ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue

Afghanistan: Current Operational Lessons From the Soviet Experience

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Discussion. Afghanistan's harsh geography and harsher climate has always made it difficult to conquer and even harder to occupy. Its diverse and warlike people know how to fight and when not to fight. On 27 April 1978, Afghan Communists launched a successful coup intended to transform Afghanistan from a diverse tribal society into a unified Communist state. The government's attacks on landlords, religious leaders and tribal elders reinforced the Afghan tendency to oppose any form of central government. Despite increasing Soviet aid, it appeared in late 1979 that the Afghan Communist government would fall. Soviet advisors blamed overzealous and inept indigenous leaders who would not follow advice.

The Soviet Union did not want a Communist government on its borders to be overthrown because of the potential internal domino effects, especially in Moslem-dominated regions of the Soviet Union (like Chechnya). Fortunately, from the Soviet perspective, their forces had effective models for coping with such situations. Twice before, in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), Soviet forces led coups to secure the capitals followed by major force deployments to occupy cities and to intimidate the population.

The strategy worked almost flawlessly when the Soviet Union launched a coup on 27 December 1979. However, the follow-on armored thrusts intended to secure major population centers backfired in the face of spontaneous popular resistance. When the Soviets counter-attacked, Afghan fighters simply retreated into the mountains where the tanks could not follow, then returned to kill all "collaborators" when the Soviets left.

As they confronted increasing popular resistance, the Soviets adopted a strategy based on their successful campaign against the Basmachi Insurgency during the 1920s. As in Basmachi, Afghan fighters depended on the local people for food, information, and support. The Soviets planned to use terror to convince Afghans to stop supporting the insurgents. In areas along key Soviet supply lines or where the people proved to be particularly stubborn, the Red Army simply killed people or drove them from their homes. While these draconian measures were tactically—and in places even operationally successful, strategically they were counterproductive. Many resistance fighters were killed and the ability of various Afghan regions to provide tangible support to the fighters was reduced or eliminated. However, the Soviet use of terror in a foreign country in the 1980s received much more media coverage than their internal use of terrorism in the 1920s. The US, UK, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others began providing more support to the Afghan resistance than Soviet forces destroyed.

As internal and international pressures increased, the Soviets began to rely on Special Forces and airpower to achieve a military solution. Soviet and Afghan Government forces adopted a defensive posture around population centers, relying on airlift for supplies as a substitute for vulnerable ground-based supply convoys. Selected conventional forces attacked resistance strongholds while air assaults attempted to envelop retreating insurgents. These units were light enough to be as mobile as the resistance, yet they could call in tremendous firepower—Soviet airpower. Hence, fighters were killed—not simply chased. The Soviets also used special means to attack resistance logistical bases inside Pakistan covertly. These new tactics were initially so effective that some international observers believed the Soviets might be on the verge of defeating the resistance. After some deliberation, the resistance's international supporters began supplying them with man-portable surface to air missiles. In a single stroke this made the Soviet tactic of surrounding the fighters through air assault prohibitively expensive, made close air support less effective, and made air resupply of smaller garrisons infeasible. The Soviets reverted to ground convoys that proved even more vulnerable to ambush now that their air support could also be attacked.

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Finally, the Soviets resorted to diplomacy to achieve their overall objectives; they offered to withdraw from Afghanistan in exchange for a halt in international support for the resistance. Even though the West refused, the Soviets "withdrew" anyway. Operational realities forced the Soviets to transfer responsibility for the war to the Afghan army although the Soviet military left combat support and advisors in Afghanistan and continued to provide air support, now from bases in the USSR. In effect, the Afghan resistance had won the tactical and operational battle for their country, but the Soviet strategy worked partially. Without an overt external enemy, the resistance began to fracture. In addition, foreign aid diminished as the overt Soviet presence and activity waned. The Communist government in Kabul held on months longer than many observers had anticipated. In the end, though, too many government supporters had been killed for the Communists to consolidate their hold on the country.

Analysis. Some historians assert that the human and economic costs of war in Afghanistan contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. Others argue that the loss of credibility owing to the Soviet failure to win the war was the most damaging effect of the war. Having helped the Afghans to block Soviet conquest, the US believed its mission was accomplished and disengaged, leaving an independent but war-ravaged Afghanistan, ripe for internal chaos and the rise of a faction that promised order—the Taliban.

While Afghanistan's geography, demographics, and recent history all favored a protracted insurgency; an effective insurgency *did not* develop after the recent US invasion of that country. Hence, it would appear Soviet strategy prompted the insurgency. Apparent situational factors actually depended on the very different goals and strategies of the US and the USSR. For example, religion played a relatively small part in Operation Enduring Freedom's successful regime change operation in 2001-02 because international objectives targeted the illegitimate Taliban regime rather than the entire Afghan society. Also, much of the external support for the Afghan resistance was provoked by Soviet operations and tactics, and was made feasible by the length of the operation. It appears that Soviet operational effectiveness improved over time—but the resistance also adapted strategies and tactics to each modification of Soviet tactics. The Soviet style of force-on-force wargaming did not lend itself to developing a comprehensive campaign plan focused on achieving a strategic end state.

Relevance for Current Operations:

1. Limit outside support, this includes both not provoking intervention and sealing international and local borders.

2. Don't take resistance controlled areas until you can protect the people who come to your side.

3. Win the legitimacy fight, both by building up the government and eroding the adversaries. A key way to do this is, paradoxically, to protect our friends while keeping a lower profile. How? One key is airpower:

   - Use airpower to allow a smaller tactical footprint
   - Use airpower to increase Iraqi security force tactical effectiveness through increasing their situation awareness and firepower while preserving a legitimate Iraqi face on the operation
   - Examine options for theater ground lift vs. airlift to identify feasible less dangerous options
   - Consider locating as many functions outside Iraq as feasible, again fewer targetsUS/Coalition targets makes it harder for resistance groups to paint regime as a puppet. Possible functions include air bases, logistical bases, staff functions

4. Wargame alternative COAs, as this should help develop both a better plan and one that covers more of the campaign.
5. Continue to wargame branches and sequels even as the campaign plan is executed, updating it to depict new realities and new enemy innovations, allowing counters to be developed faster.