Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan: A Preliminary Assessment

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Abstract
An analysis of Soviet operations in Afghanistan shows that Soviet forces have not had the requisite doctrine, force structure, or number of troops in that country in order to secure it. Chemical warfare and the use of helicopters are seen as particularly significant aspects of Soviet operations. Tactical and equipment changes have taken place and valuable lessons are being learned, but, at the end of 1982, Soviet forces were no closer to pacifying Afghanistan than they were in 1980.

Introduction
Assessing the performance of an army in combat is a difficult task. Factors such as morale, esprit de corps, discipline, and tactical proficiency are difficult to weigh even when the data are readily available. This type of assessment is doubly difficult when dealing with a subject like Soviet military operations in Afghanistan. Both

The views and conclusions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not purport to represent the official policy or position of the U.S. Military Academy, or any other government agency of the United States.
the Soviets and the freedom fighters "manage" the flow of information from the war zone, and the decentralized nature of the conflict poses significant obstacles to any analyst. In spite of these facts, with the passage of three years since the invasion in December 1979, it is possible to develop a preliminary assessment of the effectiveness of Soviet forces in Afghanistan and to tentatively draw some general conclusions about their conduct of the war. The material which follows will attempt to accomplish these tasks.

Preinvasion Activities

The April Revolution of 1978 was, like many communist revolutions, an urban coup d'état. The prime movers behind the coup were the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), led by Nur M. Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, and the Soviet-trained Afghan armed forces. Soviet involvement in the actual coup cannot be definitely established.¹ On the other hand, no one can accuse the Soviets of having neglected to build a superstructure for the coup: from 1956 to 1977 the USSR and its allies trained over 4,000 Afghan officers and delivered more than $600 million worth of military supplies to Afghanistan. By 1977, the Soviet military advisory group numbered some 350 men. In the same period, Soviet economic aid (mostly loans) totaled more than $1.3 billion, a sum which was exceeded in the Middle East and South Asia only by the amount given to Egypt, Syria, and India.²

Taraki’s government very quickly came under pressure from three directions. First, rural tribesmen revolted because of the regime’s internal repression, its disastrous land reform program, and its poorly concealed pro-Soviet sympathies. Secondly, Taraki’s own party split, and many of the Parcham (Banner) faction were jailed or exiled. This rupture prevented Taraki and his two successors from forming a strong, united government, especially since there were only a few thousand PDPA members in 1978.³ Thirdly, having noticed these facts and having been horrified at the regime’s abortive attempt to rescue the kidnapped U.S. Ambassador, Adolph Dubs, Western nations suspended nearly all aid after February 1979, further limiting Taraki’s freedom of action.

In March 1979, the rebellion of Afghanistan took an ominous turn. An army mutiny, coupled with a rebel attack on the western
city of Herat turned into a crisis for the Soviet Union. An American analyst summed up the tragedy in this manner:

... Soviet advisors were hunted down by specially assigned insurgent assassination squads conducting house-to-house searches. Westerners reportedly saw Russian women and children running for their lives from the area of the Soviet-built Herat Hotel. Those Russians that were caught were killed: some were flayed alive, others were beheaded and cut into pieces which were then paraded around the city impaled on pikes.4

As might be expected, the Afghan government and the Soviets reacted strongly. On the Afghan side, domestic repression increased, with one estimate of the final total of slain political prisoners (April 1978-January 1980) put as high as 20,000.5 In April 1979, an Afghan army unit (with Soviet advisers in attendance) sacked the town of Kerala and massacred 640 of its male inhabitants.6 On the Soviet side, an authoritative Pravda article of March 19, signed by the pseudonymous I. Aleksandrov, for the first time accused “some Western countries” (China, Iran, and Pakistan) of instigating unrest in Afghanistan. In a more substantive vein, Soviet General Alexei Yepishev, chief of the main political directorate of the armed forces, was dispatched to Afghanistan and apparently recommended an increase in military aid and advisers, then estimated to number one thousand. Among the weapons subsequently provided were 100 T-62 tanks and 12 Mi-24 helicopter gunships.7

Despite increased pressure, the resistance movement, disorganized as it was, began to grow, and further escalatory measures were taken by the Soviets. From August to October, General Ivan Pavlovsky, Deputy Defense Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Ground Forces, visited Afghanistan along with twelve other generals. At the same time, the role of Soviet advisers was broadened to include advising at the company level and routinely flying active combat missions.

In September 1979, after attending a conference of nonaligned nations in Havana, Taraki visited Moscow. In retrospect, it appears likely that in Moscow Taraki was urged to oust his deputy, the radical Hafizullah Amin, who had by then become the re-
pressive power behind the throne. Upon Taraki’s return, a gun battle broke out in the Arg Palace and, when the smoke cleared, Amin was in control. Taraki was killed in the battle or executed shortly thereafter.

Relations between Amin and the USSR remained officially cordial, but under the surface they were deteriorating. No doubt, Brezhnev was embarrassed by Taraki’s demise less than a week after their “fraternal” meeting. Moreover, the war against the rebels continued to go badly for Amin. In August, army forces mutinied in Kabul. In September, rebels temporarily captured the Salang Pass, the key choke point on the road from Kabul to the USSR. Desertion by whole army units had become commonplace, and Amin was having difficulty staffing a government without Parcham or Taraki supporters. Despite Soviet pressure, Amin, acting like an “Afghan Tito,” refused to broaden the base of the ruling party or to adopt more moderate policies. He rejected offers of Soviet troops, and a member of his government openly criticized the Soviets for interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, Amin demanded the recall of the Soviet Ambassador, A. Puzanov, who was implicated in the original attempt to assassinate him in September.

It is not difficult at this point to reconstruct the Soviet estimate of the situation in Afghanistan in the fall of 1979. Internally, as both Generals Yepishev and Pavlovsky had witnessed firsthand, Amin’s regime was crumbling. His army would not fight and he had no political base, having by this time begun to staff some key government positions with his relatives. The economy was in ruins and, even by Soviet estimates, government control over 18 of 26 provinces was in doubt.

Soviet inaction would certainly have resulted in Amin’s ouster. This in turn would have been a blow to Soviet prestige, a violation of the spirit of the Soviet-Afghan friendship treaty, and, in ideological terms, a Chilean-type thermidor on the Soviet Union’s border. Moreover, the Soviets might have believed that a radical, Islamic-oriented regime would take over in Kabul. Thus, Afghanistan could have been seen as a threat to stability in Soviet Central Asia. Even more important, the Soviets were surely reluctant to add another hostile state to those already along its southern bor-
der, especially when the Soviet leadership believed that they could safely and easily prevent this from occurring. With the United States fixated on its problems in Iran, the Soviets had every reason to believe that the West would be powerless to prevent or interrupt a rapid move into Afghanistan. It is also possible that the Soviets believed that impending U.S. action in Iran might deflect Third World criticism away from their invasion of Afghanistan.

In summary, Soviet activities prior to the invasion set the stage for what became a tremendous blunder. Blinded by "success" in Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, etc., the Soviets became increasingly entangled with a hopelessly ineffective regime. Furthermore, the USSR myopically viewed the regime's problems as military in nature. They sent two generals to Afghanistan who had previously recommended the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. When the Politburo needed advice, the two generals predictably presented the Soviet leaders with a recommendation for a military solution.

The Invasion

On December 8, lead elements of a 1,000-man airborne unit landed at the Soviet-controlled air base at Bagram, north of Kabul. On December 20, this unit moved north and cleared the Salang Tunnel area of rebel activity, thus securing the highway from Temerz in the Soviet Union to Kabul. This action was complemented by the call-up of Soviet reservists in late October and November to man the five Category 2 and 3 divisions then near the Afghan border. Bridge equipment was brought up to the Oxus River (Amu Darya) and a command post for the invasion, headed by Marshal Sokolov, a First Deputy Defense Minister, was established at Temerz, near the Soviet-Afghan border.

On Christmas eve, despite prior American warnings and the presence of an Afghan armored division nearby, the Soviets began landing elements of an airborne division at Kabul Airport. On December 27, following a three-day airlift which averaged 75-120 flights per day, troops from the division deployed to the Darulaman Palace outside Kabul, destroyed Amin's guard and its eight tanks, and killed President Amin. The account of a KGB major
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now in the West is eloquent testimony to the speed and efficiency with which this task was accomplished:

The day after Christmas 1979, Soviet paratroopers began arriving at the Kabul airport. They strengthened the substantial garrison we had quietly been building up there. The next day an armored column moved out of the airport toward the palace. It consisted of a few hundred Soviet commandos plus a specially trained assault group of KGB officers—rather like the U.S. Green Berets. They were all in Afghan uniforms, and their vehicles had Afghan markings.

Along the road the column was stopped at an Afghan checkpoint. Afghan troops gathered round to find out what was happening. Suddenly the flaps of the front vehicle went up and the Afghans were machine-gunned to the ground. The column rolled on. When it reached the palace, the special troops attacked from three sides, while Colonel Bayerenov (the head of the KGB’s terrorist-training school) led the assault on the palace. The attack got off to a good start. It would have been even better had the leading armored vehicle not got caught up in the palace gates. Moscow wanted no Afghans left to tell the tale of what had happened in the palace. No prisoners were to be taken. Anybody leaving the building was to be shot on sight. Amin was found drinking in a bar on the top floor of the palace. He was shot without question.16

Babrak Karmal, head of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, then in exile somewhere in USSR, was proclaimed President. Later that same day, senior Afghan Army officers who were unwilling to cooperate with the Soviets, including the general commanding the Central Army Corps, were killed by Soviet troops.17 MVD Lieutenant General Viktor Paputin, the apparent commander of the “political” operations associated with the invasion, also died, either in Kabul or later, perhaps by his own hand, in Moscow. Rumors of suicide were reinforced by the absence of Brezhnev’s signature to Paputin’s obituary.18

Beginning on December 27, two motorized rifle divisions, one destined for Kabul and the other for Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, led the procession of Soviet troops across the border. By the first week in February, elements of seven Soviet divisions had been identified in Afghanistan. With the exception of the
105th Guards Airborne Division, these units were composed of at least 50 percent reserve fillers on a 90-day call-up. Interestingly, a large number of the Soviet reservists (perhaps as many as 90 percent) were Central Asians.19

Soviet forces were quite methodical in the operations that followed. First, they moved to consolidate their hold over major roads and urban areas. Second, troops were then deployed near the Iranian and Pakistani borders in an attempt to limit infiltration from the sanctuary areas in these two countries. Third, concurrent with the first and second steps, disloyal elements of the Afghan army were disarmed or, if they refused, as the 26th Afghan Parachute Regiment did, they were destroyed by the superior firepower of adjacent Soviet units.20 Throughout the initial stages of the invasion, Soviet advisers played a key role in neutralizing Afghan army units whose loyalty was questionable. This was accomplished by Soviet control over fuel and by deceptions, such as having the questionable units turn over their ammunition for inventory or having them turn in vehicle batteries for winterizing.21

Any assessment of the invasion must be mixed. On the positive side of the ledger, the Soviet military and security apparatus proved that: (1) it is capable of rapid (though detectable) mobilization; (2) it can perform major operations without severe logistical breakdown; (3) it had sufficient ground forces to mount major, conventional operations in low-intensity environments outside the Warsaw Pact or Chinese border areas; and (4) it is reliable in “political” operations, such as assassination and the disarming of unreliable “friendly” forces. On the other hand, there were some glaring judgmental errors. The massive use of Central Asian reservists — evidently designed to facilitate movement and communication with the populace — was a mistake. Many of these reservists had spent their active duty in noncombat units and were poorly trained for fighting. Many were also guilty of fraternization and a few even defected.22 While the use of Central Asians did not cripple the operation itself, it may have unnecessarily disturbed the delicate political equilibrium in Central Asia. In short, what may have started out in part as an operation designed to insulate Soviet Central Asia from pan-Islamic fervor may well end up generating problems there.23 By February 1980,
Soviet reservists were withdrawn and replaced by regular Soviet forces.

On the negative side, mention again must be made of the Yeltsin-Pavlovsky estimate. Only someone with a pathetic ignorance of Afghan culture and history could have believed that the Afghans would not fight a foreign invasion force or that their Quisling, Babrak Karmal, could ever hope to gain popular support or even acceptance in the countryside. To see Afghanistan as a replay of events in Czechoslovakia was a key error and a disastrous attempt at trying to apply historical lessons as maxims. In summary, the Soviet leadership made the most fundamental military mistake: they failed to identify the nature of the conflict and to accurately gauge the relationship between means and end in Afghanistan. No battlefield error could have been as critical. As Clausewitz said:

The first, the grandest, and most decisive act of judgement which the Statesman and General exercises is rightly to understand in this respect the War in which he engages, not to take it for something, or to wish to make of it something, which by the nature of its relations it is impossible for it to be. This is, therefore, the first, the most comprehensive, of all strategical questions.24

Current Operations

The current situation in Afghanistan pits roughly 100,000 Soviet and 30,000 Afghan troops against 85-100,000 freedom fighters. Soviet forces (the 40th Army), according to unclassified sources, are composed of six motorized rifle divisions and five Air Assault Brigades (about 2,000 men each), backed up by an undisclosed number of “airborne/ranger” units, around 240 gunships and several squadrons of MIG 21s and 23s, and at least 1 squadron of SU 25 attack aircraft. The deployment of this latter aircraft is significant in that the Soviets have chosen Afghanistan as the location for its first operational deployment.25 Recent reports indicate MIG 25s configured for reconnaissance may also be in the country.

The freedom fighters come from at least six loosely organized and disunited resistance groups and fight in anywhere from pla-
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...toon to regimental strength. Armaments vary, with some units having 1 AK rifle per platoon, while others have nearly all of their fighters equipped with AKs. Fire support is limited, in the main, to RPGs, machine guns, and mortars. Although some analysts put foreign aid to the freedom fighters at the $100 million level, relatively little of the material has found its way to fighting units. Some recent observers have noted that the open market price of an AK in Pakistan — about $2,800 — has not declined appreciably from 1979 to 1982. The best source of arms is still the Soviet and Afghan forces.

The third element in the military equation, the Afghan army, is in disarray. Disillusionment with the government has produced defections of whole units to the rebel side. In fact, even the paltry force which is left is more burden than boon to the Soviets. In August 1980, fearing further defections, the Soviets were forced to remove all antiair and antitank weapons from the Afghan forces to preclude their falling into rebel hands. In April 1981, fearing further unrest within the Afghan army, the Soviet army expelled the Afghan garrisons from the Kabul area and took over many of their local security duties.

To bolster their forces, take the pressure off Soviet units, and perhaps to regain some autonomy, the Karmal government has repeatedly resorted to desperate measures. In January 1981, a new draft law was promulgated and press gangs have reportedly been rounding up teenagers as young as 14 years of age. Paramilitary groups, "Defense of the Revolution Battalions," have been formed but, in spite of high pay, they have generally proven to be ineffective. In July 1981, the government, by design or incompetence, committed some 300 cadets of the Afghan Military Academy to combat only 16 miles from Kabul! The results were devastating: as many as 70 were killed and 200 may have defected.

Overall, since mid-1980, the Soviet position in Afghanistan has deteriorated, though not yet to the point where it might jeopardize the entire operation. While territorially-based estimates are necessarily suspect, experts have increased their estimate of rebel-controlled territory from 75 percent of the country (December 1980) to as much as 90 percent (December 1981). It would be more accurate to say that perhaps as much as 90 percent of Afghan
territory is neither controlled by the Soviets nor the freedom fighters on a permanent basis. Soviet forces are free to move in strength into almost any area, but neither they nor their Afghan allies possess the numerical strength to occupy and pacify major areas of the country. The freedom fighters, of course, depend too much on mobility and concealment for their survival to establish effective control. In any case, the major cities and base areas are only safe for the Soviets during daylight hours. In the countryside, only the narrow strip joining the PRC to Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor (which has been annexed in effect by the USSR) and the thinly populated areas in the extreme northwest and southwest of the country are relatively free of rebel activity.

To date, Soviet strategy appears to have been to hold the major centers of communications, limit infiltration, and destroy local strongholds at minimum cost to their own forces. In essence, the Soviet strategy is one wherein high technology and superior tactical mobility are used as a force multiplier and as a means to hold "friendly" casualties to a minimum. By intent or in effect, Soviet policy has been a combination of "scorched earth" and, in anthropologist Louis Dupree's words, "migratory genocide." Nearly 4 million Afghans (2.8 in Pakistan, 1 million in Iran) have become refugees as a result of the war.

Total Soviet casualties (killed and wounded) have been estimated at 15,000. Exact figures on the number of Soviets killed in action are impossible to obtain but responsible analysts have cited estimates from 3,000 to 9,000. The freedom fighters claim that only 1,000 fighters have been killed, but they put civilian casualties at 20,000. In all, despite the costs, the Soviets are preparing for a prolonged stay. Permanent logistics facilities and barracks are being constructed. Airfields are being upgraded and the construction of a permanent bridge across the Amu Darya has been completed. The tour of duty for Soviet soldiers has also been set at two years.

Operationally, new or untried Soviet equipment (e.g., the improved BMP, the AK74 rifle, the Hind helicopter, scatterable mines, the AGS 17 automatic grenade launcher) has been tested, and some technical innovations have been made. For example, the Soviets have experimented with a new main armament on their
standard BMP infantry fighting vehicle. Based on their Afghan experience, they have moved to replace the slow-firing 73mm cannon with an automatic 30mm cannon. This change will enable Soviet forces to achieve an even larger volume of suppressive fire. The use of helicopters is also an important facet of operations in Afghanistan. Helicopters are used for resupply, reconnaissance, troop transport, fire support, and command and control. Pilot training in Afghanistan is superb. As one Soviet officer described it,

Flying in the mountains and above the desert, plus the real possibility of coming under fire by anti-aircraft weapons which are making their way from Pakistan to the bandits operating on DRA territory—this is a real training school. . . . No wonder they say that after a month in Afghanistan helicopter pilots can be awarded the top proficiency rating without testing their piloting ability.

This pilot training is also costly, however. The rebels have shot down as many as 100 Soviet helicopters with small arms, antitank weapons and, more recently, SA 7 Grail missiles.

According to two highly detailed U.S. State Department reports, Soviet forces have used chemical weapons in at least 15 provinces of Afghanistan. Witnesses have made a total of 59 separate incident reports, and the State Department noted that at least 36 of the reports were corroborated by additional evidence. Amazingly, the Soviet use of chemical weapons — incapacitants, lethal chemicals, and even the dreaded mycotoxin biological weapons — has continued apace even after the first detailed U.S. report appeared in March 1982. The reports conservatively estimate that the attacks resulted in 3,000 deaths. One other ominous detail did not go unnoticed: detailed survey and monitoring operations following some of the strikes showed that the Soviets were obviously "interested in studying after-effects, lethality, or some other quasi-experimental aspect of a new chemical weapon.”

There is very little reliable information on the performance of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. A distillation of the scant information which is available reveals that:
1. The initial complement of regular forces were not trained in counterinsurgency or mountain warfare techniques. One Soviet source even reported that “it took a while for [an Afghan] soldier to believe that the majority of Soviet servicemen had first seen mountains here — in Afghanistan.” Not finding the Chinese or American “agents” whom they were told were causing the trouble has also been bad for morale. Recent interviews with Soviet POWs indicate widespread discontent among Soviet forces.

2. The pace of operations ranges from frantic “offensives” or “damage limiting” operations to long periods of boredom. Soviet soldiers are apparently not coping very well with this and reports of the use of hashish have surfaced. Five separate sources have confirmed the widespread use of hashish and the fact that Soviet soldiers have traded truck parts, uniforms, ammunition, and even rifles for hashish or other local drugs.

3. Soviet tactics still tend toward an overreliance on motorized rifle and tank troops employed in “sweep” or “hammer and anvil” operations. Air assault operations—usually of company or battalion strength—are becoming more important although they are usually conducted in movements by motorized rifle units. Tanks are apparently being used mostly in a fire support role. Much of the Soviets operational experience apparently has been in road clearing operations, designed to keep open the ground lines of communication. On the whole, airborne and air assault troops seem to be held in higher esteem by the freedom fighters than troops from the motorized divisions.

Ambushes of various sizes have proven to be very effective. An Afghan army major described guerrilla tactics in a conversation with a Soviet reporter:

Usually they operate in groups of 30-40 men. They used to assemble in larger gangs. They prefer to use ambushes by bridges, or in defiles. They destroy the bridge or block the road and then open fire from the commanding heights. If a strong army subunit is moving, they allow
the reconnaissance and the combat security detachment to go by. All of a sudden, they open up with volleys of well-aimed fire and then rapidly withdraw. They mine the roads, then cover the mined areas with small arms fire. The hand of professional foreign instructors can be felt at work.44

A Soviet defector evaluated the freedom fighters as follows:

The mujahidin were brave when they began their resistance and they still are. Resistance is still strong. Pilots as well as all soldiers in the Soviet Army respect the courage and tactics of the mujahidin and recognize their successes.45

Soviet efforts to date have not produced the desired results. Contrary to Soviet propaganda, the bulk of the fighting has been done by Soviet troops, sometimes opposed by mutinous Afghan army forces. A Western summary of recent major combat actions included the following:

Between April 13 and July 15, 1981, at least 107 high-level Afghan Communist officials and Soviet officers were assassinated in Kabul, on two occasions at the very gate of the Soviet Embassy at midday. In Herat, a noman's land for two years, Soviet soldiers are killed in their barracks. Unable to wrest Kandahar from the resistance, the Russians bombed much of it into rubble in June; two weeks later, the resistance again controlled Kandahar. On June 19, the main Soviet airbase at Bagram was set ablaze, and fuel, ammunition dumps, and aircraft were destroyed. In July, the resistance won Gulbahar on the north-south supply road. The landscape is littered with ruined Soviet tanks and armor.46

A captured Soviet tank officer, one Captain Sidelniko, added that in a series of three raids on Bagram in 1981 and 1982, the rebels had destroyed 38 aircraft.47

There are few accurate accounts of entire battles by which we can judge the state of Soviet military art in Afghanistan. However, since early 1981, the rebels have begun to operate in larger elements and the frequency of engagements involving more than 1,000 troops on each side has markedly increased. One recent,
A month-long operation was witnessed by Christian Science Monitor correspondent Edward Giradet. The battle was apparently designed to eliminate the 3,000 fighters of Ahmed Shah Massoud which had been implicated in numerous raids, to include at least one successful penetration of Bagram air base. Four previous Soviet forays into the Panshir valley had failed to eliminate this unit of freedom fighters. While this operation was significant because of its size, it was also important because it appeared to represent an archetypal Soviet "battle recipe" which has been used time and again in Afghanistan in the past two years.

After an entire week of serial bombardment, Soviet and Afghan forces were inserted by helicopter into the narrow east-west Panshir corridor on May 17. The freedom fighters, having been previously warned of the Soviet battle plan, had escaped down the side valleys or onto the top of the ridge lines. As a Pravda military correspondent noted, the first waves of attackers encountered "a multilevel system of fire prepared in advance." Three days later a tank/motorized rifle force entered the valley bringing the total of Soviet and Afghan forces to twelve thousand. A series of sharp engagements followed, and within the first ten days 50 Soviet and Afghan vehicles and 35 helicopters (at least by resistance reports) were destroyed in the fighting. Amidst only light casualties the freedom fighters may have netted 100 AK74 rifles. While the Soviets did destroy some supplies and disrupted the resistance’s routine, they failed to install a secure civilian leadership and withdrew on June 13. In early September, Soviet fighter planes again began bombing the Panshir valley.

One must add at this point that the end of this war is not in sight. While it is clear that the Soviets do not have sufficient forces in Afghanistan to pacify a country the size of Texas, it is likewise clear that they have not moved significantly toward a withdrawal, nor have they made a decision to attempt to conclude the war on a military level. While they are not on the verge of being ejected from Afghanistan, their poor performance would seem to suggest that options preferable to the present policy of "muddling through" do exist. Perhaps the "final solution" in Afghanistan awaits the consolidation of Andropov's leadership or at least the resolution of the Polish crisis, the potential troop requirements
for which must be serving as a brake on any substantive reinforcement in Afghanistan. Until such time, the prophetic observation of an anonymous Pakistani diplomat retains its validity:

The Soviets can continue to occupy the country, but they cannot win over the people. The longer they stay, the more they alienate the people. The more they alienate the people, the longer they must stay. This Russian dilemma is also the Afghan dilemma, and both seem condemned to suffer its consequences.51

Conclusions

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan supports a number of conclusions. First, Afghanistan is proof positive that great power does not insulate its holder from great mistakes. Indeed, having great power tempts the possessor to regard himself as invincible, especially under low-risk circumstances. Afghanistan vividly demonstrates that even superpowers are at the mercy of religious, ethnic, and similar forces in their dealings with Third World countries. Armored divisions and unusable ICBMs have rarely overcome the indigenous forces of nationalism and religious faith. Great powers must take this into account in their dealings with Third World countries. There are tides which one dares not swim against.

Second, in the area of doctrine, Afghanistan appears as a unique case. The Soviets entered Afghanistan not expecting to fight, believing that the Afghans, like the Czechs in 1968, would succumb to the massive influx of Soviet power. This in turn would give Babrak Karmal the breathing spell needed to restore domestic order. Very soon the Soviets found themselves embroiled in a full-blown counterinsurgency in a mountainous country and with an army which had been designed and trained for World War III on the plains of Europe. While the Soviets have in the past shown a strategic appreciation for limited war,52 they were put in the awkward position of having a force structure and tactics which did not match the military situation. Moreover, it was a situation which required an independent, decentralized style of command somewhat alien to the Soviet experience.53
Tactical adaptations, as noted above, have taken place and are in evidence even in Soviet accounts of battles in Afghanistan. The Soviet military press is replete with articles discussing "mountain training" and exhorting leaders to pay more attention to developing the illusive "initiative" and physical fitness among their subordinates. For example, *Voennyy Vestnik (Military Herald)* showed a steady increase in articles on mountain warfare from 0 in 1978, to 3 in 1979, to 15 in 1981.\(^5\) Time and experience will undoubtedly enable the Soviets to turn this evolving body of information into a working doctrine, but, if we assume that the lessons of recent history dominate the minds of decision-makers, they will probably be inhibited from soon attempting to stage another counterinsurgency.

In a similar vein, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan would seem to make a Soviet invasion of Iran only a remote possibility. The conditions which led up to the Soviet move in Afghanistan — a pro-Soviet government, a long history of direct involvement, the Friendship Treaty, a low probability of a direct American response — are all, at least for the present, absent from Iran. Moreover, their bloody and frustrating experience in Afghanistan will no doubt ensure that the "lessons learned" — unlike those in Angola and Ethiopia — are recorded on the debit side of the ledger. The Soviets looked favorably on their experience in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and attempted to use the Czech "recipe" in Afghanistan. It is highly unlikely that they will attempt to apply the Afghan "recipe" to any other country. Finally, as both Keith Dunn and Joshua Epstein have pointed out, Iran is a tough nut to crack. The Soviets know this, and Afghan bases would be of only limited assistance in invading Iran.\(^55\) While it is clear that the Soviets will benefit at least marginally from being able to move their air assets closer to the Indian Ocean, it is not similarly clear that this or any other "asset" secured in Afghanistan would help them in an invasion of Iran.\(^56\)

Third, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan has given them valuable experience in mobilization. Unfortunately, from their point of view, many of the lessons learned were painful. The performance of Central Asian troops was poor, and this could lead to greater emphasis on reserve training and changes in active duty...
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manning policies. Marshal Ogarkov, the Soviet chief of staff, highlighted the role of the reserves in his 1981 article in *Kom­munist*:

If an aggressor unleashes a war, the prepared reserves of personnel and equipment assigned to formations and units must reach them in extremely short periods of time. Hence, the task of constant readiness for immediate mobilization deployment of troops and naval forces is of great state significance.

Later on, he added that "supplying the troops with prepared reserves of personnel and equipment predetermines the need for efficiently planned measures even in peacetime." All in all, the Soviet reserve forces and mobilization procedures bear further watching. Changes based on their experience in Afghanistan may already be taking place.

Fourth, in the area of weapons and personnel, Afghanistan has been a prize (though a very expensive one) for the Soviet military. Training deficiencies will be detected and combat experience, though it tends to be fleeting, will ensure a more seasoned Soviet army. Particularly significant here has been the performance of Soviet pilots. As one freedom fighter noted, "we are not afraid of the Russians, but we are afraid of their helicopters." We can be assured that the Soviets will hone their ground support skills to a fine edge in Afghanistan. This in turn will give them a more flexible fire support apparatus. It was not by accident that the Soviets chose Afghanistan as the area in which to deploy the new SU25 attack aircraft.

Fifth, one Soviet "adaptation" which should strike alarm in Western minds is the use of chemical weapons. The use of these weapons in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia again confirms that — not surprisingly — the Soviets find them put to their best use against unprotected subjects, incapable of retaliation. Afghanistan is proof positive that the Soviets do not consider these devices as "special weapons." Considerations of utility and not morality will govern their use of them in future conflicts.

The Soviet use of chemical and biological weapons in Afghanistan also suggests that the validity of future arms control agree-
ments rests heavily on whether or not we can verify Soviet compliance and whether we can retaliate in kind if those agreements are violated. It is clear from the experience in both Southeast Asia and Afghanistan that the various treaties which the Soviets have signed on chemical and biological weapons are presently of little value in curbing either the manufacture or use of such weapons by the Soviet Union.

Finally, there is perhaps one conclusion that we should not draw from events in Afghanistan. Learning the wrong lessons from history can hurt far more than ignoring experience altogether. Attaching too much significance to the inability of the Soviet Union to achieve its goals in South Asia could be foolhardy. A Soviet defeat, even if it were to be essentially irreversible, would not prove any static, general proposition about Soviet power. Even if the Soviets were to leave Afghanistan without having accomplished their purpose, such an outcome would not prove impotence. As Kenneth Waltz has reminded us, a jackhammer is no less powerful just because it cannot be used to drill teeth.59

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Notes


7. Garrity, op. cit.

8. The emergence of Amin is neatly described in L. Dupree, op. cit., pp. 34–43.


10. Selig Harrison is the major proponent of the idea that the Soviet inability to control Amin was a major factor in the Soviet decision to invade. See *New York Times*, January 13, 1980, p. 23.


31. A July 23, 1981, story in the New York Times reported that the cadets had been committed to battle, but a Christian Science Monitor story of the same date reported that the cadets had been passing through the area and were subsequently ambushed. For details on the impressment of Afghan youths, see New York Times, January 20, 1982, p. 12.
