MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

September 24, 1979

SECRET/SENSITIVE

INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR: ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI
FROM: THOMAS THORNTON
SUBJECT: Regional Cooperation re Afghanistan (S)

Bob Gates said that you wanted a paper on this; one is attached. I have discussed it with Gary Sick and it generally reflects his views. (C)

The paper sets forth two strategies -- A is low-key and would be my preference between the two. B is much higher profile. They could also be characterized as Indian and Iranian strategies. (And that choice tells you something about the problem!) (C)

Beyond this, you are aware of my various efforts to stimulate greater discussion of regional security problems. This is, of course, very long range. In addition, Mike Oksenberg and I are working on ideas to bring the Chinese to a greater degree of cooperation. (S)
Preliminary Observations

First, what are our objectives? Assumedly they involve:

-- Preventing a Soviet psychological victory and forcing the Soviets back at least to the status quo ante as regards Afghanistan.

-- Second, bringing about a change in government in Afghanistan that will be no less favorable to us than was the Daoud regime.

-- Third, developing a self-sustaining security system in South-west Asia that is compatible with US interests. (S)

The third of these needs further examination since it is not only an objective in itself but can also be the means of attaining the first two objectives. (S)

Ideally, we seek a regional approach which comprises an Indian leadership role in South Asia; broad acceptance of this role by strong and independent regional states (especially Pakistan); a substantial improvement in Chinese-Indian relations to the point that each accepts the bona fides of the other; the re-establishment of a strong Iran that has sympathetic relations with us and the other countries involved. The US would have no significant security involvement beyond limited arms sales to Iran, India and Pakistan, and a modest, offshore presence that was accepted as benign by all others. The USSR would play no greater role than we do except that it might be very heavily installed in Afghanistan. We are a long way from this situation and it may be unobtainable. It should, however, be our goal and we should try to avoid actions in conflict with it. (S)

Short-Term Approaches

The following suggestions fall into two groups. The first (Group A) constitutes steps that are consistent with the long term goals; the second (Group B), in varying degrees, less consistent and should be pursued only if it meets the criteria of urgency and probable effectiveness. (S)

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Original Classif. by Thomas Thornton
Review on September 24, 1985
1. We seek to develop increasing awareness of the situation through a program of diplomatic and intelligence briefings. The main aim, from our point of view, is heightening the awareness of the regional states that Soviet involvement in Afghanistan presents a novel security problem for them. Most of them do recognize this; India, which is key to our strategy, is however reluctant to accept the idea. (S)

2. Through these discussions we are seeking to stimulate discussion of the problem among the regional states. We should do more -- e.g. urging Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, etc. to put pressure on the Indians to take account of their regional concerns. (S)

3. The China factor must be turned into a positive rather than a negative element -- i.e. Peking should take added initiatives to improve relations with India and reduce the Indian perception of a Sino-Pakistani (and perhaps US) alliance. (S)

4. Something has to be done about Iran. First, it seems incapable of purposeful action; second, our relations with it are poor; and third, its strident Islamic tone frightens the Indians. The third point might be amenable to improvement if we could convince the Iranians to initiate some discussion with the Indians about their concerns with the Soviet role in Afghanistan. (Similarly, we might encourage the Iranians to start thinking of the Chinese as a potentially useful connection in that regard.) The first and second might be amenable to some improvement if we and the Iranians could find ground for collaboration in approaching the Afghan problem. This subject has been broached; discussions could be intensified. (S)

5. The Pakistani element is substantially frozen by the nuclear impasse, although there seems to be increasing Pakistani interest in assistance to the insurgents. The problem with that is ensuring that it not justify a Soviet intervention or otherwise evoke a more direct Soviet threat to Pakistan. We have consultations coming up with the Pakistanis next month and can sound them out better then. Before then, we should concentrate on intelligence exchange. (S)
6. India is very difficult to deal with because of the absence of a functioning government. This problem will at the earliest be resolved early next year. In the interim, we should play an unobtrusive role, concentrating perhaps on briefings through intelligence liaison channels. We should not take the initiative in urging the Indians to consult with others. (S)

In sum -- We would be relying essentially on the regional states to take initiatives among themselves to heighten mutual awareness and perhaps lay the groundwork for cooperative action. Our role would be limited to behind the scenes efforts and the risks would be small. But the chances of an effective result are also not great unless there is a massive and unambiguous Soviet intervention in Afghanistan that so alarms the regional states that they can put lesser problems behind them. (S)
This set of actions would escalate Group A significantly in terms of US involvement. The strategy would focus on closer regional coordination, with the US playing as unobtrusive a role as possible, but nonetheless one that would be much higher profile than in the Group A scenario. (S)

1. In this strategy, the emphasis shifts from India to Iran. We would pick up on their offer to discuss the Afghan insurgency problem. If they show further interest, we would have to be prepared to offer Iran help in supporting the insurgency. We could provide arms, money and training; we would consult closely with Tehran and provide intensive intelligence briefings. It is by no means certain that the Iranians (especially Qom) want to play this role but it is one of our few shared interests and a major benefit of this strategy is that it gives us something to talk about with Iran.

2. (S)

3. The Pakistanis would be asked to coordinate with the Iranians

4. The Chinese would be urged to add something to the pot for the insurgents, working through both Iran and Pakistan. (S)

5. The overall coordination of this kind of effort would be much more structured than in the Group A case. There would have to be a focal point for coordination of effort among the parties concerned
6. Iraq is not likely to join in. We and other concerned nations should, however, urge Iraq to take a benevolently neutral stance, pointing out that the issue of the day is thwarting Soviet hegemonism, rather than exploiting old regional antagonisms. (S)

7. A heightened US military presence would be appropriate, demonstrating support for Pakistan and in the Gulf area. (S)
Theoretically, there is a Group C -- actions that would provide a much more dramatic US profile. This would call for a public and leading US role in the coordination of Southwest Asian security, involving a reborn CENTO or, at least, open US membership in the coordinating body dealing with Afghanistan. (S)

The costs of such action -- polarization, raising of unrealistic expectations, damage to other US policies -- are too high to warrant consideration, given the meager increase in benefits to be expected. (S)

Critique

There are several serious problems involved in the Group B actions (and a fortiori in Group C) that must be kept in mind:

1. Outside involvement in the Afghan situation will serve as a trigger -- and for many a justification -- for Soviet intervention.

2. Aside from the political costs with India, etc., this will make it highly unlikely that whatever we and others may do will save the insurgents from defeat. We will in all likelihood have our bluff called and emerge from the confrontation weakened. Even the regional countries who welcomed our support will have to reconsider their options vis-a-vis the Soviets.

3. The strategy relies heavily on Iran which is one of the more uncertain trumpets around. We could reduce this danger somewhat by focussing mainly on Pakistan and China, but this would simply be the replay of 1971.

4. If we drive India definitively into the Soviet camp the political cost would far outweigh whatever gains we have any reasonable expectation of making elsewhere. Hope for any stable regional security system would be destroyed. (S)

The B Strategy thus shows little promise of meeting the objectives set at the beginning of this paper. In addition, it does
not meet the test of urgency since nobody really expects us to do anything in Afghanistan. (S)

At the same time, it might be worth pursuing for domestic political reasons; as a means of showing our determination to become involved in Gulf security; or as a global signal to the Soviets. Certainly a successful thwarting of Soviet designs in this important region would be of immense benefit on all fronts. Also, this strategy could be of importance in building a new relationship with Iran and the greater the degree of foreign involvement, the greater the chances for coordination and effective action by the Afghan rebels. (S)

The cost-benefit equation will be more favorable if we can move rapidly, decisively and effectively, and if our role is appreciated. The chances of bringing this off depend partly on skill, but also heavily on our ability to manage the public information side effectively. That has not been our strong point recently. (S)