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Jp.0187

Mr PowellAfghanistan: Gorbachev's Speech in Vladivostok

At Vladivostok on 28 July, Gorbachev said that the Soviet Union would withdraw one armoured regiment, two motorised rifle regiments, and three anti-aircraft artillery regiments from Afghanistan before the end of the year. He referred to a possible withdrawal of all Soviet troops in the event of a political settlement, but warned that if intervention against Afghanistan continued, the USSR would not "leave our neighbour in the lurch".

2. The six regiments referred to probably total in all around 6,500 men. This must be set against the total figure for Soviet forces in Afghanistan of some 118,000 men. It thus accounts for a little over 5% of the Soviet total. In practical terms the move is of even less consequence than this low figure might suggest. Only the motorised rifle regiments will have been of practical use in the recent fighting and it seems likely that the Russians have spare capacity here. In recent months the Russians have been making more use of Special Purpose Forces, and have limited the use of their own regular ground troops, concentrating on giving air and artillery support to the Afghan regular forces. This may have been in part an attempt to limit Soviet casualties, and the policy has had only mixed success. But it has allowed the Russians and the Afghan Government to claim that the Afghans are themselves playing the leading role in the fight against the insurgents.

3. This is essentially a propaganda move with a US/Soviet summit and the UN Geneva talks (resuming on 30 July) in mind.

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 PERCY CRADOCK

28 July 1986