



# The Soviet and U.S. Experiences in Military Intervention in Afghanistan and Current U.S.-Russian Cooperation

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June 2, 2011



CREDIT: Dennis Doyle, Carnegie Council

*This paper was presented at a conference entitled "Carnegie Council's Program on U.S. Global Engagement: a Two-Year Retrospective."*

*The conference took place at the Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund from June 1-3, 2011. Organized by the Carnegie Council in cooperation with the U.S. Army War College, the conference served to review and report on two years of program activity, and to generate new ideas and resources among an international group of innovative thinkers on U.S.-Russian relations, nuclear arms control and nonproliferation, European and NATO security challenges for the future, including Afghanistan, and competition and cooperation in the Arctic region.*

**The U.S. Global Engagement program gratefully acknowledges the support for its work from the following:**

**Alfred and Jane Ross Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Donald M. Kendall, Rockefeller Family & Associates, and Booz & Company.**

It is hard to believe that the current U.S.-led military intervention in Afghanistan will reach ten years in October 2011, already making it more than 18 months longer than the long Soviet experience that former General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev rightly described in 1986 as a "bleeding wound" for the Soviet Union. While the authoritarian Soviet government took many measures to hide the reality of their war in Afghanistan from their citizens, still the war was unpopular and helped erode the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. While the number of U.S. casualties is still less than one-third what the Soviets experienced, the American public is increasingly weary of the Afghan War—perhaps more sensitized to the high economic costs during a period of growing fiscal crisis. There are a number of other striking similarities as well as differences in the Soviet experience in the 1980s and the current U.S.-led coalition effort, and these will be explored in the first part of the paper.

The second part of the paper will address the challenges and the interests for Washington and Moscow to avoid an end-game as happened when the Najibullah regime fell in early 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the total curtailment of aid from Moscow. When the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan in February 1989 in compliance with the Geneva agreement, most experts, including the majority of the U.S. intelligence community, expected a swift collapse of the Najibullah-led government. With major Soviet military and economic assistance continuing to flow for the next two-plus years, however, to Kabul, the rebels were unable to overthrow the existing government—a lesson in and of itself as the United States and coalition partners prepare to withdraw forces gradually to the end of 2014. But it was the nasty aftermath following Najibullah's demise, which was marked by brutal conflict amongst warring factions who were aided and abetted by various international sponsors, that gave rise to the Taliban taking control in 1996. Not only did Moscow abdicate responsibility, more understandably given the Soviet collapse and ensuing economic crisis, but so did the United States, thinking that our job was done as the Soviet-supported government in Kabul was no more. Matters were made worse by the breakdown in U.S.-Pakistani relations in the early 1990s over its nuclear program. Not only do Russians and Americans have serious interests in avoiding what happened with Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago, but so do virtually all other regional actors, including Iran, the Central Asian states, Pakistan, India, and China.

## Comparing Context and Strategy in the Soviet and U.S.-led Coalition Military Interventions in Afghanistan

The circumstances leading to the Soviet and U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan could hardly be more different. For the United States, it was extraordinary terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 that mobilized the George W. Bush Administration to retaliate against the Taliban government in Afghanistan that allowed the attackers, al Qaeda, safe refuge on Afghan territory. The United States was directly attacked for the first time since Pearl Harbor almost 60 years earlier, and the response was similar—going to war against those that unleashed the strike, and in the case of al Qaeda, those that provided them refuge. At the time, Afghanistan was not considered a "war of choice" for the United States, and it is hard to imagine that if Democratic Party candidate Al Gore had been elected in 2000, that his administration would have reacted much differently, at least at the outset (in contrast to the war in Iraq in 2003 that clearly was a war of choice, and, while this is speculation, it is unlikely that a Gore administration would have undertaken a war in Iraq). And while many international observers ascribe geopolitical factors and goals beyond rooting out al Qaeda and toppling Taliban control driving the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, it is difficult to find the evidence in what we know about Bush Administration deliberations to support this hypothesis.

The context for the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan in December 1979 is almost a polar opposite to that of the United States in 2001. The intervention in Afghanistan was clearly a war of choice for the Soviet Union, and there were geopolitical drivers as the Cold War competition dominated international relations. The harder question to answer is whether the Soviet intervention was inspired more by perceptions of geopolitical defense or offense. Much of the U.S. commentary at the time, especially in more conservative circles, ascribed Soviet motivations as taking advantage of relative U.S. weakness after the collapse of the Shah in Iran in 1978 and more broadly in Moscow's offensive throughout the Third World, as it was called at the time, from East Asia, to the Middle East, Africa, and to Latin America. The United States was still reeling from defeat in Vietnam and mired in the economic doldrums of stagflation in what President Carter referred to as a national "malaise." But available Soviet archival material as well as interviews with and memoirs of many retired Soviet political advisors and military figures do not fully support the "offensive" explanation.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet invasion in December 1979 can be explained as implementation of the Brezhnev Doctrine (so named after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968), which calls for defending socialist regimes with allied ties to Moscow. The Soviet leadership was also concerned that the United States was angling to strengthen ties with Afghanistan in an effort to replace listening posts and intelligence assets when the Shah's government fell in Iran the previous year.

The nature of the military interventions, at least at the outset, could also not be more different. Very quickly the Soviets brought in about 100,000 troops, a force level that remained fairly consistent until the beginning of their drawdown. The United States, however, with support from the Northern Alliance on the ground, was able to topple the Taliban government in the fall of 2001 with the deployment of less than 1,000 special forces and intelligence operatives supported by airpower with a couple of thousand troops deployed in Uzbekistan in a reserve role. It was not until nearly eight and one-half years later in December 2009 that President Obama announced the "surge" that brought U.S. force levels to about the level which Moscow used in its war. The Soviet withdrawal—which was completed in February 1989, a little more than nine years after the invasion—occurred at a similar time point that U.S. force levels were peaking. The starting conditions in Afghanistan were quite different as well. While Afghanistan was a very poor country in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded, it was considerably more developed than when the U.S.-led intervention took place in the fall of 2001. The 1970s are recalled as a sort of "golden age" for Afghanistan, as the country had been at peace for decades, government institutions functioned for the most part, and physical and economic infrastructure was continuing to develop. The country that the United States and later allied forces entered in 2001 was virtually destroyed after more than 20 years of war with the Soviets, followed by civil conflict and Taliban rule. Agriculture especially, a mainstay of the Afghan economy for decades and centuries, was perhaps the biggest casualty in this regard—with the exception, of course, of poppy cultivation and the drug trade. From an economic development standpoint, the Soviets were starting with a much stronger foundation.

But the Soviet challenge was much greater in that its only ally was the weak Afghan government, and they were opposed by a powerful global coalition led by Pakistan, the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, and others. The United States, however, was supported from the outset after 9/11 by a powerful global coalition including first and foremost its NATO allies and Pakistan.

Looking at the similarities in these two experiences also yields considerable insights. It is hard not to be struck by how, in retrospect, both the Soviet Union in 1979 and the United States in 2001 may have been at the peak of their global power and influence when each entered Afghanistan. By the time of the Soviet withdrawal, completed in early 1989, and the United States today, each country faced daunting domestic economic and political challenges. The Soviet Union did go bankrupt a little more than two years later and collapsed; the United States' indebtedness today is now and will challenge the very fiber of the American system and its role in the world as the leading great power for years to come. Of course, neither for the USSR nor for the United States today, are these respective wars in Afghanistan the root causes for these economic challenges, but the simultaneity for each of lengthy wars in Afghanistan, which for the USSR was a failed enterprise and for the United States today remains a major question mark, is striking.

Looking more specifically at the military and political experience of each intervention, one must start with the similarities of fighting a counter-insurgency war in which the enemy is principally supplied from, and finds refuge in, Pakistan, in border regions that are virtually impossible to defend, not to speak of govern. Both Moscow and Washington also faced challenges of maintaining relations with besieged and not particularly popular governments who maintain little authority outside of Kabul, especially outside the urban centers. Like U.S. relations with the Karzai government, often the goals and objectives of the Soviet government did not entirely coincide with their local patrons; both the Karmal government until 1986 and the Najibullah government afterwards, did not entirely coincide. Ironically, the Afghan governments were for the most part far more enthusiastic about developing a socialist economy than their Soviet advisors, and the Russians were continuously urging their allies to be more open and inclusive.

For the Soviet Union in the 1980s as for the United States and its allies today, there has always been a realization that a military solution alone was not possible and that a more durable stabilization of Afghanistan requires major attention to economic development as well as national political reconciliation. Perhaps Moscow's greatest frustration with Afghan leader Babrak Karmal, who was installed as leader after the Soviet intervention and the murder of former President Amin, was his failure to promote a national political reconciliation. His successor Mohammad Najibullah, who assumed power in 1986, did make greater efforts in this regard, but he too was not very successful—and certainly the increasing desire of Moscow to withdraw from Afghanistan to focus more on domestic reform weakened Najibullah's hand in these efforts. In fact, the challenges faced by the Karzai government and his international supporters (remember that Karmal and Najibullah had virtually no other international supporters aside from Moscow) look eerily similar to those of Soviet-supported Afghan leaders in the 1980s. The problem today may, in fact, be greater because the Afghanistan of the 1980s was not as endemically and systematically corrupt as contemporary Afghanistan.

Reading the history of Soviet efforts to advise on governance, economic development, and other key policy issues also resonates deeply and ominously for current policymakers in Washington and elsewhere seeking to support the Afghan government. Thousands of Soviet advisors, most of them with minimal training and very thin knowledge of Afghan history and culture, were sent from different institutions in the Soviet government, from military to intelligence services to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and others—and often the coordination and communication between these representatives of different bureaucracies was inefficient and ineffective, or worse, they were working at cross purposes.<sup>2</sup> Often different Soviet Ministers and Politburo members were also not singing from the same song sheet in their meetings with various Afghan colleagues.

Ineffective coordination of policy as well as competing policy objectives and/or differences have clearly been a challenge both for the Bush and Obama administrations in Afghanistan—probably more so for the latter as policy differences during major Afghanistan debates and policy reviews have been widely publicized.<sup>3</sup> And the challenge of policy coordination is much greater now than in the Soviet experience because, essentially, the Soviets only needed to manage themselves. In the current intervention, however, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition is made up of 48 countries, and the assistance efforts include at least as large a number of bilateral donors as well as many multilateral international agencies.

The last similarity of Soviet and United States experiences in Afghanistan is that, from the decision to intervene, more than one administration had responsibility for war-time policy. Leonid Brezhnev and company made the decision to bring in Soviet troops in December 1979, and later, after brief interregnums of Andropov and then Konstantin Chernenko at the helm, Mikhail Gorbachev and his leading advisors were in consensus by 1986 that their predecessors had made a big mistake, even if they struggled to reach consensus about how to correct it. Even though they were not so invested in the original policy and after their own "surge" in 1986 they sought peace and withdrawal of forces, it was important that any peace agreement and withdrawal not be viewed by their allies and others as defeat and abandonment of the government they had supported in Kabul. In the U.S. case, both candidate Obama and then President Obama sharply criticized the Bush administration for prematurely turning its attention to Iraq before adequately finishing the job in Afghanistan. But this is how the situation for Obama differs from that of Gorbachev 25 years ago. President Obama has doubled down on Afghanistan politically while Gorbachev's instincts from the outset were simply to get out, and minimize political fall-out from doing so.

### **Contemporary U.S. and Russian Interests in Afghanistan and the Potential for Cooperation**

Russia has important security interests in the success of the international coalition in Afghanistan, both to contain the movement and activities of Islamic insurgents and terrorists and to curtail the flow of narcotics infecting its own population.<sup>4</sup> Despite the buffer of independent Central Asian states, Moscow may feel more vulnerable to these threats than during the Soviet period as border controls are far weaker now. On the other hand, the Russian leadership views Central Asia in a proprietary way—as being in Moscow's "sphere of influence," which should be carefully protected from encroachment of other powers, especially the United States and NATO. Although impossible to quantify, the Soviet failure in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the support provided to the mujahedeen by the United States also colors the Russian perspective on the difficulties the United States and allied forces are

currently encountering.

The international coalition's brilliant success in knocking out the Taliban in the fall of 2001 marked a high point in U.S.-Russia cooperation since the Soviet collapse, and many analysts hoped this was the harbinger of a broader and deeper security relationship between Moscow and Washington. Unfortunately, that was not the case, and from 2002 through the end of 2008 the bilateral relationship steadily worsened.<sup>5</sup> When the Obama administration came to power in January 2009 and soon signaled their interests in improving ties with Moscow, many Russian officials and experts expressed the view that of all the issues on the U.S.-Russia agenda at that time, Afghanistan is where our interests were most closely aligned.<sup>6</sup> Russian president Medvedev, speaking during an official visit to Uzbekistan in January 2009, announced: "We are ready for full-fledged cooperation with all countries on the issue of assuring security in Afghanistan, including the United States. We hope the new U.S. administration will have greater success than the previous one in resolving the Afghanistan issue."<sup>7</sup> Zamir Kabulov, then Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan, told *The Times* of London in an interview that "It's not in Russia's interests for NATO to be defeated and leave behind all these problems... We'd prefer NATO to complete its job and then leave this unnatural geography." The formulation by Kabulov, a veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, probably comes close to capturing Russia's desired outcome. It would be best for Russia if NATO does not fail and even better for it to leave the region after some degree of stabilization in Afghanistan.

More skeptical and cynical interpretations of Russian interests argue that enduring destabilization of Afghanistan is Moscow's desired outcome, because this serves as a justification for Russian security and military engagement with Central Asian neighbors, as well as prevents the opening of transit corridors for energy and trade flows to the south. Failure of the mission in Afghanistan would constitute a deep blow for NATO and the United States in Russia's neighborhood, rendering Central Asian states more dependent on Russian economic and security ties. It is fair to conclude that Russian interests in Afghanistan and our success there are somewhat mixed, but during periods of stronger U.S.-Russia relations overall in the past decade, such as 2001 to 2002 and again now, Moscow and Washington have viewed their interests as more aligned in Afghanistan.

Russia's essential role in the establishment of alternative transit corridors to supply U.S. forces in Afghanistan, what the U.S. government termed the *Northern Distribution Network* (NDN), over the past two-plus years, is the most outstanding example of cooperation and merits a closer look. Russia has a number of motivations for participation in the NDN beyond its larger concerns about the threats of Islamic terrorism and drug trafficking, noted above, which incline Moscow to work with the United States and the ISAF to stabilize Afghanistan.

The impact of the global economic crisis, beginning in the fall of 2008 at the time U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) was exploring the establishment of new transit corridors for non-lethal materials to U.S. forces in Afghanistan, increased Russia's incentive to cooperate. The NDN offers Russian transit companies, especially Russian Railways, a lot of business from the world's largest client during a time of economic stress and spare capacity. Already for years in Afghanistan, as well as in Iraq and Africa, Russian and Ukrainian air cargo companies who rent out cargo and personnel to NATO, were deeply dependent on this business.<sup>8</sup> It is telling that in the wake of the Georgia war in 2008, when U.S.-Russia and NATO-Russia relations were in the deep freeze, this cooperation involving major Russian carriers, such as Volga-Dnieper, were not curtailed.<sup>9</sup> This is security cooperation, requiring political approval, which provides a very significant economic return, approximately \$1 billion for Russian companies annually.

In addition to direct economic benefit for Russian transit companies, there are geopolitical incentives as well. The more efficiently and predictably the Northern rail route works—starting in Latvia through Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—the more Moscow may hope there will be less demand to utilize the southern NDN route beginning in Georgia through the Caspian. It could not have sat well with President Putin and his colleagues that the Georgian port of Poti began serving as the gateway for the NDN south route less than one year after the Russian invasion of Georgia (when Poti was briefly occupied by Russian forces). The Russians understand very clearly that establishment of the southern route is both designed to increase alternative routes, but also to strengthen U.S. security ties with Azerbaijan and Georgia. No doubt the preferred Russian option would have included only new routes controlled by Russia and negotiated through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) rather than bilaterally with Central Asian and Caspian states—but this was a non-starter for Washington as well as the other states of the region.

Although many current and former U.S. government officials ritually accuse Russia of "zero-sum thinking" in international relations, it is more accurate to describe their approach as pragmatic and transactional. In the case of the NDN, it is pragmatic because not only does Moscow share interests in containing threats from Afghanistan, but it also recognizes that since the United States is clearly going to establish alternative routes to reduce reliance on Pakistan, Russian interests are best served by making Moscow a, if not *the*, central partner.

The NDN experience is a useful one as we ponder to what extent Russian and U.S. interests can and will be aligned in promoting a framework for security in Afghanistan to 2014 and beyond. It seems axiomatic that as the

U.S. and NATO military presence decreases in Afghanistan, the role of regional powers must grow. The joint statement from the June 2011 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), for example, made exactly this point, further stating that the role of the SCO would increase. In a recent presentation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and in a forthcoming CSIS report, Dr. Ivan Safranchuk outlined four scenarios that Russian analysts and policymakers share about Afghanistan's future development and U.S. and Russian interests.<sup>10</sup>

In the first scenario, the United States will choose a strong regional partner for managing Afghan issues as it downsizes its military presence and eventually withdraws from the region. Russia believes this to be America's first choice scenario; however, not all regional actors, especially Russia and most likely China, would approve of such a configuration. However, certain regional actors, such as India and Pakistan, would accept an appointment by the United States, and such an approach could be plausible because it would clearly indicate the United States' continued commitment in solving the crisis. The obvious drawback is that it is virtually impossible to imagine a scenario in which one regional partner would be acceptable to the others.

In the second scenario, the American military withdrawal is paralleled with a withdrawal of commitments to the solution of the Afghan crisis. Consequently, this would lead to direct or indirect interference by regional actors in Afghanistan's domestic politics and create proxy wars within Afghan borders. This scenario most closely resembles Afghanistan in the early 1990s post-Soviet withdrawal. Most regional actors are opposed to such a situation developing in the region, with the exception of Pakistan. Pakistan feels most capable to interfere in Afghani politics and to openly operate in Afghanistan. From the Russian perspective, any intensification of the Afghan crisis would risk the stability and security of Russian allies in Central Asia and would force Russia to beef up its security commitments in Central Asia.

The third scenario would result in the regional players dividing Afghanistan into unofficial spheres of influence. This scenario differs from the second because rather than only meddling in Afghani politics, the regional actors would take responsibility for geographic and economic zones of Afghanistan. Iran would dominate the West; Central Asia, and Russia would be most active in the North; and the Southern and Eastern regions would be most closely tied to India and Pakistan. Because such a framework has strong economic basis in existing conditions, it could prove realistic. This would not be Moscow's favored option, but it would be superior to the previous two.

The fourth scenario for regional development would include participation from regional as well as non-regional actors who are stakeholders or donors with legitimate interests in Afghanistan, and they would develop a coordinated position. This open and inclusive regional compact would prevent regional competition and destabilization, and would be based on coordinated policies of all regional actors, including first and foremost, the Afghan government. Simultaneously, this arrangement must have mechanisms that would restrain certain regional actors from exercising too much leverage on Afghanistan. This option would be most attractive to Russia under the following conditions: 1) Afghanistan's neutrality, as defined by presence of U.S. forces in training and support capacity; 2) maintenance of Afghani territorial integrity and reconciliation of all border disputes; 3) complete Afghan sovereignty over domestic affairs and economic development; and 4) ethnic balance in the Afghan government.

The good news is that this last option is also closest to that being advanced by the Afghan government in the context of the Kabul process, and, it is closest to the vision of the Obama administration for the future of Afghanistan's security and economic development. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton articulated a vision for Afghanistan and its regional partners in July 2011 in an important speech in Chennai, India.<sup>11</sup> The bad news is that time is short, and the challenge to develop and implement such a vision enormous. We, the United States especially, but the international community at large, have inefficiently utilized time and resources for nearly a decade in Afghanistan. We now have another year or two for the final opportunity to get this right, or at least right enough to prevent a similar outcome after the Soviet withdrawal more than 20 years ago that essentially created the conditions for our intervention in Afghanistan ten years ago.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Just in the past year two excellent English-language books, based on extensive analysis of archival material, memoirs, and interviews have been published, and they greatly enrich our understanding of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s. See Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011) and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See Artemy Kalinovsky, *The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in*

*Afghanistan* (Washington DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Working Paper #60, January 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010) and Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General" (*Rolling Stone*, June 2010).

<sup>4</sup> This section draws from Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, *The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the bilateral relationship from the Soviet collapse through 2010, see Andrew C. Kuchins in *Russia: The Challenges of Transformation* by Piotr Dutkiewicz and Dmitri Trenin (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> In conducting field interviews with many Russian officials and experts in the first half of 2009 for the above referenced report on the *Northern Distribution Network* (NDN), there was a strong consensus on the point that U.S.-Russian cooperation could go much further with the exception of "bases in Central Asia and Russian boots on the ground." One interlocutor presciently suggested in February 2009 to the author that "bases" be renamed "transit centers," the term now used for the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>7</sup> ["Russia Ready to Cooperate with US on Afghanistan."](#) *New Europe*. Brussels News Agency, 26 Jan. 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Beyond the Afghan Trauma: Russia's Return to Afghanistan*, (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, August 2009), p 12.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. government officials made this point in interviews with the author on a visit to Moscow in July 2009. If the Russian government had decided to not allow Russian air carriers to continue, this would have been a logistical problem for a deeply stretched U.S. military.

<sup>10</sup> Conference, July 26, 2011: ["International Perspectives on Afghanistan and Regional Security to 2014 and Beyond"](#)

<sup>11</sup> Clinton, Hillary R. ["Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century."](#) Anna Centenary Library. Chennai, India, 20 July 2011.

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