

Afghanistan: Is it the new Sarajevo?

by Daniel Snider

Some days after the coup in Kabul and the massive flow of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, a British journalist reported the following story from Teheran where the Soviet embassy was briefly stormed by Iranian and Afghani exile protestors. A Soviet embassy official was asked what they would do if *their* embassy was occupied in Iran. The official removed the wristwatch on his arm and placed it on the table. "It is now 3:00 o'clock," he said. "By 3:45, there would be no Iran."

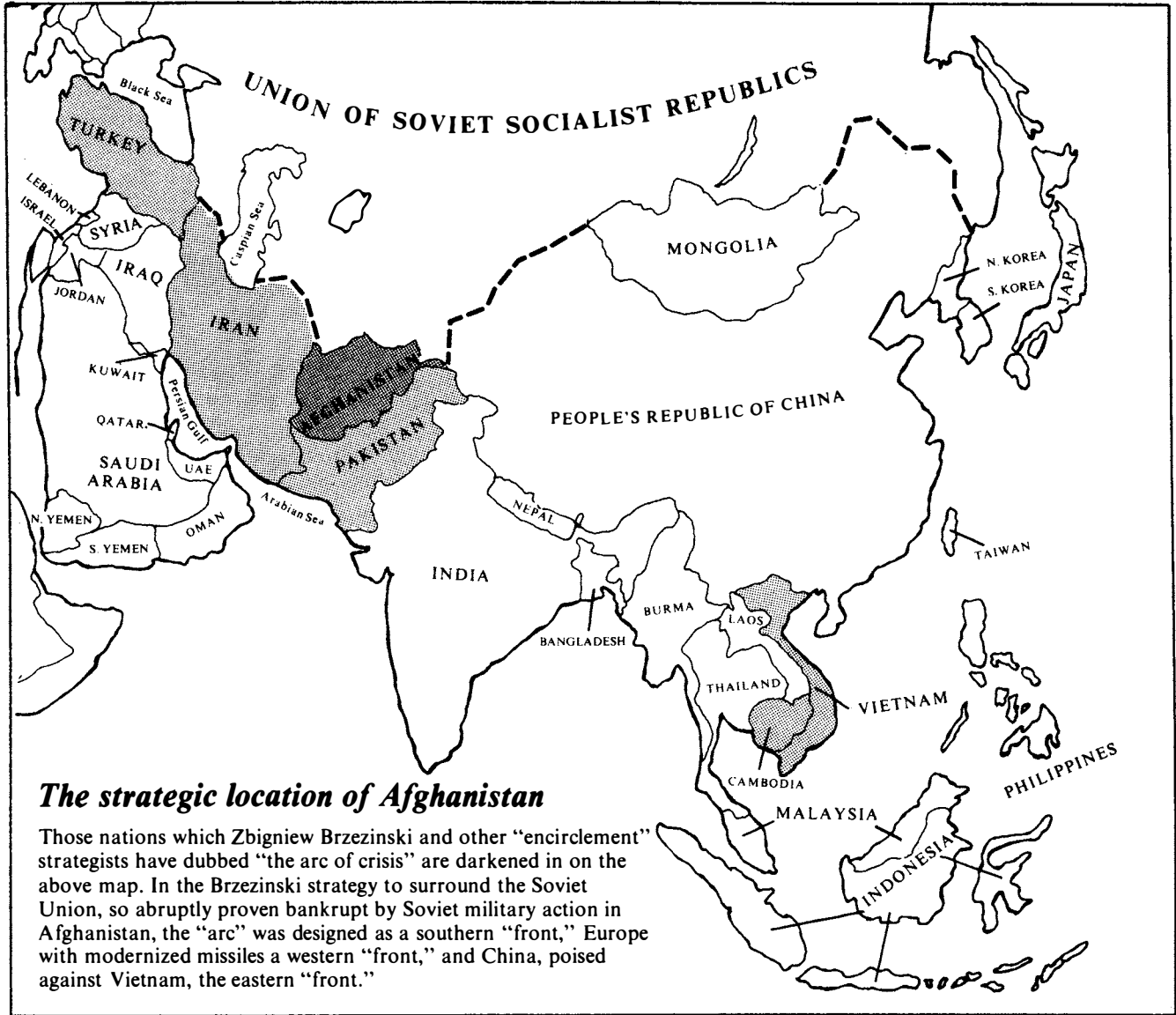
This perhaps neatly sums up the meaning of the Soviet move—that superpower is prepared to act when it feels its vital strategic interests and national security are threatened. The question of *why* the Soviet Union did what it did in Kabul remains, but it is not so mysterious a puzzle to solve as people have been led to believe in the past days.

It is not the events within Afghanistan which brought Soviet troops into action for the first time since 1945 outside the boundaries of the Warsaw Pact. Rather it was the conclusion drawn by the Soviet leadership, and in particular the Soviet military which is now evidently in command of the situation, that the United States administration, allied with that of London, has committed itself to a policy of ending detente in favor of an arms buildup, confrontation in Europe, and an alliance with the Peking regime in China. The Soviet move was carefully prepared and chosen to deliver an unmistakable signal to both NATO and China that a threat to perceived vital Soviet interests would be met, not with diplomatic protest, but with every weapon in the Soviet arsenal, including *total* thermonuclear war.

The defining characteristic of the present situation is not the Soviet move but the severe miscalculation—and in the case of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, madness—in the response coming from Washington. Brzezinski's stated intention to play the "Islamic card" against the Soviet Union, including a clearly signaled effort to effect an alliance with the Islamic kooks in Iran and Pakistan against their "new enemy," is merely one aspect of that miscalculation. More dangerous is the dispatch of Defense Secretary Harold Brown to China, a previously scheduled visit now described as taking place "in a new dimension."

The buildup of events in Europe

The most crucial development leading up to the present situation was the NATO December decision to place the new Pershing II tactical nuclear missiles in Western Europe, a decision brought about by the capitulation of West Germany and Italy to heavy pressure from Washington and Bonn. The Soviet Union had made it clear beforehand that such a decision would be viewed as bringing to an end further arms control talks. The Soviets rejected the formulation put forward by the pressured government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt that the decision for production could still be followed by arms control talks, before actual deployment of the missiles took place. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko stated that the decision "destroyed the basis" for further negotiations, and a Soviet source is cited in the *New York*



Times this past week saying that after all, he "meant it."

That this is the Soviet view is even reported in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* of Jan. 3, which both carry summaries of the view of a top Soviet source, obviously the same one. As the *Times* puts it: "The sources said the Kremlin had decided to move only after a review of what it regarded as setbacks to detente with Western Europe and the United States, meaning the decision by the Atlantic alliance to deploy more modern nuclear-armed American missiles in Western Europe and the likelihood the Senate would reject the arms treaty."

The *Washington Post* had earlier reported that Soviet Ambassador to the United States Dobrynin was recalled to Moscow about three weeks before the Afghan move. Just before he left he had a long meeting with State Secretary Cyrus Vance in which he asked detailed questions on the administration's policy, toward SALT, arms

budget, and similar issues. The *Post* concludes that this was the last phase of a Soviet policy review before the final decision was made.

The collapse of Soviet detente endeavors was keyed most of all to their entente with Paris and Bonn, based on the economic cooperation outlook expressed in the May 1978 Schmidt-Brezhnev accords and the 25-year economic cooperation pact the two leaders signed. The collapse of Bonn under Anglo-American pressure, in the context of U.S. intervention threats in Iran, creation of the so-called mobile strike force, and the Euromissiles decision dealt a death blow to the Soviet-Brezhnev strategy, forcing a shift from a basic war-avoidance posture to a war-fighting posture.

This can be easily confirmed in the pages of *Red Star*, the Red Army's daily, where article after article appears now talking of the "arms race" and the "end of detente."

Most pointed was the appearance of an article by Major-General Simonyon the day before the Soviet-backed coup in Kabul. Simonyon declared that the adoption of the limited nuclear war doctrine implied in the Euromissile decision was highly dangerous and was based on the illusion that any conflict in Europe could be contained below the level of full-scale warfare. Such a move he said would require Soviet response.

The degree of Red Army command is also illustrated in the Kabul move itself. General Igor Pavlovsky, the Soviet Deputy Minister of Defense and commander of the Soviet ground forces was present in Afghanistan from mid-August onward for two months. He is reportedly in command from a position in Soviet Central Asia of the present Soviet troop deployments. More momentous perhaps is the reported ongoing visit of the commander of the Soviet fleet, Admiral Gorshkov, to Vietnam, supposedly to attend the 35th anniversary celebrations of the Vietnamese army.

The Carter administration itself seems to regard the key point as Europe in sending Assistant Secretary of State Warren Christopher there for consultations. A first meeting was held in London, followed by a NATO council meeting in Brussels. While Christopher claimed assent by all in London—representatives from France, Britain, Germany, Italy and Canada—to a complete review of bilateral relations with Moscow, the reality was otherwise. The French foreign ministry immediately issued a disclaimer on the truth of that statement, and the latest reports from Bonn, where the initial reaction was somewhat in line with Washington, is that the German foreign ministry is unhappy with talk of U.S. military aid to Pakistan because of fears this “might broaden the conflict into a general East-West conflict.” This report, from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, also cites those sources saying that SALT II must be ratified and muttering that the “public debate” about “sanctions against the U.S.S.R. was inappropriate.”

France and President Giscard d'Estaing have been far more direct in resisting the direction coming from Washington. Giscard went on French TV on New Year's Eve to declare that the question before the French people was one of “war or peace.” In a sober tone he declared that “the war danger is real,” while expressing hopes for cool-headedness among world leaders. Later that week Giscard reportedly told a diplomatic gathering in Paris that “detente is irreversible” and that new conceptions would now be necessary to strengthen detente. No mention was reported to have been made of Afghanistan.

Kabul, Pakistan and the Islamic card

Despite this dose of reality, the Carter Administration, joined by Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher, is rushing headlong into not only the China Card game but

also Brzezinski's Islamic card. The talk is now of a new NATO-axis in the Middle East, an Islamic pact which would include Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Oman—and all linked to Israel in a new “Middle East Treaty Organization.” This scheme is linked with establishment of a permanent U.S. military base or bases in the area, with Egypt's Sadat seconding Israel in making that formal offer. Pakistan, of course, is seen as a crucial part of this military pact. The aim is a new Islamic Central Treaty Organization, which could include Iran, in the view of many in Washington, provided Khomeini would recognize that Moscow is a bigger threat than “U.S. imperialism.”

Such talk of an Islamic pact against the Soviet Union brings us back to the Afghan situation, which must be properly treated as a relative side affair. The speculation surrounding both the military move and the coup rests on an alleged fear from Moscow that the Islamic guerrillas based in Pakistan who had been battling the Kabul government were about to win, and that the dispatch of the Soviet troops and the removal of President Amin in favor of the more conciliatory Babrak Karmal was a response to this situation.

The evidence at hand does not bear this explanation out. One clear sign that Moscow is not worried about Islamic fundamentalism infecting its own Muslim population is the fact that much of the Soviet force is composed of soldiers from Soviet Tadjik and Uzbek populations, who can speak the Darsi dialect spoken by many Afghans from similar stock.

More important in the Soviet view is the organized effort being mounted from Pakistan (and Iran) by groups run by the Muslim Brotherhood and linked to British, U.S., Chinese, and Egyptian intelligence. The Pakistani government has been none too careful in concealing its role in upsetting Afghanistan—providing base camps, conducting arms from China and elsewhere, giving training and allowing the Pathan tribes of the Northwest Frontier province to be freely used as the main forces of the guerrilla raids into Afghanistan. One could say this is Soviet propaganda, but that is simply not the case.

At this point an effort to reinforce the Pakistani regime flies in the face of that reality. With the likely victory of Indira Gandhi in the Indian elections, Pakistan ruled by a narrowly based Islamic fanatic-run military junta (which sat by while the U.S. embassy was burned in Islamabad) loses out to Bolivia in the political stability category. That leaves Peking, which is contemplating a new invasion of Vietnam, as the Carter administration's line of response. This, too, is hardly impressive. The problem for Brzezinski comes at this crucial juncture—the point at which his paranoid fantasies of breaking up the Soviet Union between the force of Khomeini and Mao Tse-tung followers meets the cold steel reality of the barrel of a T-72 tank.