

1990 SEA POWER FORUM

BRIEFING PAPER

NOVEMBER

1990

Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan: Never Again?

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Rapporteur

Introduction

On September 26 and 27, the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) brought together Soviet and American experts on the war in Afghanistan to discuss the lessons of the war, its effect on Soviet society, and its impact on Soviet policy in the Third World. The session on September 26 was the concluding panel of CNA's annual Sea Power Forum, which examined the lessons of recent U.S. and Soviet involvement in regional conflicts. Participating on that panel were Stephen Stestanovich, Director of Soviet and East European Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and CNA's four Soviet guests: journalists Artyem Borovik and Alexander Prokhanov, both of whom reported from Afghanistan during the war; Col. Valerii Ochirov, Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Committee on Defense and State Security and veteran of the Afghanistan war; and Andrei Kokoshin, Deputy Director of the Institute of the USA and Canada. A second session was held at CNA, where Soviet experts were joined by CNA's James McConnell, as well as Lt. Col. Joseph Collins of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and Stephen Blank of the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, both authors of books on the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

For members of the audience who had seen Americans and Soviets share a podium in the past, these two sessions were striking in that the sharpest cleavages were not between the American and Soviet participants, but among the Soviets themselves. The discussion illustrated the extent to which a culture of debate is developing in the Soviet Union today. Despite a few signs of reticence about airing their differences directly, the Soviet participants did not mince words as they broadcast their respective views. Rather than disagreeing on particular issues, they tended to express their differences through their selection of topics for discussion.

For instance, Mr. Borovik focused on political issues—the mistakes of the decision to intervene, the ineptitude of the Soviet embassy in Kabul, the censorship on war reporting—and in doing so, roundly condemned the war. He called the effort to export the Soviet way of life to Afghanistan “arrogant.” “In reality,” he said, “we were exporting stagnation.” In contrast, Mr. Prokhanov discussed heroism and the human side of war, and lessons learned in combat. Thus, although he agreed with Mr. Borovik that Soviet troops should not have been sent into Afghanistan, he conveyed the impression that the war had a positive side.

These contrasting interests and views produced a wide-ranging discussion that mixed analysis with anecdotes from the Soviet participants' own experiences in Afghanistan. From this variety of perspectives emerged a few common themes. Key among them was that the Soviet army was sent into a country about which it knew very little to fight a war for which it was unprepared.

The Way the War Was Fought

Soviet troops had been trained to fight a conventional war in Europe, and the tactics relevant to warfare in Europe were not applicable to the guerilla war the Soviet army had to fight in the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan. The Soviet army had engaged in mountain warfare in the Caucasus in World War II, but the lessons of that experience had not been integrated into Soviet military thought and were not being taught in the military institutes. The Soviet army simply had no military doctrine appropriate for Afghanistan. The initial thrust to Kabul in December 1979 was operationally identical to what would have been expected in Europe, and a carbon copy of the intervention into

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE NOV 1990		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1990 to 00-00-1990	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan: Never Again?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) CNA,Center for Naval Analyses,4825 Mark Center Drive,Alexandria,VA,22311				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 4	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviet army was forced to adapt as it fought the war.

In some ways, the Soviet army successfully developed tactics to fight in Afghanistan. Mr. Prokhanov identified three areas in which learning occurred: controlling the roads, both to protect Soviet supply lines and to interdict those of the opposition; conducting large-scale helicopter operations in the mountains and dropping paratroops in preparation for combat; and developing networks of intelligence agents to cope in Afghanistan's complex tribal system. Lt. Col. Collins acknowledged that there were some successes, but argued that on the whole, the Soviet army was very slow to adapt. He said that some things remained unchanged over the nine years of Soviet involvement.

Dr. Blank argued that a major failing of Soviet strategy in Afghanistan was an overreliance on air power. Soviet strategy turned on the ability of the air force to bomb strategic targets, engage in tactical interdiction, insert troops into strategic areas, and provide close air support. As a result, Mujaheddin air defense took a toll on the effectiveness of Soviet operations. In Dr. Blank's view, the Soviet inability to neutralize the opposition's air defense—which included Stinger missiles supplied by the United States—negated Soviet strategy in Afghanistan.

Other participants attributed less significance to the Stingers. Lt. Col. Collins contended that "it was the Mujaheddin, not the Stinger, that won the war." As the Soviet panelists noted, when the Mujaheddin acquired Stingers, Soviet pilots adjusted their tactics, flying low over areas where they might be threatened by Stingers. Col. Ochirov said that the adaptation was successful; although the Stingers imposed a psychological burden on Soviet pilots, they had little concrete effect on the course of the war.

A Failure of Understanding

Both the political and military leadership had a poor understanding of the situation facing the Soviet army in Afghanistan. Col. Ochirov said that Soviet attention focused on military considerations, to the exclusion of the social, political, and ethnic factors that proved to make the war so complex. Lacking an understanding of these factors, Soviet leaders failed to appreciate, for example, that Soviet intervention would only unify and strengthen the opposition. Nor

did they appreciate that the Soviet Union would make enemies by imposing border controls between Afghanistan and its neighbors, and that sealing the borders of Afghanistan and interdicting supplies coming in through Pakistan was a formidable task.

Even in pure military terms, the problem was misunderstood. According to Col. Ochirov, the Soviet leadership sent troops into Afghanistan with the expectation that they could stay out of combat. Initial plans called for Soviet troops to guard strategic locations, thus freeing Afghan government troops for combat. The constraints imposed by Afghanistan's infrastructure capped the size of the contingent at 120,000, and these 120,000 troops were thought to be adequate to permit the Afghan government to consolidate its position. Lt. Col. Collins characterized these expectations as wholly unrealistic, and indeed, contrary to leadership hopes in 1979, the Soviet army was soon engaged in combat.

Nonetheless, according to Dr. Blank, through much of 1980, the High Command believed that the situation could be stabilized quickly and Soviet troops withdrawn. The military leadership reportedly promised that Soviet troops would be home by the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and when that deadline had passed, promised withdrawal by the 26th Communist Party Congress in February 1981. But the war was rapidly becoming a Soviet war: Soviet troops were increasingly drawn into combat, and Afghan troops were relegated to support roles. Dr. Blank said that by the autumn of 1980, military leaders recognized that victory was not in sight. They reportedly told the political leadership that 300,000 troops were needed to do the job the army was being asked to do.

The initial optimism faded, fighting intensified, and gradually over the nine years of the war, fatigue set in and the war came to be viewed as unwinnable. Mr. Borovik and Mr. Prokhanov drew parallels between the Soviet Union's evolving attitude towards the war and the attitudes of individual soldiers sent to fight. Like the country, they said, each soldier went through stages that brought him from optimism to cynicism.

Impact on Soviet Society

This disillusionment that individual soldiers experienced in Afghanistan, this sense that the war was futile, spread rapidly in the Soviet Union when *glasnost* finally touched

the war in 1987-1988. The public mood quickly swung towards opposition to the war. Once subjected to *glasnost*, the war had a profound impact on Soviet society. In this respect, both American and Soviet discussants said, comparisons to the American experience in Viet Nam are apt. Like Viet Nam for America, Afghanistan was a national trauma for the Soviet Union, and one that divided society. It was the discussion of the domestic impact of the war that touched raw nerves among the Soviet participants.

Opposition to the war turned into opposition to all things military. This antimilitary sentiment was a dramatic reversal for a society that had kept its memories of World War II alive with tales of heroism told and retold over 45 years. The previously irreproachable image of the Soviet soldier was tarnished by *glasnost* on Afghanistan, which revealed not only heroism, but terror bombings and civilian casualties, disillusionment and confusion, drug abuse and ethnic violence. This popular antagonism toward the military has proved to be a major irritant in civil-military relations. It has sapped military morale and enhanced the credibility of civilian critics of the armed forces. It has helped to fuel the movement towards reform in Soviet security policy.

Mr. Borovik described the impetus the war gave to reform as the one positive result of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, "we bombed our own ideals," he said, and the war inspired a "revolution." He said that although the war was lost, "a new mentality was won." In contrast, Mr. Prokhanov and Col. Ochirov saw the war in less apocalyptic terms and implied that the turnabout in public attitudes towards the military was unwarranted. They described Afghanistan as a war that was fought by valiant and able soldiers, according to orders from misguided political leaders. From this perspective, the army has unjustly borne the brunt of public resentment over Afghanistan. "Perhaps the Politburo worked poorly," Prokhanov said, "but the young soldiers fought well."

The war split the country in other ways. The draft process was corrupted, and Afghanistan became a war fought by the sons of workers and peasants. According to Mr. Borovik, the elite kept their sons out of Afghanistan by bribing and pulling strings for places in universities and institutes. The war also aggravated national divisions. As Dr. Blank put it, every nation believed that it served dispro-

portionately. And Mr. Prokhanov argued that while Soviet leaders may have hoped that intervention in Afghanistan would check the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, in fact, the reverse happened, as evidenced by recent disturbances in Central Asia. Both he and Mr. Borovik used similar images to describe how sharply the war had divided Soviet society. The war has not ended for the Soviet Union, they said. Rather, it has crossed Soviet borders and is now being fought in the streets of the republics.

On one issue, the discussants agreed, there is a consensus across the ideological spectrum in Soviet society: The Soviet Union should stay out of future regional conflicts. Dr. Stestanovich argued that it is this public resentment over the cost and pointless loss of life in Afghanistan that will keep Soviet troops at home for some time to come. Whereas external factors were the primary determinants of foreign policy when Gorbachev first came to power, he said, today domestic factors are driving Soviet policy.

Whither Soviet Third World Policy?

Caution is the watchword for Soviet Third World policy in the 1990s. The public antipathy towards military involvement abroad complements a fundamental reorientation in Soviet foreign policy in the Gorbachev era, a reorientation Dr. Stestanovich illuminated with a historical perspective. He said that whereas Brezhnev favored detente with the West but supported activism in the Third World and Andropov questioned Soviet commitments in the Third World but took a confrontational approach to the United States, Gorbachev wedded U.S.-Soviet detente with *glasnost* on Soviet Third World policy. The result was a coherence that neither Brezhnev nor Andropov managed to muster. By making his foreign policy seem a success overall, Gorbachev was able to avoid the impression that the withdrawal from Afghanistan was a defeat. For the future, popular sentiment and government policy both support a continued pull-back from the Third World.

The Soviet panelists made clear, however, that caution does not mean complete Soviet withdrawal around the world. They said that, as a superpower, the Soviet Union has interests abroad and will continue to safeguard them.

Col. Ochirov argued that Afghanistan was the exception to the rule in Soviet Third World policy—the exception that

demonstrated the wisdom of the rule. Typically, he said, as in Angola, Mozambique, and Nicaragua, Soviet assistance has been limited to military advisers and air defense units. Such limitations could be examined as the basis for superpower agreement on assistance to allies in the Third World. The United States and the Soviet Union should cooperate to ensure that their advisers do not participate in combat and to prevent attack on one side's advisers by the other side. Col. Ochirov argued that the presence of military advisers should be considered normal, and indeed could exert a positive influence. To make their presence a positive one, the superpowers should act to constrain their allies and deter escalation of conflicts between third parties.

Mr. Kokoshin advocated superpower cooperation to preempt regional crises in the future. He said that the lack of U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the Persian Gulf before the invasion of Kuwait may have encouraged Saddam Hussein. To deter the Saddams of the future, he argued, the United States and the Soviet Union should make clear that they will form a united front against aggressors. U.S.-Soviet cooperation is not a given, he warned; U.S. and Soviet interests will not always coincide. He also lobbied for understanding of his view that, for geographical reasons, the Soviet Union is more vulnerable to threats from the Third World than is the United States. Like Col. Ochirov, he advocated a continuing Soviet presence in areas of vital interest. He said that Soviet presence should retreat from the Brezhnev-era stretch into Latin America and Africa and return to the "traditional" areas of concern around the Soviet perimeter.

This CNA Briefing Paper is based on CNA's 1990 Sea Power Forum. The Sea Power Forum was initiated in 1984 with two main objectives: to promote constructive discussion of major issues among senior U.S. officials and knowledgeable analysts, and to foster greater appreciation of the challenges faced by the Navy and Marine Corps as they seek to protect the nation's global interests. Such matters as technological trends, force design, missions, and strategies are analyzed and debated. For further information about CNA's Sea Power Forum, contact Elizabeth French at (703) 824-2639

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