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TELNO 1897

OF 240730Z DECEMBER 87

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ISLAMABAD TELNO 1179: AFGHANISTAN

*A very
interesting
analysis.
off.*

SUMMARY

1. COMMENT ON EVOLVING SOVIET PRESENTATION OF AFGHAN POLICY. SIGNS OF FLEXIBILITY WILL AT LEAST IMPROVE THE SOVIET UNION'S INTERNATIONAL POSTURE. NO REASON TO DOUBT THAT THE SOVIET UNION WOULD LIKE TO WITHDRAW SOONER RATHER THAN LATER: BUT STILL TOO SOON TO KNOW WHETHER THEY WILL WITHDRAW 'WITH MINIMUM CONDITIONS' IN 1988.

DETAIL

2. IN HIS TUR, HM AMBASSADOR AT ISLAMABAD REFERRED TO INDICATIONS THAT THE RUSSIANS HAVE TAKEN THE DECISION TO WITHDRAW WITH MINIMUM CONDITIONS.

3. PUBLIC TREATMENT OF THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN HAS INDEED DEVELOPED HERE IN RECENT MONTHS. IT HAS FOR A LONG TIME BEEN PART OF THE STANDARD SOVIET POSITION THAT THE POLITICAL DECISION TO WITHDRAW FROM AFGHANISTAN HAS BEEN TAKEN. HOWEVER, EMPHASIS IS NOW BEING GIVEN BOTH THE OFFER TO WITHDRAW IN 12 MONTHS OR LESS AND TO THE HUMAN COST OF THE WAR. PRESS COVERAGE OF THE SUBJECT IN GENERAL HAS EXPANDED. THE CURRENT LINE WAS NEATLY ENCAPSULATED IN PRAVDA'S INTERNATIONAL ROUND-UP OF 20 DECEMBER WHICH STATED:

'THE SUBJECT OF AFGHANISTAN DISTURBS THE SOVIET PEOPLE. IT DISTURBS THOSE WHO HAVE CARRIED OUT AND ARE CARRYING OUT THEIR INTERNATIONALIST DUTY, AND THOSE FAMILIES WHICH HAVE EXPERIENCED THE BITTERNESS OF THE LOSS OF A SON, BROTHER, OR HUSBAND. THEREFORE, IN MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO RESOLVE THE AFGHAN PROBLEM, WE HAVE A

RIGHT TO DEMAND FROM THE UNITED STATES AN HONEST POSITION ON THIS QUESTION. THE TERM FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF SOVIET TROOPS HAS BEEN SPECIFIED - 12 MONTHS, IT COULD EVEN BE LESS. BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE WITHDRAWAL MUST BECOME SIMULTANEOUSLY THE BEGINNING ALSO OF THE CESSATION OF ASSISTANCE IN WEAPONRY AND FINANCING TO THE DUSHMANY'.

4. IT IS IN THIS CONTEXT THAT SOVIET TV HAS REPORTED THE SIEGE OF KHOST AND OTHER EVENTS. IN PRIVATE ALSO, SOVIET OFFICIALS ARE BEING MORE FORTHCOMING. WE ASSUME THAT POLICY ON AFGHANISTAN IS DIRECTED CLOSELY BY THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE, TO WHICH WE HAVE LITTLE ACCESS. HOWEVER, IN RECENT CONVERSATIONS WITH US AND WITH THE AMERICANS (REPORTED IN SAUNDERS-DAVIES'S TELELETTER OF 23 DECEMBER) A DEPUTY HEAD OF THE MIDDLE EAST DEPARTMENT IN THE MFA HAS TAKEN A MORE REASONABLE LINE ON A SETTLEMENT AND WITHDRAWAL THAN WE HAVE EXPERIENCED PREVIOUSLY. IN PARTICULAR, SIDORSKY SEEMED TO ENVISAGE AN EARLY COMPROMISE ON THE WITHDRAWAL PERIOD AND THE COMPLETION OF CORDOVEZ'S FOUR INSTRUMENTS DURING THE NEXT GENEVA ROUND: AND WAS CONSPICUOUSLY UNDOGMATIC ABOUT THE FUTURE GOVERNMENT OF AFGHANISTAN. HE ALSO CAME VERY CLOSE TO TREATING THE ALLIANCE OF SEVEN RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS AS A LEGITIMATE NEGOTIATING PARTY.

5. I AGREE WITH MR BARRINGTON THAT WE MUST KEEP OUR MINDS OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT IS NOW SERIOUSLY SEEKING A WAY OUT: BUT I ALSO AGREE WITH MR MACKLEY (KABUL TELNO 376) THAT WE MUST NOT TAKE WORDS FOR DEEDS. THE RUSSIANS HAVE TRIED APPLYING PRESSURE TO PAKISTAN, BUT THE PAKISTANIS HAVE NOT CRACKED. WITH EFFECTIVE EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE, THE STRENGTH OF THE RESISTANCE HAS INCREASED. WITHIN AFGHANISTAN, NATIONAL RECONCILIATION HAS NOT WORKED. THE RUSSIANS DO NOT STAND TO GAIN FROM CONTINUING THE WAR INDEFINITELY. THE WAR HAS BECOME UNPOPULAR, EXPENSIVE AND UNPRODUCTIVE. POPULAR SENTIMENT WILL OF COURSE NOT BE THE DECIDING FACTOR, AND TO THE AVERAGE CHAUVINISTIC RUSSIAN A HUMILIATING WITHDRAWAL WOULD BE EVEN MORE UNPOPULAR THAN CONTINUING CASUALTIES. BUT THE OUTLOOK IS SUFFICIENTLY BLEAK TO LEAVE LITTLE ROOM FOR DOUBT THAT GORBACHEV WOULD IN PRINCIPLE LIKE TO BE RID OF AFGHANISTAN SOONER RATHER THAN LATER. IN A PERIOD OF IMPROVED EAST/WEST RELATIONS, AND BETWEEN SUMMITS WITH PRESIDENT REAGAN, HE MAY HAVE JUDGED THAT THE TIME IS RIPE TO PUSH FORWARD ON THE NEGOTIATING FRONT.

6. WHAT, AT THIS POST AT LEAST, WE DO NOT KNOW IS WHETHER THE RUSSIANS ARE NOW PREPARED TO REDUCE THEIR CONDITIONS TO THE POINT WHERE A SETTLEMENT CAN BE PUT INTO EFFECT: THE WASHINGTON SUMMIT

SEEMS TO HAVE PROVIDED INDICATIONS THAT THEY MAY BE. EITHER WAY, THE SOVIET UNION STANDS TO BENEFIT FROM A MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH. IF, AS A RESULT OF THEIR FLEXIBILITY, CORDOVEZ IS NOW ABLE TO COMPLETE THE SETTLEMENT PLAN ON PAPER, THE ONUS WILL PRESUMABLY SHIFT (AS THE PASSAGE QUOTED ABOVE FROM PRAVDA SUGGESTS) TO THE MUJAHIDEEN AND THEIR WESTERN SUPPORTERS TO TERMINATE EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE. IF THE INTERFERENCE CONTINUED - AND IT WOULD BE EASY FOR THE RUSSIANS TO CLAIM THAT IT WAS CONTINUING - THE SOVIET UNION'S INTERNATIONAL POSTURE WOULD BE MORE DEFENSIBLE THAN HITHERTO.

CARTLEDGE

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