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On November 18, Selig Harrison, a Senior Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, spoke to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute on the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

"We are at a point in the Afghan conflict where we see a striking contradiction," Harrison stated. "On the one hand, there is military escalation on both sides." The United States has increased the size and scope of its aid to the resistance and the Russians continue to build up their position in Afghanistan. "But at the same time we see a winding down of the struggle at the diplomatic and political level." As a significant concession, the Soviets have recently agreed to reduce the time frame for their troop withdrawal under the United Nations agreement. They have conceded to shorten this period from a previous offer of sixteen months to twelve months or less. More importantly, they have agreed to the replacement of the Communist regime in Kabul by an interim coalition government.

The Current Soviet Posture

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has encouraged the United Nations to play a more active role in negotiating an interim government. This is a departure from the policies of his predecessors. Previously, the Kabul government had acquiesced to the proposal for a United Nations monitoring force made up of observers from non-aligned nations to verify a withdrawal of Soviet forces and the termination of assistance to the resistance. Harrison noted, "this was one concession that observers didn't expect until the last stage of negotiations." In regard to the UN role in negotiating the composition of an interim government to take power following a Soviet withdrawal, Harrison noted that "up until six months ago, the Soviets were saying that the government of Afghanistan is no business of the UN." Now they're "encouraging" the United Nations to play a decisive role in this process. The current Soviet posture is to look for a "compromise, not a surrender," that would enable them to extricate their forces.

Harrison attributes this reversal to a recognition that the Afghan communist party (Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan or PDPA) is not strong enough to sustain itself, without a massive Soviet military presence, in the face of American help for the resistance. With only 30,000 "hard-core members," the PDPA in reality controls only 30% of the country. The costs to the U.S.S.R. of military intervention, both financial and diplomatic, have increased recently. Resilient rebel groups, now equipped with sophisticated weapons like Stinger missiles, are capable of inflicting heavy damage on Soviet and government forces. The persistence of the conflict has undermined among non-aligned nations the Soviet image as a defender of self-determination. The Afghanistan situation also harms Gorbachev's strategy of presenting the Soviet Union to the Western European public as a nation seeking peace. These developments have prompted the Soviets to accept the formation of a coalition government which would downgrade the Communist role in favor of non-Communist elements.

Prospects For a Coalition Government

The impediments to a resolution of this issue revolve around two factors: the alliance of Afghan rebel forces, and the role of the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah. Harrison believes that a regrouping of the non-Communist Afghan groups that would "subsume" the "Peshawar Alliance" (an amalgamation of 7 guerrilla groups named for the Pakistani city where many Afghan refugee camps are located) is necessary before a settlement can be reached. The "Peshawar Alliance contains many elements," he claims, "that were not significant prior to the Soviet invasion." For example, Islamic fundamentalist groups, who advocate the establishment of an Islamic Republic, are using their effective military effort against the Russians to galvanize support for a movement that had limited strength in Afghanistan ten years ago. There were only one thousand Muslim fundamentalists before 1978. Today there are four major fundamentalist groups within the alliance and they are likely to oppose any agreement on a coalition government that includes Communists.

The United States, the Soviet Union and the United Nations all favor a leading role for the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, who presently lives in Italy. Harrison cited a recent survey among Afghan refugees in Pakistan in which 71% of those polled favored the King as their spokesman in seeking a political solution. Informally, the Soviets have expressed their support for an interim government, to include both Communist and non-Communist elements, with the King in a symbolic role, which would be accompanied by the abdication of Najibullah, the current Afghan ruler. The new government would result from a series of conferences among Afghans facilitated by the UN in consultation with Zahir Shah and others. But

Pakistan, which "created and supports the Peshawar alliance," has been resisting any new configuration that would reduce the influence of their fundamentalist clients.

The Iran Factor

According to Harrison, "Iran has been playing a much less committed role in Afghanistan than people are saying." There is a degree of ambivalence in their policy. The Iranians have attempted to secure a foothold in Afghanistan by supporting Shiite guerrilla groups and stating publicly that the Russian intervention is the main impediment to Soviet-Iranian relations. The other side of this policy is a criticism of the American presence in the Afghan conflict, stressing that "superpower involvement in Afghanistan is a serious problem for non-aligned countries like Iran."

The Iranian response to a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan following the conclusion of a settlement would be to rhetorically oppose any UN-sponsored agreement that precluded the establishment of an Islamic republic. But Harrison doesn't believe that Iran would do anything "to upset" the process; this neutral stance would "assist the

Soviet Union in its efforts to consolidate a better relationship."

Harrison said that "while the United States and the Soviet Union are in serious competition in Afghanistan and the Gulf region," the possibility of identifying mutual interests in a reduction of military tensions in this area "is much greater than it has ever been." A settlement in Afghanistan would contribute to such a reduction. However, if the Soviet Union is successful in securing a settlement in Afghanistan and the United States at the same time continues its intensified military presence in the Gulf, the net effect may be an improvement of relations between the U.S.S.R. and strategically-located Iran. The U.S. policy "must be sensitive" to the effects that a new situation in Afghanistan may have on Iranian relations with the superpowers. And it must be careful not to foster a realignment of forces that could adversely affect U.S. interests in the region.

Reported by Robert Monyak with assistance from Paul Lerner

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