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NEWS ANALYSIS

A Somber Warning on Afghanistan

By ALISON SMALES

GENEVA — Western powers now in Afghanistan run the risk of suffering the fate of the Soviet Union there if they cannot halt the growing insurgency and an Afghan perception that they are foreign invaders, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former U.S. national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter.

In a speech opening a weekend gathering of military and foreign policy experts, Mr. Brzezinski, who was national security adviser when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in late 1979, endorsed a British and German call, backed by France, for a new international conference on the country. He also set the tone for a weekend of somber assessments of the situation.

He noted that it took about 300 U.S. Special Forces — fighting with Northern Alliance troops — to overthrow Taliban rule after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

Now, however, with about 100,000 U.S. and allied troops in Afghanistan, those forces are increasingly perceived as foreign invaders, much as the Soviet troops were from the start, Mr. Brzezinski said.

For President Barack Obama, Afghanistan is the foreign policy issue that has “perhaps the greatest need for strategic review,” said Mr. Brzezinski, who met with Mr. Obama during the presidential campaign last year, and endorsed his candidacy but was not a formal adviser.

“We are running the risk of replicating — obviously unintentionally — the fate of the Soviets,” Mr. Brzezinski said in his speech Friday night.

The presence of so many foreign troops underpins an Afghan perception that the Americans and their allies are hostile invaders and “suggests transformation of the conflict is taking place,” he added.

A new international conference would help devise a more refined strategy, Mr. Brzezinski said in a brief interview Sunday. Using the military to support a development strategy would help prolong the European presence, he suggested — “our European friends are less likely to leave us in the lurch.”

If the United States is left alone in Afghanistan, Mr. Brzezinski said Friday night, “that would probably spell the end of the Alliance.”

A discussion on Afghanistan on Saturday featured, among others, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British foreign secretary’s special representative for Afghanistan and a former British ambassador to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

“All is not doom and gloom in Afghanistan,” Sir Sherard told the conference, the Global Strategic Review of

the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, a nongovernment organization. But “walking away would destroy everything that has been achieved.”

“The pullout option is not one that any government could responsibly follow,” he added, emphasizing, that America’s role was crucial. “While Obama remains committed, we remain committed.”

In calling last weekend for a conference on Afghanistan, Britain and Germany seemed anxious both to dispel the tension that has arisen surrounding the election there last month, in which foreign observers say there were clear incidents of fraud, and to shift emphasis away from the rising numbers of foreign troops.

Sir Sherard suggested the solution lay in devolving political power back to tribal elders who have traditionally held sway in Afghanistan, and funneling money for development through them.

With 68,000 troops from the United States expected by the end of the year and some 40,000 from other countries, numbers — and the rising number of deaths and casualties — are going to influence not only hostile Afghans but Western public support for the Afghan mission.

Speakers at the conference said that Americans are unlikely for long to support maintaining many times the number of troops from Britain, Germany and France, the three European allies who have sent the most soldiers to Afghanistan.

What is needed now is “the intelligent application of military force” alongside long-promised development strategies, Sir Sherard said, evoking what he called a dream that, by 2011, a truckload of pomegranates would be able to pass unhindered from Afghanistan through Pakistan and into India, that Western students could study Afghan archaeological ruins, and that posters in the Pashto language inviting Pashtuns to “come on over” from the Taliban would be tattered remnants — unneeded rather than unheeded — on the roadsides of southern Afghanistan.

“That,” he stressed, “is the dream.”

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