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FROM SUCCESSFUL INVASION TO FAILED WAR:

AN ANALYSIS OF SOVIET MILITARY STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN 1979-1989

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Introduction

The 1979 Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan commenced with a notably effective invasion. However, it ended a decade later with the withdrawal of Soviet forces after a costly and ineffectual war. This paper will analyze the Soviet military strategy for the intervention and examine how initial success turned into ultimate failure. Specifically, it will show that the Soviets did not achieve their political objectives in Afghanistan due to miscalculations of human and moral factors resident in the Afghan insurgency, rigidity in doctrine and strategy that disallowed effective adaptation to changing circumstances, inherent weaknesses in the Soviet political and military system, and the ultimate realization that the costs of the war far exceeded its potential benefits.

Historical and Political Context

Historians trace the roots of Russian interest in Central Asia to the 1682-1725 rule of Peter the Great. However, Russia's first attempt at expansion into modern-day Afghanistan did not occur until 1837, when a Russian-backed Persian force failed to annex the city of Herat after British military and diplomatic support allowed local forces to prevail. This incident foreshadowed the continued Russo-British confrontations of "The Great Game" that ensured the existence of the Afghan state as a buffer between the two contending powers.ⁱ

The 1947 British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent effectively removed the only counterbalance to the growing Soviet influence in Afghanistan. When the United States declined to provide requested economic aid and arms assistance through the early 1950s, the Afghans

reluctantly turned to the Soviets. Over the 25 years that followed, Soviet influence in Afghan trade, economic aid, and arms and other military assistance became predominant.ⁱⁱ

The Afghan regime of the late 1940s was monarchical but governed by a parliamentary structure within what could be described as a limited democracy. Soviet political influence reached its zenith in 1978 with the “April Revolution” that brought the pro-Soviet Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) into power in the proclaimed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). DRA Prime Minister Nur Mohammed Taraki formalized long-term cooperative relations with the Soviets in December 1978; however, the Afghan political situation quickly deteriorated.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Afghan population became disenchanted with factional conflicts within the PDPA, as well as the effects of Soviet influence, and open rebellions resulted. The most notable of these occurred in Herat in March 1979, where the murder of a number of Soviet technical advisors prompted an increase in Soviet military advisors and the deployment of additional military equipment that included Mi-24 helicopters. Taraki’s liquidation and replacement by rival Hafizullah Amin in October 1979 further exacerbated the situation. Amin’s policies of socialist-principled modernization failed to engender confidence in the Soviet leadership and further estranged and antagonized the Afghan Muslim populace.^{iv} By the end of 1979, the stage was set for Soviet military intervention.

Political Objectives

Any analysis of military strategy must include an examination of the underlying political objectives that it seeks to support. Historians have been challenged to definitively identify the motives for the 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, largely due to the dearth of related

information provided by the governments of Leonid Brezhnev and his successors. Nevertheless, several schools of thought have emerged that offer differing degrees of plausibility.^v

The most convincing argument holds that the primary Soviet political objective was that of stabilizing an at-risk bordering client regime in which it had invested substantial resources. Viewed as another Soviet battle in the Cold War, the Afghan intervention was consistent with that visited upon Czechoslovakia by the Soviets in 1968. There, the “Brezhnev Doctrine” justified intervention in the name of preserving collective European socialism. Soviet national prestige was at stake, and it is likely that Moscow was loathe to adopt a “hands off” policy in Afghanistan in light of the uncertain concurrent situation in Poland. Specifically, the Soviets aimed to rebuild the DRA government and military infrastructure, as well as to effect civic and political reforms that would establish credibility and support for their wayward client regime.^{vi}

In a 1997 CNN interview, General Valentin Varennikov, Deputy Head of the Soviet General Staff from 1979-1984 and a key contributor to the Soviet strategy for Afghanistan, supported this view with an additional emphasis on Cold War security considerations. He noted the strategic importance of Afghanistan as a Soviet “immediate neighbor” and the perception that it was “a buffer against our enemies that were beyond Afghanistan—primarily Pakistan, which was completely allied with American policy.” He further notes, “We had set ourselves the task of turning Afghanistan into a stable, friendly country....”^{vii}

Less convincing is the theory that the primary Soviet political objective was to preempt the security risk to its Central Asian border that specifically would have been posed by a fundamentalist Islamic Afghan state. Little justification for this view is evident in official Soviet documentation. However, this consideration is likely to have contributed to the Soviet decision to intervene as a secondary or “lesser included” objective.^{viii}

The least convincing argument is primarily expansionist in nature. It posits that the intervention in Afghanistan was a logical intermediate step to gaining a strategic position on the Persian Gulf, to include securing warm-water ports and petroleum resources. While Soviet actions subsequent to the invasion provide little support for this interpretation, it should not be discounted as a potential contributing factor to Moscow's decision.^{ix}

Soviet political constraints related to the intervention, either governmental or popular, were nearly non-existent. Apparently there was no group within the Politburo that was united against the invasion, and Soviet public opinion was not a consideration. The United States had made little substantive response to recent Soviet interventions, was distracted by the Iranian hostage situation, and was judged to have neither the will nor the capability to directly oppose the intervention. United States actions in the foreign policy arena, as well as efforts to provide aid through Pakistan, were anticipated but deemed an acceptable risk. Soviet assessments of responses by China, Pakistan, and the Third World proved similarly benign. Overall, the Soviets viewed the proposed intervention as a low-risk operation with negligible constraints.^x

Military Objectives

While an analysis of Soviet military objectives in Afghanistan would logically begin with an examination of the centers of gravity identified by the Soviet leadership, these apparently are not available in the historical record. However, one can surmise that in light of the failure of other Soviet instruments of national power to rectify the volatile situation in Afghanistan, the Soviets viewed the Red Army as their strategic center of gravity. Operationally, the Soviet hub of power was the 40th Army, which had been organized near the Afghan border in the Turkestan Military District starting in October 1979.^{xi}

Conversely, the Soviets viewed the Afghan government, military, and overall society as fragmented and weak. However, one can infer that the Soviets viewed the source of relative Afghan strategic power as a combination of Prime Minister Amin and his sources of political strength in the capital of Kabul and the surrounding provincial centers. One can further assume that the Soviets initially identified the operational Afghan center of gravity to be the DRA Army. Again, this was a relative assessment given the DRA Army's weakened condition as a result of political turmoil, purges, and desertions to the resistance; by the end of 1979, DRA Army strength had fallen from about 90,000 to about 40,000 men. Accordingly, it is apparent that the Soviet post-invasion focus soon shifted to the Mujahideen resistance forces as the enemy operational center of gravity.^{xii}

These centers of gravity produced military objectives designed to accomplish the primary political objective of stabilizing the Afghan state. In the words of General Varennikov,

The most important reason to move troops was to stabilize the situation in the main areas of the country: in the capital, around the capital, and in the provincial centers. We supposed that when our troops were stationed there, their very presence would stabilize the situation. We were not planning to engage in any combat actions....^{xiii}

The Soviets initially established three primary military objectives. The first was to secure Kabul and the highways leading to it from Herat and Kandahar, as well as from Termez on the Soviet border by way of the Salang Pass. The second, despite General Varennikov's statement to the contrary, was to take offensive action against the resistance until the military effort could be turned over to a revitalized DRA Army. The third was to close the Pakistan frontier to deny incoming weapons and reinforcements and to obviate the effect of foreign aid, particularly from the United States.^{xiv}

Military Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

In examining the military capabilities of both the DRA military and the resistance, the Soviets—as previously noted in the quote from General Varennikov—assumed that the Afghans would pose little to no opposition to the invasion. The Red Army had gained significant experience and enjoyed increasing success in prosecuting “stability operations” in Ukraine (1945-1951), East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968). The Soviets modeled the Afghan intervention on the latter, to include establishing military and KGB elements in-country and conducting overt “reconnaissance tours” by senior military officers well prior to the invasion. Soviet confidence in an easy victory was evident in the initial assessment that force commitment would be required for only several months. It appears that the Soviets assumed no Afghan military objectives or courses of action existed beyond local resistance.^{xv}

The initial balance of forces, whether examined from the perspective of the DRA military or the resistance, was overwhelmingly in favor of the Soviets. By the time of the invasion, the Soviet military mission in Afghanistan had risen to over 5000 personnel, and Soviet deployed strength increased to 50,000 troops within a week.^{xvi} The Soviets rapidly overwhelmed and subsumed the degraded DRA military. Soviet military forces in Afghanistan eventually ranged from 90,000 to 104,000 men. The 40th Army was comprised of four divisions, five separate brigades, three separate regiments, and numerous support units; it employed airborne, air assault, Spetznaz, and motorized and mountain rifle units.^{xvii}

The Soviets employed substantial air power, eventually augmented by DRA aircraft, under the direct control of the 40th Army.^{xviii} DRA Air Force strength in 1979 numbered about 10,000 men and operated about 160 Soviet tactical aircraft.^{xix} By the end of 1982, the combined Soviet and Afghan air force totaled over 200 rotary-wing and nearly 400 fixed-wing aircraft.^{xx}

Qualitatively, the Soviet combined arms machine was technologically superior and expected to quickly overwhelm initial DRA military opposition and subsequent actions by resistance forces.

Those resistance forces had come to be known as the Mujahideen, or Holy War warriors, when the National Islamic Front directed a Jihad against the Afghan government in March 1979. The Mujahideen was divided into an estimated 30 to 40 groups, although seven became predominant. All groups were dedicated to removing the Soviet-installed government and forcing the Soviets out of Afghanistan. However, they were also fiercely independent and largely unable to cooperate or function under each other's leadership. Estimates of mujahideen strength throughout the war range from 100,000 to 200,000 men.

An initial lack of modern weapons and ammunition was another key limiting factor for the Mujahideen. However, tentative initial American covert arms support increased to a Congressionally approved level of \$250 million in 1985. Additionally critical were the estimated 900 Stinger anti-aircraft systems and 2700 missiles provided through Pakistan in 1987 for use by the resistance.^{xxi}

Soviet Strategic Concept

The Soviets envisioned a rapid intervention to initially establish control over the DRA military, capital, and key facilities while "stabilizing" the DRA government and the country as a whole. Relative to the Mujahideen resistance, they anticipated a limited war against a limited insurgency. The Soviets considered neither conquest nor full-scale occupation, nor did they anticipate a protracted guerrilla war. In fact, one of the overriding goals of Soviet strategy was to limit the level of military commitment applied to Afghanistan.^{xxii}

Soviet prioritization of initial military objectives was apparent in the order and manner in which they were addressed. The substantial and long-entrenched Soviet military mission in

Afghanistan was tasked to secure key Afghan airbases and military garrisons by the 27 December 1979 ground force D-Day. On 7-8 December an airborne brigade was airlifted into Bagram airbase, 40 miles north of Kabul, and on 20 December this unit moved 30 miles further north to secure the Salang Tunnel for the impending ground invasion. On 24 December two more airborne brigades were lifted into Bagram airbase.^{xxiii}

Motorized rifle divisions of the 40th Army crossed into Afghanistan on 27 December and moved to secure the two vital highways that would serve as lines of communication throughout the war. They accomplished this action by garrisoning the major population centers along the routes.^{xxiv} Concurrently, Spetsnaz units stormed and secured the Darulaman Palace in Kabul. During this action President Amin was killed, and by 28 December Babrak Karmal was installed by the Soviets as his successor.^{xxv}

The Soviet military strategy for the invasion of Afghanistan was time-tested and sound. It relied upon speed, surprise, deception, and overwhelming offensive force to address military objectives both sequentially and simultaneously. Adequate resources were devoted to each objective in an environment nearly free of political and operational constraints. Physical constraints imposed by the demanding Afghan terrain were anticipated and addressed. Well-planned and organized preparatory military actions of an indirect nature supported aggressively direct execution on D-Day. As a result, asymmetrically superior force was applied to a weak and surprised opposition. At the political level, initial strategic objectives were met, to include achieving surprise vis-à-vis the United States, China, Pakistan, and Iran.^{xxvi}

The Soviets, however, appeared to neglect one military objective—that of closing the Pakistan frontier to prevent foreign assistance from reaching the Mujahideen. While initially not a key consideration, failure to achieve this end proved critical to the ultimate Soviet failure in

Afghanistan. Further, it was indicative of Soviet miscalculations relative to the Mujahideen resistance and its ability to garner international support. Finally, it served to portend Soviet inability to prevail in counterinsurgency operations against a determined guerrilla foe.

The unexpected level of mujahideen resistance, coupled with the disappointing performance of the DRA military, served to extend and expand Soviet operations in Afghanistan. In February-March 1980 the Soviets attacked into the Kunar Valley in the first of a continuing sequence of major offensives. The 5000-man force was supported by substantial air power and demonstrated that it could maneuver with impunity and displace the local populace. However, it proved incapable of scoring a decisive victory against the elusive Mujahideen, who utilized the advantages of the dissected “home turf” to withdraw in the face of superior Soviet power. At the conclusion of the offensive, the Soviet force withdrew, and the resistance returned.^{xxvii}

Tactical and operational adjustments by the Soviets over the next several years were matched by those of the resistance, and the pattern of the initial Kunar Valley offensive was repeated over the course of the next nine years with minor variations. Conventional Soviet military strategy and operations continued to prove indecisive and constituted a significant drain on resources.^{xxviii} At the same time, the Soviets were incapable of implementing an unconventional strategy against the Mujahideen insurgency. Of the three tenets of Soviet counterinsurgency doctrine—establishing a popular political organization, isolating insurgents from external support, and utilizing “terror tactics” to quell rebellion^{xxix}—only the latter was implemented to any effect.

The Soviet inability to implement a viable counterinsurgency strategy effectively eliminated any chance of achieving stated political objectives. As previously noted, failure to stem the flow of foreign military assistance, primarily through Pakistan, ensured that the

resistance was able to keep pace with Soviet tactical and operational innovations. The use of the American-sourced Stinger missile system to counter increased Soviet use of heliborne forces and other aviation in support of conventional offensives is the best example of this failure.

Politically, repressive Red Army “terror tactics” served only to undercut the mass-based popular support for the Afghan regime that the Soviets sought to achieve. The 1986 replacement of DRA President Karmal with Dr. Najibullah Admadzi, as well as associated outreach and reform programs, failed to improve the Afghan political situation. Concurrently, Soviet casualties and other costs associated with the war undermined Soviet domestic support, and international condemnation of Soviet actions continued in concert with robust external support to the Afghan resistance. Consequently, the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev began the reassessment of Afghan-related policy that culminated in the 1989 Soviet withdrawal.^{xxx}

Conclusion

It may appear difficult to understand how the Soviets so grossly miscalculated the situation in Afghanistan given their direct economic, military, and political involvement in Afghan affairs dating from the 1950s. However, one can draw several conclusions for the reasons that Soviet military strategy ultimately failed to achieve the stated political objectives in Afghanistan.

The primary error of Soviet military strategists was the underestimation of the resolve and abilities of the Mujahideen resistance and the Afghan populace that supported it. While planning and execution of the initial stages of the intervention were nearly flawless, the invasion’s success can largely be attributed to the application of speed, surprise, and overwhelming force against a weak, compliant, and static regime. After the initial shock wore off, however, the Soviets faced an unanticipated challenge to which they responded poorly.

The Soviets were probably blinded, at least partially, by overconfidence in their military capabilities relative to Afghanistan and insecurities related to the Cold War environment. Nevertheless, their failure to recognize the dominant role that human and moral factors play in war is difficult to rationalize. The Soviets' sustained prosecution of their original limited war strategy—against an adversary who approached the conflict as absolutely total—was a recipe for disaster. Compounding their underestimation of Mujahideen resolve was their overestimation of the abilities of the DRA government and military forces to consolidate power and gain control of the Afghan state.

The Soviets' rigidity in doctrine and strategy also contributed to their failure in Afghanistan. Although Soviet forces incrementally adapted to the changing character of the war, they were unable or unwilling to do so efficiently or effectively enough to defeat the resistance. The continued application of sequential conventional operations against a fragmented but skilled insurgent guerrilla force—despite repeated indecisive results—is a resounding indictment of the Soviet military and political system. At the same time, the Soviet inability to implement a dedicated and effective counterinsurgency strategy against the Mujahideen was telling.

Despite initial miscalculations and ineffective military adaptations, it is apparent that Soviet military planners eventually recognized both the nature of the challenge facing them and what needed to be done to prevail. Accordingly, one can infer that their ultimate assessment of the costs associated with winning the war in Afghanistan—and subsequently of maintaining it as a viable client regime—were not worth the potential benefits. Although the risks associated with continuing the war were relatively low, the probable costs in blood and treasure did not justify continued pursuit of the original political objectives. This realization by Gorbachev and his

political and military advisors is likely to have been the underlying reason for their termination of the war through withdrawal.

Finally, in many ways the Soviet military failure in Afghanistan emphasized the weaknesses inherent to the repressive and autocratic Soviet political system. If one accepts that the underlying motives for Soviet political objectives in Afghanistan were patently flawed, it follows that any supporting military strategy would suffer in parallel. This line of reasoning, when extended, supports the theory that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan substantively contributed to precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The lessons of Soviet political and military failures in Afghanistan are keenly relevant to the current war on terrorism. While innumerable differences exist between the 1979-1989 Soviet incursion and current American and coalition efforts, several parallels are apparent. Simply put, we are attempting to compel, through limited means, an adversary who not only views the conflict as total, but who has “been there before” and prevailed. Continued analysis of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan may be well worth the effort for strategists engaged in prosecuting the current war.

ⁱ J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986), 4-17.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 19-27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan*, Leavenworth Papers, no. 20 (Ft. Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 131-132.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*, 129, 132.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 133, 138.

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- vii “General Valentin Varennikov: Commander of Soviet Forces, Afghanistan,” *CNN*, Perspective Series, Cold War, Episode 20: Soldiers of God, Interviews; available from <http://robots.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/20/interviews/varennikov/>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2001.
- viii Baumann, 133.
- ix Ibid., 132-133.
- x Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1986), 133-135.
- xi Baumann, 138.
- xii Mohammed Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, “The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?” (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Foreign Military Studies Office); available from <http://www.bdg.minsk.by/cegi/N2/Afg/Waraf.htm>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2001.
- xiii Varennikov.
- xiv Baumann, 135-138.
- xv Nawroz and Grau.
- xvi Edgar O’Ballance, *Afghan Wars: What Britain Gave Up and the Soviet Union Lost* (London: Brassey’s, 1993), 89.
- xvii Nawroz and Grau.
- xviii Baumann, 155.
- xix O’Ballance, 88.
- xx Ibid., 122.
- xxi O’Ballance, 115-119, 137, 162.
- xxii Baumann, 135.
- xxiii O’Ballance, 89-90.
- xxiv Baumann, 138.
- xxv O’Ballance, 89-92.
- xxvi Ibid., 94-95.

^{xxvii} Baumann, 139.

^{xxviii} Ibid., 139-148.

^{xxix} Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *War Without Winners: Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition After the Cold War* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 93-94.

^{xxx} Baumann, 169-177.