

MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

September 17, 1979

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INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR: ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI
FROM: THOMAS THORNTON
SUBJECT: What Are the Soviets Doing In Afghanistan? (S)

Simply, we don't know. Speculation is, however, intriguing. (S)

There appears to be three possibilities:

1. The entire sequence over the weekend (dismissal of the military in the cabinet; retirement of Taraki; Amin's announcement of the end of one-man leadership) was stage-managed by the Soviets as a way of getting a more acceptable government installed in Kabul. This doesn't seem likely. The Soviets made quite a fuss over Taraki last week in Moscow; Taraki would have been a much better figurehead for a national front government in Afghanistan; and the Soviets would not seem to have any reason to do in the military faction. This would seem to be the least likely explanation. (S)
2. Amin is doing the whole thing in defiance of the Soviets, facing them with a fait accompli. This would be a high-stakes game for him, but he is capable of it. It is not clear, however, why Amin would now be calling for broadened leadership unless that is solely window-dressing or nothing more than a gratuitous slap at Taraki. (S)
3. Amin started out on his own, but after the dropping of Taraki, the Soviets stepped in, called his bluff, and are now forcing him to accept a collective leadership -- something the Soviets have probably been looking for for quite a while. (S)

We have no evidence that proves or disproves any of these. [redacted] before the

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ouster of the military men may denote foreknowledge, but not necessarily complicity. As between the second and third explanations, I like the second one since I think that Amin would have held out longer in his bluff against the Soviets, and will doubt his vague professions of future collegiality until he starts implementing them. That, however, is only a guess. (TS/Codeword)

It is hard to see how the Soviets can come out winners no matter which is the case. They tried before to put a national front together and failed, probably because nobody else would play. Why would anybody be more willing to sign on now -- unless the Soviets could give credible guarantees that there would be a genuine sharing of power? That doesn't seem too likely. And, given the growing weakness of the regime, why would anybody want to share power now when they might get the whole thing shortly? (There may be in fact reasons that would impel people to do so, arising perhaps from inter-tribal considerations. But I don't understand these and know nobody who does.) (S)

Most likely, the Soviets have just been pushed a big step nearer to their moment of truth in Afghanistan. In this game of "Ten Little Afghans," there is now only one left. (S)

Whatever the Soviet role in this, they should be made to look as if they had a hand in the operation. Taraki was something of a Lenin figure and had a degree of foreign respect. Amin is the Stalin of the drama and the Soviets should have him hung prominently around their necks. (S)

Bremont concurs.

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