

Tugwell speaks

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and this requires counter-measures that really hurt the USSR and which are directly related to the Afghan adventure. Of course we would like that country to regain its independence; this however is an unrealistic aim. It may be possible later, but only if our initial response succeeds.

In considering method I am immediately ruling out a direct military response. Short of resorting to nuclear weapons, there is

no way that the West can challenge the USSR in Afghanistan. There may be a need to deploy forces to deter Soviet exploitation beyond the Afghan borders, but this is a separate matter. Our response should surely capitalize on Russian weakness rather than attempt to confront its strongest element - that of military power. Weaknesses can sometimes be found in the panoply of strength, in this case in the Soviet motives

for invading Afghanistan at all. So let us attempt to analyze these causes.

Although empire-building may have been a factor, I think it likely that Soviet leaders were influenced mainly by defensive considerations when they decided on all-out military involvement. Like President Johnson in 1964, when the US considered committing ground forces to the fight in Vietnam, the Politburo may have feared that doing nothing would be worse than doing something. Russian concerns were probably twofold and linked. First, there is an unwritten law that once the country becomes communist, it must never be allowed to slip out of Marxist control. Chili was the exception that proved the rule, and Moscow is not about to undermine its credibility by allowing it to happen twice. Second Islamic fervour is a new and unwelcome phenomenon for an imperial regime such as the USSR where 15 per cent of the population are Muslims. A force that can unseat the Shah from his peacock throne might make trouble in the USSR where minority nationalities are anyway beginning to assert their identities. The defeat of a Soviet-backed Afghan regime by Islamic rebels - a prospect that seemed very real until Christmas Day 1979 - could have set an unwelcome and humiliating precedent.

If fear was the Soviet motive, we have something to exploit. There has been vague talk about Afghanistan becoming Russia's Vietnam based, it would seem, on the pious belief that God punishes aggressors and it's Russia's turn now. Neither Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, East German, Bulgaria, Roumania, Hungary nor Czechoslovakia became a Russian Vietnam, and I have a feeling that God reserves his punishments for another world. The reason why, to the democracies, Vietnam is synonymous with defeat, is that the communists made it so.

This took years of skilful diplomacy and subtle propaganda, endless patience, and the will and ability of the insurgents and their backers to conduct a long and costly war. In the end, communist victory was absolute, because the US was demoralized and guilt-ridden, as well as incapable of continuing the struggle. As a result, the Soviet Union which had hardly fired a shot, emerged as the outright victor. Afghanistan could become Russia's Vietnam, but only if the West has the will and the ability to make it so. The key factor is Islamic opinion. The Russians must have gambled on a rapid liquidation of opposition in Afghanistan and on the ability of their propaganda apparatus to sell the theme of righteousness which is already at full blast and which

seeks to present their puppet Babrak Karmal as defender of the faith, and to discredit the rebels as dupes of Washington and Peking, whose meddling made Soviet "assistance" necessary. Another theme stresses the "legality" of Soviet actions, founded on the pretence of responding to Karmal's request for fraternal assistance even though he himself returned to Kabul in the second echelon of the invasion force. Although in the shocked aftermath of the event such themes may seem far-fetched experience suggests that in six months time they will have convinced most of the "non-aligned" nations and the confused and guilt-ridden in the West will be presenting them in terms acceptable to sophisticated audiences. You may wish to make a note in your diary if by June 1980 all this is happening. Russia's Afghan gamble will have paid off.

This depressing outcome is not inevitable. The Afghan invasion can rebound on the Russians if Western diplomacy convinces the Muslim leaders that the Soviets rather than the Americans threaten Islamic values, if with appropriate support the Afghan rebels can keep up the struggle and inflict rising casualties, and if the Islamic propaganda and western communications technology combine to arouse the Islamic population inside the USSR. Considering how eager the Russians have been in the past to silence relatively innocuous western broadcasts to their own people, we may reasonably assume that disaffection is a major worry. Propaganda is doubly effective when sponsored by persons with whom the target audience can easily identify. Pakistanis, Iranians, Arabs, and dispossessed Afghans might achieve in parts of the USSR what the New Left accomplished in the late sixties in the United States. A combination of Islamic hostility abroad and Islamic unrest at home, economic sanctions, reproach by the non-aligned and a more united and determined Western Alliance could convince the Politburo that their Afghan policy had been mistaken, discourage further aggression and pave the way to face-saving formula for disengagement.

The difficulties are obvious. The Iranian crisis and the Palestine problem hamper American diplomacy. Propaganda as a weapon system has been neglected by the West and our covert agencies have been undermined, while Soviet capability in both fields is strong. Islam is far from united. A question mark hangs over the leadership and endurance of the Afghan rebels. Moreover, one of the problems of democracy is the need for political leaders to play to their domestic galleries at the same time they are conducting foreign affairs. A subtle, indirect strategy of the sort that is proposed which calls for patience and restraint by its instigators, may be difficult to sell to a public clamouring for dramatic responses. Some of these difficulties could be eased if powers such as Canada, Britain, and West Germany played key roles. Difficult or not, this seems to me to be the type of conflict that we in the West must learn to master. Continued reliance on old-fashioned diplomacy backed only by old-fashioned armed force could mean that in the 1980's we have to choose between constant appeasement and nuclear war.



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