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Soviet-style scenario for Afghan national reconciliation

20/11/2008 MOSCOW. (Pyotr Goncharov, foreign news commentator, for RIA Novosti) - The Soviet Union fought in Afghanistan from December 1979 till February 1989. Right now, U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan are coming to resemble a Soviet-style scenario and timeframe.

The two wars have some interesting similarities.

In 1986, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev voiced Moscow's decision to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. Gorbachev's statement came seven years after the U.S.S.R. deployed its troops in the country. The Soviet side officially said it was impossible to solve the Afghan problem solely by using military force.

Although Moscow's decision to pull out from Afghanistan shocked many people, the then Afghan leader, Dr. Najibullah, and his entourage quickly recovered and proclaimed the so-called "national reconciliation" policy.

Najibullah then moved to convene the Loya Jirga, or Grand Assembly, which was originally attended only by Pashtun tribes, but later included other ethnic groups. He also called on the armed opposition to negotiate.

History tends to repeat itself. The U.S.-led anti-terrorist coalition, which also includes Russia, has been fighting in Afghanistan since October 2001. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a NATO-led security and development mission in Afghanistan, was established by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001.

Although a troop withdrawal is still out of the question, the parties concerned have already started talking about the need to negotiate with the Afghan opposition.

On November 16, Afghan President Hamid Karzai called on Taliban leaders to launch talks. His somewhat categorical statement was addressed to part of the international community supporting the struggle against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

If Mullah Omar Mohammad, the Taliban leader, tells me that he wants to return to Afghanistan or to conduct peace talks, I will do anything to guarantee his safety, President Karzai said.

He said the international community should either oust him or not interfere with his actions, even if it opposed his plan.

NATO is so far the only international organization to support Karzai's move. If President Karzai and the government of Afghanistan make this choice, then we will support it, NATO spokesman James Appaturay said.

NATO believes that there is no purely military solution to this problem, Appaturay said.

It appears that all 40 nations that have contributed their troop contingents to ISAF share this position, all the more so as NATO virtually represents ISAF interests.

Russia, the only country to oppose the proposed talks, was indirectly supported by Washington.

Ambassador George A. Krol, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, said the talks could get underway if the Taliban laid down their weapons, returned to civilian life, renounced all ties with Al-Qaeda, recognized the primacy of the Afghan Constitution and president, and if they recognized the U.S. government as their partner.

However, this resembles the terms of surrender, rather than a format of future talks.

The United States should admit that it missed an excellent chance to convert Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the official name used by the U.S. government for its contribution to the war in Afghanistan, into a peace-enforcement operation. Washington should have done this right after the creation of the interim Afghan administration in Kabul. A peace-enforcement operation should have been conducted on the initiative of that administration and should have also stipulated talks with the Taliban.

That opportunity was missed, however, and the Taliban have now seized the initiative. Naturally, the Taliban turned down Karzai's offer and said there could be no talk of a ceasefire agreement pending the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

The Taliban also noted Washington's obvious tactical mistake and inquired why President Karzai didn't think about negotiations in 2001.

Although the Afghan leader pondered and repeatedly noted the need for such dialogue, his stand had many opponents both inside Afghanistan and among international community members.

It turns out that President Karzai was right, after all. But the Taliban is unlikely to negotiate on Washington's terms.

There would be no need for peace talks, if the Taliban lay down their weapons, return to civilian life, renounce all ties with Al-Qaeda, recognize the primacy of the Afghan Constitution and president, and if they recognize the U.S. government as their partner.

Still this seems unlikely because the Taliban has seized military initiative and because any local peace talks should be preceded by a ceasefire. The current situation is no exception either.

Dr. Najibullah was a skilled politician who knew the feelings of ordinary Afghans. By proclaiming the national reconciliation policy and calling on the armed opposition to negotiate, he retained political initiative and won people's sympathies. He also got rid of state symbols that irritated the Afghan population and initiated a ceasefire agreement.

Right now, the traditionally influential ulems (experts on Islamic law) and the Muslim clergy of western Afghan provinces support the idea of negotiating with the Afghan Taliban, but do not want to hold talks with foreign members of the Taliban movement.

The national reconciliation program launched by Dr. Najibullah is appropriate in the present-day context. Most importantly, the international community should not hinder the efforts of President Karzai and the Afghan nation to negotiate with the Taliban because no one else knows this problem better.

No matter what we say about the allegedly pointless talks and a flawed ceasefire agreement with the Taliban, this choice belongs to the people of Afghanistan, and nobody else.

The opinions expressed in this article are of the author and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.