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Thirty Years of War: Soviet Legacies and Today's Challenges in Afghanistan

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The United States' recent reassessment of its strategy in Afghanistan occurs at a critical time. A spreading insurgency continues to gain ground over an ineffectual Afghan army and government propped up by foreign military forces. After long deliberation, American President Barack Obama has decided to respond to this pressure by combining a troop increase with attempts to build up the Afghan army and strengthen the central government's capacity to govern. He has paired this increased effort with a commitment for a significant troop reduction beginning in 2011. It remains to be seen whether this "new" approach can improve the situation of Afghanistan and its people. However, such policies do not occur in a vacuum. Notwithstanding their ideological and geopolitical differences, America's Afghan policies and outlook today eerily mirror that of its former Soviet adversary over two decades ago.

History never truly repeats itself, however continuities persist over time. Patterns of thought developed among Soviet policymakers have reemerged in different forms among Americans facing vaguely similar problems in Afghanistan. In this vein, examining the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from the perspective of high ranking members of the Soviet establishment can perhaps shed some light on the American situation today. One should keep in mind that the Soviet invasion, coupled with massive American financial and material support for the mujahedeen resistance forces, helped create a situation of lasting insecurity, violence, and religious extremism in Afghanistan. These conditions show no signs of abating anytime soon.

On December 24th and 25th, 1979, Soviet forces from the 40th Army crossed into Afghanistan in order to replace the leadership of the existing government and secure vital parts of the country. Despite its initial projections, Soviet forces remained in Afghanistan for over nine years. The war they fought generated millions of refugees, cost the lives of some 26,000 Soviet soldiers, and an estimated one million Afghan civilians. The conflict also incurred severe costs to the stagnant Soviet economy, a factor which played an important role in the eventual disintegration of the Soviet system. Why did the Soviets invade in the first place?

In fact, Soviet involvement in Afghanistan did not begin with their Christmas 1979 invasion. In April of the previous year, elements of the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), mounted a successful coup against the increasingly unpopular government of Mohammed Daoud. The PDPA immediately called upon



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Soviet assistance and support to help them build socialism and to counter the growing Islamist insurgency in the country. However, serious divisions within the PDPA itself marred both its relations with the Soviets and the political situation within Afghanistan itself. Led by Nur Mohammed Taraki and seconded by his ambitious deputy Hafizullah Amin, the "Kahlq" faction of the PDPA represented the dominant group within the government. Several months after their coup, and against Soviet advice, Taraki and Amin conducted a systematic purge of the PDPA and the Afghan government of the rival "Parcham" faction. The leader of the Parcham group, Babrak Karmal, fled the country.

This political infighting increased Soviet misgivings about the regime. The Soviet ambassador, Alexandr Puzanov, and other Soviet advisors became convinced that Afghan governmental incompetence and parochialism had made it imperative that the Soviets themselves take a more active role in government planning and policy execution. Puzanov became increasingly frustrated by the fact that Taraki's government continually ignored Soviet advice, while at the same time augmented their requests for economic and military support.

These problems within the PDPA evolved in a broader political context that began to worry Soviet policymakers. Various factions of a growing Islamist insurgency coalesced and grew thanks to popular discontent at government initiatives aimed at radically disrupting and "modernizing" local cultural and religious practices. The success of the neighboring Iranian revolution in January, 1979 bolstered this trend, despite the Shiite-Sunni theological and cultural divide. The situation came to a head, however, in March of that year when the Afghan regime confronted an Islamist inspired uprising in the western city of Herat. The ensuing fighting and repression killed several thousand of Herat's residents, including dozens Soviet citizens. This further inflamed the insurgency and Taraki's government now faced a full fledged civil war. Over the next few months, the Soviets increased their aid to the PDPA. Groups of military advisors also deployed to the country to help train and lead Afghan troops.

However, in September, shortly after returning to Afghanistan from the Soviet Union, Taraki was killed as Amin took power in a bloody coup. This infuriated Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev as he had previously promised Taraki Soviet protection. As the Islamist rebellion against Kabul grew, the Afghan army could not effectively stop it, and some units defected to the rebels. The Soviets seriously worried about their position in the country. By late 1979, the upper echelons of the politburo, the principal Soviet decision-making body, began considering intervention. This tendency became dominant when the KGB reported that Amin had met with the Americans. The Soviets feared that, having lost Iran as a forward observation and listening post bordering the USSR, the Americans aimed at reestablishing this position through a presence in Afghanistan.



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In early December, top Soviet policymakers, led by Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB, and Dmitri Ustinov, the Minister of Defense, pushed Brezhnev to authorize a military intervention to replace Amin with exiled leader Babrak Karmal. Rather than taking the character of a small operation, Ustinov advocated a large invasion force. The large size of this force had several goals. First, it would awe the mujahedeen rebels into submission, or at least inactivity. Additionally, a large force would prevent any pro-Amin forces from significantly impeding the transfer of power. Furthermore, Ustinov wanted to use the troops to secure Afghanistan's borders with Pakistan and Iran, from whom the mujahedeen received a great deal of support. Brezhnev and the rest of the politburo signed off on the plan by December 12th. On the 24th and 25th, Soviet paratroopers landed in Kabul, and more troops crossed the Amu Darya River into Afghan territory. By the 27th they killed Amin and replaced him with Babrak Karmal who declared himself the Prime Minister of Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding its large size (around 50,000 troops), most of the politburo saw the intervention as a limited operation principally aimed at consolidating the new regime and expected to have most of the troops withdrawn within a few months. Expectations of an easy mission with limited negative consequences came to naught.

Rather than subduing the Islamist resistance, the Soviet invasion and installment of Karmal in power galvanized it. Although suffering initial losses to superior Soviet military formations, the mujahedeen quickly adopted a guerilla strategy. The Soviet army was ill-equipped for this kind of fighting as its principal military doctrines had evolved from its experiences in World War II and its expectation of fighting a large-scale conventional war against NATO or China.

Karmal and his allies began to push for radical social and political reforms aiming at empowering women and changing the role of religion in society. Instead, these policies empowered the Islamist resistance and contributed to reinforcing the alienation of the regime from the people. This included many elements of the Afghan military.

Although the Soviets only expected to play a supporting role to Afghan army operations against the mujahedeen, they found that Afghan government forces suffered from low morale and divided loyalties. Therefore, Soviet forces began to bear the brunt of combat operations on behalf of the newly installed Afghan government. This confirmed the impression of many Afghans that Karmal's PDPA only existed through the good graces of the Soviets.

From the Soviet perspective, the Afghan army's ineffectiveness combined with the regime's severe lack of legitimacy meant that they had to expend more effort to bolster the regime politically and militarily in order to save the situation. Thus, in conjunction with their military efforts, they began to invest heavily in education



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and political infrastructure designed to consolidate governmental control over at least some parts of the country. The Soviets also tried, usually unsuccessfully, to pressure Karmal into broadening his government by bringing some opposition figures into the regime.

These state-building efforts represented too little, too late. By mid-1980, the mujahedeen resistance had not only recovered from earlier reverses against the Soviets, but had grown stronger. Most of the world outside of the socialist bloc strongly condemned the invasion. Pakistan, Afghanistan's eastern neighbor and host to most of the resistance groups and Afghan refugees, became the focal point for international aid to the Afghans, aimed at driving the Soviets out. Since the Pakistani military regime controlled the distribution of the aid, they managed to gain a strong degree of influence over the competing mujahedeen movements based on its territory.

The Soviet's war entered a second, bloodier phase in March, 1980. With the retreat of mujahedeen forces into the mountainous regions on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, many of the Soviet's military advantages disappeared. On the narrow mountain paths and steep defiles, the Soviets could not effectively deploy their heavy armor units and thus had to engage with the rebels on a more equal footing. This required more troops and resources, as the regime's army still did not have the capability to mount and sustain substantial operations. Thus, from March, 1980 until April, 1985, the Soviets increased the size of their armed contingent, which reached nearly 100,000 troops. Large military sweeps of mujahedeen areas characterized this period often resulting in many casualties and displaced people. However, after the troops left, the mujahedeen nearly always returned.

Also, during this time, the mujahedeen improved their armament and supplies. Although the United States began funding and supplying some weapons to mujahedeen forces in 1979, the Reagan administration did not decide upon a major commitment until 1983-1984. This aid proved decisive in that the mujahedeen began to receive very modern weapons and equipment which allowed it to sustain the fight. The Soviets estimated that mujahedeen numbers swelled during this period from some 40,000 to 150,000 fighters.

Realizing the difficulty of any kind of military victory, towards the end of this period the Soviets started to reduce the scope of operations. Instead, they concentrated on protecting lines of communication and important bases while focusing on political efforts to win back the countryside, which had completely escaped the government's control. During this time, Soviet military and political leaders became more frustrated with the Afghan authorities to whom they attributed administrative incompetence and severe governance problems which rendered these efforts futile. However, Soviet actions must have also played a significant role in this regard.



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Since many mujahedeen fighters received support from the local population, Soviet commanders reasoned that driving the population from guerilla-controlled areas would make it harder for the rebels to operate. Subsequently, the Soviets shelled, strafed, bombed, and mined large areas of the Afghan countryside. Mines laid by Soviet forces and various mujahedeen factions during this time continue to kill and maim many Afghans today. The enormous refugee population fleeing to Pakistan as a result of this brutal repression contributed to swelling the ranks of the mujahedeen.

With the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev at the head of the Soviet Union in March, 1985, Soviet policymakers began to look for ways to extricate themselves from the Afghan imbroglio. First, Gorbachev temporarily increased the tempo of Soviet military engagement while at the same time pressuring Karmal to cooperate with governmental consolidation. In October, 1985, he informed Karmal that the Soviets would begin to withdrawal significant numbers of troops and limit their combat operations beginning in the summer of the following year. He urged him to open his regime to former mujahedeen, to reconnect with local Islamic traditions and local clergies, and to generally broaden his political base and "forget socialism."

Meanwhile, Soviet troops grew to 110,000 men and the war drastically increased in intensity. Gorbachev and the Soviet military leadership hoped that by doing so they could weaken the mujahedeen long enough for the Afghan regime to get back onto its feet. This period marked one of the bloodiest periods of the war. Nonetheless, by 1986 Soviet forces had already begun withdrawing significant numbers of soldiers from combat operations with the goal of relying on the Afghan military for these missions. They also encouraged and supported the Afghan army in its efforts to cultivate support in the countryside to counter the influence of the Islamist resistance. These efforts, did not bear much fruit. The Soviet army only heavily engaged itself against major mujahedeen bases in order to disrupt their command and logistics capabilities.

By early 1986, the Soviets began to tire of Karmal's perceived incompetence and inability to broaden support for his regime. Furthermore, their own military operations in Afghanistan became more difficult as the Americans started supplying the mujahedeen with Stinger portable anti-aircraft missiles which made close air support much more difficult for the Soviets. This neutralized a very important element in their anti-guerilla struggle. In May of that year, the Soviets pressured Karmal out of office and replaced him with the younger and seemingly more competent Mohammed Najibullah.

Nevertheless, the overall situation continued to deteriorate. The Afghan army desertion rates equaled recruitment levels. It continued to suffer from low morale and organizational problems. In a November 1986 politburo meeting, Soviet leaders noted that their military had done nothing to improve the situation. Despite



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significant military victories, no one had followed them up with appropriate political activity. Also, due to the difficult terrain along the Pakistani border, even large numbers of Soviet troops could not effectively prevent resupplies of mujahedeen forces within Afghanistan. Furthermore, in this principally agricultural country, after eight years of supporting and reinforcing a supposedly progressive regime, nobody's standards of living had improved. The revolution had failed.

By this point, the Soviet leadership had abandoned all idea of building socialism in Afghanistan, and downgraded their ultimate strategic objective to a simple neutralization of Afghanistan within the Cold War framework in order to prevent the Americans from setting up shop. Even this more limited goal required a strong enough government in place to comply with this wish. Thus, even as Soviet troops began their retreat, aid to the government continued unabated. The Soviets continued to encourage Najibullah to embark upon a program of national reconciliation aimed at integrating some mujahedeen and other opposition elements into his government. Meanwhile preparations for a full withdrawal moved ahead.

In early 1987, Najibullah declared a ceasefire and significantly increased the tempo of his "national reconciliation" efforts. This effort came too late. The mujahedeen benefited from virtually unlimited American support and they had little motives to negotiate with a regime whose primary backer, the Soviet Army, had begun to retreat. Many in the Soviet military realized this. In August that year, Colonel K. Tsagolov, braving certain negative career consequences, wrote to the Soviet Defense Minister explaining the problems in the reconciliation process. According to Tsagolov, "reconciliation" represented an impossible dream. Not only did the mujahedeen have no interest in reconciling, but the majority of the Afghan people detested the PDPA. Furthermore, many in the PDPA itself had no desire for reconciliation. In his view the "counter-revolution" had already gained too much strength for such measures to work.

The Soviet leadership knew this too. Domestic unrest over the human and economic costs of the war grew. Gorbachev even read letters from angry citizens to his politburo. In spite of pleas from allies elsewhere in the Soviet bloc that a withdrawal would seriously undermine the prestige of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders now knew that they had no other alternative. Gorbachev remarked that introducing more troops would mean the end of perestroika. Also, the longer the Soviets stayed, the more the Americans would gain by bleeding them dry. Unfortunately for Gorbachev and the rest of the Soviet leadership, it was too late. Afghanistan had already bled the Soviet Union dry.

In order to save face, the Soviets tried to gain Pakistani and American assurances that they would cease their aid to the mujahedeen after their retreat. However, neither made significant commitments to doing this, and Gorbachev announced his



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intention to withdrawal anyway. In April, 1988, the Soviet Union signed an accord in Geneva providing for limited (and ultimately meaningless) guarantees of US and Pakistani noninterference in Afghanistan. The Soviets pledged to fully withdrawal by February 15th, 1989. The Soviets stuck to their pledge, but the mujahedeen factions had not participated in the negotiations and were not parties to the agreement. They thus continued their war against Najibullah's regime which continued to benefit from considerable Soviet support. In April 1992, just months after the end of the Soviet Union, and more than three years after the Soviet withdrawal, mujahedeen forces finally forced Najibullah to step down.

What conclusions can we draw from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan? Comparisons are dangerous; nonetheless several similarities emerge between the Soviet experience and the current American/NATO effort. Both the Soviet Union and the US entered Afghanistan for perceived defensive reasons, with expectations of a time-limited engagement. They both got drawn into a protracted conflict with Islamist resistance forces with main bases in the mountainous regions on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Both suffered from a significant inability to militarily break the rebellion. Both looked for similar political solutions aiming to reinforce and build the Afghan government's capacity to govern beyond (and sometimes even within) its urban strongholds. For both, this included attempts to substantially reinforce the capacity of the Afghan army. After several years and a change in leadership, the domestic costs of the war, along with its prolonged and indecisive nature, caused both the Soviet Union and the United States to reevaluate their strategies. Both sides came to similar conclusions. Both would, for a short period of time substantially increase their troop presence with the goal of strengthening and consolidating the local government. From this logic, the government could negotiate with rebel groups from enough of a position of strength to begin to broaden its base and rebuild lost legitimacy. Both also saw this phase as a prelude to a more significant troop reduction and eventual disengagement in order to avoid an open-ended commitment.

Policymakers ignore these comparative experiences at their peril. However, here the similarities end. Significant differences also exist between today's American (and NATO) efforts, and the Soviet efforts of yesteryear. First, the current coalition's presence has a strong degree of international legitimacy which the Soviet invasion and occupation completely lacked. For all of its failures, most of the "international community" wants the coalition efforts to succeed. Today's "insurgents" do not benefit from the same degree of international funding and support that their counterparts from the 1980s did. They do not have a superpower backer and they only maintain ambiguous relations with their host state, Pakistan. Additionally, the Soviets conducted significantly more acts of brutal repression and mass violence against local populations in pursuit of their goals. This strongly contributed to making them a nearly universally detested presence in the country and significantly helped the resistance recruit new fighters. While the American and NATO presence has



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also resulted in some notable human rights abuses, they simply do not compare in scope and intent to those committed by the Soviets. Thus, their relations with the broader Afghan population, if one can speak in these terms, contains much more ambiguity than the near universal antagonism and hatred provoked by Soviet exactions. Finally, the domestic costs of the war played significant roles in forcing both the Soviets and, later, the Americans, to change their strategies. However, in the Soviet experience, the Afghan conflict nearly ruined the Soviet economy. It also completely destroyed the morale of the army, which suffered massive casualties. This played a significant role in the eventual fall of the Soviet Union two years after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country. Although economically and politically costly, the American and broader NATO war in Afghanistan does not pose the same kind of danger.

One cannot foresee what significance these similarities and differences in the Soviet and American experiences have for the broader prospects of success in Afghanistan today. Indeed, the definition of "success" seems to frequently change. The recent London conference on Afghanistan has raised hopes of a possible negotiated settlement between the current government and some of its Taliban and Islamist adversaries. Nobody can predict the eventual outcome of this endeavor, only time will tell. This endeavor does highlight one broad lesson one can draw from the Soviet and American experiences: Superpowers often overestimate their capacity to influence the political outcomes of weaker actors. Regardless of how just the cause, interfering in the lives and livelihoods of far away peoples often carries significant costs. The ultimate resolution to this conflict must come from the Afghans themselves.

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