

Reflections on Soviet intervention in Afghanistan

December 26, 1979

Memo to President from Zbigniew Brzezinski

I will be sending you separately a proposed agenda for the NSC meeting on Friday, and it will focus on both Afghanistan and Iran. In the meantime, you are receiving today's SCC minutes on both subjects. This memorandum is meant merely to provide some stimulus to your thinking on this subject.

As mentioned to you a week or so ago, we are now facing a regional crisis. Both Iran and Afghanistan are in turmoil, and Pakistan is both unstable internally and extremely apprehensive externally. If the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan, and [blacked out] the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled.

Historically, the British provided the barrier to that drive, and Afghanistan was their buffer state. We assumed the role in 1945, but the Iranian crisis has led to the collapse of the balance of power in Southwest Asia, and it could produce Soviet presence right down on the edge of the Arabian and Oman gulfs.

Accordingly, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan poses for us an extremely grave challenge, both internationally and domestically. While it could become a Soviet Vietnam, the initial effects of the intervention are likely to be adverse for us for the following domestic and international reasons:

DOMESTIC

- A. The Soviet intervention is likely to stimulate calls for more immediate U.S. military action in Iran. Soviet "decisiveness" will be contrasted with our restraint, which will no longer be labeled as prudent but increasingly as timid;
- B. At the same time, regional instability may make a resolution of the Iranian problem more difficult for us, and it could bring us into a head-to-head confrontation with the Soviets;
- C. SALT is likely to be damaged, perhaps irreparably, because Soviet military aggressiveness will have been so naked;
- D. More generally, our handling of Soviet affairs will be attacked by both the right and the left.

INTERNATIONAL

- A. Pakistan, unless we somehow manage to project both confidence and power into the region, [blacked out];
- B. With Iran destabilized, there will be no firm bulwark in Southwest Asia against the Soviet drive to the Indian Ocean;
- C. The Chinese will certainly note that Soviet assertiveness in Afghanistan and in Cambodia is not effectively restrained by the United States.

COMPENSATING FACTORS

There will be, to be sure, some compensating factors:

- A. World public opinion may be outraged at the Soviet intervention. Certainly, Moslem countries will be concerned, and we might be in a position to exploit this.
- B. There are already 300,000 refugees from Afghanistan in Pakistan, and we will be in a position to indict the Soviets for causing massive human suffering. That figure will certainly grow, and Soviet-sponsored actions in Cambodia have already taken their toll as well.
- C. There will be greater awareness among our allies for the need to do more for their own defense.

A SOVIET VIETNAM?

However, we should not be too sanguine about Afghanistan becoming a Soviet Vietnam:

- A. The guerrillas are badly organized and poorly led;
- B. They have no sanctuary, no organized army, and no central government -- all of which North Vietnam had;
- C. They have limited foreign support, in contrast to the enormous amount of arms that flowed to the Vietnamese from both the Soviet Union and China;
- D. The Soviets are likely to act decisively, unlike the U.S., which pursued in Vietnam a policy of inoculating the enemy. As a consequence, the Soviets might be able to assert themselves effectively, and [in] world politics nothing succeeds like success, whatever the moral aspects.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

What follows are some preliminary thoughts, which need to be discussed more fully:

- A. It is essential that Afghanistani resistance continues. This means more money as well as arms shipments to the rebels, and some technical advice;
- B. To make the above possible we must both reassure Pakistan and encourage it to help the rebels. This will require a review of our policy toward Pakistan, more guarantees to it, more arms aid.
- C. We should encourage the Chinese to help the rebels also.
- D. We should concert with Islamic countries both a propaganda campaign and in a covert action campaign to help the rebels;
- E. We should inform the Soviets that their actions are placing SALT in jeopardy and that will also influence the substance of the Brown visit to China, since the Chinese are doubtless going to be most concerned about implications for themselves of such Soviet assertiveness so close to their border. Unless we tell the Soviets will not take our "expressions of concern" very seriously, with the effect that our relations will suffer, without the Soviets ever having been confronted with the need to ask the question whether such local adventurism is worth the long-term damage to the U.S.-Soviet relationship;

F. Finally, we should consider taking Soviet actions in Afghanistan to the U.N. as a threat to peace.