

**March 18, 1979**

**Telephone Conversation between Soviet Premier  
Alexei N. Kosygin and Afghan Premier Nur  
Mohammed Taraki**

**Citation:**

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**Summary:**

This conversation reveals the difficulty that the Afghan political leadership faced in establishing a government--despite substantial military aid and advice from the Soviet Union.

**Original Language:**

Russian

**Contents:**

Translation - English

Top SecretSpecial FolderKOSYGIN. Tell Cde. Taraki that I would like to pass on to him warm greetings from Leonid Il'ich [Brezhnev] and from all members of the Politburo. TARAKI. Thank you very much.KOSYGIN. How is Cde. Taraki's health, is he very tired? TARAKI. I'm not tired. There was a meeting of the Revolutionary Council today. KOSYGIN. This is good, I am very glad. Ask Comrade Taraki [The conversation was conducted through an interpreter. - B. G.], perhaps he will outline the situation in Afghanistan.The situation is bad and getting worse. During the last month and a half about 4,000 servicemen in civilian dress have come from the Iranian side and infiltrated the city of Herat and military units. Right now the entire 17th Infantry Division is in their hands, including the artillery regiment and an air defense battalion, which is firing on our aircraft. Battles are continuing in the city.KOSYGIN. How many people are in the division?TARAKI. Up to 5,000. All the ammunition and depots are in their hands. We're carrying food products and ammunition by air from Kandahar to our comrades who are fighting with them now.KOSYGIN. How many people do you have left there?TARAKI. Five hundred men. They are at the Herat airfield headed by the division commander. We have sent an operations group there from Kabul by air as reinforcements. They've been at the Herat airfield since morning.KOSYGIN. But have the division's officers or the part located with the division commander at the airfield also betrayed you?TARAKI. A small part is on our side; the rest are with the enemy.KOSYGIN. Do you have support among the workers, city petty bourgeoisie, and the white collar workers in Herat? Is there anyone still on your side?TARAKI. There is no active support on the part of the population. It is almost wholly under the influence of Shiite slogans - follow not the heathens, but follow us. The propaganda is underpinned by all this.KOSYGIN. What is the population of Herat?TARAKI. Two hundred to two hundred fifty thousand. They are behaving in accordance with the situation. They will go where they are led. Right now they're on the side of the enemy.KOSYGIN. Are there many workers there?TARAKI. Very few - between 1,000 and 2,000 people in all.KOSYGIN. What is the outlook in Herat, in your opinion? TARAKI. We think that Herat will fall this evening or tomorrow morning and be completely in enemy hands.KOSYGIN. What are the prospects? TARAKI. We are convinced that the enemy will form new units and will develop an offensive.KOSYGIN. Do you have the forces to rout them?TARAKI. I wish it were the case.KOSYGIN. What, then, are your proposals on this issue?TARAKI. We ask that you extend practical and technical assistance, involving people and arms.KOSYGIN. It is a very complex matter. TARAKI. Otherwise the enemy will go in the direction of Kandahar and on in the direction of Kabul. They will bring half of Iran into Afghanistan under the flag of the Herat division.Afghans are returning who had fled to Pakistan. Iran and Pakistan are working against us, according to the same plan. Hence, if you now launch a decisive attack on Herat, it will be possible to save the Revolution.KOSYGIN. The whole world will immediately get to know this. The rebels have portable radio transmitters and will report it directly.TARAKI. I ask that you extend assistance.KOSYGIN. We must hold consultations on this issue.TARAKI. While we consult, Herat is falling and there will be even greater difficulties for both the Soviet Union and Afghanistan.KOSYGIN. Now, can you possibly tell me what forecast you can give about Pakistan and then about Iran, separately? Do you not have connections with Iran's progressives? Can't you tell them that it is currently the United States that is your and their chief enemy? The Iranians are very hostile toward the United States and evidently this can be put to use as propaganda. TARAKI. Today we made a statement to the Iranian government and transmitted it by radio, pointing out that Iran is interfering in [our] internal affairs in the area of Herat.KOSYGIN. But do you not consider it necessary to make any announcement to Pakistan?TARAKI. We will make such a statement about Pakistan tomorrow or the day after.KOSYGIN. Do you have hopes for your army? What is its reliability? Can you not gather troops to make an attack on Herat?TARAKI. We think that the army is reliable. But we can not take troops from other cities to send them to Herat, since this would weaken our positions in other cities.KOSYGIN. But if we quickly gave you aircraft and weapons could you not form new units?TARAKI. This would take some time and Herat is falling.KOSYGIN. You think that if Herat falls then Pakistan would attempt the same actions from its border?TARAKI. The probability of this is very high. Pakistani morale is rising after this. The Americans are giving them suitable aid. After the fall of Herat the Pakistanis will also send soldiers in civilian dress who will begin to seize cities and the Iranians will begin to actively intervene.Success in Herat is the key to all the remaining issues connected with the fight.KOSYGIN. What foreign policy activities or statements would you like to see coming from us? Do you

have any ideas on this question, propaganda-wise?TARAKI. Propaganda help must be combined with practical assistance. I suggest that you place Afghan markings on your tanks and aircraft and no one will be any the wiser. Your troops could advance from the direction of Kabul. KOSYGIN. They still need to get to Kabul.TARAKI. It's much closer from Kushka to Herat. But troops can be delivered to Kabul by air. If you send troops to Kabul and they go from Kabul to Herat then, in our view, no one will be the wiser. They will think these are government troops.KOSYGIN. I do not want to disappoint you, but it will not be possible to conceal this. Two hours later the whole world will know about this. Everyone will begin to shout that the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan has begun. Tell me, Cde. Taraki, if we deliver weapons to you by air to Kabul, including tanks, then will you find tank crews or not?TARAKI. A very small number.KOSYGIN. How many?TARAKI. I do not have exact figures. KOSYGIN. But if we quickly airlift tanks, the necessary ammunition and make mortars available to you, will you find specialists who can use these weapons?TARAKI. I am unable to answer this question. The Soviet advisers can answer that.KOSYGIN. It means, to put it another way, that there are no well-trained military personnel or very few of them. Hundreds of Afghan officers were trained in the Soviet Union. Where are they all now?TARAKI. Most of them are Moslem reactionaries, Akhvanists [akhvanisty], or what else do they call themselves, the Muslim Brotherhood. We are unable to rely on them, we have no confidence in them.KOSYGIN. What's the population of Kabul? TARAKI. About a million people. KOSYGIN. Can't you recruit a further 50,000 soldiers if we quickly airlift arms to you? How many people can you recruit?TARAKI. We can gather a certain number of people, primarily from among the youth, but it would require a lot of time to train them.KOSYGIN. But is it impossible to recruit students?TARAKI. One might talk of pupils and 11th and 12th grade secondary school students.KOSYGIN. But is it impossible to recruit from the working class? TARAKI. The working class in Afghanistan is very small.KOSYGIN. But what about the poor peasants?TARAKI. The core can only be formed by older secondary school pupils, students, and a few workers. The working class in Afghanistan is very small, but it is a long affair to train them. But we will take any measures, if necessary. KOSYGIN. We have decided to quickly deliver military equipment and property to you and to repair helicopters and aircraft. All this is for free. We have also decided to delivery to you 100,000 tons of grain and to raise gas prices from \$21 per cubic meter to \$37.82.TARAKI. That is very good, but let us talk of Herat.KOSYGIN. Go ahead. Can you not form several divisions right now of progressive people on whom you can rely, not only in Kabul, but in other places? We could give [them] suitable weapons.TARAKI. There are no officer personnel. Iran is sending military men to Afghanistan in civilian dress. Pakistan is also sending their people and officers in civilian dress. Why can't the Soviet Union send Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmens in civilian clothing? No one will recognize them. We want you to send them.KOSYGIN. What else can you say about Herat?TARAKI. We want you to send us Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens. They could drive tanks, because we have all these nationalities in Afghanistan. Let them don Afghan costume and wear Afghan badges and no one will recognize them. It is very easy work, in our view. If Iran's and Pakistan's experience is anything to go by, it is clear that to do this work, they have already shown how it can be done.KOSYGIN. You are, of course, oversimplifying the issue. It is a complex political and international issue, but irrespective of this, we will hold consultations again and will get back to you. It seems to me that you need to try to create new units since it's impossible to count only on the strength of numbers that are coming from elsewhere. You see from the experience of the Iranian revolution how the people threw out all the Americans there and everyone else who tried to paint themselves as defenders of Iran.We'll agree to this: we will talk it over and give you an answer. And you, for your part, consult with your military and our advisers. There are forces in Afghanistan who will support you at the risk of their lives and fight for you. These forces need to be armed now.TARAKI. Send us infantry combat vehicles by air. KOSYGIN. Do you have anyone to drive them?TARAKI. We will find drivers for between 30 and 35 vehicles.KOSYGIN. Are they reliable? Won't they flee to the enemy, together with their vehicles? After all, our drivers do not speak the same language. TARAKI. Send vehicles together with drivers who speak our language - Tajiks and Uzbeks.KOSYGIN. I expected this kind of reply from you. We are comrades and are waging a common struggle and that is why we should not stand on ceremony with

each other. Everything must be subordinate to this. We will call you again and give you our opinion. TARAHI. Give our respects and best wishes to Cde. Brezhnev and the members of the Politburo. KOSYGIN. Thank you. Send greetings to all your comrades. And I wish you firmness in deciding questions, confidence, and prosperity . Goodbye.