the resistance) bases before May 1." This means the Soviets want Pakistan to disarm tens of thousands of fierce Afghan warriors and shut down their camps—in other words do what the Red Army had not been able to accomplish. And this in the autonomous Northwest Frontier tribal areas where the Russians know perfectly well that the writ of Pakistan's government hardly extends. Clearly, an impossible condition.

As for a coalition government, the entire Afghan government in Kabul—every ministry—is now totally controlled by the Khad, Afghanistan's secret police, run by and modelled after the Soviet KGB. This week hardly

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anyone even noticed that Afghan communist leader, Dr. Najibullah, said the solution to the war was a "popular front" coalition. Non-communist popular front partners in Poland, Czechoslovakia or Romania are either dead or in prison. This, I suspect, is what Comrade Najibullah has in mind.

According to one of the best-informed sources on Afghanistan, Roseanne Klass of Freedom House, whose splendid book *Afghanistan—The Great Game Revisited* has just come out, the Soviets have 20,000 specially trained Afghan communist troops held in reserve, ready to replace any Russian troops that are withdrawn.

Most important, as this column has warned, the Soviets may have no intention of actually giving up their control of strategic Afghanistan nor its mineral wealth. What Moscow wants is to stop the public relations disaster to its image caused by its genocidal war against the Afghan people. Moscow will withdraw its troops, but only when it feels reasonably secure that Afghanistan will remain under Soviet domination. Soviet spokesmen have made it clear that Afghanistan is not going to be a second Vietnam.

China, another key backer of the resistance, has remained mute. In private, however, my Chinese sources insist Moscow cannot be trusted. "Tell them to

get their troops out of Afghanistan first; then, we'll talk" is what the tough Chinese say. So too do the Iranians, who urge an unyielding hard line toward Moscow. And so do most of the Afghan resistance leaders.

But the Reagan administration is now careening so fast down the slippery slope of detente that it seems to be in almost indecent haste to make a deal with Moscow to end the Afghan war. Great pressure has lately been put on Pakistan to agree to negotiations and so President Zia has reluctantly gone along.

This means Washington and Islamabad may cut off the resistance's arms and try to force them into a coalition with the Khad-run Kabul regime. The Soviets may be hoping that the angry resistance will then turn against the U.S. and Pakistan, producing a situation where the mujahedin can be divided and defeated in detail.

One thing seems likely: Even a partial Soviet troop pullback will result in chaos inside Afghanistan. The seven-member resistance coalition could shatter, with Hikmetyar's Hishbi-Islami joining the Kabul regime. Other resistance groups could begin fighting among themselves and Iran would likely encourage its groups to try and seize power. In such a melee, it's not hard to imagine the Soviets saying, "well, we tried to get out but the anarchic Afghans made it impossible."

So, Moscow might well wage a worldwide PR campaign while trying to divide the mujahedin by secretly negotiating a different deal with each group. Then split the Afghan resistance from the U.S. and Pakistan and drive a wedge between Washington and Islamabad—all the while insisting that Moscow's only desire is to quickly withdraw from this mess. The chess-playing Russians are masters of such Byzantine tactics. The checkers-playing Americans are not.