
THE LESSONS OF THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE

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The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 made a number of senior Soviet officials uneasy. Many saw the dangers of the intervention turning into a long-term occupation, with Soviet troops fighting Afghan villagers-turned combatants. Others, particularly diplomats who had devoted the previous decade to developing *détente* with the United States, were worried about the international reaction and the long-term damage to US-Soviet relations. When Mikhail Kapitsa, a deputy foreign minister, pointed out to his superior Andrei Gromyko that three invasions by British forces had failed, the latter, a supporter of the Soviet decision to intervene, asked sharply “Are you comparing our internationalist forces to those of the British imperialists?” Kapitsa simply responded, “No, the troops are different. But the mountains are the same.”

The story, related to me by a scholar who interviewed Kapitsa in the early 1990s, is a good illustration not only of the difficulty of raising effective criticism within the USSR against the war at the time of the invasion, but also of finding historical parallels that could be useful to policymakers. Kapitsa was right that Soviet troops would face some of the same difficulties that had confounded British troops in the nineteenth century, but Gromyko’s initial enquiry highlights an important shift in the ideological circumstances surrounding the invasion by the late twentieth century.

US officials have thus far largely avoided drawing any comparison between their own experience in Afghanistan and that of the USSR. There are two likely explanations for this reticence: first, the Soviet intervention is largely seen as a failure, and second, the US role in that conflict was far from benign and indeed contributed to the chaos that enveloped Afghanistan in the 1990s. Indirectly, then, it can be linked to the rise of the Taliban and 9/11. Most importantly, the US sees its involvement as being fundamentally different from that of the USSR; it is spreading ‘democracy’ where the Soviet Union was fighting for the spread of ‘communism’, and doing it with better-trained and better-equipped troops. Despite the many differences between the two interventions, however, it would be wise for the Obama administration to consider some aspects of the Soviet experience as it undertakes to effect a major shift in policy toward the region.

Like Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who came to power in 1985, the Obama administration has inherited a mismanaged war and wants to bring the situation under control. In Afghanistan, it faces a growing insurgency that undermines efforts at state-building, widespread corruption, and a rapidly-destabilising neighbour in Pakistan. There are several areas where the Soviet experience could provide useful lessons.¹

¹ For examples from the Soviet experience I have drawn on my own research into the topic. See Artemy Kalinovsky “Soviet Decision-making during the War in Afghanistan, from Intervention to Withdrawal.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2009) and “Politics, Diplomacy and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: From National Reconciliation to the Geneva Accords,” *Cold War History* 8:3 (August 2008), 381-404. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan, 1978-1992* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000)

First, there is the need to establish legitimate government. The Obama administration is reportedly disappointed in Hamid Karzai and may not support him for another term as president. He is seen as too weak to challenge regional warlords and all too willing to turn a blind eye to corruption within his own government. Moscow faced a similar situation in 1985-86. Having decided to embark on a major change of course in the war, Soviet leaders found that Babrak Karmal, the leader who they installed in December 1979, was similarly too weak and willing to overlook corruption. Replacing him with Mohammed Najibullah, former head of the Afghan police, took nearly a year, and the operation carried its own complications. For all of his shortcomings, Karmal turned out to have many supporters within the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and a network of allies and clients that would not accept his removal from power.

This begs the question; does the US have a replacement in mind for Karzai? Similarly, what happens if, after Karzai is gone, many of his influential supporters are hostile to the new leader? There is another, broader question; what will define the US/NATO relationship with Afghan authorities in the coming years? US officials have already reportedly begun to work directly with Afghan ministers and provincial governors in the hope of improving governance, security, and the delivery of essential services.² While all three elements are essential for successful counter-insurgency, bypassing the presidency can have the effect of contributing to centrifugal forces, undermining the legitimacy of the office of President and, more generally, Kabul's hold on the provinces.

The desire to finally establish a strong government in Kabul was one of the reasons that, in 1987, Moscow adopted a strategy opposite to the one being pursued currently by the US and NATO. Rather than increasing the presence of Soviet officials working with ministers and authorities in the provinces, Moscow withdrew most of its non-military advisers. It rejected any challenges to Najibullah's authority and sought to demonstrate his independence. The policy had a number of drawbacks, including limiting Moscow's influence within Afghanistan, but it allowed Najibullah to consolidate his power within the PDPA and to hold on to the country without Soviet troops (but with massive Soviet material support), until after the USSR itself collapsed.

More broadly, the non-military aspects of the Soviet counter-insurgency effort hold a number of cautionary tales for US and NATO efforts. Recognizing that the war against the *mujahadeen* could not be won by military means alone, Moscow sent thousands of technical and political advisers to help improve governance, establish enterprises, and modernize agriculture. These efforts were expected to help increase the government's legitimacy and win over villagers who might otherwise support the insurgents. While well-intentioned and perfectly rational/logical from a counter-insurgency perspective, the effort suffered from a number of problems. Many of the advisers and specialists sent to Afghanistan were unprepared for the work that they were sent to do. Cultural differences led to complications at both local and regional level. Lack of coordination combined with inter-service rivalry meant that aid promised to villagers often did not reach its intended destination. Since it was the advisers themselves who were responsible for reporting on the progress of their efforts, the perceptions formed in Moscow were often far rosier than warranted.

This situation may sound familiar in light of recent US and allied experiences in Afghanistan. The

² "An 'AfPak' About-Face for Obama" *Washington Post*, May 10, 2009; "Administration Is Keeping Ally at Arm's Length" *Washington Post*, May 6, 2009

white paper on Afghanistan and Pakistan released on March 30 noted similar problems in aid and reconstruction since the toppling of the Taliban. US and international assistance efforts, the white paper said, suffered from being “ill organized” and “under-resourced” and in most cases had not been subjected to impact studies. Nevertheless, the paper advocates more of the same: more civilian aid from the US and its partners, the UN, and more NGO involvement. Again, as important as reconstruction efforts are, this approach has its own pitfalls. How will effective coordination be ensured with such a wide array of actors? Will their efforts actually give Afghans confidence in their own government or on the contrary highlight its inability to deliver basic services and lead reconstruction efforts? Would not channelling aid through Afghan government institutions and moving all foreign aid work behind the scenes do more to establish good governance practices and build up Kabul’s legitimacy?

There is also the security dilemma. Soviet leaders recognized that they would need to provide continued security for the reconstruction and aid efforts to be effective, as well as keeping villages and towns safe from *mujahedin* attacks. Yet they never committed the number of troops necessary to do this, recognizing that a larger troop presence would invite even more criticism from Western countries, possibly increase tensions with the local population, and ultimately be harder to sustain domestically. Their reliance on air support—itself a result of the shortage of boots on the ground—led to high civilian casualties.

The Obama administration faces similar choices. Reconstruction and development aid is ineffective without security, but providing effective security in the context of the growing Taliban insurgency may require many more troops than the 30,000 already committed by the Obama administration. Increasing that number, or relying on air power (as it is doing in Pakistan), will continue to cause civilian deaths and inflame anti-American feeling. Although US and NATO forces have had some success in training the Afghan National Army, it is still not capable of providing security on its own. At the same time, the Afghan police force and judiciary are notoriously corrupt and ineffective.³

Finally, there is the question surrounding the exit strategy. The crux of Moscow’s exit strategy was to support a strong Pushtun leader (Najibullah) and allow him to use Soviet resources to build up personal power (including a presidential guard) and subsidize tribal militias. At the same time, Moscow continued active negotiations with parties supporting the *mujahadeen* resistance, particularly the US and Pakistan, in the hope of convincing them to cut off supplies in return for Moscow’s support of a government that included former opposition fighters. As noted above, the strategy allowed Najibullah to hold on to power, but it did virtually nothing to stop the civil war. The *mujahedin* saw it as a matter of time before Najibullah fell and continued to fight using US- and Pakistani-supplied weapons.

A recent study by the International Crisis Group urges the Obama administration to avoid such a course, which they labelled ‘Find the Right Pashtun’. The study points out that ‘Putting in power a tough Pashtun leader to rule with an iron fist would inflame ethnic tensions within Afghanistan, reignite a proxy war among regional powers and return the country to an even worse cycle of violence.’ It also argues against arming villagers, since this could create unaccountable militias that will only ‘worsen ethnic tensions and violence’.⁴

The ICG’s concerns, in this author’s view, are well justified. In fact, the consequences of these

³ “Policing in Afghanistan: Still Searching for a Strategy” *ICG Asia Briefing N°85*, 18 December 2008.

⁴ “Afghanistan: New US administration, new directions” *ICG Asia Briefing 89* March 2009.

possible approaches were evident when Moscow adopted both policies after it began pulling out its troops in 1988. Moscow's decision to unconditionally back Najibullah (endorsed by the KGB, but opposed by some in the military) made it virtually impossible to reach an accommodation with Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Tajik commander who had emerged as one of the leading figures of the opposition. The militias were dependent on subsidies from Kabul, which meant that they were dependent on subsidies from Moscow. As the Soviet economy collapsed in 1990 and 1991 these subsidies dried up, as did the loyalty of the militias. More importantly, the approach did little or nothing to strengthen the kind of institutions that might have brought stability to Afghanistan. The Afghanistan of 1989-92 was a sort of 'zombie state'—alive as long as money kept flowing from outside, but stalemated with regard to the myriad of challenges it faced.

Any emerging US strategy will have to balance the need to establish broader institutions and the need to develop stronger executive power in Kabul.⁵ Such a strategy will inevitably take a longer term commitment on the part of the Obama administration and its partners. Yet the US president faces much greater domestic pressures than Gorbachev did in the years before he withdrew troops. Already some Democrats in Congress are threatening to put pressure on the administration if it does not start winding down the war within a year. David R. Obey, a Democrat from Wisconsin, told the *New York Times*, "The problem is not the administration's policy or its goals. The problem is that I doubt that we have the tools there that we need to implement virtually any policy in that region."⁶

Obama's challenge is both more difficult and easier than Gorbachev's was in finding stability in Afghanistan. Gorbachev had to deal with the US supplying arms to the *mujahedin*, a sceptical and often hostile Pakistan, as well as, after 1989, a disintegrating Soviet Union. Obama, if all goes well, can hope for a cooperative Russia and even Iran, while Islamabad will likely continue to be supportive of US efforts. But he will also have to solve the problem of opium production, a disintegrating Pakistan, and a restless Congress that will chafe at supporting anything that seems like an open-ended commitment.

Clearly the Obama administration has much to do and not very much time to do it—looking carefully at the Soviet experience could be of great help in reassessing options and shaping strategy.

⁵ See the discussion of Obama's options in a recent paper from the Council of Foreign Relations: Daniel Markey "From AfPak to PakAf: A Response to the New U.S. Strategy for South Asia" CFR Policy Options Paper, April 2009.

⁶ "For Democrats, Unease Grows Over National Security Policy" *New York Times*, May 14, 2009.