

THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGIC CONTEXT

A Monograph

by

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ABSTRACT

THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGIC CONTEXT, by Major Harry M. York, 46 pages.

The historical record of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan has contributed greatly to a growing body of knowledge about military withdrawals from an ongoing conflict. It contains a number of lessons for international actors attempting to perform similar tasks today. However the strategic context of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 is vastly different from what the United States (U.S.) currently faces in its pending 2014 withdrawal from Afghanistan. This monograph investigates the Soviet policy objectives for military intervention in 1979, whether or not the Soviets intended a protracted occupation, what factors precipitated the withdrawal in 1989, and answers the question of how the strategic context related to the Soviet operational approach to their withdrawal. Determining how the strategic environment shaped the Soviet withdrawal informs how the strategic context of the impending U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan may require a different operational approach.

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan echoes many similarities to the U.S. experience two and a half decades later. The three most notable similarities are acknowledgement of the limits of military power, Afghan cultural resistance to foreign intervention, and the policy objective of making Afghanistan stable and secure.

There is however a major difference between the Soviet experience and the U.S. experience that would affect the operational approach. Two super-powers no longer polarize the world trying to interfere with each other's interests. With very few exceptions, nearly every country in the world supports the establishment of a stable and self-sufficient government in Afghanistan. This very important difference has implications for the operational approach to withdrawal because it implies a worldwide consent to having an international security presence in Afghanistan until the government is fully self-sufficient. Yet history suggests that Afghan culture will continue to resist both an international security presence and a self-sufficient central government. Whereas the Soviet fundamental interest in withdrawal was a part of Gorbachev's broader reforms, the U.S. challenge is going to be how to deliver an Afghan government that is diplomatically recognizable to the international community, represents the interests of the Afghan population, and denies safe haven to international terrorist organizations. The three goals conflict with one another because the population seems to be content with fragmented de-centralized governance, and it is either supportive or indifferent to militant Islamic movements.

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ACRONYMS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
ISI	Inter-Service Intelligence
LCOSF	Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
UN	United Nations

INTRODUCTION

The historical record of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan has contributed greatly to a growing body of knowledge about military withdrawals from an ongoing conflict. Noted author Alex Marshall stated in his 2007 *Small Wars and Insurgencies* article entitled “Managing Withdrawal: Afghanistan as the Forgotten Example in Conflict Resolution and State Reconstruction” that the availability of new Russian memoir material, excellent individual monographs, and large amounts of declassified material allow a more thorough understanding of the Soviet Union’s “operational-political” withdrawal strategy from Afghanistan.¹ As the title of Marshall’s article suggests, he also argues that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan “contains a number of lessons for international actors attempting to perform similar tasks today.”² Marshall credits the Soviet operational planning, the *Grupa Operatsii* (Operational Group or OG), for coordinating political and military efforts in order to successfully accomplish an extremely complex withdrawal in an extremely complex environment. Using recently available primary source material, leading military scholar Lester Grau debunked a popular conception that the Soviets withdrew in defeat from Afghanistan. In his 2007 *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* article “Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” Grau concluded that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan “provides an excellent model for disengagement from direct military involvement in support of an allied government in a counter-insurgency campaign.”³ In fact, the United States (U.S.) Army is closely studying the Soviet

¹Alex Marshall, “Managing Withdrawal: Afghanistan as the Forgotten Example in Attempting Conflict Resolution and State Reconstruction,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 1 (March 2007): 68–89, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592310601173238> (accessed March 16, 2013).

²*Ibid.*, 81.

³LW Grau, “Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no. September (2007).

withdrawal from Afghanistan in order to develop an operational approach to its drawdown in Afghanistan set to begin in the coming months.

On the subject of operational approach, School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) Professor Dr. Thomas Bruscino stated in his draft theoretical paper entitled “The Theory of Operational Art and Unified Land Operations” that in order to sequence tactical actions to achieve a political objective; the operational approach must include a comprehensive understanding of the strategic context. This may include the following: policy objectives, the political environment, and the socio-cultural environment.⁴ The strategic context of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 is vastly different from what the U.S. currently faces in Afghanistan. Lester Grau provides such a detailed account of the Soviet withdrawal; he leaves little doubt that the Red Army’s tactical movements out of Afghanistan were exemplary. However, as Marshall argues, the Soviet OG coordinated the Red Army’s tactical movements in the context of its political efforts. It is therefore not necessarily an abstract template applicable to any military withdrawal during an ongoing conflict.

This monograph analyzes the strategic context of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It investigates the Soviet policy objectives for military intervention in 1979, whether or not the Soviets intended a protracted occupation, what factors precipitated the withdrawal in 1989, and answers the question of how the strategic context related to the Soviet operational approach to their withdrawal. Determining how the strategic environment shaped the Soviet withdrawal informs how the strategic context of the impending U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan may require a different operational approach.

⁴Thomas Bruscino, “Theory of Operational Art and Unified Land Operation” (Fort Leavenworth, 2012),4.

Background

Afghan society and culture is a complex web of tribal relationships that has historically been resistant to both a central government and foreign control. Various religious, ethnic, and tribal rifts have existed for centuries making Afghanistan a fractured violent country. Antonio Giustozzi, a noted political scientist and expert on Afghanistan, is skeptical as to whether or not Afghanistan will ever succeed in forming a “modern” state, or anything that would be “diplomatically recognizable” in today’s world.⁵

Historical Context of Afghanistan

Historically, Afghanistan has been a geographic crossroads between massive empires. Consequently, it is the stage on which other empires “scheme against one another.”⁶ For example, “The Great Game,” which characterized the competing interests of the British and Russian Empires in the 19th century, illustrates Afghan cultural resistance to foreign control. It also provides an interesting historical parallel to the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet Union.⁷ In the 1820s, the Russian expansion into Central Asia by Tsar Nicolas threatened the crown jewel of the British Empire, which was India. The neighboring Emirate of Afghanistan would be Britain’s buffer to Russian expansion. The first British incursion into Afghanistan began badly in 1838 with severe and frequent attacks by Afghans on the British garrison. It ultimately prompted their retreat to India in 1842, which ended in disaster when Afghan warriors killed approximately 4,500 British and Indian colonial soldiers with 10,000 civilian family members and camp followers in tow. The annihilation of the entire British column in retreat exemplifies how,

⁵Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002-2007* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 3.

⁶Michael Barthorp, *Afghan Wars: And the North-West Frontier 1839-1947* (Cassell Military, 2002), 151.

⁷T.A. Heathcote, *The Afghan Wars 1839-1919* (Kent: Spellmount Staplehurst, 2003), 19.

throughout Afghan history, foreign forces occupying Afghanistan met violent resistance and ended in disaster.

By 1878, the Russian Empire had expanded to the edge of present day Afghanistan. Seeking diplomatic parity, Britain attempted to impose a diplomatic mission in Kabul along with a 40,000-man garrison. This triggered a second war in Afghanistan. The second British-Afghan war bore a striking similarity to the Cold War pattern of proxy wars in the 20th century. Neither the Russian Empire nor the British Empire had a strategic interest in Afghanistan itself other than it happened to be the geographic point through which each empire needed to impose its will on the other.

Afghanistan became a unified kingdom approximately a century prior to The Great Game. Although it was an emirate ruled by a monarchy as early as 1729, at no point in its history were its warring tribes ever truly unified under a central government. Afghanistan was probably most unified as a single country during the reign of Abdur Rahman from 1880 to 1901, with extensive support of the British Empire as a counter balance to Russian expansion. During this turbulent time, British Foreign Secretary Sir Mortimer Durand established the eastern boundary between Afghanistan and British India (later Pakistan). The Durand Line has always been, and continues to be a major issue because it divides the Pashtun tribes, which to this day do not consent to the boundary.⁸ In northeastern Afghanistan, tribal areas not a party to the British Empire's constitution such as Waziristan were ungovernable by either a central government or external power and remain so today. The "Northwest Frontier Provinces" and/or "Federally Administered Tribal Areas" today contain an indistinguishable mix of "Afghan Taliban" and "Pakistani Taliban" both harboring a deep hatred for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

⁸Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Anglo-Afghan Wars 1839-1919* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009).

International Security Assistance Force occupation and equally deep sympathies for the present day Afghan resistance.⁹

Origins of Afghan-Soviet Relations

The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize the sovereignty of the Emirate of Afghanistan on 27 March 1918. It established trade with Afghanistan and provided economic and military assistance. On 28 February 1921, the two countries established the “Treaty of Friendship.” On 24 June 1931, the two countries entered into a neutrality and non-aggression pact. The Soviets began providing regular military cooperation in 1956.

By 1972, Afghanistan had approximately 100 Soviet military advisors.¹⁰ By 1979, it had over 1,800 Soviet military advisors, and several thousand aid workers supporting road construction, irrigation and agriculture, canals, hydroelectric plants, pumping stations, technical education, and youth programs in Afghanistan. Over 100,000 Afghans travelled to the Soviet Union for education and training each year. A portion of Afghan Army officers received military education and training in the Soviet Union.

Inevitably, some Afghan men brought home Russian brides. For example, Galina Margoeva married an Afghan engineering student named Haji Hussein and lived on the outskirts of Kandahar throughout the Soviet-Afghan war, the civil war, and the reign of the Taliban. Another woman from Minsk married an Afghan Army officer who was a staff officer in the Afghan Army during the Soviet occupation, became a brigade commander in the Mujahedeen,

⁹Harry Kreisler, “Ahmed Rashid | Pakistan on the Brink | 2012,” *Conversations with History*, n.d., <http://conversations.berkeley.edu/content/ahmed-rashid-1> (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹⁰Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (University Press of Kansas, 2002), 7.

and a division commander in the Taliban Army. She spoke Farsi, wore the veil, raised nine children orphaned by war, and remained atheist. She was a committed communist throughout.¹¹

Emergence of Communism in Afghanistan

The Soviets spread communist beliefs into Afghanistan through various cultural, economic, and military exchanges. They never seriously believed that Afghan society had evolved to the point of a communist revolution. From the Soviet point of view, Afghan society had not evolved much past the Paleo-lithic period of human history. Nonetheless, Communist movements began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s but received very little support from the Soviet Union.¹²

The communist movement in Afghanistan eventually emerged as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1965. Consistent with Afghan culture, the PDPA was in reality a loosely bound group of tribes in violent competition with one another. It was not a political party in the modern western sense. A common perception is that the PDPA was neatly split into a Pashtun camp and a Tajik Camp: Khalq and Parcham. The reality was more complex. The various alliances and conflicts were constantly shifting to the extent that any characterization of the PDPA, Khalq, or Parcham would only be mildly accurate for a specific point in time. It is true however that the Khalqs were predominately Pashtun with rural agrarian backgrounds. Parchams were urbanites who tended to be more educated, although they still maintained tribal affiliations and the obligatory blood feuds that came with them. The PDPA was illegal in Afghanistan, yet King Zahir Shah seemed to favor the social and economic reforms proposed by

¹¹Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

¹²Ibid., 78.

the Parcham movement. The King's tendency toward Parcham reforms exacerbated the rift with the Khalqs.

The ideological basis for the rift in the PDPA was that the Parcham faction did not believe that Afghan society had evolved enough to become socialist, and the move to socialism must occur gradually. The Khalqs on the other hand, citing Stalin and Mao as historical examples, believed they could impose Socialism on Afghanistan by brute force.¹³ The Khalq point of view was that the Soviet Central Asian Republics, ethnically similar to Afghanistan, seemed to have successfully transitioned to Socialism under Stalin's rule.

In 1973, King Zahir Shah's cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan, deposed him and became dictator with the assistance of the PDPA. The Soviets maintained a friendly relationship with Afghanistan throughout the regime change. There is no indication that the Soviets favored the Khalqs over the Parchams, in fact the Soviet Ambassador and Chief Soviet Military Advisor were instructed to have no contact with the PDPA leaders and only deal with representatives from the Daud government. There is ample evidence that the Soviets tried to mend the rift between the two factions in order to stabilize the new regime. According to former British Ambassador Rodric Braithwaite, "Under continued Russian pressure the two factions of the PDPA eventually agreed to reunite. In July 1977 they met in Jalalabad, their first joint meeting in 10 years." However, as events such as the April Revolution and rebellion in Herat unfolded in 1978 and 1979, it became obvious the Soviets were unsuccessful in unifying the PDPA or stabilizing the Afghan government.¹⁴

On 17 April 1978, a member of the Parcham faction of the PDPA named Mir Akhbar Kyber was assassinated. The complex nature of Afghan tribal relationships makes it nearly

¹³Braithwaite, 38.

¹⁴Ibid., 38–40.

impossible to determine motives for murder. Kyber's funeral morphed into a massive political demonstration, which Daud's police brutally suppressed. The ensuing arrests were along tribal lines, and to a large degree along Khalq-Parcham lines. The arrests exploded into a series of violent and bloody events called the Saur Revolution. The Saur Revolution culminated in the killing of Mohammed Daoud Khan, his family, and all of his security apparatus.

A common perception in the West is that the Soviets orchestrated the Saur (April) revolution. Multiple sources indicate this is not the case. Retired Major General Alexander Antonovich Lyakhovskiy, the leading Russian historian of the Soviet Afghan War, indicated that the PDPA intentionally did not seek Soviet assistance because they knew Moscow would reject the idea.¹⁵ However, in the aftermath of the revolution, the Soviets had little choice but to support the new regime.

The new regime named itself the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). The new leaders, emplaced with Soviet assistance, were both Parcham and Khalq. The prime minister was Nur Mohammed Taraki, a Pashtun Khalq. The deputy prime minister was Babrak Karmal, a Tajik Parcham. The foreign minister was Hazifullah Amin, a Khalq with a master's degree from Columbia University, New York. The well-intended efforts of the Soviets to unify the Afghan government by forcing the factions to work together only resulted in further violence. Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom can fully appreciate the enormous difficulties of trying to unify a government characterized by sectarian hatred for one another. However, in Afghanistan, those were the small problems. The bigger problems erupted when the DRA tried to impose its Khalq brand of socialism on the Afghan population using Stalin and Mao as models for success. In practice, the DRA reforms were more reminiscent of Pol Pot than either

¹⁵Alexander Antonovich Lyakhovskiy, *Tragedia i Doblest Afganistana (Tragedy and Valor in Afghanistan)*, 3rd ed. (Moscow, 2009), http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose_af/afgan_tragedy_and_glory/index.shtml (accessed 18 August 2013), 108.

Stalin or Mao. However, one difference between Cambodia and Afghanistan is the Afghan warrior spirit.

Emergence of Militant Islam in Afghanistan

Virtually the entire population of Afghanistan rejected the socialist reforms of the DRA. The DRA imposed Atheism by closing mosques, abolishing Islamic law, and encouraging men to shave their beards. Land reforms made it illegal for powerful warlords to own property. The gender reforms clashed with Afghan cultural treatment of women by requiring education and schooling for females (in the same classroom as males). It imposed a minimum age at which women could be married, prohibiting the Afghan tradition of forced child marriage. Although the attempt to liberate women was a laudable effort, even the former King Zahir Shah faced widespread rebellion when he tried to promote liberation and education for girls because it clashed with the conservative principles of the Afghan tribal system. The DRA imposed the reforms with Soviet-style brutality resulting in tens of thousands of people put to death and imprisoned. In response, the entire country rebelled.¹⁶

In a previous rebellion in 1975, insurgents escaped into Pakistan where they found sanctuary to grow an insurgency. By 1978, they had a base of operations in Pakistan with training centers in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The displaced Afghans seeking refuge from Taraki's reforms strengthened the insurgency. In 1978 and 1979, they launched rebellions in Baglan, Oruzgan, Farah, Badghis, Ghower, Logar, Nuristan, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Khost, and Herat.¹⁷

¹⁶Noted scholar Antonio Giustozzi stated that the causes of insurrection were different in different parts of the country. For example, some villages initially supported the reforms but then rebelled when they were forbidden to pray in the Mosque. In other places, the first announcement of land reform led straight to an explosion. See Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 5–6.

¹⁷Russian General Staff, 30.

The March 1979 rebellion in Herat was particularly noteworthy for two reasons. First, it convinced U.S. President Carter to provide financial aid to the Islamic insurgency and second, the Soviet attitudes began to favor a “military option” in Afghanistan. When the Islamic insurgents seized control of the town, the DRA ordered the Afghan 15th Division to defeat the rebellion, but the 15th Division joined the opposition. Accounts of the intensity of the rebellion and casualty figures vary widely. A common report was that insurgents butchered approximately 200 Soviet advisors and their families. However, other researchers can only find three specific instances of Soviet citizens killed in the Herat rebellion. One was a Red Army military advisor Major Nicolai Bzyukov who was dismembered by soldiers of the unit he was advising, the Afghan 17th Infantry Division. The second was a Soviet wool buyer named Yuri Bogdanov. The third death was a Soviet oil expert killed by a stray bullet while watching the fight from a window.¹⁸ According to the Soviet General Staff report translated and edited by Les Grau, Soviet piloted aircraft bombed the town leaving an estimated 5,000 dead.¹⁹ The British ambassador to the Soviet Union, Ambassador Braithwaite, stated the Soviets responded with only a bus and truck to evacuate Soviet citizens, using one T-34 tank for security. Regardless of the casualty figures, the importance of this event is that the Soviets interpreted it as a clear indication that Afghan instability presented a danger on their southern border. The U.S. interpreted it as an opportunity to fund an Islamic insurgency that would further expand a U.S. presence on the Soviet southern border.

¹⁸Braithwaite, 45. Diego Cordovez states a Soviet official gave the higher estimate to him in 1989. See Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36. Zamir Kabulov, the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan stated on 7 September 2008 to Rodric Braithwaite, the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Russia that the lower figure was correct and total casualties were less than 100.

¹⁹Russian General Staff, 30.

Two days after the uprising, on 17 March, the Politburo met to discuss military options.²⁰ Prior to this event, Soviet military options were not serious considerations. A telephone report of the Herat rebellion from the Chief Soviet Military Advisor in Kabul, General Gorelov, alarmed members of the Soviet Politburo. He reported that the insurgents were Muslim fanatics trained and armed by Iranians, Chinese, and Americans. In truth, the Americans had not yet begun supporting the Islamic insurgency in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, “Cold War logic” would assume Americans were definitely involved. The Politburo meeting lasted four days and concluded with a decision to provide military aid consisting of materiel and 550 additional military advisors.²¹

As rebellions continued throughout the summer, the Soviets conducted division-level training exercises on the Afghan border anticipating the possibility of a mission into Afghanistan. The Soviets formed an “Islamic Battalion” consisting of Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen soldiers and based them in Tashkent (the present day capital of Uzbekistan). The *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti* (KGB) sent a SpetsNaz (Special Purpose Force) detachment code-named *Zenit*, under the command of Colonel Grigori Boyariniov to provide security to the Soviet embassy in Kabul. The Soviets sent an infantry battalion to Bagram in order to orchestrate the possible evacuation of Soviet advisors.²² By the end of the summer of 1979, the Soviet military increased its presence in Afghanistan and was prepared to stabilize the Afghan regime with force. Despite their preparations, the Soviets were still reluctant to provide military force even with repeated requests from the DRA.

A rift formed in the Afghan government concerning how to deal with the Islamic insurgency. Hazifullah Amin had consolidated power by becoming secretary of the PDPA Central

²⁰Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992*, 9.

²¹Braithwaite, 45.

²²Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 132.

Committee, a member of the Afghan Politburo, Prime Minister, and Deputy Chairman of the Afghan Armed Forces. He openly undermined President Taraki, and Taraki in turned publicly charged him with dereliction of duty. Both Taraki and Amin ignored any advice from the Soviets and insisted that massive military intervention and widespread terror would solve all of Afghanistan's problems. Four cabinet members formed a coalition against Amin without the support of President Taraki. The "Gang of Four" approached the KGB requesting assistance to remove Amin from power since Amin seemed to be the main proponent of military force and a campaign of terror. Amin removed the four ministers from office and accused them of plotting to assassinate him. When Amin sent his security forces to arrest them, a shootout occurred, killing two of Amin's security forces. The Gang of Four escaped to the Soviet Embassy on 13 September 1979 and requested the Soviets arrest Amin.

The next day on the advice of the Soviets, President Taraki arranged to meet with Amin at the Presidential Palace in order to resolve their differences and come to an agreement. Outside the meeting room was a burst of gunfire, and Soviet advisors observed Amin running away from the building wearing a blood soaked shirt. There were no eyewitnesses to the actual shooting, and two of President Taraki's bodyguards were dead. Russians close to the situation suspect that Amin staged his own assassination attempt to provide a cause for revenge. Amin fled to the Ministry of Defense building, mobilized the Afghan Army, surrounded the palace, and had Taraki arrested and killed.²³

The Strategic Context of the Soviet Occupation

Taraki's murder was a tipping point in the Soviet decision to intervene with force in Afghanistan, but there were other events tipping the scale as well. With the expulsion of

²³Vasili Mitrokhin, *The KGB in Afghanistan*, trans. Osterman (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2002), 59–62.

Americans from Iran, the Soviets knew that the U.S. would be seeking another foothold on their southern border. Amin's U.S. education and apparent ties to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) made this a very likely and dangerous possibility. The fact that nobody in Afghanistan was capable of governance created a security dilemma too dangerous for the Soviets to ignore.

Instability on the Soviet Southern Border

The mood in Moscow favored the use of force. At a minimum, they needed to replace Amin. Taraki's murder personally upset Brezhnev because they were close friends and he made a promise to protect him. Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB, was "mortified by his department's failure to keep control of events" and advocated replacing Amin with a leader the Soviets could work with.²⁴

The apparent impotence and powerlessness to influence events in Afghanistan embarrassed the Soviet leadership, especially considering the massive economic, military, and political assistance it provided. Moscow recalled and sacked nearly all of the senior Afghan advisors in November and December of 1979. On the eve of the invasion, the senior Soviet officials inside Kabul had no experience with Afghanistan.²⁵

Potential U.S. Influence in Afghanistan

To say that the Soviets were skeptical of Amin's New York City educational credentials is a mild understatement. They had strong suspicions that Amin was a CIA operative because he frequently met with U.S. Embassy officials. The Soviets felt increasingly threatened by the U.S. because the senate failed to ratify the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks II treaty (to limit nuclear weapons), and the Reagan administration reinstated the MX missile and the B-1 Bomber

²⁴Braithwaite, 74.

²⁵Ibid., 74–76.

programs. If an attack on the Soviet Union came from Afghanistan, air defenses could not protect the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test facility at *Baikonur Cosmodrome* in Kazakhstan, just across the border. Additionally, from Afghanistan the Americans could enforce a strategic embargo on the Soviet Union further harming its interests.

Spread of Militant Islam in Soviet Central Asia

The anti-Soviet Islamic insurgency spilled across the border provoking frequent skirmishes with the Soviet frontier forces. The Soviets were aware that U.S. President Carter authorized \$500,000 to the CIA in order to aid the insurgency in July 1979 after the Herat rebellion in March.²⁶ Therefore, military intervention was quickly becoming the only effective option to secure their southern border.

A narrative commonly circulated is that nobody really knows how the Soviets decided to occupy Afghanistan or why. This is not true. In fact, the Soviet leadership debated military intervention in Afghanistan at a special Party Plenum and most of those present endorsed it.²⁷ The decision to intervene in Afghanistan ended up being a foreign policy disaster, but it was not irrational. Moreover, it was not an emotional knee jerk reaction by a small inner circle of geriatric Stalin-era decision makers, which is a common perception stated by authors. The decision to use force was a solution to a very real security concern, and the majority of Soviet leadership endorsed it. They understood the costs in blood and treasure. They understood the international outrage that would result. However, a U.S. presence in Afghanistan seemed likely and they feared

²⁶Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2004); Zbigniew Brzezinski, "CRG -- The CIA's Intervention in Afghanistan," *Center for Research of Globalization*, 1998, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.html> (accessed 2 August 2013).

²⁷Braithwaite, 81.

that more. The Soviets viewed it as an encroachment on their rear that they could not let go unchallenged.

International Reaction to the Soviet Occupation

There were essentially two strategic issues surrounding the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. First, the international community believed the Soviet Union was denying the Afghan population its inherent right to self-determination.²⁸ Second, the Afghan government saw neighboring Pakistan's active support to the Afghan insurgency (Mujahedeen) as interfering with the internal affairs of Afghanistan. These two issues framed the various United Nations (U.N.) resolutions condemning the Soviet occupation. However, the Cold War entangled the two issues in a complex web of competing interests between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

The Cold War

Many scholars agree the Cold War began in 1947 with George F. Kennan's "Long Telegram," sent through diplomatic channels, and later published in a *Foreign Affairs* article entitled "Sources of Soviet Conduct." It became the basis for the U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union, generally referred to as The Containment Strategy.²⁹ However Kennan himself said that his words were twisted, containment strategy was really not what he was advocating. The Long Telegram advocated a policy of ignoring the Soviet Union and letting the system collapse on its own. But his words were twisted by others who wanted a more aggressive approach, especially after the siege of Berlin.

²⁸In this context, the "international community" is defined as the voting member states of the United Nations. See Cordovez and Harrison.

²⁹Leading Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis emphasizes that no single event precipitated the Cold War, rather the U.S. and Soviet Union evolved from being reluctant allies at the end of World War II into bitter enemies by 1947. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2005), 32.

At the conclusion of World War II, the European theater was bifurcated between the U.S. allies and the Soviet Union. By 1955, two military alliances emerged. The first was NATO with the U.S. as the hegemon, and the second was the Warsaw Pact with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) as the hegemon. In the U.S., President Harry S. Truman's administration sought to restrict the expansion of communism with a strategy of containment. The U.S.S.R. sought to accelerate the spread of communism with the belief that a worldwide communist revolution was inevitable.³⁰

Both NATO and Warsaw Pact countries avoided direct military conflict because each side possessed enough nuclear weaponry to annihilate the entire world several times over. Under the threat of "Mutually Assured Destruction," each side advanced their strategic interests taking care not to provoke the other into a nuclear exchange. In Europe, the Soviets controlled the region described as the "Eastern Bloc" which included East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Albania. The Soviets invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 in order to secure faltering Marxist-Leninist regimes. From their pre-war 1941 western border, the Soviets expanded their control over hundreds of miles through Europe into Germany. Therefore, the U.S. and its NATO allies viewed the Soviet expansion of communism as the single biggest threat to their national interests.³¹

The Cold War evolved into a series of proxy wars between the U.S. and Soviet Union that spanned the entire globe and four decades. The Korean War in 1950 represented a significant escalation with U.S. conventional forces coming in direct hostile contact with Chinese communist (Peoples Liberation Army) ground forces and Soviet piloted MiG-15 jets on the Korean

³⁰Vladislav Martinovich Zubok and Konstantin Viktorovič Plešakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev*, vol. 6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 94. For the most concise history of the Cold War, see also Gaddis.

³¹Ibid., 12–14, 28. See for example the maps of territorial changes on pages 13 and 23.

peninsula. The spread of communism to Central America and the Caribbean Islands were particularly threatening to the U.S. beginning with the Soviet-backed Cuban revolution in 1953 and escalating to the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961. The Cuban Missile Crisis in the following year came dangerously close to a full nuclear exchange between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Elsewhere in Central America, the U.S. and Soviet Union had become embroiled in the Guatemalan Civil War beginning in 1960, Nicaraguan Civil War in 1979, and the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. In the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict had evolved into a contest between Soviet-equipped Arabs and U.S. equipped Israelis.³² In the 1980s, the proxy wars had become so convoluted, a U.S. scheme to support the Nicaraguan Contras by perpetuating the Iran-Iraq war erupted into a scandal dubbed the “Iran-Contra Affair.”³³ The U.S. involvement in Vietnam is eerily similar to the Soviet-Afghan war in the sense that the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China successfully kept U.S. forces tied up in what amounted to a potentially disastrous weakening of U.S. force projection.³⁴ Likewise, the strategic goal for the U.S. support to the Mujahedeen was to bleed the Red Army, not to train and equip the Mujahedeen for a rapid decisive victory.³⁵ The Soviet-Afghan war was the last of the Cold War proxy wars.

³²Zubok and Plešakov, 112-113.

³³George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: Diplomacy, Power, and the Victory of the American Deal* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 901–904.

³⁴Oleg Leonidovich Sarin, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union’s Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993), 46-50.

³⁵Cordovez and Harrison, 102–105.

Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan coincided with the end of the Cold War in 1989 with Poland taking power as the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe.³⁶ Regime changes followed in Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. All of the regime changes were generally non-violent except Romania. The Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu, following the Chinese example of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, ordered his army to shoot pro-democracy demonstrators in Timisoara. The crackdown fueled a violent revolution and ultimately the dictator's execution on Christmas Day.³⁷

In 1991, the Soviet Union itself collapsed with its 15 republics becoming independent countries: Russia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan.³⁸ From the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the Russian Federation emerged with territory smaller than the Russian Empire under Tsar Nicolas I circa 1826.

The end of the Cold War was essentially a western triumph in a contest between two competing economic and political systems. The free market economy triumphed over the centrally-planned socialist economy. A common thread in nearly all countries of the post-Cold War era is a general acceptance of a free market economy. While the collapse of the Soviet system gave rise to 15 new countries, not all of the countries became democratic, but most if not all, accepted some level of globalized capitalism in order to grow their economies.

³⁶Gaddis, 221, 242. Beginning in 1981, the Soviet decision not to intervene in the Solidarity movement in Poland signaled a reversal of the Brezhnev Doctrine. It was during this time the Soviet economy began to rapidly decline; while the U.S. defense budget doubled during the Reagan Administration.

³⁷Gaddis, 246.

³⁸The United States and its NATO allies never recognized the U.S.S.R. claim to the Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

The Soviet Response to International Pressure

The pattern of expansion in Eastern Europe and Central America justified the international community's skepticism as to the Soviet motives for invading Afghanistan. Soviet foreign policy committed them to possibly unlimited assistance to any Marxist-Leninist movement worldwide for an indefinite period. The NATO alliance held the belief that the Soviets would expand communist dictatorships anywhere in the world by any means necessary, contrary to Stalin's clear stance, and Gorbachev renounced it entirely.

From the Soviet perspective, the charge that they were denying the Afghan people's right to self-determination was unfounded. The Soviets had an assistance treaty with Afghanistan, and the legitimate government of Afghanistan requested assistance. The DRA was enforcing its lawful right to govern its own people. The DRA request for Soviet assistance was not the issue. The Afghan insurgency was the issue because external countries (including the U.S.) were interfering with Afghanistan's internal affairs by funding an insurgency.

Early Efforts to Withdraw from Afghanistan

The increasingly large body of declassified documents from the former Soviet Union and personal memoirs of former Soviet officials indicate that the Soviets recognized that their occupation of Afghanistan was a strategic blunder from the beginning. They were seeking a way out as early as 1983.³⁹ The two events that blocked a Soviet withdrawal in 1983 were the U.S. escalation of support to the Mujahedeen, and the illness (and death) of Soviet General Secretary Yuri Andropov. Diego Cordovez, the U.N. Personal Representative of the Secretary General responsible for negotiating an end to the Soviet-Afghan war, said of a meeting with Andropov in February 1983, "Obviously the Soviet leader had his own, probably extremely serious internal

³⁹Cordovez and Harrison, 6.

problems, but the trip to Moscow had left no doubt in my mind that he himself felt the invasion had been a mistake.”⁴⁰

One other indication that the Soviets were serious about withdrawing from Afghanistan in 1983 was their commitment to the U.N. peace negotiations. During the first Geneva conference in 1983, the Soviets assigned Stanislav Gavrillov as a special liaison to Cordovez. The Soviets considered Gavrillov an “expert on the region and the highest ranking diplomat in Kabul.” He was an honest broker whom Cordovez found “crucial to the achievement of a negotiated settlement.” In May of 1983, a U.N. brokered trilateral agreement between the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, and Pakistan nearly sealed the organized withdrawal of Soviet troops. In June of 1983, Gavrillov had a heart attack. His replacement, Vasily Safronchuk, categorically rejected the terms of the agreement. Gavrillov died a few months later. Andropov had suffered kidney failure in February of 1983, and by August he was permanently hospitalized. Evidence shows that Andropov had selected Mikhail Gorbachev to succeed him, but the “old guard” Bolsheviks had firmly seized power in Andropov’s absence.⁴¹ Chernenko would become the new leader of the Soviet Union. The U.N brokered deal would languish while the Soviet military operations in Afghanistan would intensify.

A churning of Soviet leadership characterized the year 1983. An opportunity to withdraw had been lost, and to complicate matters the U.S. had a firm intelligence presence in Pakistan. There was no end in sight to stabilizing Afghanistan. Another main reason why the Soviets failed to stabilize Afghanistan quickly and withdraw in 1983 was due to failures in the operational approach to the initial invasion.

⁴⁰Cordovez and Harrison, 124.

⁴¹ Christopher Marsh, *Russia at the Polls: Voters, Elections, and Democratization* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2002), 27–48.

Factors Protracting the Occupation

The Soviet General Staff acknowledged four operational blunders with their initial invasion, which set the stage for a protracted occupation: Pashtun hostility toward the ethnic composition of Soviet forces, poor integration of “propaganda,” improper command relationships, and improper task organization. The Soviets eventually addressed these issues, but too late to keep them from affecting the strategic context of their withdrawal.

Ethnic Composition of Soviet Forces

Initially the invasion force, called the *Ogranichenny Kontingent Sovetskikh Voisk v Afghanistane (OKSVA)* translated as “Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan” (LCOSF), was composed of Central Asians. After a decade of futility in trying to unify Pashtuns and Tajiks, the Soviets should have known not to deploy ethnic Tajiks into Pashtun tribal areas. Whatever their reasoning at the time, the Soviet General Staff concluded that the ethnic composition of the LCOSF was a major factor in prolonging the violence and did little to stabilize the country. As the war dragged on and Soviet forces established a rotation schedule, they became much more sensitive to the ethnic rivalries peculiar to Afghanistan.⁴² It is important to note that less than 10 percent of the Soviet military ever deployed to Afghanistan. The majority of Soviet forces, including the vast majority of their elite forces, were oriented on Western Europe in preparation for a major war against the NATO alliance.⁴³ Neither the initial force nor follow-on rotational forces had the resources or expertise required because they were reserved for the European Theater.

⁴²Russian General Staff, 24.

⁴³Braithwaite, 125.

Poor Integration of Themes and Messages

The Soviets acknowledged that they lost the propaganda war. It seemed to the Soviets that the Afghan population never understood that they came to Afghanistan to help.⁴⁴ The Soviet General Staff all agree that “non-military” efforts such as economic assistance and local governance were not integrated at all into any of the nine major combat offensives they conducted between 1980 and 1986. It became obvious in retrospect that Soviet themes and messages did not convince anyone inside or outside of Afghanistan that their continued presence was benefitting anyone.

Convoluting Chains of Command

The LCOSF operated in Afghanistan under the operational control of a temporary headquarters called the OG (analogous to a Joint Force Headquarters), located in the Soviet border town of Termez (currently the southernmost town in Uzbekistan on the Uzbek-Afghan border). The commander of the OG was Deputy Minister of Defense Marshal Sergei Sokolov, who reported to the Minister of Defense. The LCOSF was a task force made primarily from the 40th Army, which was subordinate to the Commander of the Turkmenistan Military District in Tashkent, General Tukharinov, who reported to the Chief of Staff in Moscow, not the Minister of Defense. Therefore, two different chains of command issued orders to the LCOSF without coordination. In Kabul, the Chief Soviet Advisor to the Afghan government, responsible for the several thousand military advisors already in Afghanistan, believed that he too had operational control of all Soviet forces operating in Afghanistan. These three “competing commanders” each had different allies in Moscow politics. The personalities were very forceful, and they did not

⁴⁴Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 122–123, 129; and Lyakhovskii, 117–118.

always agree. The contradictory guidance never fully disappeared and tended to compound the existing complexities of the military operation.⁴⁵

Task Organized for the Wrong War

Another major problem with task organization was the size and composition of the units. The LCSOF was only a portion of the 40th Army. It consisted of two motorized rifle divisions, an airborne battalion, a helicopter battalion, and a tank battalion. It was a small operation by Soviet standards. In comparison, the 1956 invasion of Hungary consisted of 17 Soviet divisions, and the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia consisted of 18 Soviet divisions and eight Warsaw Pact divisions.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the tactical formations were too large for what they faced in Afghanistan. The terrain was too restrictive, and they were unable to react quickly enough to insurgent activity. The large-scale tactical operations caused extensive civilian casualties. The Soviet operational approach was to separate the guerilla fighters from their source of power by depopulating the centers of known guerilla activity. The result was that 30 percent of the pre-war Afghan population became refugees. Instead of eliminating the insurgency, the depopulation campaign increased the support to insurgents and added over 5.5 million displaced potential fighters. The Soviets eventually restructured the command relationships and deployed in formations no larger than battalion size, but not before creating a refugee crisis in neighboring Pakistan and a massive displaced population of Islamic militants.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Braithwaite, 85.

⁴⁶Comparing the size of the invasion force for Afghanistan to prior to Soviet actions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia provides further evidence that the Soviets did not plan, prepare, or equip for a protracted war or indefinite occupation.

⁴⁷Russian General Staff, 21–34.

Support to the Islamic Insurgency

Soviet efforts in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate. By 1986, the Soviet General Staff concluded, “It was clear to reasonable people that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem.”⁴⁸ It was also painfully obvious to the Soviets that failure to find a solution to the Afghan problem was “mainly the result of CIA and ISI [Pakistani Intelligence] efforts to unite the counter-revolutionary movement . . . The military failure, defined by the survival of the Mujahideen movement, was not a military factor but a political factor.”⁴⁹

The Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI)

Pakistan opposed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan based on Islamic ethos. From its inception in 1947, Pakistan was by design a state grounded in fundamental Islamic beliefs. They wanted to defend their Islamic brothers from the “aggressive Godless creed of the Soviet Union”.⁵⁰ The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was an opportunity for Pakistan to assert Islamic values, repair relations with the U.S., and become a regional hegemon.

Prior to the Soviet occupation, Pakistan was suffering from U.S. sanctions because it began developing nuclear weapons in 1972 in violation of the U.N. conventions for nuclear non-proliferation. Consequently, the U.S. abandoned all economic aid and security cooperation with Pakistan. By 1979, Pakistan’s military was extremely weak, its economy was languishing, and Soviet-backed India still threatened it. Therefore, Pakistan urgently needed U.S. economic and security aide.

⁴⁸Ibid., 28.

⁴⁹Ibid., 56, 28.

⁵⁰Riaz Mohammad Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 11.

In December 1979 when the Soviet occupation occurred, the U.S. had lost its ability to monitor Soviet ICBM testing in Central Asia because the Iranian Revolutionary Government expelled the U.S. from their country. Therefore, the U.S. needed to re-establish a foothold in the region. The U.S. strategic interest was to establish itself in Pakistan in order to monitor Soviet ICBM test activity. To achieve this, the U.S. provided two economic assistance packages to the Pakistani government in conjunction with securing a CIA base of operations. The first six-year package totaled \$3.2 billion consisting of military sales, grants, and government loans at 2 percent interest. The second six-year package totaled \$4.2 billion. The combined 12-year assistance package from 1980 to 1992 totaled \$7.4 billion.⁵¹

The Afghan insurgency inside Pakistan formed first from a failed rebellion in 1975, then strengthened with Afghan refugees escaping Taraki's socialist reforms in 1978. The exiled leaders initially formed two resistance groups. The first was Jamiat-e-Islami (Islamic Society of Afghanistan) led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the second was Hizb-e-Islami (Islamic Party), led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Three additional resistance groups formed, two from prominent Pashtun religious families and the third from families loyal to the exiled King Zahir Shah. The two Pashtun groups were Jubha-e-Melli-e Nijat Afghanistan (Afghan National Liberation Front) led by Sbgatullah Mojadeddi, and Mahaz-e-Melli Islami Afghanistan (National Islamic front of Afghanistan) led by Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani. The group loyal to King Zahir Shah was called Harak-e-Inqub e Islami (Revolutionary Islamic Movement) led by Moahammed Nabi Mohammadi. Hekmatyar's Hizb group split over the conduct of a revolt in Paktia in 1979 to form a sixth group under the leadership of Yunis Khalis (Hizb e Islami Khalis). A prominent Islamic theologian Adbdul Rab Rasul Sayef, who had studied in Cairo and Saudi Arabia (currently a leading candidate to replace President Karzai in the next election), formed the seventh group.

⁵¹Ibid., 13, 28, 60.

Released from a Kabul prison in 1979, he formed Ittehad-e-Islami-Brai-Azadi-e-Afghanistan (Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan). The last group had independent Saudi and Egyptian funding in addition to U.S- backed Pakistani funds. It is important to note that alliances between these organizations were temporary and only for the purpose of political expediency.⁵² In fact, according to Alex Marshall, “Mujahideen inter-party fighting ended up inflicting as many casualties within Afghanistan as Soviet military activity . . . with relations particularly bad between Rabbani’s Jamiat-e-Islami and Hekmatyr’s Hizb-e-Islami.”⁵³

Pakistan limited its support to seven resistance groups, collectively called Tanzeemat, which is synonymous with Mujahedeen. The numerous disparate groups inside and outside of Afghanistan opposed to the Soviet occupation were never unified under one anti-Soviet banner, but the Tanzeemat did enter into an alliance in May 1985.⁵⁴

Trying to describe the character of the groups in the Tanzeemat by saying one was “Pashtun-Sufi” or “moderate” or “traditional” is problematic. The best metaphor to describe them is to say they were like water. Each group took the shape of whatever container it happened to be in at that particular moment in time. However, they did have some things in common. They all agreed on the establishment of an orthodox Islamic government for Afghanistan. They all envisioned a protracted expansion of orthodox Islam beyond the Afghan borders. They all believed in de-politicizing Islam and to that end they believed that restoring the monarchy could be a reasonable way to separate Islam from state politics. The six groups that formed before the

⁵²Khan, 73; Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, 53–56.

⁵³Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 72-80.

⁵⁴Khan, 68–69.

Soviet invasion and one group that formed shortly after became the Pakistani label for the “Afghan Resistance.”⁵⁵

The need to determine what exactly the “Afghan Resistance” was came from Pakistan’s requirement to manage the massive influx of refugees after the Soviet invasion. The refugee crisis drove a requirement to determine how to support the resistance, and who can speak on behalf of the resistance. The number of groups vying for recognition and international support exceeded 40 by 1981. They would have continued to grow if the Pakistani government had not imposed the artificial limit of seven. The only qualifying factor in determining composition of the Tanzeemat seems to be that the five original leaders had existing relationships with ISI operatives.⁵⁶

The traditional Afghan method for determining national policy is to convene a conference of tribal elders called a Loya Jirga. The numerous other groups composed of both Afghan refugees and educated Afghan émigrés vehemently disagreed with the arbitrary nature in which the ISI seemed to decide the future governance of their country. As a result, the remaining Afghan Diaspora attempted a Loya Jirga in Pakistan with the backing of the exiled king. Although Pakistan never opposed the Loya Jirga, they did nothing to promote it. Simple bureaucratic inertia prevented a more unified Afghan resistance from ever materializing. Therefore, the Tanzeemat became the face of Afghan resistance.

A common perception is that the entire Afghan resistance and the Taliban problems that came later were solely a result of ISI decisions to support groups with more militant Islamic beliefs. The ISI managed the support to the Afghan resistance, but they had very broad international acceptance. Support to the Islamic Afghan resistance also came from the Non

⁵⁵Khan, 71-72.

⁵⁶Bird and Marshall, 72-80.

Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC).⁵⁷ The ISI and the Pakistani president Mohammed Zia ul Haq formed a coalition of Islamic donor states who all envisioned an orthodox Islamic state and protracted expansion of Islam outside the borders of Afghanistan. The CIA funneled Mujahideen aid through the ISI as well. CIA funding to the Mujahideen began in 1980 at \$30 million dollars per year and escalated to a peak of \$630 million per year in 1987. The ISI therefore managed all aid from a variety of sources primarily through the NAM and OIC, with the preponderance of funding from the CIA. As a result, the support to the Afghan insurgency went to militant Islamic groups favored by the ISI, but with the consent of the international community.

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

Although the U.S. publicly denounced the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the anti-communists within the Reagan administration saw it as an opportunity. The initial U.S. support to the Mujahideen was designed to prolong the conflict in Afghanistan, not hand a quick decisive victory to the Mujahideen and form a stable government. The U.S. saw the Mujahideen as a “valuable instrument of containment.”⁵⁸ Most of the people involved in the 1983 U.N. negotiations, including Soviet special assistant Gennadi Yevstafiev, believe that if the U.S. had “actively supported Cordovez, Andropov would have prevailed over his opponents” and succeeded in withdrawing the Soviet troops from Afghanistan.⁵⁹

The U.S. had little interest in sponsoring the U.N.-brokered settlement because with the Soviets bogged down in a civil war on their border, they would bleed to death. According to Selig

⁵⁷Khan, 73.

⁵⁸Tom Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Analysis and Chronology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 11.

⁵⁹Cordovez and Harrison, 100.

Harrison, CIA director William Casey viewed the U.N negotiations in 1983 as Soviet deception. Harrison recalls an interview with National Intelligence Officer Graham Fuller saying that Casey's "underlying assumption was the Soviets would never leave." Former Chief of Staff of the Army General Meyer said in an interview with Harrison, "Casey would say that he wanted them out, but he actually wanted them to send more and more Russians down there and take casualties."⁶⁰ If Casey believed the Soviets would never leave Afghanistan, then prolonging the conflict in order to weaken the Soviet Union would have been the best outcome in lieu of a withdrawal. Therefore, Casey's strategy in supporting the Mujahedeen was to keep them fighting, not equipping them for victory.

According to journalist Bob Woodward, during the spring of 1983, Casey was in control of American relations with Pakistan. Casey had the closest relationship with President Zia of any member in the Reagan administration.⁶¹ Both liberal and conservative legislators criticized Casey for supplying the Mujahedeen with "inadequate quality and quantity of weaponry."⁶² The Kremlin was well aware of this, which is why they stopped thinking about withdrawing.

Representative Charles Wilson of Texas single handedly took up the cause of increasing support for the Mujahedeen. He quadrupled the CIA budget in 1984 from \$30 million to \$120 million. By 1987, he had incrementally increased the Mujahedeen funding through Pakistan to over 20 times its original level: \$630 million. According to Harrison, the Saudi Arabian government matched all of the increases.⁶³

⁶⁰Ibid., 102-103.

⁶¹Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 310–312.

⁶²"A War for All Congressmen," *The Economist*, 19 January 1985.

⁶³Cordovez and Harrison, 157.

Strategic Context of the Soviet Withdrawal

The single most important factor for the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 was the appointment of Mikhail S. Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985. Gorbachev recognized that the Soviet Union was internationally isolated, and socially backward. Placing the blame for these serious issues squarely on the Soviet leadership, he introduced sweeping reform programs termed *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (economic restructuring).⁶⁴ The withdrawal from Afghanistan was one element of Gorbachev's overall effort to reform the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ It had nothing to do with whether or not the Soviets were successful in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Glasnost

In his book *Russia at the Polls: Voters, Elections, and Democratization*, SAMS Professor Dr. Christopher Marsh wrote that Gorbachev wanted to “make party and state leaders more responsive to the people's needs by opening them up to criticism”.⁶⁶ The *Glasnost* policy required public officials to appear on radio and television programs to answer complaints from the population, and stand for competitive elections. Of the many unintended consequences of open debates about public policy, allowing the public to express its outrage over the Soviet-Afghan war was a significant factor. Moreover, the leadership could not silence the public outcry over the Soviet war in Afghanistan once it began.

Perestroika

Gorbachev's primary motivation for a firm, unambiguous, unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan stemmed from the urgent need to reform the Soviet economy. Dating back to the

⁶⁴Marsh, 35.

⁶⁵Ibid., vi; and Rogers, 7–10.

⁶⁶Marsh, 35.

regimes of Lenin and Stalin, the Soviet Union had a very one-dimensional foreign policy based on military force. Military power was the Soviet Union's only source of international status, and it had over-extended itself. By 1980, the Soviets had to address the enormous inconsistency between domestic conditions and its superpower status. Compared to the U.S., Soviet defense spending was twice the percentage of its Gross National Product. They had an army of nearly 775,000 troops (compared to 545,000 U.S. troops), over a half million of which were stationed in Eastern Europe and 105,000 in Afghanistan. The sheer cost of its military posture was causing the entire socialist model to fail.⁶⁷ Although the cost of the military was the biggest economic factor, it was not the only factor. It was a downward spiral of several factors, each one exacerbating another. For example, the Soviet Union's main source of hard currency was petroleum, the prices of which dropped considerably in 1985. The lack of hard currency made it difficult for the Soviet Union to purchase machinery and technology for modernization. Lacking modern equipment, production of consumer goods stagnated and then declined. The shortage of consumer goods caused a decline in the standard of living, which caused public complaints within the framework of *glasnost*, which caused domestic instability.

Gorbachev not only sympathized with the commonly held belief that no military solution existed for the Afghan problem, but that whatever the problem was in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union was not going to keep pursuing solutions indefinitely. In 1985, Gorbachev gave the LCOSF and Afghan DRA a deadline of one year to conclude major combat operations and begin withdrawal.⁶⁸ It is not clear if Gorbachev himself increased the tempo of the Afghan war, or he lacked control over the hard-line Soviets opposed to his reformist agenda. In any case, the LCOSF had nearly free reign and unlimited resources to end the Soviet Afghan war in 1985-

⁶⁷Gelman, 144.

⁶⁸Rubin, 146.

1986. It was the bloodiest year of the Soviet-Afghan war, and it was a year of transition to withdrawal. For Gorbachev, it was obvious by 1986 that the war had serious internal and international repercussions.⁶⁹ As a result, Gorbachev demanded an unconditional withdrawal.

Gorbachev forced the Afghan government to become independent and self-sufficient instead of a Soviet puppet state. Beginning in 1985, he began a transition process of “Afghanization” (or “de-Sovietization” for the intents and purposes of the withdrawal). It was essentially a two-phase process. In the first phase from 1985-1987, the LCSOF shared responsibility with the DRA security forces, with DRA forces gradually taking the lead. The second phase began in 1988 with the DRA having full responsibility and the Soviets withdrawing.⁷⁰

Gorbachev drove the withdrawal process with a firm hand. He insisted on sticking to a withdrawal timeline regardless of conditions on the ground. This served as a forcing mechanism for the Afghan government to step up and accept responsibility for governing their country. For example in the first week of January 1988, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze emphasized to Afghan president Najibullah that the Soviet withdrawal was not contingent on any internal political agreements. Yuli Alekseyev, head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry for Afghan issues, claimed that the Soviets would withdraw even with the possibility of the country descending into civil war, and even if the Afghan government did not have a monopoly on power.⁷¹

In his book *Out of Afghanistan*, Diego Cordovez claims that one of the thornier issues negotiating the Soviet withdrawal was the issue of the Afghan resistance. The Soviets required

⁶⁹Russian General Staff, xxiv.

⁷⁰D. G. Fivecoat, “Leaving the Graveyard: The Soviet Union’s Withdrawal From Afghanistan,” *Parameters* 24, no. 2 (2012): 43.

⁷¹Cordovez and Harrison, 248.

that the U.S. and Pakistan must stop supplying the Mujahedeen before they could begin withdrawing. The U.S. and Pakistan required a total withdrawal of Soviet troops before they would begin to dismantle the resistance.⁷² Gorbachev completely reversed this policy. Gorbachev announced on 8 February 1988 “. . . an acceptable regime in Kabul is no longer a prerequisite for a Soviet withdrawal.” Gorbachev did suspend the withdrawal in November and December 1988 complaining that the U.S. and Pakistan were continuing to supply the Mujahedeen in violation of the Geneva Accords. However, by this time they were too far along in the withdrawal process to attempt either a military victory or political solution to stop the Mujahedeen attacks. The Soviets negotiated directly with the Mujahedeen in order to obtain a cease-fire.⁷³

Aftermath of the Soviet Withdrawal

Most commentators in the Soviet Union predicted Afghanistan would turn into a bloodbath after their withdrawal.⁷⁴ By continuing to exist for two more years, the nascent Najibullah regime demonstrated some indication that it would succeed on its own. The fact that it collapsed in April 1992 only four months after the Russian Federation withdrew economic aid, indicates that the Najibullah regime was entirely dependent on the Soviet Union for security and economic assistance.⁷⁵ Although the Geneva Accords called for an equal drawdown of the Mujahideen in conjunction with the Soviet withdrawal, the Soviet Union continued to provide military assistance to the DRA and the Pakistani ISI continued its support to the Mujahideen.

The withdrawal of Soviet military and economic assistance to the Afghan regime instantly paralyzed the Afghan military. A lack of fuel grounded all aircraft and vehicles.

⁷²Ibid., 248-260.

⁷³Rogers, 32–47.

⁷⁴Braithwaite, 282.

⁷⁵Bird and Marshall, 27.

Mujahideen seized power quickly; however, they were never able to form a unified Islamic government because Gulbuddin Hekmatyr's Hizb-e-Islami group refused to cooperate.

The Afghan Civil War

As the favored leader among the Pakistani ISI, Hekmatyr had received the lion's share of financial support. His military organization seemed to be the most highly disciplined of the seven factions that composed the Tanzeemat. It had a Soviet style security apparatus with Islamic religious monitors to control his subordinate commanders, much like Soviet political officers. Najibullah's strongest commander General Dostum defected with a force of 40,000 Afghan soldiers to join Ahmad Shah Massoud's insurgent force, causing Najibullah to peacefully step down in April 1992.

Within a month, Hekmatyr began attacking the Dostum-Massoud alliance in Kabul with rockets. By the end of the year, Hekmatyr's force killed approximately 5,000 and displaced approximately one million civilians. The shelling reduced Afghanistan's most modern city to rubble. Afghanistan plunged into a civil war from 1992-1996. In the absence of a central authority, it was a failed state. Local warlords protected and governed the various individual provinces, tribes, and districts. The country was transformed to a series of "medieval micro-states," with disputes erupting between rival warlord factions.⁷⁶

Origins of the Al-Qaeda Sanctuary in Afghanistan

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, many of the foreign Islamic militants returned to their home countries. A substantial number of the veterans were Saudi Arabians commanded by Osama Bin Laden. The Iraqi threat to Saudi Arabia after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 presented an opportunity for the holy warriors to defend the kingdom and the sacred cities

⁷⁶Bird and Marshall, 33.

of Mecca and Medina. The king of Saudi Arabia opted instead for a U.S. military solution, which became Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The Saudi King's choice was decidedly un-Islamic in the view of Bin Laden and his holy warriors, and thus began a very successful propaganda campaign characterizing the Saudi royal family as apostates and the U.S. as the "Great Satan." The ensuing feud resulted in Saudi Arabia revoking Osama Bin Laden's citizenship, a number of successful Islamic terrorist attacks on the U.S., and a number of failed U.S. attempts to kill or capture Bin Laden. In 1996, the Taliban government granted Osama Bin Laden and his Islamic army sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Rise of the Taliban

The Taliban was an Islamic political movement that originated in one of the religious schools provided to Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Religious schools along the Afghan-Pakistan border grew from 244 before the Soviet invasion to 1,869 by the Soviet withdrawal. Mostly sponsored by Saudi donors, the schools provided a monthly salary with free room and board to young Afghan refugees who had no other means of receiving an education or employment. One religious school in particular, the Jama'at Ulema-i- Islamiyya Madrasa in Karachi, housed primarily Afghan refugees from nearby Kandahar. By 1994, Kandahar had descended into total lawlessness with numerous atrocities committed against unprotected women and children.⁷⁷ A group of Kandahari students from the Jama'at Ulema religious school calling themselves "Taliban" (students) attacked and captured Kandahar in order to restore order. With only 16 rifles among them, the Taliban emerged as a military force with the capture of Kandahar, the surrounding provinces, and the border crossing at Spin Boldak.

⁷⁷Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (New York, NY: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 27–29.

The capture of Spin Boldak on 12 October 1994 was significant because the Taliban captured a Hekmatyr weapons cache, providing them with an infusion of rifles and a supply line back to Pakistan.⁷⁸ After their initial success in Kandahar, the Taliban performed poorly in subsequent military engagements and would have been defeated by Hekmatyr had it not secured external support. Their idealistic political platform, to form an orthodox Islamic state, appealed to Pakistan and the Wahabi of Saudi Arabia. External support and military hardware secured in Kandahar eventually led to Taliban military victory. They formed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996.

The core of Taliban rule was enforcement of Islamic law. They made sure the local population attended the mosques for daily prayers, enforced prohibitions on TV, VCR, and satellite dishes, and made sure men's beards were of the proper length among other things. They did nothing to remove or replace the black market economy that emerged during the Soviet occupation. The Taliban were content to collect taxes on trucking fees imposed by various warlords, and on the 2,500 tons of opium exported annually from Afghanistan.⁷⁹

The Taliban and its supporters envisioned Afghanistan as a base for a transnational movement that would expand orthodox Islamic governance worldwide. Therefore, from 1994 onward, the Taliban was a coalition composed of not only Afghans, but also approximately 30,000 Pakistani nationals and 3,000 other militants from a variety of Islamic countries. The Taliban agenda dovetailed with Osama Bin Laden's vision for his transnational Islamic army. They became so tightly integrated that, by the attacks of 11 September 2001, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were one in the same.

⁷⁸Bird and Marshall, 40.

⁷⁹Ibid, 44.

Conclusion

Summary

Soviet-Afghan diplomatic relations began shortly after Russian Revolution in 1918, and ended in conjunction with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Soviet ideology spread to Afghanistan as a side effect of economic and diplomatic exchanges. Very little evidence supports the notion that the Soviets planned or supported a Marxist-Leninist movement in Afghanistan in the same manner they swept through Eastern Europe or Central America at the height of the Cold War. The Afghan clash between Marxist ideology and Islamic ethos created an instability the Soviets could not ignore. They made a valiant effort to stabilize Afghanistan through economic assistance in the years and months leading up to the Soviet military intervention. The Soviet strategic interest in Afghanistan, before and during the occupation, was to secure its Southern border from Islamic militants and U.S. influence.

As the Cold War slips further and further into the depths of history, it becomes more difficult to appreciate the paranoia, fear, and hatred that divided the U.S. and Soviet Union or how the deep enmity played out in countries such as Afghanistan. The clash of Islamic and Soviet ideology created instability in Afghanistan that the U.S. fully intended to capitalize on. The threat of a U.S. presence there presented a clear and present danger to the Soviet Union requiring them to respond with force. Therefore, provocative U.S. foreign policy played a major role in the initial Soviet invasion and prolonging the conflict.

Diego Cordovez concluded that lasting peace failed after the Soviet withdrawal because of the “tribal rivalries, religious and ethnic rifts” that are endemic to Afghanistan. The British failed in Afghanistan playing their “Great Game” a century prior, and any outsider who dares meddle with the internal affairs of Afghanistan will learn the same hard lesson the Soviets and

British learned. Cordovez suggests that the failure of peace is simply a matter of Afghan culture. The rest of the world has no business getting involved in their tribal blood feuds.⁸⁰

Afghan culture is not the only factor. The internal affairs of Afghanistan did not provoke the Soviet occupation in 1979 as much as a fear of U.S. presence on their Southern border and the spread of Islamic insurgency into Soviet Central Asia. Afghan culture was not the primary factor in prolonging the Soviet occupation as much as international aid to the Mujahideen, or Soviet mistakes in their initial operational approach. Although the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in good order, they did not withdraw because the internal affairs of Afghanistan were particularly stable or they had achieved a military end state. They withdrew because of conditions in the Soviet Union.

Implications

Afghan culture is nonetheless a major, if not central factor in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and its future stability. The historical resistance to a strong central government and foreign intervention creates a security dilemma because Afghanistan will need both in order to assure the rest of the world it is capable of denying sanctuary to international terrorists.

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan echoes many similarities to the U.S. experience two and a half decades later. The three most notable similarities are acknowledgement of the limits of military power, Afghan cultural resistance to foreign intervention, and the policy objective of making Afghanistan stable and secure. Soviet General Staff acknowledged the limits of military power and concluded by 1986 that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem. Currently in the West, a belief that continued military activity will not achieve a higher level of security in Afghanistan is gaining wider acceptance among critics of U.S. foreign policy. Second, the Soviets underestimated local resistance to reconciling the various tribal rifts endemic

⁸⁰Cordovez and Harrison, 387.

to Afghanistan. Likewise, in spite of its best efforts, the U.S. has little impact in eliminating the various warlords that govern the country or in reducing crime and corruption in the Afghan central government. Third, although the U.S. misinterpreted the Soviet intentions, both countries' strategic goal was to establish a stable and self-sufficient government in Afghanistan capable of maintaining a monopoly on violence within the country.

There is however a major difference between the Soviet experience and the U.S. experience that would affect the operational approach. Two super-powers no longer polarize the world trying to interfere with each other's interests. With very few exceptions, nearly every country in the world supports the establishment of a stable and self-sufficient government in Afghanistan. This very important difference has implications for the operational approach to withdrawal because it implies a worldwide consent to having an international security presence in Afghanistan until the government is fully self-sufficient. Yet history suggests that Afghan culture will continue to resist both an international security presence and a self-sufficient central government. Whereas the Soviet fundamental interest in withdrawal was a part of Gorbachev's broader reforms, the U.S. challenge is going to be how to deliver an Afghan government that is diplomatically recognizable to the international community, represents the interests of the Afghan population, and denies safe haven to international terrorist organizations. The three goals conflict with one another because the population seems to be content with fragmented de-centralized governance, and it is either supportive or indifferent to militant Islamic movements.

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