

Soviets want out of Afghanistan

Genoset has not yet come to Afghanistan. The war, now entering its eighth year, drags on. It has forced 4.5 million Afghans to flee to Pakistan and Iran — the world's largest refugee population.

Behind these dreary scenes, a fascinating diplomatic fencing match is going on between Pakistan and the Soviet Union that may bring an end to this bitter struggle.

According to highly placed sources involved in the Geneva talks, the Soviets have adopted a four-pronged strategy for Afghanistan:

- (1) Negotiate for a communist-dominated coalition government in Kabul that would, at best, give the seven resistance groups only a token role.
- (2) Keep hitting Pakistan hard by border attacks, bombings and terror attacks. Without Pakistan's support, the anti-communist resistance could not go on fighting. (So far, Pakistan has remained firm in the face of mounting Soviet intimidation.)
- (3) Try to split apart the shaky Afghan resistance and turn its not very united groups against one another.
- (4) Create maximum publicity to give the impression that Moscow is struggling to find a solution to a war it does not want.

Two competing factions appear to be shaping Soviet policy on Afghanistan. One urges that some sort of face-saving government be created in Kabul that would allow the Soviets to withdraw their occupation army. If the mujahedin sweep it away — well, too bad say members of this faction. The official position will be: We have done our internationalist duty but the Afghan communists let us down.

Some Soviet watchers believe Mikhail Gorbachev sides with this view and would like to end the war that continues to blacken the reputation of the USSR and mock



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its attempts to project a new, benign image. The other faction's voice was heard this past week when a senior official said bluntly that the Soviets would not leave Kabul "on the struts of their helicopters." He was, of course, referring to the disgraceful American abandonment of South Vietnam. After all, the Soviets pride themselves on consistent policy and loyalty to their allies — the USSR does not abandon friends.

But Moscow is also sick and tired of its unruly Afghan communist allies. Just this week, for example, the brother of Najib, the Afghan communist leader, embarrassingly defected to the mujahedin.

Even so, the anti-withdrawal faction contends that Moscow can give the impression of wanting to pull out by holding high-profile negotiations while quietly allowing the Red Army to grind down the resistance.

Pakistani intelligence sources estimate it will take the Soviets another four years at the current level of fighting to neutralize the mujahedin. Some sources close to the Soviets have reported that Gorbachev recently turned down an army request to send more troops to Afghanistan. Others suggest that Gorbachev has agreed to give his soldiers until spring to try one last effort to crush the resistance. Few think the Soviets will succeed. Back in Geneva, Soviet negotiators have been inching their proposals forward, trying to get Pakistan to agree

to a communist-dominated coalition in Kabul. The Pakistanis are being just as tough as the Soviets, and equally patient. I am reliably informed that Iran is giving Pakistan firm backing in the talks and has urged Islamabad to take an even harder line toward the Soviets.

That favorite old tactic of the Soviets — to stick to their position while urging everyone to be reasonable and moderate — often works with the West but not with the hard-bargaining Pakistanis or Iranians.

What next? Many insiders at the talks think the Soviets will make major concessions in the coming months. Some sort of deal may be made that will see 20 to 100 of the top Afghan communists exiled to the USSR. After that, the resistance coalition will form a government that will include some communists in minor positions. In other words, Moscow will end up taking the same bitter medicine it has been offering the resistance. Afghanistan will be neutralized and everyone will agree that it will never be used as a base for anti-Soviet activities.

If a real peace comes, Afghanistan will go back, ironically, to being what it was eight years ago — an independent buffer state under considerable Soviet influence.

Creating a workable coalition government in Kabul seems to me a near impossible task, but the Geneva negotiators are increasingly optimistic. They believe a deal can be worked out and that peace might actually come to ravaged Afghanistan by this spring.

Perhaps. But facts speak louder than words — and the facts, in this instance, are being created by Soviet army engineers in Afghanistan. While talks go on in Geneva, in Afghanistan the Soviets are building new roads, bridges, rail lines and military bases. Why do this if the Red Army is about to pack its bags and go home?