

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**WAR TERMINATION BY AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE
THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN**

LONGER ESSAY

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Disengaging from a military stalemate overseas is a difficult process, and the U.S. has never been very good at it. Many Americans would argue that our problem stems from the very nature of our democracy, especially our inability to speak with one voice on foreign policy and to keep secrets. But does an authoritarian regime have an easier time of disengaging than a democracy? This paper looks at the experience of the USSR in leaving Afghanistan to try to answer this question.

Most observers agree that when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, he was eager to bring Soviet troops home from Afghanistan as soon as possible. Yet it took him three years to get the Geneva Peace Accords signed and four years to complete the Soviet troop withdrawal. Not only did it take a long time, but the settlement fell apart even as the Soviet withdrawal was going forward. And by the time Gorbachev left office, the worst predictions of the 1979 hawks had come true: Afghanistan had degenerated into chaos, and its territory was serving as a launching pad for attacks on former Soviet territory.

Every military engagement is different, as are the causes of and paths to disengagement. Still, whatever the nature of the political system, any leader who sets out to bring the troops back from abroad without a clearcut victory or defeat needs to accomplish three basic tasks:

- create and sustain a domestic consensus supporting withdrawal;
- maintain stability on the ground during the withdrawal process; and
- work out international arrangements supporting the withdrawal.

Using this three-part framework, this paper analyzes the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Our purpose is to see whether the authoritarian nature of the Soviet system helped

or hindered the withdrawal process, and whether there are any lessons that democracies can learn from the Soviet experience.

CREATING AND SUSTAINING A DOMESTIC CONSENSUS FOR WITHDRAWAL

Creating a domestic consensus to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam was a protracted, divisive and highly publicized process that started at the grass roots. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was an elite decision with very little evidence of dissension inside or outside the government.

But the withdrawal decision was the result of a process that was incomparably more destructive to the Soviet system than the 1960s and 1970s were to the U.S. political system. When Gorbachev became General Secretary there were four institutional actors shaping Soviet foreign policy: the Communist Party (CPSU); the KGB; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA); and the military. In the process of disengaging from Afghanistan, Gorbachev reshaped these four institutions, stripping much of the power from the first two. He used "glasnost" to bring a fifth "actor" on to the scene: public opinion, which until then had played only a negligible role in Soviet foreign policy.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan was made possible by Gorbachev's reforms; it did not cause them. But without the reforms, the war would probably have continued for many years, since the Soviet system lacked a mechanism to force re-consideration of policies supported by its major institutional actors -- unless disaster was actually staring them in the face. We will now look at the four foreign policy institutions that Gorbachev inherited and at the roles they played in getting the USSR into and out of Afghanistan.

Nobody in Russia today confesses to having supported or participated in the decision to

send Soviet troops into Afghanistan. It is commonly asserted that the decision was made in secret in December 1979 by a small group of now-dead leaders - Brezhnev, Defense Minister Ustinov, KGB Chief Andropov and Foreign Minister Gromyko.¹ Technically, it is probably true that these four men made the final decision, but the responsibility was not theirs alone: clearly their action must have reflected, at least in some measure, the information and advice they received from below. Thus it is difficult to believe that this advice was as uniformly negative as today's writers would have us believe.²

The only first-hand account of KGB activities in Afghanistan comes from Alexander Morozov, the KGB deputy station chief in Kabul at the time of the invasion, in a series of articles published in the Soviet magazine New Times in 1991. He has an axe to grind, so it is questionable whether the KGB's operation blundered as frequently as he claims. Morozov writes that the KGB initially opposed the PDPA coup in April 1978, but had agents in all PDPA factions,

¹ See, for instance Artyem Borovik, The Hidden War (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990) 5-7. But it is worth noting that Shevardnadze, who also propounds this view, said in a television interview that he feels guilty because he "had the opportunity to say something" when the decision was made but "at the time I could not muster the strength and the courage to do so." See Shevardnadze, Eduard. Interview. Political Investigation behind the Scenes of War by Mikhail Leshchinskiy and Ada Petrova. Moscow Central Television First Program. December 24 1991. (FBIS-SOV-91-249 p.6)

²The KGB, the Central Committee of the CPSU, the military and the MFA all had their own representatives in Afghanistan before the invasion, and were sending back intelligence and analyses through separate channels. According to the KGB's deputy station chief in Kabul, there was a wide divergence of opinion in the field, in part because representatives of the different institutions were deeply involved in the bitter factional infighting that split the Afghan Communist Party. As a result, in the spring of 1979, the Embassy received an instruction from Moscow that "all intelligence concerning the situation in Afghanistan...was to be analyzed on the spot and ..certified by signatures of the Ambassador, the chief military advisor, the representative of the KGB and the military intelligence." The result was "a dwindling flow of intelligence to Moscow." See. Alexander Morozov, "Two CIA 'Plots'" New Times 40.91 p39.

before and after the coup. Morozov suggests that the KGB's support for intervention resulted from their conviction that Hafizullah Amin was a madman who was murdering too many good Communists. He said that Amin's murder by KGB special forces during the invasion was specifically ordered by KGB Chairman Andropov, who directed that Amin should not be taken alive. Had he had a chance to talk, according to Morozov's account, he would have embarrassed the KGB by showing that he was an agent of theirs, not of the CIA's as Soviet propaganda later claimed.

Even if Morozov is not an entirely trustworthy source, several things come out clearly in his account: the KGB ran its own show in Afghanistan and followed its own line, which did not always coincide with that of other agencies of the Soviet government. Andropov was personally involved in the events leading up to Moscow's intervention in Afghanistan, as was Vladimir Kryuchkov, the KGB's director of foreign intelligence, who was named KGB chairman in 1988.³ Given the KGB's extensive investment in Afghanistan, it was probably the institution most loathe to withdraw. Indeed, according to documents released from the CPSU archives, Chebrikov was the only Politburo member to speak against its 1986 decision to set a withdrawal timetable.⁴

The attitude of the Soviet military toward entering and leaving Afghanistan was more complex. The invasion was preceded by a buildup in the number of Soviet military advisors in

³According to Alexander Yakovlev, Kryuchkov travelled regularly to Afghanistan throughout the period, often under the alias of "Alexandrov". See Alexander Yakovlev. Interview. Political Investigation Behind the Scenes of War. Mikhail Leshchinskiy and Ada Petrova. Moscow Central Television First Program. December 27 1991. (FBIS-SOV-91-251 p.4)

⁴Michael Dobbs, "The Afghan Archive: Reversing Course" The Washington Post, November 16 1992:A:30.

Afghanistan, and at least two visits by high-level military commanders (Chief of the Main Political Administration General Alexei Yepishev in April 1979 and Commander of Soviet Ground Forces General Ivan Pavlovskiy in August.) Thus it is clear that the military were at least consulted, although we don't know what their advice was. After Gorbachev came to power and criticism of the invasion became common, reports began to circulate that the General Staff had opposed the invasion, and that the Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the Chief of the Main Operations Directorate, General Sergey Akhromeyev, and his deputy, General Valentin Varennikov had all argued against it. These reports fingered Defense Minister Ustinov -- who was conveniently dead by then -- as the only high-level military proponent of the invasion.⁵ One key figure, whose position remains unclear in these reports, is Marshal Sergey Sokolov, who was in charge of carrying out the invasion as First Deputy Defense Minister in 1979 and was promoted to Defense Minister in 1984.⁶

Even if some senior military figures were opposed to the invasion, none appear to have protested against it vigorously enough for their careers to have suffered for it.⁷ When Gorbachev

⁵ A detailed rendition of this scenario was recently published by Ret. Col. Gen. V.A. Merimskiy in a Russian military journal. But Merimskiy was Akhromeyev's deputy at the time of the invasion, so he is not exactly an unbiased source. See V.A. Merimskiy, "Afghanistan: Lessons, Conclusions" Voyenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal No. 11, 1993, p.30-36. (JPRS-UMA-94-005 p46-52) Akhromeyev told the same story in a 1991 interview. Sergey Akhromeyev, Interview, Author's TV. Moscow Central Television Second Program, July 14 1991. (FBIS-SOV-91-137 p.44-46)

⁶ The only evidence on Sokolov's attitude toward the withdrawal comes from UN negotiator Cordovez, who was told by senior Soviet officials that Sokolov's ouster after the Matthias Rust flight in spring 1987 was good news for the negotiations. See Don Oberdorfer, "Afghanistan: The Soviet Decision to Pull Out" The Washington Post, April 17 1988.

⁷ The only possible exception is Pavlovskiy, who was replaced as Commander of Soviet Ground Forces in December 1980, although it may have been for other reasons.

became General Secretary in 1985, all of the senior Soviet military leaders, including Akhromeyev, Ogarkov, Varennikov, Sokolov and Yazov had their careers deeply tied up in Afghanistan. None of them, as far as we can tell, suffered from their close association with an unsuccessful war. On the contrary, service in Afghanistan appears to have enhanced their careers. Even if the leadership of the military recognized by 1985 that the war was a mistake, and wanted to disengage gracefully, they had a lot to lose if the withdrawal were perceived as a military defeat and repudiation of their fighting tactics.

In this they differed from the MFA, for whom, by 1985, the war in Afghanistan was basically a diplomatic embarrassment. Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko was the only one of the four original decision-makers who was still in office when Gorbachev came to power, and probably provided a brake on efforts to withdraw from Afghanistan. But one of Gorbachev's first moves as General Secretary, in June 1985, was to move Gromyko up to the largely honorific job of President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and replace him with Eduard Shevardnadze, an early and vocal proponent of withdrawal. Shevardnadze, in turn, embarked on a vigorous reshuffle of cadres within the Foreign Ministry, which included the promotion of a number of "Americanists" whose focus was on improving relations with the West rather than supporting Third World revolutions.

In Kabul the senior MFA representative in 1979 was Ambassador Alexander Puzanov, whose career came to an end when he was recalled to Moscow in November 1979. Puzanov was replaced in January 1980 by Fikret Tabeyev, former CPSU First Secretary in Tatarstan who

reportedly displayed a firm conviction that Soviet troops would triumph in Afghanistan.⁸

Tabeyev was removed in 1986. In October 1988 he was replaced by Yuli Vorontsov, the chief Soviet negotiator for the Geneva Agreement. Vorontsov almost certainly was sent to Kabul to ensure that problems on the ground did not prevent implementation of the withdrawal.

Despite Gromyko's prominence, it was the Communist Party (CPSU), not the Foreign Ministry that took the lead on foreign policy under the old Soviet system, both in formulating policy and in overseeing its implementation.⁹ The MFA and its professional diplomats were traditionally subservient to the International Department (IAD) of the Central Committee. Under Gorbachev, however, the balance of power between the two began to shift, until the Central Committee Secretariat was abolished in October 1988.

In February 1986 Gorbachev removed Boris Ponomarev, the conservative 82-year old head of the IAD, and replaced him with Anatoly Dobrynin, long-serving Ambassador to Washington. Starting in 1986 he travelled regularly to Kabul, often accompanying Shevardnadze.¹⁰ According to Dobrynin, part of his task was to evaluate the situation in Afghanistan on the ground. The other was to convince Najib that the Soviets genuinely intended

⁸Morozov claims that Puzanov supported Hafizullah Amin, which would certainly explain his recall. See Alexander Morozov "Shots fired in the House of the Nation" New Times, 41.91 p32-35.

⁹In 1979 the IAD had its own representatives in Afghanistan, including both the head of the Afghan section of the IAD, Nikolai Simonenko, and a group of CPSU advisors to the Afghan Communist Party (PDPA) headed by Semyon Veselov. It was through this mechanism of party-to-party ties that the CPSU ensured its influence in the field.

¹⁰Although Dobrynin claimed in a telephone interview in Washington in February 1994 that he played only a minor role in the Afghan withdrawal, and couldn't remember many of the details, all evidence suggests that he was key player.

to follow their withdrawal timetable.

The highest decision-making body of the CPSU was the Politburo, and it was here that the decision to send troops to Afghanistan was made on December 6 1979.¹¹ The decision to set a two-year timetable for withdrawal was set by the same body on November 13 1986.¹² In the intervening seven years, however, membership in the Politburo had changed substantially, and only three full members of the 1979 body retained their seat in 1986 (Gromyko, Kunayev and Shcherbitskiy). The major personnel shifts began early in 1985 and continued throughout Gorbachev's tenure as General Secretary. According to most accounts, Gorbachev, Shevardnadze and Ligachev and Yakovlev were the earliest and most vocal partisans of withdrawal.

There are several reports that the Politburo held a review of Afghan policy as early as April 1985, but came to no conclusions. Shevardnadze reported that the decision to withdraw was made by the Politburo "in principle" at the end of 1985, and a special Poliburo Commission on Afghanistan was then set up under his chairmanship to "ensure the regular and smooth withdrawal of our troops, and to ensure a regular development of cooperation with the Afghan leadership and the development of a stable relationship after the withdrawal."¹³ According to Yakovlev, who was a member of the commission, other key members were from the KGB (Chairman Chebrikov and his deputy Kryuchkov) and the military (Defense Minister Sokolov, Akhromeyev and Varennikov). The group met every week or ten days, according to Yakovlev.

¹¹Michael Dobbs "The Afghan Archive: Into the Quagmire" The Washington Post November 15 1992:A1.

¹²Michael Dobbs "The Afghan Archive: Reversing Course" A1.

¹³Shevardnadze/Leshchinskiy p.5.

Their proposal to set a two year withdrawal date was debated and approved at a closed Politburo meeting on November 13 1986. It was approved unanimously although Chebrikov spoke against it.

The withdrawal decision didn't come easily in 1986. In order to achieve the Politburo consensus, the advocates of withdrawal had to reach beyond the four traditional national security institutions and create a new one: public opinion. Until Gorbachev came to power, Soviet media operated under very strict restrictions in Afghanistan.¹⁴ As a result, there was relatively little popular awareness of the extent of the fighting and the conditions that Soviet soldiers faced. Starting in June 1985 Gorbachev changed all that. The media was permitted to do fuller and more critical reporting of the war but censorship remained in place, and many subjects -- such as atrocities by Soviet servicemen -- remained taboo. As Yakovlev recalled:

"The difficulties, the maneuvering in the commission and the Politburo, increased...Suddenly somebody had the idea of actually showing what was really happening..This put pressure on...this process of glasnost -- applied to the war -- helped us a very great deal in bringing closer the withdrawal."¹⁵

"Glasnost" was a tactic that Gorbachev used to force reforms in other areas as well, and should not be confused with real freedom of the press, which only came later. Unlike the U.S. decisions to disengage from Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia which were driven in large

¹⁴In July 1992 Russian television broadcast the text of the original government directive on media coverage of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Among other provisions it limited the reporting of combat death or injuries to Soviet servicemen to one per month. See "Special File" Moscow Russian Television Network July 14 1992 17:20 GMT. (FBIS-SOV-92-138 p.30-33.)

¹⁵Yakovlev/Leshchinskiy p.4.

part by U.S. public opinion, the Soviet decision to leave Afghanistan was an elite decision, supported, but not driven by popular demand. In essence, Gorbachev manipulated the press to create a sense of popular dissatisfaction with the war, which in turn created support for the withdrawal. And there is no doubt that the critical reporting on the Afghanistan had a disillusioning effect on Soviet public opinion. As Artyem Borovik, the best known Soviet journalist to cover Afghanistan recalled:

"Anyone who stayed in Afghanistan for a long period of time...typically went through four phases. The first stage (which would last up to three months) went something like this: 'The war is proceeding normally. If only we can add another twenty or thirty thousand men, everything will be fine.' Several months later, the second stage: 'Since we've already gotten ourselves in this jam, we should get the fighting over with as quickly as possible.....We need at least one other army to shut off all the borders.' Five or six months later, the third stage: 'There is something desperately wrong here. What a mess!' Then half a year or so later, the fourth and final stage: 'We'd be wise to get the hell out of here -- and the sooner the better.'"¹⁶

Gorbachev apparently reached this "fourth and final stage" in 1985, and used "glasnost" to bring the message to the rest of the country. But while it worked for Afghanistan, he soon discovered that "glasnost" is a double-edged sword. As the eighties wore on, media criticism began to focus less on his opponents and more on his own policies. But by then, he discovered, it was too late to put the genie back in the box.

¹⁶Borovik p. 14-15.

MAINTAINING STABILITY ON THE GROUND FOR THE WITHDRAWAL

If we compare Soviet foreign policy institutions in 1985 to those of a democracy -- or even those of Russia a decade later -- we see substantial differences. Most important are the powerful roles of the KGB and Communist Party, the relatively weak roles played by the media and public opinion and the non-existent role of the legislative branch of government. But if the institutional actors in Moscow were unique, the dilemmas they faced were common to those of other governments trying to disengage from a military engagement short of victory: how to withdraw "gracefully" without destroying your international credibility and the stability of the regime you were supporting; how to get your ally to go along with the withdrawal decision and your adversaries not to take too much advantage of it; and how to ensure the safety of your troops during the difficult and dangerous withdrawal process. This section will look at the military and political issues the Soviets had to deal with during the withdrawal; the next section will cover the international and diplomatic ones.

In July 1985, four months after Gorbachev became General Secretary, General Mikhail Zaitsev was named commander of the Afghan theater (the Soviet Southern Theater of Military Operations.) The Western press reported that the Politburo gave Zaitsev one year to "start winning the war" but no hard evidence of this deadline has come to light.¹⁷ If indeed, this deadline was set, it suggests that in 1985 at least, there were still some in the military who thought that a military solution was possible.

¹⁷See Oberdorfer. The closest reference I have found to such a deadline from a Soviet source comes from Yakovlev's 1991 television interview in which he says that the army suggested that military aid to the regime be stepped up before any withdrawal was contemplated and Baklanov was asked to send Scud missiles to Afghanistan. See Yakovlev/Leshchinskiy p.4.

Certainly Zaitsev carried out a more energetic policy than his predecessor, featuring increased use of special forces (spetsnaz), renewed efforts to cut supply routes from Pakistan, and a concerted effort to train, motivate and equip the Afghan army (DRA) to take on the burden of Afghanistan's defense. 1985 and early 1986 saw an upsurge in terrorist bombings in the refugee camps in Pakistan, cross-border artillery shelling and Soviet/Afghan air intrusions into Pakistani airspace, which led to a threat by the U.S. to provide AWACS to Pakistan.¹⁸

This pattern of expanding the level of violence while preparing one's ally to take on a greater share of the fighting was so reminiscent of Kissinger's strategy in Vietnam that Western observers christened it "Afghanization." But even under the new strategy, the Red Army operated under strict politically-imposed limits in Afghanistan. The actions against Pakistan were nowhere near the scale that would have been required to effectively seal the border, and there was no increase in Soviet troop strength on the ground.

Thus the military's two major gripes against the civilian leadership remained. Within a few weeks of the December 1979 invasion, the Soviets had 85,000 troops in Afghanistan. Thereafter the Politburo steadfastly refused to raise the number substantially (beyond 115,000) despite significant improvements in the number, organization and equipment of the mujahidin. They also consistently barred the military from taking serious measures against mujahidin safehavens and supply routes in Iran and Pakistan. This political restraint was motivated by concern for foreign public opinion, rather than domestic pressure. But the impact on the Red Army was similar to the impact on the American military in Vietnam. The Soviet military were humiliated by their

¹⁸Tom Rogers, The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Analysis and Chronology (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992) p70.

inability to defeat a third-world foe. They blamed their failure on the political leadership who gave them a task and then denied them the necessary tools.

"Afghanization" reached its high-water point at the April 1986 Battle of Zhawar, when a predominantly DRA force overran a major guerilla base on the Afghan-Pakistani border with heavy losses on both sides¹⁹. It is worth noting that despite the increased tempo of fighting, Soviet combat deaths in Afghanistan declined substantially in 1985 and again in 1986, which suggests that Zaitsev's tactics paid some dividends.²⁰

But the overall impact of the new strategy was negligible, as Akhromeyev acknowledged in the November 1986 Politburo meeting, when he complained: "There is not a single piece of land in Afghanistan that the Soviet soldier has not conquered. Despite this, a large chunk of territory is in the hands of the rebels...We control Kabul and the provincial centers but we have been unable to establish authority over the seized territory. We have lost the struggle for the Afghan people."²¹ Thus by November 1986 at the latest, the top leadership of the military had given up the hope of winning the war militarily.

The November 1986 Politburo decision to set a two-year timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan did not mean that the USSR was washing its hands of Afghanistan. On the contrary, according to recently-released documents from the Central Committee archives, the decision specifically called for continued provision of military assistance

¹⁹Mark Urban War in Afghanistan (New York: St Martin's Press 1990) p191-5.

²⁰In 1989 Pravda listed the figures as 2343 killed in 1984; 1868 killed in 1985; 1333 killed in 1986; 1215 killed in 1987; 759 killed in 1988 and 53 killed in 1989. Urban p317.

²¹ Michael Dobbs "The Afghan Archive: Reversing Course" pA1.

to the Afghan government (DRA) and directed that in 1990 -- one year after the withdrawal was supposed to be completed -- the DRA would receive 380 tanks, 865 infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, 1000 rocket launchers, 54 aircraft and other equipment and ammunition.²² The specificity of these figures suggests that there was an working assumption that a viable regime would be left behind after the withdrawal.

Although the Soviet military had no great love for the Afghan regime, they had a considerable stake in its survival, at least for a "decent interval." A speedy mujahidin defeat of the Afghan military would further tarnish the Red Army's reputation, and could put lives at risk if it took place before the withdrawal could be completed. The military were also worried by the prospect of instability on the USSR's southern border. Therefore, the survivability of the regime they had fought for was a major concern, and their experience on the ground did not give them much confidence in the DRA's ability to defend itself. During the course of the withdrawal, the military had four specific objectives: ensuring a continued flow of weapons to the Afghan military; achieving a cut-off of military supplies to the mujahidin; carrying out the withdrawal with a minimum of Soviet casualties and pinning as much of the blame as possible on the politicians rather than the generals.

In this regard, their interests were far different from those of the reformers in the political leadership, such as Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, Yakovlev and Dobrynin, whose main goal was to get the war over with as soon as possible, so that the USSR could get down to the serious

²²"Special File" Moscow Russian Television Network 1720 GMT July 14 1992.

business of a forging a new relationship with U.S., China and the rest of the Western world.²³

Both the politicians and the military wanted "peace with honor", but the former had a greater stake in the "peace" element of the equation, and the latter in the "honor."

As a result, the decision to withdraw was not a one-shot deal, but a rather a long series of negotiations on the timing and conditions of the pullout. As Yakovlev recalls the debate:

"Varennikov never once said that he favored the continuation of the war in Afghanistan. He didn't say any such thing. The whole time they were putting forward seemingly objective and reasonable arguments... But when you put them all together in a logical pattern it became apparent that they were deliberately holding things up, spinning things out in order to put off the moment when it would be possible to say: That's it, we're getting out."²⁴

This difference in perspective may account for one of the stranger episodes of the withdrawal period which occurred in July 1986, when Gorbachev announced that six Soviet regiments would be withdrawn from Afghanistan before the end of the year. The withdrawal did take place amid considerable publicity in October 1986, but U.S. intelligence noticed that the only

²³This difference in perspective was confirmed by Dobrynin, who said in a telephone interview that he and others in the political leadership paid only scant attention to the military situation on the ground during the withdrawal debate. He claimed that military developments -- such as the arrival of the Stinger missiles in the second half of 1986 -- had little impact on the withdrawal decision.

²⁴Yakovlev/Leshchinskiy p.4. Varennikov himself, in a 1993 television interview with Borovik, confirms this friction between the military and the civilian leadership. He says that he first met Gorbachev during a meeting of the Politburo Afghan Commission and was favorably impressed by him, but later became disillusioned when "it became clear that the whole time he was on the path of obliging the Americans on all issues, on all problems, including Afghanistan to the detriment of the Soviet Union. This was so the Americans could trust him as someone they could rely on." See Valentin Varennikov, Interview. Top Secret, With Yevgeniy Kozhokin and Artem Borovik, Russian Television Network. March 13 1993. (FBIS-SOV-93-048 p.66)

militarily significant elements to be "withdrawn" (the tanks and the two motorized rifle regiments) had been introduced into Afghanistan after the withdrawal speech, without any serious attempts at camouflage. The U.S. and Chinese immediately denounced the exercise as a "sham" and Gorbachev's credibility in the West suffered considerably from the episode. The timing was particularly damaging because it occurred on the eve of the Reykjavik Summit when Gorbachev was preparing to unveil a radical proposal for unprecedented cuts in nuclear weapons. There is no obvious explanation for this anomaly, and no clear evidence that the military acted against political instructions. But it does suggest the extreme reluctance of the military to go down the slippery slope of withdrawing its forces piecemeal.

Once a withdrawal was agreed upon, the military strategy seems to have been to get it done as quickly as possible. This is indirectly confirmed by Shevardnadze who said that the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan had been made in principle by the January before the withdrawal began (he presumably means January 1987) but the way it was to be carried out remained uncertain. Shevardnadze then continued : "I must say now that on this point the military were right: ...once the decision had been made we should have withdrawn immediately."²⁵

One reason arguing for speed was the fact that the military situation on the ground seemed to be deteriorating by the end of 1986, when the mujahidin began to receive Stinger missiles, and Soviet aircraft, for the first time in the war, became vulnerable to attack. But even without the Stingers, it made good military sense to get out fast. Once the withdrawal decision became known, morale and discipline would inevitably suffer -- particularly among the Afghan government forces. Thus the longer the interval between announcement and actual withdrawal,

²⁵Shevardnadze/Leshchinskiy p.5.

the more likely the military was to be faced with their ultimate nightmare: the regime falling and chaos erupting before the withdrawal was complete.

The departure scenario that was approved at the end of 1986 probably included a coalition government in Kabul, at least a partial ceasefire on the ground, and the cessation of Western military supplies to the mujahidin. But as 1987 and 1988 wore on, Soviet negotiators were unable to achieve any of these objectives, and it became increasingly clear that Soviet forces would come under fire as they left Afghanistan. Most of the roads out of Afghanistan went through mountainous terrain, making them vulnerable to ambushes.

It became the task of Lieutenant General Boris Gromov, who was named Commander of the 40th Army at the end of 1986, to ensure that Soviet casualties during the withdrawal period were kept to a minimum. He was more successful at this task than many Western analysts had predicted. His tactics included negotiation of local truces with any guerrilla commanders willing to negotiate, and large-scale artillery and air attacks against those who refused a truce. His task was eased by the fact that most of the mujahidin decided to save their bullets to fight against the Afghan army and each other.

But before the military could leave, major work had to be done to get the Afghan regime prepared for the withdrawal. As in Moscow, the changes began at the top: the ouster in May 1986 of Babrak Karmal, the Afghan Party chief, and supposed issuer of the "invitation" to Soviet troops to intervene in Afghanistan in 1979.²⁶ Karmal was replaced by Najibullah, former head of the KHAD, the Afghan secret police. An intensive schedule of consultations began: Najib

²⁶Karmal was luckier than his three immediate predecessors, in that he survived his ouster and was granted asylum in the Soviet Union. In a 1989 interview with Artyem Borovik, he denied ever having issued any invitation to the Soviet troops. Borovik p.8.

travelled to Moscow with a large delegation in December 1986, where Gorbachev told him of the withdrawal decision.²⁷ In January 1987 Shevardnadze and Dobrynin travelled to Kabul to supervise implementation of the new line: under Soviet prodding Najib announced a unilateral ceasefire, an amnesty, and a policy of national reconciliation, offering to share power with repentant mujahidin. Even though Najib was evidently hand-picked by the Soviets to fit the new conditions, it was not easy to move the frightened faction-ridden Afghan Communist Party down the road of power-sharing and democratization. Their concern, not surprisingly, was for their own survival and they clung desperately to the Soviet lifeboat. As Yakovlev recalled unsympathetically: "Time passed and objections were raised from the Afghan side...(they) accused us of leaving them in the lurch. (They) moaned that Afghanistan would soon collapse, that reprisals would start and so on."²⁸ Najib paid three visits to Moscow in less than a year (December 1986, July 1987 and October 1987) and was prodded step by step into expanding the base of his government and offering a greater share of power to his opponents.

With Najib, the Soviets were faced with the classic dilemma of dealing with a puppet regime: if they didn't push, he wouldn't budge, but if they pushed too far, the regime would collapse. Najib's base of support in Afghanistan was too weak for him to oppose Soviet will and policies, but it was also too weak for him to carry them out successfully. Most of the browbeating went on behind closed doors, but as time passed the Soviets became impatient and made increasingly open statements about their intentions to pull their troops out. These

²⁷Oberdorfer reports that Gorbachev told Najib during the meeting that a 12-month withdrawal deadline would be announced publicly in June 1987, and that this announcement caused panic in Najib's entourage. Oberdorfer p. A30.

²⁸Yakovlev/Leschchinskiy p.4.

statements increased the pressure on Najib to cooperate, but at the same time they removed the incentive for other parties to join him in a government of national reconciliation. Early in 1988 the Soviets gave up on their efforts to form a coalition government in Kabul and announced that they would withdraw their troops regardless. In the final analysis, Najib's government survived for much longer than most observers predicted, and he was not overthrown until the spring of 1992, three years after the withdrawal was completed. But his longevity was less the result of his own actions, than it was the result of the mujahidin decision to turn on each other before they got around to finishing him off.

The withdrawal decision was made at a closed Politburo session and never publicly announced, so the Soviets were able to keep their adversaries guessing about their intentions until the last minute. This may have been an advantage in making political and military preparations for the withdrawal, but it became a disadvantage in the diplomatic arena, because it made it harder for them to convince their negotiating partners that they sincerely intended to leave. As a result they got a relatively unsatisfactory diplomatic solution, and it took a long time to achieve. The next section looks at the difficulties of working out an international settlement.

WORKING OUT INTERNATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE WITHDRAWAL

The Soviets faced two major obstacles on the diplomatic front: lack of credibility and lack of a unified enemy to negotiate with. The first was a problem of their own creation, the second a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in the last decade.

The Soviets were looking for three things in order to ease their departure from Afghanistan: agreement on a governing arrangement in Kabul that would provide for a peaceful transition of power at a "decent interval" after the Soviet departure; an end to the flow of

weapons to the mujahidin; and a multilateral agreement with the U.S. that would demonstrate the ability of the two superpowers to cooperate in the international arena. After long and painful negotiations, they achieved their third goal, but only at the cost of giving up on the first two.

The international negotiating framework was called the Geneva "Proximity" Talks, so called, because the two official participants -- Pakistan and Afghanistan -- did not have diplomatic relations and were unwilling to sit in the same room when the talks began in 1982. As a result, they sat in separate rooms, and the negotiator, UN Undersecretary General Cordovez, shuttled between them. The format had two problems: the parties did not talk to each other, and most of the decisive actors -- the mujahidin, the U.S., the Soviets and the Iranians -- were not represented. Until 1985, this unpromising structure produced six rounds of essentially sterile negotiations. In a triumph of form over substance, Cordovez did not settle any of the key issues, but instead created the diplomatic vehicle for an agreement, composed of four "instruments" which were to govern bilateral relations. All that remained was to reach agreement on the substance.

Starting in 1986, the pace of negotiations quickened, although most of the substantive movement came only in 1987. The key concessions were made outside the framework of the Geneva negotiations, mainly in bilateral U.S.-Soviet talks, which began in June 1985, and continued at regular intervals thereafter. Shultz says in his memoirs that he began to believe that the Soviets were serious about withdrawing in September 1987, when Shevardnadze told him "privately" that the Soviets would leave "soon."²⁹ At that time, Shultz's conviction was shared by

²⁹George Shultz, Turmoil and Triumph, (New York: Charles Scribner's Son 1993) p.1086.

few in the U.S. Government outside the State Department. Skepticism was strong in the intelligence community, especially among long-time Soviet watchers, who found it impossible to believe that the leopard was really changing his spots. The 1986 "fake withdrawal" played a considerable role in strengthening the arguments of the skeptics that Soviet policy was long on words but short on deeds.

As the year 1988 opened, three issues remained open: the makeup of the Kabul Government, the timing of the withdrawal, and the issue of arms supplies to the mujahidin. On February 8 Gorbachev gave a televised speech, backing down on two of the three issues: he announced that the troop withdrawal would go forward, whether or not a coalition government was formed in Kabul, and he set a nine-month deadline for the withdrawal, to begin May 15. Yakovlev reports that these concessions required Gorbachev's personal intervention in the Politburo.³⁰ Gorbachev and Shevardnadze seem to have been under the impression that the U.S. had agreed to cease arming the mujahidin once the withdrawal date was agreed upon.

Instead, however, the U.S. insisted that they would continue supplying the mujahidin as long as the Soviets supplied arms to the Kabul government. Shultz recalled in his memoirs that his insistence on this point resulted from his distrust of the conviction held unanimously in the U.S. intelligence community, that the Kabul regime would fall as soon as the Soviets left. This

³⁰As Yakovlev recalled this particular argument between the military and political leadership in his interview with Leshchinskiy "Each side tried...to force the other to accept responsibility. If you make this decision, you must accept responsibility for the consequences. So this shining, gleaming ping-pong ball of responsibility flew back and forth. Where would the buck stop...Mikhail Sergeyevich, of course, he had the final say. Enough hesitation, he said, the troops must be withdrawn. That's all there is to it. They must be withdrawn." Yakovlev adds that the military predicted at this point that the regime would collapse within a week or two, resulting in a bloodbath. Yakovlev/Leshchinskiy p.5.

issue of "symmetry" became a major stumbling block at the final stages of the negotiations in 1988, and seems to have been a important point of contention between Gorbachev and the Soviet military.³¹ Lengthy negotiations ensued between Shevardnadze and Shultz in March, without results. Ultimately, the Soviets forced Najibullah to sign the Geneva Accords on April 14 1988, even though the U.S. had made it clear in public that they planned to continue providing arms to the mujahidin. Much of Gorbachev's insistence on getting a deal probably resulted from his desire to have the withdrawal underway when Reagan travelled to Moscow for a Summit in late May 1988.

Once the Geneva Accords were signed and the mechanics of the withdrawal got underway, the limitations of the Geneva forum became a serious problem for the Soviets. The mujahidin had not been a party to the Accords and had not undertaken any obligations, yet their cooperation was vital in order to minimize Soviet casualties during the withdrawal. The Soviet army had long had contacts with individual mujahidin leaders in the field in Afghanistan, but not with the Peshawar-based leadership. But it was the latter who held the key to a problem that Moscow had paid little attention to during the negotiations: the fate of the approximately 300 Soviet POWs and MIAs. The Soviets' ability to ignore an issue of such emotional resonance until very late in the negotiating process shows how small a role public opinion actually played in the withdrawal. It also reflects the Stalinist legacy from World War II, when any soldier who "allowed" himself to be taken prisoner was labelled a traitor.

By 1988, former POWs and the families of current POWs were beginning to speak out

³¹In his interview with Borovik, Varennikov recalls that his opposition to Gorbachev began when the latter "did not have a firm say regarding U.S. responsibilities when the Geneva accords were signed " Varennikov/Borovik p.64.

and put pressure on the government to seek an accounting of the dead, and release of those still alive. In June they held a news conference in Moscow. In October the Soviet Ambassador in Kabul, Vorontsov, began a series of meetings with the Pakistani-based mujahidin leaders to talk about POWs. These talks were later expanded to other issues, including the formation of a coalition government in Kabul, and arrangement of a cease-fire to permit Soviet troops to leave Afghanistan unopposed. But none of these discussions were successful, and some of the POWs and MIAs remain unaccounted for to the present day. Part of the reason for this lack of success stems from the disunity of the Peshawar groups, whose ability to compromise evaporated as they began to smell victory. But a large part of the failure can be explained by the Soviet tactics, and the fact that they started serious negotiations on these issues only after they had given up all of their bargaining chips.

WAR TERMINATION IN AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE

After looking closely at the Soviet experience in leaving Afghanistan, it is hard to argue that the Soviet system's authoritarian nature made it easier for Gorbachev to disengage than if he were the leader of a democracy.

The process of reaching a domestic consensus to withdraw from Afghanistan was much less raucous than the analogous process in the U.S. during the Vietnam War. But it was far more subversive to the political system. It required a change in the political leadership to make the withdrawal decision at the outset, and a re-shaping of the society's main institutions to make it stick. For the USSR, the withdrawal from Afghanistan was part of a revolution that ultimately destroyed the state. This is not to suggest that it requires a revolution for an authoritarian regime to terminate an unsuccessful war. But as long as there is no cataclysmic change on the battlefield,

the decision to disengage usually requires a change in the political leadership, particularly if there has been a significant investment of blood and money. Democracies are less likely than authoritarian states to stay bogged down for long periods in unsuccessful wars, because public pressure and the electoral process force reconsideration at an earlier stage.

Despite the differences in the government structure, the interaction between the Soviet military and the political leadership during the withdrawal period was quite reminiscent of the U.S. experience in the Vietnam era. Although they worked together for a common goal -- "peace with honor" as Nixon expressed it -- they had sharply different interests and concerns, which inevitably led to conflicts. The military's concern was for the safety of their troops, for the survival of their allies and for their own professional reputation and honor. The political leadership, in order to reach a diplomatic settlement, had to compromise on all of these. The result was a sense of betrayal and demoralization on the part of the military. The U.S. military was traumatized by Vietnam, but has had almost twenty years to recover. The Red Army never got a chance to recover from the trauma of Afghanistan before it was overtaken by an even greater one: the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fracture of the Soviet armed forces.

During the Afghan war, the Soviet military sometimes argued -- like the U.S. military in Vietnam -- that they could "win" the war, if only they weren't fettered by political constraints, i.e., the limited numbers of the Soviet military contingent, and their inability to pursue the mujahidin into their safe-havens in Pakistan and Iran. In retrospect, however, it seems clear that neither of these conflicts were susceptible to a military solution. They might have been dampened down temporarily by more efficient application of military force, but would not have been won for long. And there is nothing in the Soviet experience to suggest that authoritarian governments are

any better than democracies at figuring out which political conflicts are susceptible to military solutions and which ones are not.

As an authoritarian regime, the USSR could deal somewhat more ruthlessly with the puppet government it supported in Afghanistan than the U.S. could in Vietnam, but this freedom produced few results. Moscow was able to give Najib's regime over a year in which to prepare for the withdrawal -- between December 1986 when Najib was informed of the decision and March of 1988 when Gorbachev made the withdrawal timetable public -- but Najib was unable to accomplish much during the interlude.

The Soviets were probably least successful in the diplomatic arena, even though it is here that the advantages of speaking with a single voice should be most visible. In the end, they were forced to withdraw with all of their specific goals for Afghanistan unfulfilled. After the Soviet troop withdrawal the fighting intensified, central rule disintegrated, and Afghan territory began serving as a springboard for armed attacks by Moslem fundamentalists against the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan. After nine years of fighting and thirteen thousand killed in action, the Soviets were left with a situation on their southern border that was far more hostile and unstable than the situation they had confronted in 1979.

The war in Afghanistan produced a generation of soldiers, known as the "afgantsy" who make up the leadership of today's Russian Army and the backbone of its officer corps. Like the Vietnam vets, the "afgantsy" are not uniform in their allegiances. They range from Yeltsin-supporters such as Grachev to harder-line elements such as Gromov and Lebed. But most share a strong feeling of comradeship and an abiding distrust of the politicians in Moscow. Given the unsettled political situation in Russia, this group is likely to play a bigger role in Russian political

developments than its counterparts in the U.S. did.

One final area, where parallels between the U.S. and Soviet experiences are striking, is the so-called "Afghan syndrome" -- the current unwillingness of Russians to send their sons to die in conflicts in alien lands. Some would argue that this phenomenon explains the peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union: after the Afghan experience, no one was willing to send the Red Army to war to maintain control over Tajikistan or Uzbekistan, or even Ukraine. On the positive side, this syndrome acts as a limiting factor on Russia's ability to intervene militarily in the affairs of the former Soviet republics. But many Russians argue that the "Afghan syndrome" has gone too far, and sapped the country's ability to resist any kind of threats to its national interests. If the U.S. experience is any indication, Russia is likely to grapple with this issue for the next decade.

Despite the differences in their political systems, analysis shows far more similarities than differences between the U.S. experience in leaving Vietnam and the Soviet experience in extricating itself from Afghanistan. The Afghan war was less costly in blood and money than Vietnam, but no easier to get out of. Any advantages conferred by the authoritarian nature of the Soviet system seem to have been transitory -- as, indeed, the system turned out to be.

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