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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

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INFO IMMEDIATE WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, ISLAMABAD

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MYTELNO 622 (NOT TO ALL): AFGHANISTAN: SOVIET AMBASSADOR'S VIEWS

## SUMMARY

1. VORONTSOV QUIETLY CONFIDENT OF A POLITICAL SOLUTION BEFORE SOVIET FORCES WITHDRAW, PINNING HIS EXPECTATIONS ON REGIONAL DEALS WITH MUJAHEDDIN COMMANDERS. DISMISSIVE OF THE "FAT CATS OF PESHAWAR". AMERICAN COOPERATION DESIRABLE BUT NOT ESSENTIAL. SOVIET/MUJAHEDDIN NEGOTIATION IN TWO WEEKS. HE ALSO CONFIRMED GULABZOI HAD BEEN DISCIPLINED, AND THAT THE REGIME'S NEXT MOVE WOULD BE TO SEPARATE PARTY FROM GOVERNMENT TO MAKE COALITION PROPOSALS MORE ATTRACTIVE. THE RUSSIANS MAY WELL BE DEPLOYING THE WELL TESTED TACTIC OF BOUNCING THEIR OPPONENTS INTO A DEAL IN AN ARTIFICIALLY ABBREVIATED END GAME.

## DETAIL

2. I HAD ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY LAST NIGHT (15 NOVEMBER: AT THE GDR AMBASSADOR'S HOUSE), TO DISCUSS A RANGE OF AFGHAN QUESTIONS WITH VORONTSOV. THE DIALOGUE WAS A LITTLE MORE STRUCTURED TOO, BECAUSE FOR THE MOST PART NATO COLLEAGUES SEEMED CONTENT TO LET ME MAKE THE RUNNING. IN CONTRAST TO THE PREVIOUS OCCASION, VORONTSOV SEMED QUIETLY CONFIDENT RATHER THAN BELLICOSE, BUT WAS TANTALISINGLY COY ON POINTS OF SUBSTANCE.

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3. FOR EXAMPLE, VORONTSOV REFUSED TO BE DRAWN ON THE QUESTION OF SOVIET TROOP WITHDRAWAL BY 15 FEBRUARY, ALTHOUGH AT NO POINT, DESPITE BEING GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY, DID HE REITERATE HIS EARLIER THREAT THAT WITHDRAWAL WAS CONDITIONAL ON THE CONCLUSION OF A POLITICAL SOLUTION. INSTEAD HE PROFESSED CONFIDENCE THAT A SOLUTION WAS LIKELY SOONER RATHER THAN LATER. I ASKED WHETHER THERE WAS ANY PROSPECT OF DIRECT NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE RUSSIANS AND THE MUJAHEDDIN, AND HE SAID THERE WOULD BE A MEETING IN ABOUT TWO WEEKS TIME, BUT IN REPLY TO MY QUESTION SAID THIS WOULD "NOT NECESSARILY" TAKE PLACE IN PAKISTAN (HE ALSO SAID TALKS ON SOVIET POWS HAD EITHER JUST STARTED OR WOULD VERY SOON BEGIN IN ISLAMABAD). VORONTSOV WAS CAUSTICALLY DISMISSIVE OF "THE FAT CATS OF PESHAWAR", AND GAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THE NEGOTIATIONS WOULD BE WITH IN-COUNTRY COMMANDERS. HE SAID, AS HE HAD DONE BEFORE,, THAT COMMANDERS HELD THE KEY TO A POLITICAL SOLUTION. HE AGREED WITH MY SUGGESTION THAT MASSOUD WAS ONE OF THE MORE IMPORTANT POTENTIAL INTERLOCUTORS. I THEN ASKED WHY IT WAS, IN THAT CASE, THAT THE RUSSIANS HAD RESUMED BOMBING OF THE PANJSHIR VALLEY WITH AIRCRAFT BASED IN THE SOVIET UNION, SINCE THIS SEEMED LIKELY TO ANTAGONISE MASSOUD AND HIS FOLLOWERS, ESPECIALLY IF IT WAS THE CASE (AS UNHCR OFFICIALS HAD TOLD ME EARLIER IN THE DAY) THAT 16,000 FAMILIES HAD RECENTLY RETURNED TO THE AREA. VORONTSOV REPLIED, SOMEWHAT DELPHICALLY, THAT I SHOULD CHECK WITH PESHAWAR AS TO PRECISELY WHOSE FOLLOWERS HAD BEEN BOMBED. ALTHOUGH HE WAS GUARDEDLY VAGUE, VORONTSOV GAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THE RUSSIANS ARE CONTINUING WITH A FORM OF BALKANISATION, WHEREBY (AS NAJIB HAS HINTED IN THE PAST) LEADING MUJAHEDDIN COMMANDERS WOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO FORM LOCALLY AUTONOMOUS POLITICAL FIEFDOMS WITH WHICH KABUL WOULD COOPERATE. THE REGIONS WOULD IN TURN NOMINATE REPRESENTATIVES TO JOIN A COALITION NON PARTY GOVERNMENT (SEE PARA 6 BELOW). I THEN ASKED WHETHER HE REALLY BELIEVED THAT A SUBSTANTIVE POLITICAL SOLUTION WAS POSSIBLE WHILE ANY SOVIET TROOPS REMAINED IN AFGHANISTAN: IT SEEMED TO ME THAT RESISTANCE HEARTS WOULD RUE THEIR HEADS AND THAT EVEN THOUGH IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE FOR AFGHANS TO DO DEALS REGARDLESS OF PRINCIPLE, NONE OF THE LEADERS WAS LIKELY TO RISK THEIR FRAGILE UNITY BY CHANGING THE GROUND RULES AND ATTEMPTING ACCOMMODATIONS WITH THOSE AGAINST WHOM THE JEHAD HAD BEEN WAGED. VORONTSOV REPLIED THAT IT WAS PRECISELY BECAUSE AFGHANS WERE CAPABLE OF DOING DEALS WITHOUT COMPROMISING PRINCIPLES THAT HE WAS CONFIDENT A POLITICAL SOLUTION WOULD BE IN PLACE BEFORE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL WAS COMPLETED.

I ASKED WHETHER THERE WERE ANY PLANS FOR VORONTOV TO ACCOMPANY GORBACHEV ON HIS FORTHCOMING VISIT TO WASHINGTON. HE SAID IT WAS UNLIKELY. HE SPECULATED THAT THE MAIN ITEM ON THE AGENDA WOULD BE DISARMAMENT , AND CONCEDED THAT A MEETING OF MINDS ON AFGHANISTAN WAS POSSIBLE IF THE DISARMAMENT DISCUSSIONS WENT SMOOTHLY. I SUGGESTED THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING OF AN IMBALANCE HERE: THE RUSSIANS WERE WELL-PLACED TO DELIVER THE REGIME, BUT THE SAME DID NOT APPLY TO THE AMERICANS AND THE MUJAHEDDIN. HE COMMENTED THAT WHILST HE HOPED THE AMERICANS COULD BE PARTY TO THE SEARCH FOR A POLITICAL SOLUTION, THEY WERE NOT ESSENTIAL.

5. VORONTOV CONFIRMED THAT BAKLANOV'S VISIT HAD BEEN TO RE-NEGOTIATE THE MILITARY AID AGREEMENT, AND VOLUNTEERED THAT MUCH OF THE 3 DAY NEGOTIATION HAD BEEN DEVOTED TO AN EXCHANGE OF VIEWS ON THE LONGER TERM PROSPECTS WITHIN AFGHANISTAN. HE ADDED THAT BAKLANOV'S DELEGATION HAD BEEN ONE OF THE BIGGEST THE RUSSIANS HAD EVER SENT TO ANY COUNTRY, AND THAT HE (VORONTOV) HAD PARTICIPATED IN ALL SESSIONS.

6. ON REGIME DOMESTIC POLITICS, VORONTOV TOLD ME THAT THE DECISION TO REMOVE GULABZOI WAS INDEED A SUDDEN ONE, WAS INTENDED TO ENSURE PARTY UNITY, AND HAD BEEN TAKEN AS A DIRECT RESULT OF GULABZOI'S BEHAVIOUR AT THE PARTY PLENUM. HE PROFESSED NOT TO KNOW HOW LONG GULABZOI WAS LIKELY TO RETAIN HIS POST AS AMBASSADOR TO USSR. I ASKED WHETHER IT WAS RIGHT TO INTERPRET FROM STATEMENTS OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS THAT THE REGIME PLANNED IN DUE COURSE TO ATTEMPT A FURTHER IMPROVEMENT IN ITS IMAGE BY STAGE MANAGING A SEPARATION OF PARTY FROM GOVERNMENT. HE SAID THIS WAS RIGHT, AND THAT THE OBJECTIVE WAS FURTHER TO IMPROVE THE CHANCES OF A GENUINE BROAD BASED COALITION. HE AGREED WITH MY SUGGESTION THAT THIS WOULD PRESENT NAJIB WITH A DIFFICULT CHOICE, BETWEEN HIS POSITIONS AS PARTY GENERAL SECRETARY AND AS PRESIDENT, BUT DECLINED TO BE DRAWN ON WHICH WAY NAJIB WOULD GO.

7. VORONTOV CONFIRMED THAT THERE WERE STILL MANY SOVIET TECHNICAL ADVISERS IN AFGHANISTAN, AND SAID THERE WERE NO IMMEDIATE PLANS TO REMOVE THEM. AS EVIDENCE, HE POINTED TO THE RECENT INTRODUCTION OF AEROFLOT WINTER SCHEDULES OF ONE FLIGHT A WEEK BETWEEN MOSCOW AND KABUL.

8. ON A LIGHTER NOTE, VORONTSOV CREATED SOME AMUSEMENT BY GENTLY SNUBBING THE ACTING FRENCH CHARGE, WHO HAD SOUGHT TO INGRATIATE HIMSELF WITH REMARKS ON THE QUALITY OF HIS FRENCH BY REFERENCE TO HIS PERIOD AS AMBASSADOR IN PARIS. VORONTSOV PUT ON HIS MOST WINNING SMILE AND SAID THAT ALTHOUGH HE UNDERSTOOD FRENCH, HE HAD NOT HAD MANY OPPORTUNITIES IN HIS THREE YEARS IN PARIS TO PRACTICE IT, BECAUSE "EVERYONE VERY KINDLY ALWAYS TALKED TO ME IN ENGLISH".

COMMENT

9. AS ALREADY NOTED, VORONTSOV GAVE THE IMPRESSION OF CONFIDENCE THAT HE WILL BRING ABOUT A POLITICAL SOLUTION WITHIN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS. IT IS POSSIBLE HE WILL MAKE AN OFFER THE MUJAHEDDIN CANNOT REFUSE, OR THAT GORBACHEV WILL DO SO IN HIS FORTHCOMING FOREIGN POLICY SPEECH OR AT WASHINGTON. BUT I STILL FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE THAT, HOWEVER GOOD THE OFFER, RESISTANCE LEADERS WILL COME ON BOARD BEFORE THE LAST SOVIET SOLDIER HAS LEFT, OR UNLESS THE PDPA IS JETTISONED ENTIRELY. PERHAPS, INSTEAD, VORONTSOV HOPES TO ESTABLISH THE FRAMEWORK, WHICH WILL ENCOURAGE A DIMINUATION IN FIGHTING IF NOT A FORMAL CEASEFIRE, FOR A RAPID POST WITHDRAWAL SETTLEMENT.

10. ONE TACTIC AVAILABLE TO THE RUSSIANS, AS IN THE WEEKS BEFORE THE GENEVA SETTLEMENT AND AS THEY HAVE DEPLOYED IN OTHER NEGOTIATIONS, IS TO CAPITALISE ON THE BREVITY OF TIME AVAILABLE TO FORCE THROUGH A SETTLEMENT - PLAYING ON THE FEARS OF THEIR OPPONENTS THAT THE ALTERNATIVE IS A PROLONGATION AND ESCALATION OF THE WAR TO SECURE A DEAL THAT FALLS SOME WAY SHORT OF THEIR REAL BOTTOM LINE. TO AN EXTENT, THIS RHETORIC IS ALREADY BEING DEPLOYED, WITH THREATS TO DELAY WITHDRAWAL, INTRODUCTION OF SCUD AND OTHER SOPHISTICATED WEAPONS, READINESS TO DESPATCH SOVIET BASED BOMBERS IF THE MUJAHEDDIN PRESS TOO HARD ON SENSITIVE AREAS, ETC. THE MESSAGE, IN SHORT, SEEMS TO BE "YOU CANNOT WIN: ACCEPT HALF A LOAF OR RISK GETTING NOTHING". THERE WILL DOUBTLESS BE MORE IN THIS VEIN IN WEEKS TO COME, AT LEAST PARTLY DESIGNED TO CAUSE WOBBLING AMONG SOME OF PAKISTAN'S AND THE RESISTANCE'S FRIENDS AND ADVISERS, AS WELL AS AMONG THE PLAYERS THEMSELVES.

MACKLEY