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FM KABUL

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Summary only

MYTELNO 503-505: AFGHANISTAN: THE END GAME

SUMMARY

1. THE RUSSIANS HAVE GRADUALLY MODIFIED THEIR NEGOTIATING STANCE, AND ALTHOUGH THEIR BOTTOM LINE IS NOT YET CLEAR IT IS LIKELY TO BE BASED ON SELF INTEREST, NOT ALTRUISM. KABUL COULD FALL AFTER PROLONGED BOMBARDMENT OR AS A RESULT OF A MAINLY ECONOMIC SIEGE. VORONTSOV COULD PRODUCE A POLITICAL SOLUTION, BUT TIME IS SHORT AND SOVIET AND PAKISTANI INFLUENCE OVER THE PARTICIPANTS IS LIMITED. FIGHTING LIKELY TO CONTINUE AT LEAST UNTIL NEXT SPRING, PROBABLY SUMMER. INITIALLY, SUCCESSOR GOVERNMENT WILL BE UNSTABLE, BUT KABUL UNLIKELY TO BECOME ANOTHER BEIRUT. *mt*

DETAIL

2. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE HINTS THAT THE START OF PHASE 2 OF THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL MAY BE DELAYED BEYOND 15 NOVEMBER, IN AN ATTEMPT TO PRESSURISE NEWLY ELECTED ADMINISTRATIONS IN PAKISTAN AND THE USA TO BRING THE MUJAHEDDIN TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE, THE RUSSIANS ARE NEVERTHELESS COMMITTED TO HAVE COMPLETED THE EXERCISE WITHIN THE NEXT 16 WEEKS. THIS MAY THEREFORE BE A CONVENIENT MOMENT TO REASSESS THE LIKELY COURSE OF POLITICAL AND MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN OVER THAT PERIOD, AND IN PARTICULAR THE EFFECT ON LIFE IN KABUL.

POLITICAL

3. IT REMAINS MY VIEW, AND VORONTSOV'S APPOINTMENT TENDS TO STRENGTHEN IT, THAT SOVIET POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN CONTINUES TO BE MOTIVATED BY THE DESIRE TO LIMIT THE DAMAGE TO ITS OWN INTERESTS RATHER THAN BY ALTRUISM, BUT THAT THE RUSSIANS WILL STOP SHORT OF DELAYING TROOP WITHDRAWAL BEYOND 15 FEBRUARY (GIVE OR TAKE A FEW DAYS) OR OF SUBSEQUENTLY REINTRODUCING

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TROOPS, BECAUSE THE PRICE OF CONTINUED OR RENEWED SOVIET MILITARY INTERVENTION WOULD BE TOO HIGH, BOTH DOMESTICALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY. BUT IT IS STILL FAR FROM CLEAR WHAT MOSCOW'S BOTTOM LINE REALLY IS. THERE HAS BEEN A SERIES OF MOVES OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS TO SUCCESSIVE FALL-BACK POSITIONS: FROM RETENTION OF ALL POWER BY THE PDPA TO AN OFFER OF COALITION (WITH THE PARTY A MINORITY IN GOVERNMENT BUT RETAINING THE VITAL PORTFOLIOS), FOLLOWED MORE RECENTLY BY HINTS OF A SEPARATION OF PARTY AND GOVERNMENT AND OF SOVIET WILLINGNESS TO NEGOTIATE DIRECTLY WITH THE RESISTANCE. SHARQ'S IMMINENT VISIT TO NEW YORK WILL PROBABLY TAKE THIS ONE STAGE FURTHER, WITH AN APPEAL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN, AND MAY EVEN INCORPORATE A QUALIFIED ACCEPTANCE OF THE CORDOVEZ PLAN. IN ALL CASES, HOWEVER, THE SOVIET OBJECTIVE SEEMS TO BE TO RETAIN A ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN FOR THE PDPA, EITHER AS A POLITICAL FORCE OR FAILING THAT IN THE FORM OF INDIVIDUALS WHOSE SURVIVAL WOULD PROVIDE A NUCLEUS AROUND WHICH TO RESTORE SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE FUTURE.

4. SUBJECT TO THE VIEWS OF HMA IN MOSCOW, IT SEEMS LIKELY HOWEVER THAT WHILE THE RUSSIANS WILL GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS TO PRESERVE AT LEAST A TOE HOLD IN THE POLITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN KABUL, AND MAY DO SO STRENUOUSLY AND WITH DIRE THREATS TO PAKISTAN - PERHAPS EVEN ENCOURAGING TERRORIST-STYLE ATTEMPTS TO UNSETTLE THE NEWLY ELECTED CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT THERE - THEIR JUDGEMENT OF THE PROBABILITY OF A LONGER TERM SOVIET DROIT DE REGARD OVER AFGHANISTAN WILL LEAD THEM TO CONCLUDE THAT NOTHING WILL BE GAINED BY CONTINUING TO ATTEMPT TO PROP UP THE REGIME AFTER 15 FEBRUARY, ALTHOUGH THEY ARE LIKELY TO SEEK TO ENSURE IT DOES NOT FALL UNTIL A DECENT INTERVAL AFTER THEIR LAST SOLDIER HAS LEFT. THIS WOULD SAVE FACE, AND ENABLE THE RUSSIANS SUBSEQUENTLY TO CLAIM THE ENSUING CHAOS WAS DESPITE THEIR BEST ENDEAVOURS AND BECAUSE OF AN ESCALATION OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE. IT WOULD ALSO ALLOW THEM TO CONTINUE TO GIVE RHETORICAL IF NOT PRACTICAL SUPPORT TO THE PDPA (IN EXILE OR UNDERGROUND), AND THEREBY DAMPEN DOWN OTHER CLIENT REGIME'S SUSPICIONS AS TO THEIR CONSTANCY.

MILITARY

5. THE REGIME MIGHT YET SURVIVE WITHOUT SOVIET MILITARY SUPPORT, ALBEIT IN A MUCH WEAKENED STATE IN A BALKANISED AFGHANISTAN. PRESSURE FROM REFUGEES TO RETURN IN THE SPRING COULD BECOME UNCONTAINABLE IF THE BORDER PROVINCES REMAINED AT RELATIVE

PEACE, AND A MASS RETURN WOULD CERTAINLY DISTRACT MANY MUJAHEDDIN FROM THEIR EARLIER MILITARY OBJECTIVES. OR THE REGIME MIGHT DO DEALS WITH MAJOR RESISTANCE COMMANDERS, WHICH IN PRACTICE WOULD AMOUNT TO LITTLE MORE THAN A RETURN TO THE PRE 1973 - AND SEMI FEUDAL - ADMINISTRATIONS, WHERE A WEAK CENTRE MANIPULATED AN UNEASY BALANCE OF POWER WITH AND AMONG STRONG REGIONAL FIEFDOMS. ON PRESENT EVIDENCE HOWEVER IT SEEMS MORE LIKELY THAT THE REGIME WILL FALL SOME TIME AFTER THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL. THERE ARE CURRENTLY TWO BROAD VIEWS AS TO HOW THIS MIGHT COME ABOUT:

A. THE ARMAGEDDON THEORY (WHICH MY FRENCH COLLEAGUE FAVOURS) POSTULATES THAT KABUL WILL COME UNDER CONTINUOUS SEIGE WITH MASSIVE ROCKET AND MORTAR ATTACKS BRINGING UNACCEPTABLY HIGH CIVILIAN CASUALTIES, EVENTUALLY FORCING THE REGIME TO CAPITULATE AS MUCH BECAUSE THE CIVIL POPULATION HAS NO INCLINATION TO EMULATE THE DEFENDERS OF STALINGRAD AS FOR PURELY MILITARY REASONS. OBJECTORS TO THIS LINE ARGUE THAT TO SUSTAIN SUCH A SEIGE THE MUJAHEDDIN WOULD HAVE TO 'GO CONVENTIONAL' OR AT LEAST SIGNIFICANTLY BEEF UP BOTH THEIR MANPOWER AROUND KABUL AND THEIR SUPPLY LINES, THEREBY EXPOSING THEMSELVES TO THE REGIME'S SUPERIOR FIREPOWER, INCLUDING AIRCRAFT. ALTERNATIVELY, IF THE MUJAHEDDIN WERE IN A POSITION TO BLITZ KABUL THE WAR WOULD BE VIRTUALLY WON ALREADY AND RESISTANCE COMMANDERS WOULD SEE NO POINT IN ALIENATING THE CIVIL POPULATION OR RISKING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE.

B. THE ALTERNATIVE TO THIS IS A CONTINUED WAR OF ENCIRCLEMENT, INCLUDING A WINTER BLOCKADE OF KABUL (BASICALLY ONLY THE JALALABAD AND SALANG ROADS NEED TO BE CUT), AND SOME ESCALATION OF SOFTENING UP ROCKET ATTACKS, BUT WITH THE MUJAHEDDIN AVOIDING ANY SET PIECE BATTLE WHICH THEY WOULD HAVE NO GUARANTEE OF WINNING. THE 'BATTLE FOR KABUL' COULD WELL BE FOUGHT ELSEWHERE, WHERE THE REGIME'S CAPABILITY IS LESS AND RESUPPLY DIFFICULT, EG KANDAHAR OR GHAZNI. EVEN IF THIS DID NOT ALTOGETHER OBIATE THE NEED FOR A FINAL PUSH ON THE CAPITAL ITSELF, IT WOULD PROBABLY LIMIT ITS DURATION.

6. WE ARE NOT WELL SIGHTED ON RESISTANCE THINKING, BUT MY GUESS IS THAT ALTHOUGH AT LEAST SOME OF THE PESHAWAR LEADERSHIP MIGHT PREFER THE ARMAGEDDON APPROACH, IF ONLY FOR FEAR THAT THEIR PERSONAL AMBITIONS MIGHT OTHERWISE BE FRUSTRATED DURING A LONG DRAWN OUT CAMPAIGN EITHER BY A UN SPONSORED POLITICAL SETTLEMENT OR THROUGH A DWINDLING OF SUPPORT AMONG ORDINARY

AFGHANS, MUJAHEDDIN COMMANDERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO OPT FOR AND SUCCEED IN IMPLEMENTING, THE MORE COST-EFFECTIVE WAR OF ENCIRCLEMENT.

TIMING

7. VORONTSOV MAY YET CONJURE UP A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT. HE CAN RELY ON CORDOVEZ TO SUPPORT HIS EFFORTS. HE MAY BE ABLE, THROUGH PROPAGANDA, TO CAPTURE THE MORAL HIGH GROUND AND THEREBY BRING INTERNATIONAL (ESPECIALLY NON-ALIGNED) PRESSURE ON THE NEW CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT IN PAKISTAN TO CONCEDE THAT LESS THAN THE WHOLE LOAF IS VICTORY ENOUGH FOR THE MUJAHEDDIN. BUT VORONTSOV'S ABILITY TO ACHIEVE SUCH AN OUTCOME WILL BE SEVERELY CONSTRAINED: HE MIGHT CONVINCE A PAKISTANI CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT, BUT IT COULD NOT DELIVER THE MUJAHEDDIN. HIS ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE WITH THE REGIME WILL ALSO BE IN INVERSE PROPORTION TO THE NUMBER OF SOVIET TROOPS REMAINING IN AFGHANISTAN. I THEREFORE BELIEVE THAT IF A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT IS NOT IN THE OFFING BY THE END OF YEAR, THEN A CONTINUATION OF THE WAR IS INEVITABLE. GIVEN THE PROBLEMS OF CAMPAIGNING AROUND KABUL IN WINTER, THIS IS LIKELY TO MEAN A PROLONGATION OF FIGHTING AT LEAST UNTIL THE SPRING, PROBABLY INTO THE SUMMER, BEFORE THE AFGHANS FIND THEIR OWN SETTLEMENT, WITHOUT BENEFIT OF SOVIET OR UN MEDIATION.

8. ONE ASPECT OF A SETTLEMENT, WHETHER POLITICAL OR MILITARY, THAT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED IS A SUCCESSOR REGIME'S POTENTIAL STABILITY. WITHOUT KNOWING THE LIKELY FORM OF A SUCCESSOR REGIME, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT THE TURN EVENTS MIGHT TAKE, BUT IT IS IMPROBABLE THAT ANY PATCHED UP ADMINISTRATION WILL REMAIN UNITED FOR LONG. IF THE PDPA SURVIVE, ITS LATENT FACTIONALISM WOULD RESURFACE WITH A VENGEANCE. IF THE SEVEN PARTY RESISTANCE ALLIANCE TOOK OVER, IT WOULD NOT BE LONG BEFORE ITS MEMBERS FELL OUT. IT IS ALSO INCONCEIVABLE THAT A UN OR SOVIET INSPIRED JOINT RESISTANCE/REGIME ADMINISTRATION WOULD SURVIVE LONG. THAT IS NOT TO SAY HOWEVER (AS SOME DO) THAT KABUL WOULD BECOME ANOTHER BEIRUT. FOR ONE THING THERE ARE NOT THE SAME FUNDAMENTAL CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL DIFFERENCES IN AFGHANISTAN THAT CONSPIRE TO KEEP LEBANESE FACTIONS APART. FOR ANOTHER, THE AFGHANS ARE RENOWNED PRAGMATISTS WITH A LEGENDARY CAPABILITY TO DO DEALS WITHOUT NECESSARILY COMPROMISING THEIR PRINCIPLES (PARA 5 ABOVE). BUT IT IS NEVERTHELESS LIKELY THAT POLITICAL DIRECTION WILL BE FRAGILE FOR SOME TIME AFTER ANY SETTLEMENT, AND IN ALL PROBABILITY THE LEADERSHIP WILL GO THROUGH SEVERAL

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METAMORPHOSES BEFORE GENUINE STABILITY IS RESTORED. SOME QUARRELS WILL INEVITABLY SPILL ON TO THE STREETS, AND ALTHOUGH THE WESTERN COMMUNITY WILL NOT BE A TARGET IT IS NOT INCONCEIVABLE THAT HISTORY WILL REPEAT ITSELF AND THAT, AS IN 1928/9, WESTERNERS MAY NEED TO LEAVE KABUL FOR A TIME AFTER RATHER THAN DURING THE REVOLUTION, SIMPLY BECAUSE THERE WAS NO ADMINISTRATION WITH WHICH TO DO BUSINESS OR TO MAINTAIN SUPPLY OF BASIC NECESSITIES SUCH AS POWER AND FOOD.

MACKLEY

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