

February 3, 1989

**Report of the Soviet Ambassador Y. M. Vorontsov,
concerning the current political situation inside
Afghanistan and the possibilities of solving the
Afghan question**

Citation:

"Report of the Soviet Ambassador Y. M. Vorontsov, concerning the current political situation inside Afghanistan and the possibilities of solving the Afghan question", February 3, 1989, Wilson Center Digital Archive, State Central Archive Prague, File 02/1, CC CPCz Politburo 1980-1989, 103rd Meeting, 3 February 1989, in Czech. Translated by Todd Hammond and Derek Paton. Obtained by Oldrich Tuma.
<https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/113128>

Summary:

This document discusses the disagreements among Afghan leaders regarding a coalition government. The Soviet invasion, withdrawal, and the prospects for peace with Afghanistan are also revealed.

Original Language:

Czech

Contents:

Translation - English

Y. M. Vorontsov reported on his talks with representatives of the Afghan opposition in Tehran and Istanbul. In Tehran he met with a representatives of the alliance of 'Eight'. It was a very unusual group of people; only one person spoke on its behalf - Khalili - who talked mainly about the French Revolution. He said that once an Islamic state was created in Afghanistan there would be full equality and freedom in the country. Vorontsov replied that it was first necessary to bring about an end to the fighting in Afghanistan and establish a coalition government. Khalil did not reply to that.

According to Vorontsov the leading Iranian representatives took a pragmatic, matter-of-fact approach in talks with him. They had directly asked him what had to be done to solve the Afghan problem. Vorontsov replied that the war had to be stopped and all the representatives of all the forces in Afghan society had to be brought to one table. They replied matter-of-factly that they were looking into what could be done to that end. Unlike earlier talks, they avoided talk about the ideology of the Islamic revolution.

It was agreed that Vorontsov would meet again with representatives of the 'Eight' (according to Vorontsov they are not at all independent, and are run by Iran).

In Pakistan, according to Vorontsov, Mrs Bhuta is not in charge; power is in the hands of the generals. In Islamabad he had been told openly that the country supported the Mujahadeen on the basis of Islamic commonality and the fundamentalist principles established in the country by Zia ul Hak. The generals had come out particularly hard: Baig and Gul, the Head of Military Intelligence (who runs the Mujahadeen).

The meeting with Vorontsov was attended by Mudzhalidi, Gilani and representatives of Gulbuddin and Rabbani. Rabbani himself was abroad. Also in attendance was the head of the pro-Iranian 'Eight', Khalili. During the talks there were clearly also sharp differences between participants, and mu-

[p.2] tual hatred. The talks took place in an extremely tense atmosphere; partners stated that they did not want to hear anything about the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

At one point Mudzhadidi said that he wanted elections to be held in Afghanistan to make it appear that the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan had the support of the masses. Vorontsov agreed that there should be elections, but pointed out that would be the first test of the position of members of the 'Seven' alliance, which so far had never appeared before the Afghan people. Gilani immediately declared that he did not want any elections.

Vorontsov demanded that the talks should focus on two main tasks: the ceasing of hostilities and the creation of a provisional organ. A sort of 'consultative council' was discussed, which was to comprise between fifty and sixty members. Vorontsov expressed his agreement with the condition that the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan would also be suitably represented in it. The Pakistanis then proposed a council comprising between five hundred and six hundred persons; their reasoning was that all the leading armed groups operating in Afghanistan also wanted to be represented in it (because they did not believe the 'Seven', and wanted to be alone at all talks). Vorontsov pointed out that such a large assembly did not decide anything. He then, however, agreed again to the condition that the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan would be appropriately represented. The Pakistani Foreign Minister, Jakub Khan, promised that they would try to see to that. Now, however, Sevan (Cordovez's political representative) said that he was considering providing the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan with twelve places (out of five hundred to six hundred places); that, however, is unacceptable. The pro-Iranian opposition (the 'Eight') also refused to take part in this 'council', because it had been assigned only sixty places, though it had demanded twice as many. Vorontsov feels that it is

necessary to return to the variant of a council with fifty to sixty members', in which the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan should hold twelve places and the other groups would also have twelve places each.

What was important, according to Vorontsov, was that everybody should be very interested in the creation of some sort of 'consultative council' (including representatives of Iran and Pakistan; and there were also signals of interest from the USA.) Mrs Bhuto asked Vorontsov when such a council should begin to operate; Vorontsov replied, that it should be as soon as possible.

Vorontsov said that everybody (from both the 'Seven' and the 'Eight') wanted to negotiate, but only with him. At the same time, the most irreconcilable men, in his words, wanted to have highly private talks with him (so that none of their partners finds out).

[p.3] The main problem, however, is what Vorontsov called the 'Pakistan Game': to turn these ideas about 'councils' into a reality only after 15 February. On 15 February they want to test their strength, to see whether they can manage to overthrow the Kabul regime militarily; if they do not succeed, then they would negotiate about 'councils' and compromises - that is Plan B. The politicians do not discuss that publicly. The generals speak more openly about this. They (Baig and Gul) told Vorontsov that their primary effort would be to find a military solution to the Afghan question; if they didn't succeed, it would be the turn of the diplomats. This position is also taken by the USA, and one cannot expect another approach even from the new Bush administration.

Concerning former King Zahir Shah, Vorontsov said that in his talks with him, Zahir Shah complained at great length about his having been deposed. He expressed sorrow over the suffering of the people of Afghanistan as a result of the many years of war, and stated that he was prepared to do everything to end this war and bring peace back to Afghanistan. He did not support the condition that Nadzhibullah and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan had to leave the political scene; yet he was aware that Nadzhibullah could not stand at the head of a broad coalition based on all the political forces of Afghan society. At the same time he knew he could not return as king. But he did openly say to Vorontsov that his activity in this sense would be possible after the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. Vorontsov's personal view was that Zahir Shah himself was not particularly interested in this activity, but was being forced into it by those around him (his relations). The Czechoslovak titular head reported on his talks with Minister Pazhvak and about the latter's proposal that Czechoslovakia use its good name with Zahir Shah and send its emissary to him for talks (see my 010/89). Vorontsov very much welcomed the proposal and recommended it be carried out, especially if we found somebody who had once talked to Zahir Shah in the past.

The Soviet representatives stated clearly to the leading actors of the Kabul regime that they had to withstand the initial assault from the side of its enemies. Vorontsov added that contacts would continue (with the 'Seven' and the 'Eight') and other groups and actors (though only after 15 February; likewise, Nadzhibullah and members of the Kabul leadership would also negotiate intensively with the opposition along their lines.)

[p. 4] The aim of the recent visit of E. A. Shevardnadze in Kabul was to negotiate with the Kabul leadership, about what assistance they still required in order to withstand the assault from the side of the armed resistance after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. After Shevardnadze's departure members of the delegation remained, and discussed details related to this assistance. Vorontsov reported that other Soviet actors (such as Defence Minister Yazov) would soon be flying to Kabul with this end in mind.

Vorontsov reckons that the first assault from the side of the armed resistance against the Kabul regime would last about one month (that is to say, till about 15 March). The Kabul regime had to hold out, and had all the necessary conditions for that. The opposition was at a disadvantage, because it would be fighting both against the Kabul regime and amongst itself. Each part of the opposition wanted to be the first to enter Kabul; heavy fighting was already taking place among them. The strongest forces among them are those of Gulbuddin and Rabbani, but they hate each other more than they hate Nadzhibullah and the Kabul politicians.

The Soviet Union is giving the Kabul leadership everything necessary - including powerful new weapons - so that they have enough of everything to fight for a year. In conversations with leading Kabul politicians, E. A. Shevardnadze emphasized that their unity was essential to drive back the enemy, and that was a life-and-death question for them.

To relieve the military situation of the governing forces the Soviet Union would any day now also provide assistance in the form of heavy weapons and aircraft: places where enemy forces, ammunition dumps, etc. were concentrated had been destroyed. These strikes, carried out together with the Afghan government forces, were very effective and caused the enemy great losses. At present a lethal operation was underway against the strongest of the home leaders of the armed opposition, Ahmad Shah Masud, whose divisions had occupied the Panshir Valley, a territory in the northeast provinces, and operated particularly in the region of the Solang pass, where they disrupted traffic on the Kabul-Hairaton highway.

[p. 5] Even though talks had been held with him for several years now (both from the side of the Kabul leadership and from the side of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan), he has turned out to be insincere and is the first to prepare an attack on Kabul after the departure of Soviet forces. According to Vorontsov the Americans have won him over to their side, and have recently (not through Rabbani, as was the case in the past) provided him with money and arms, and sent their emissaries to him. Masud is Tadzhik and the [ILLEGIBLE] want to make him the leader of the northern part of Afghanistan and thus, through whom, complicate the situation between the Tadzhiks and other peoples in the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. Devastating strikes with rockets and air raids, followed by artillery fire, have caused heavy losses to Masud in terms of men and material, decimating his units. Evidently units of other leaders of the armed opposition (particularly Gulbuddin) are taking part in this campaign against Masud.

Vorontsov confirmed that the Soviet divisions would leave Afghanistan by 15 February. The most important situation will be on the Kabul-Hairaton highway, where Soviet and Kabul units are now conducting a mopping-up operation. That must then be assured by the government forces themselves. In the same way the government forces are taking over the protection of Kabul airport. Vorontsov emphasized several times that the Kabul leadership had everything needed to that end, but must demonstrate strong resolve.

According to Vorontsov a large war over Kabul, a concentrated attack on the city, is not anticipated. He is convinced that the Soviet Union will thwart the attempt to blockade the city, and will ensure the necessary foodstuffs for the inhabitants of the city (an airlift has been made). It is necessary, however, to be prepared for terrorism within the city and rocket attacks on it. The Afghan security forces have discovered hundreds of rockets prepared for use against the town; Vorontsov noted that means that the Mudzhahadeen have moved thousands of rockets into the proximity of the city. The rockets should be of the same strength as those that were fired on the town; only their range may have been extended to 35-40 [?] km. A basement shelter ought to provide sufficient protection.

[p. 6] It is also necessary to be prepared for bandit attacks, explosions and provocations in the city.

For employees of our offices in Kabul that means the following:

(1) A reduction in the number of employees to the bare minimum. In accordance with the latest decision, the Embassy of the USSR has sent all women home. There are now about three hundred persons on the Embassy grounds - Vorontsov was trying to reduce this number even more. Employees sent to the USSR shall continue to remain in the employ of the Embassy; they should take their vacations and possibly work for a short period in the Foreign Ministry of the USSR. He expects that they will return to Kabul within one and a half to two months.

(2) The preparation of basement shelters in case of rocket attacks.

(3) Expecting terrorist attacks in the city; one should therefore not leave the city unless it is absolutely necessary, and then only together with other vehicles. In the event that Embassy buildings are attacked, one should not defend oneself (or return fire); one should try to hide and immediately request the assistance of the Afghan security organs (the Ministry of the Interior and the State Security). One should also immediately signal other embassies of the socialist countries by radio, informing them that they should also try and get the Afghan security forces to take action. To that end it has been agreed that the radio operators of all the fraternal embassies would meet to work out permanent contact and codes; the Embassy of the USSR will obtain the same kind of transmitters for everybody.

Vorontsov stressed that the socialist countries should not close their embassies in Kabul. At the present time it is very important to support the Afghan leadership politically and morally, to bolster its self-confidence. Vorontsov stated that the Soviet leadership is convinced that the leadership of the Afghan Republic would hold out, would resist the assault by the enemy forces, and would thus force the opposition to negotiate with them about the future organization of the country. The USSR was continuing to develop economic relations with the Afghan Republic. In his opinion, it was necessary to activate the relations between the socialist countries and the Afghan Republic, to develop contacts with private entrepreneurs and with intelligence, among others. In contacts with the leading Afghan figures (both with the representatives of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the SAZA [Toilers of Afghanistan Party], as well as other political forces), to emphasize the necessity of their unity, so that they concentrate all their forces on repelling enemy assaults and only then should they work out their personal differences.

[p. 7] It will also be necessary, according to Vorontsov, to develop a big political and propaganda campaign after 15 February, in which the following should be emphasized: it is said that the main cause of the fighting in Afghanistan is the presence of Soviet troops in the country; and yet, though Soviet divisions are now leaving, fighting continues and is even intensifying. The cause of that is the personal ambition of representatives of the Peshawar alliance and their support and instigation on the part of the USA and Pakistan. This campaign must therefore be focused on condemnation of the approach of the USA, Pakistan and the Peshawar leaders. In developing this campaign the USSR will request the assistance of the socialist countries and their mass media, as well as other members of the progressive, peace-loving public throughout the world.

After acquainting yourself with the report, please return the material to Comrade J. Molek.

Prague, 3 February 1989