

Soviet pullout won't end Afghan woes

Are the Soviets really serious about wanting to pull their troops out of Afghanistan? After seven years of war, intense diplomatic activity between the Soviets, the U.S. and Pakistan, dramatized by loud stage whispers from Moscow, suggests that some sort of settlement may be in the works.

"We have agreed on everything — everything except the timing of the Soviet withdrawal," Pakistan's President Zia ul-Haq told me recently. Like many others, Zia is deeply skeptical of Soviet intentions but still hopeful that Mikhail Gorbachev may have decided to shut down the Afghan war and concentrate, at least for the present, on domestic problems.

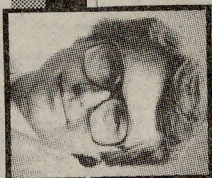
Pakistan's chief negotiator at the Geneva talks confirmed to me that Washington, Moscow and Islamabad had all agreed on the creation of a pro-Soviet, non-aligned regime in Kabul along with the pullout of all Soviet forces and an end to American and Arab aid to the resistance forces. The Pakistanis are urging a withdrawal in a few months; Moscow wants four years — time enough, say the Pakistanis, to crush the resistance while the world's attention is diverted elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the Afghan *mujahedin* are watching the negotiations, from which they have been excluded, with mounting rage. "We are being sold down the river," one of their senior leaders told me.

Here is the crux of the Afghan problem — one that no one seems ready to face.

Assume a three-way deal is made between the USSR, the U.S. and Pakistan. A non-aligned but pro-Soviet regime is set up in Kabul, either a second Finland or,

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concede the Pakistanis, more like another Mongolia. Soviet troops withdraw and their puppet communist regime crumbles overnight.

Once the Red Army departs, 150,000 armed Afghan *mujahedin* will converge on Kabul, determined to seize power and, in typical style, exact murderous revenge on their enemies. Who will protect the new non-aligned regime? Some have suggested UN troops. But if 120,000 Soviet soldiers can only barely protect Kabul today, what will a handful of lightly armed UN troops do? Run, of course.

Having seized Kabul and other urban centres, the *mujahedin* factions will most likely begin fighting among themselves in a seven-way civil war. This is a terribly depressing yet almost inescapable prospect. The *mujahedin* are united only by their hatred of the Soviets. Without the Russians, the resistance groups may be expected to revert to traditional Afghan feuding and infighting.

Given these grim realities, it becomes apparent that the only way to assure a non-aligned, pro-Moscow regime in Kabul may be for the West and Pakistan to defend it with their own troops against their former Afghan allies.

Crazy? Surreal? Of course. But few alternatives seem viable. If civil war erupts, some of the warring factions will certainly seek aid from Moscow, others from Iran, Pakistan or China. Foreign troops will again enter the country, most probably the Red Army.

Which shows just how hard it is to extricate oneself from a war. Even if the Soviets truly want to get out of Afghanistan, how to do so remains a mystery. Will Moscow simply cut and run as the Americans did in Vietnam? Will we see films of the last KGB officers being helicoptered off the roof of the Soviet Embassy in Kabul while thousands of Afghan communists clamor in front of its locked gates?

I don't think so. The Soviets have far more sense of dignity, face and patience than the media-driven Americans.

Nor, in the midst of the current euphoria over prospects of a settlement, should we forget for a moment that all the ballyhoo may be no more than another masterful example of the Soviet art of disinformation. World opinion, which has been heaping opprobrium on Moscow for its slaughter of the Afghans, may be deluded into thinking that the Soviets really tried to pull out. Washington will become increasingly preoccupied by Central America. The fractious Afghans could even end up being blamed for Moscow's remaining in Afghanistan.

Whether the Soviets pull their troops out of Afghanistan or remain, that tragic nation seems doomed to more years of war and suffering. My pessimistic view is that Moscow will stay and grind down the resistance. Either way, Afghanistan's future is uniformly bleak, as bleak as its dark, wintry mountains.