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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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*Dear Michael,*

Why did the Soviet Union invade Afghanistan?

Following the conversation between the Prime Minister and Lord Carrington on 2 January, I enclose a note of FCO views on this question. It has not been cleared with other government departments.

*yours ever*

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## WHY DID THE SOVIET UNION INVADE AFGHANISTAN?

Soviet Foreign Policy: Expansion and Opportunism

1. A major aim of Soviet foreign policy is to gain influence world-wide and to reduce and limit Western and Chinese influence. The cohesion of NATO, reinforced recently by demonstrations of resolve such as the decision on TNF modernisation, has blocked Soviet military expansion in Europe for the time being. So the Russians have been concentrating on amassing military strength which could be used for political arm-twisting in Europe, as well as on subversion, propaganda and diplomatic blandishment.

2. The main thrust of their expansionism has been in the developing world, where in recent years they have become much more assertive. In 1975 they correctly judged that the United States, after Vietnam, would not react strongly to the unprecedented military intervention by Cuban proxy forces in Angola. Then came the intervention in Ethiopia, much greater influence in South Yemen, and Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea.

Motives in Afghanistan

3. The Soviet desire for greater influence is especially strong in relation to nearby countries. The Russians have steadily built up their influence in Afghanistan, particularly since 1973 when the monarchy was overthrown. In April 1978 they made a major advance through the installation of Taraki's communist regime. Although this was rapidly weakened by internal dissension, the Russians continued to support the government and gradually increased the numbers of Soviet civilians and military advisers. The crude doctrinaire approach of the government, aimed at increasing its power in the provinces, and a hurried land reform programme alienated the Moslem tribes. The Afghan army proved incapable of dealing with the insurgents. Russians began to be killed. The rebellion was very disorganised but the government began to crumble with purges and shootings. President Taraki tried to remove his prime minister Amin; but Amin, in whom the Russians seem to have had no confidence, came out on top. Moscow was soon faced with a dilemma; to risk the ousting of Amin by some group which might prove anti-Soviet and possibly pursue a nationalistic Moslem extremist line, or to intervene, install an alternative or their own choosing and try to end the revolt. Careful plans had clearly been laid in case the

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second course was chosen, and the infrastructure had been installed during many years of Soviet aid. The Russians used excuses for aggression that were even more breathtakingly untrue than on past occasions. The major reasons why they acted were that they thought they risked losing their investment in a neighbouring country, when Iran was already in chaos and, on the other side of Afghanistan, China was becoming a world power. In addition, abandonment of a 'socialist revolution' would have meant loss of face.

#### The Invasion

4. In undertaking this first use of Soviet armed forces outside the Warsaw Pact since the War, the Russians must have calculated that the advantages for their position in Afghanistan outweighed the risks in East-West relations and to Soviet standing in the world. They perhaps thought that Western protests and gestures would be short-lived and that there would be no retaliatory measures which would really hurt the USSR. They will have foreseen the risk of driving the West and China closer together but may have judged that this process was in any case taking place. They presumably now intend to quell the rebels to a large extent but, despite the disunity and inefficiency of the rebels, this may require more than the 50,000 Soviet troops so far in the country. The Soviet political purpose will be to consolidate a lasting grip on Afghanistan, while maintaining the country's nominal independence and its membership of the Non-Aligned movement.

#### Implications

5. The Russians will hope, from their new base in Afghanistan, to be better placed to extend their influence in Asia, and to make further advances in Russia's long-standing search for access to the Indian Ocean. Pakistan is unstable and could be vulnerable. The Soviet Union could seek to exploit the border disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan as a basis for political and military intervention. In Iran, the Russians have not so far been involved in the revolution, and their invasion of Afghanistan will add to Iran's distrust of the Soviet Union. But the latter has very strong power-political and energy motives for trying to gain influence in Iran if opportunities arise out of the current chaos there. The

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Russians will hope to increase their influence in India if Pakistan moves closer to the West.

6. New Soviet leaders may prefer to be cautious on the international scene for a time. But, if the present military intervention succeeds, the use of Soviet or proxy forces in developing countries will attract the Soviet Union even more in the future. At the same time, the Russians have reasons for pursuing a limited kind of ~~c~~tente with the West - notably the desire to avoid confrontation with the US and for technology and grain on credit. Whether the military option is actually adopted on future occasions will thus depend significantly on whether the West and the world react now to the invasion of Afghanistan more sharply and lastingly than the Russians have expected.

Eastern European and Soviet Department  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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