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Soviet Policy toward Afghanistan

JOSEPH COLLINS

Nearly eight years after the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet forces are still fighting from a limited number of insecure bases to maintain their hold on the cities and their ground lines of communication back to the USSR. Although the performance of their "limited continent"—about 3 percent of the total Soviet ground forces—has generally been poor, the USSR, unharried by serious international pressure, is gaining valuable military experience and has begun to improve some aspects of its military performance. Despite its failure to rebuild an Afghan government, the USSR has not indicated that its will to persevere in Afghanistan is weakening. Although the will of the freedom fighters appears even stronger, the mid- to long-term future may be grim for them. To paraphrase Tom Goutierre of the University of Nebraska, the Soviets may be failing, but they are also prevailing.

Assessing Soviet policy toward Afghanistan is a difficult task for a number of reasons. Both 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 analysts. Moreover, policy in Afghanistan is dominated by propaganda and covert activity. Few "facts" can be taken at face value. In spite of these concerns, with the passage of more than seven years since the invasion, accurate judgments can be made in a number of key areas.

Motives

Why the USSR invaded Afghanistan, especially if long-term goals are considered, is a contentious issue that parallels the great debate over the nature of Soviet policy. The invasion was not directed toward acquiring a warm water port, nor was it an "opportunity"—like Angola and Ethiopia—that demanded exploitation. Rather,

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the most immediate and important reasons for the Soviet invasion fall under four headings: doctrine, pressure of events, Soviet security concerns, and commitment.

Although it is not easy to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between Soviet doctrine and policy, Soviet estimates and experience indicate the assumptions that may have guided decision makers on Afghanistan. A complete review of Soviet theoretical writing concerning the Third World is beyond the scope of this inquiry, but, to lend background to the other motives, it is important to note a number of points.

First, Soviet analysts attributed a high utility to the growth in Soviet military power in the 1960s and 1970s. Not only did this shift in the correlation of forces aid Soviet policy, but it also fostered a more favorable international environment, leading to the downfall of colonialism and the emergence of countries with a socialist orientation.

Second, Soviet analysts generally placed great hope on these countries with a socialist orientation but recognized their frailties and the "inevitable" counterrevolutionary machinations of the former colonial powers and the United States.

Finally, Soviet analysts took pride in the "victories" of the 1970s (Vietnam, Angola, South Yemen, Ethiopia, and Nicaragua) and probably exaggerated the role of Soviet assistance in each case. Soviet military analysts saw "class liberation wars," fought by the newly independent countries with a socialist orientation as an inevitable response to the "combined forces" of reaction and imperialism.

The lessons that the Soviets have drawn from the experience in the Third World were very different from those learned in the United States. While the United States experience in Vietnam, for example, would have counseled against a move into Afghanistan, the Soviet experience may have encouraged intervention. Other historical events may have indirectly influenced the Soviet decision to invade. As one Soviet journal noted after the invasion:

> What is the internationalist solidarity of revolutionaries? Does it consist only of moral and diplomatic support, of sincere wishes of success, or also of material assistance, including military help, given in definite, extraordinary circumstances, and especially in a situation of manifest massive outside interference?
>
> The history of the revolutionary movement confirms the moral and political legitimacy of this form of assistance and support. Such was the case, for instance, in Spain in the 1930s, and in China in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, when there exists a system of socialist states, it would be simply ridiculous to question the right to such assistance. . . . To refuse to use the possibilities at the disposal of the socialist countries would signify virtually evading performance of the internationalist duty and returning the world to the times when imperialism could throttle at will any revolutionary movement.[1]

All of this is not to argue that doctrine was a major, immediate factor in the decision to invade. The situation in Afghanistan and the international climate produced more critical and proximate reasons for the invasion.

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took control in a military coup in April 1978. The inefficiency of the PDPA, factionalism, and armed resistance in the countryside turned the situation in Afghanistan from bad to worse,

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despite considerable Soviet aid. According to a Soviet Central Committee staff member, by the end of 1979, "counterrevolutionary detachments" were operating in eighteen of Afghanistan's twenty-six provinces and had severely disrupted economic activities in the country. "A serious threat hung over the Afghan revolution. The Afghan state was on the verge of disintegration and of the loss of its sovereignty. . . . The imperialists and their minions were preparing aggression and undeclared war, seeking to make gains at the cost of the weakened country and, through its territory, to approach the borders of Soviet Central Asia."[2]

It could have been surmised that the regime of Hafizullah Amin could not last much longer. Since many party leaders were dead or exiled, there was no likelihood of another Marxist government emerging "spontaneously." Armed intervention may have been seen as the only alternative to uncertain developments that could have militated against Soviet interests, especially in light of recent events in the area. The on-the-scene reports of General Alexei Yepishev and General Ivan Pavlovskiy, both of whom had made "inspections" before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, may have reinforced the perception of decay in Afghanistan and overemphasized the likelihood of success for the intervening troops.

Southwest Asia has always been a key concern for the Soviet Union because the region is contiguous to the southern-most republics, adjacent to China, and located on the edge of the great Middle East oil fields. Unfortunately (from a Soviet point of view) the West was also strongly interested in the area, especially where it concerned Iran and Pakistan. After the Soviet withdrawal from Iran in 1946, Iran became decidedly pro-Western, but, for the most part, it also maintained "correct" relations with the Soviets. Afghanistan was of little concern and generally pro-Soviet in its orientation. Although Pakistan was somewhat hostile to the Soviet Union, it was checked by India to the east and by Afghanistan to the west.

When the shah of Iran was overthrown in January 1979 and the Afghan insurgency against the PDPA regime grew, the status quo was quickly upset. Iran became hostile to both superpowers, and it seemed that an Islamic movement might topple the Afghan government. More significantly, United States fleet deployments increased, and the Soviets may have thought that the United States would soon move to reestablish its "position of strength" in Iran. The Soviets had previously coexisted with a pro-Western Iran, but losing Afghanistan would create a bigger problem. If not kept solidly in the Soviet camp, Afghanistan could become a third hostile country on the southern border. To the Soviet Union the American obsession with the situation in Iran was, in part, a mask for a larger strategy of mending "holes in the strategic arc" along the USSR's southern borders.[3]

The Soviet Union's concern over a deteriorating strategic position was intensified by its security commitment to Afghanistan. Article 4 of their friendship treaty stated that, in extreme cases, both countries will "take appropriate measures with a view to ensuring the security, independence and territorial integrity of the two countries."[4] While this represented far less than an ironclad guarantee of Afghan security, one can imagine the great loss of prestige for the USSR if a Marxist revo-

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lution on its border were to fall to reactionary forces. This commitment to Afghanistan was accentuated by previous losses to counterrevolutionary forces, as in Chile in 1973.

In planning for the invasion, the Soviets may have decided that they had little to lose in East-West relations. While many United States analysts saw the Soviet invasion as the first decisive battle of a new cold war, Soviet analysts blamed United States behavior before the crisis. Particularly vexing for the Soviets was the plan of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to station American Pershing II missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe to offset the growing Soviet advantage in long-range intermediate nuclear forces. *Pravda* around this time reported that German, British, Italian, and Belgian acquiescence had been received, although the plan had not yet been approved. Andrei Gromyko, on a visit to Bonn, West Germany, complained about the move in a news conference on 25 November.

Prospects for Sino-Soviet relations were also dim. China had attacked Vietnam less than a year before, and in the 1979 talks in Moscow on an extension of the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty, China again put forth claims on disputed Soviet territory and, in a Soviet view, behaved with customary stubbornness. Around the same time, the Carter administration ended its evenhanded policy toward the USSR and China, announcing that Secretary of Defense Harold Brown would visit China in January 1980. To the Soviets, Carter's policy of evenhandedness toward the USSR and China had degenerated into a "factual alliance" between the United States and China.

The leading Soviet expert on the United States, Georgiy Arbatov, summed up the Soviet view by saying, "It was before the events in Afghanistan that the US took other steps: it froze the arms limitation talks, put into effect a policy of delaying the SALT II treaty that almost amounts to its rejection, sharply heightened the pitch of anti-Soviet hysteria and accelerated rapprochement with Peking on an anti-Soviet basis. Thus, it was clear by mid-December that the US was executing an abrupt policy swing."[5]

The Soviets may have concluded on the issue of Afghanistan that the United States and its allies could do little to hurt them and less to stop them. The USSR may have also thought that Western furor over a rapid, successful invasion might dissipate quickly, as it did after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, or that international furor against the Soviet Union might be deflected by aggressive United States actions in Iran.

Current Political and Economic Situation

In December 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan. The Soviet force of 85,000 troops—about 80 percent mobilized reservists—was apparently designed as an army of occupation, a shield behind which Babrak Karmal, the Soviet quisling, could restore order, unify the party, rebuild the army, and gain control of the countryside.

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These objectives have not yet been reached. Fighting within the PDPA (115,000 by official Afghan estimates) continues. In February 1981, the arrest of 2,000 officials was reported. This was followed by another purge of the same number in March 1982. In September 1982, the Khalqi (the populist faction) general commanding the Central Army Corps was found shot to death in his office under circumstances not connected with the war. In May 1983, the Khalqi deputy defense minister assaulted the defense minister after having been passed over for promotion. As late as September 1985, gun fights have taken place in high-level government or party meetings. Military mutinies and defections are still commonplace, and factional fighting has apparently increased since Karmal's replacement by Najib (formerly, Najibullah) in May 1986. Now, in addition to rivalry between the Khalqi faction and the ruling Parcham faction, there is also strife within the Parcham faction itself.

Perhaps the greatest indicator that the Kabul regime has little support among the population is its inability to field an improved army. Whole units continue to defect to the resistance, and the size of the army is less than half its preinvasion total of 80,000. This is doubly remarkable, considering the desperation of the regime's measures. Press-gangs have reportedly been rounding up teenagers as young as fourteen years of age. The new ruler, Najib, has met with little success in recruitment. Rather than taking time to build popular support and broaden his base within the PDPA, he has set out on a new round of impressments, this time including house-to-house searches and the revocation of PDPA deferrals. Since June 1986, applicants for postsecondary education will have to complete military service. Najib has made a slow start on his two primary tasks: strengthening party unity and improving the armed forces. Already, his speeches bear some resemblance to the laments of the deposed but not disgraced Karmal: "Our principal failing is . . . a lack of energetic action. While we have . . . a strategy, we are poor practitioners. Many fine thoughts and plans drown in words or remain only on paper. . . . It is this gap between word and deed that causes stagnation."[6]

Indicative of the lack of prestige of the Afghan army, the Soviets intermittently halted Afghan participation in joint operations in 1983 and 1984. The highly paid, tribal-based militia is better but is also unreliable. Nearly 3,000 militiamen defected to the resistance during the fall of 1984. The resistance leaders regard the militia as dangerous but still a prime source of weapons and supplies.

The Afghan regime has had one organizational success: the Khad (secret police). With an estimated 40,000 members, the Khad has been instrumental in gathering intelligence, fomenting intertribal disputes, and carrying out assassinations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is rapidly becoming the cornerstone of the Afghan government, a fact demonstrated by the promotion of its former leader, Najib, to lead the PDPA and the government.

The war has taken a toll on economic life in Afghanistan. Natural gas is being exported to the USSR at concessional rates to defray the costs of the war. Grain production is down by 20 to 25 percent, and food prices may have increased by as much as 145 percent. A British organization has estimated that 500,000 Af-

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ghans are in danger of starvation, and other reports suggest that severe food shortages exist in regions taxed by high levels of combat. In March 1983, the party set the ambitious goal of attaining 1978 levels of economic production by 1986. Although economic conditions are a problem for the Afghan people, they are a blessing for the Soviets in Afghanistan. Poor food supplies and a depressed rural economy encourage emigration to Pakistan or movement into Soviet-controlled cities, draining popular support from the freedom fighters. One-third of the prewar population is in foreign exile, and another third has been displaced by the war but remains in Afghanistan.

While acknowledging some success in the Soviet Union's "scorched earth" strategy, in December 1985 the Afghan Information Center noted: "The Soviets still try to ignore the political nature of the resistance. They are not willing to admit that they are facing a popular war of national liberation. . . . The Russians have failed to win popular support for the Kabul regime. The staging of elections for the popular council deceived nobody . . . pro-Islamic propaganda is not taken seriously. They were not able to unite the rival factions of the ruling communist party; the tension between the two factions has become deeper. They did not succeed in rebuilding the Afghan Army. . . . Their own regular soldiers are not any better. . . ."[7]

Pravda, in an unsigned editorial, agreed in part with this assessment. Addressing Babrak Karmal's attempt to "acquire new friends and political allies" for the revolution, an editorial of 21 December 1985 noted that "by no means everyone in Afghanistan, even among the working people, has accepted the April Revolution. . . ." Citing the underdevelopment of the country and "mistakes" made in the early stages of the revolution, the editorial went on to note that the number of people who had accepted the counterrevolutionary line was "considerable" and that it would "take time to eliminate existing prejudices and dispel false notions."[8]

Soviet Strategy

Currently in Afghanistan, roughly 118,000 Soviet and 30,000 Afghan army troops are battling 120,000 resistance forces. The Soviet 40th Army, according to unclassified sources, is composed of an equivalent of five divisions, a few air assault brigades, almost 500 helicopters, several squadrons of MiG-21s and MiG-23s, and a few squadrons of Su-25 (Frogfoot) attack aircraft, the first deployment of this new ground attack aircraft anywhere. These forces are supported by another 50,000 Soviet air force and support troops in the southern part of the USSR.

Divisional deployment is geographically balanced, with about a third of the ground forces located in the Kabul area and other major deployments at Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz in the north, Herat and Farah in the west, Kandahar in the south, and Jalalabad in the east.

The resistance forces come from seven loosely organized groups, nominally led by the Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujaheddin coalition. In the field, the freedom fighters operate in anywhere from platoon to regimental strength. Some of the

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more effective groups are divided into local defense forces, area forces, and "mobile groups," the latter being better trained and armed and more likely to be assigned to missions outside the local area. Armaments vary, and fire support is mainly limited to rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, and mortars. Although analysts estimate that foreign aid to the resistance is more than $500 million a year, aid from Mujaheddin supporters (with the exception of air-defense weaponry in 1986) has barely kept up with additions made to Soviet capabilities since 1980. The best source of arms and ammunition is still the Soviet and Afghan forces. One active local commander estimated that 80 percent of his weapons came from the enemy.

Most experts estimate that 80 percent of the country is controlled by rebels. Indeed, in a 1985 interview, Najib claimed that only 35 percent of the country was under government control. But it would be more accurate to say that nearly 80 percent of Afghanistan is permanently controlled neither by the Soviets nor by the resistance. Soviet forces are free to move in strength into almost any area, but they do not have the numerical strength or support to occupy or pacify major areas of the country. In most cases, the resistance forces rely too much on mobility and concealment for their survival to establish effective control. In any case, since 1985 the Soviets have marginally improved their hold on the Kabul area and in the areas north of the Hindu Kush. They have depopulated many areas in the eastern provinces, but fighting there remains spirited. The areas around Herat and Kandahar are still rebel strongholds.

Soviet strategy appears to be to hold the cities, secure the lines of communication, limit infiltration, and destroy resistance strongholds and their lines of communication at minimum cost. The Soviet strategy is essentially one in which firepower and superior tactical mobility multiply Soviet combat power and minimize casualties. In effect, Soviet policy has been a combination of "scorched earth" and "migratory genocide." Numerous reports have suggested that Soviet forces, particularly their air assets, have deliberately burned crops and destroyed villages to force the population—the main source of resistance support—to flee to Pakistan or Iran to join the population of exiles (approximately 3 million in Pakistan and nearly 2 million in Iran). Soviet terror tactics range from the use of booby-trapped toys to wholesale bombings. Reprisal bombings of entire villages suspected of harboring or supporting the resistance are commonly conducted by Soviet forces.

The Soviets, however, are not intent on winning the war solely by military means. Although military operations increased in frequency and scope in 1985 and 1986, the Soviets and the PDPA are placing great importance on educating a new generation of cadres. In the long run, the Soviets apparently think that 10,000 young Afghans who are being educated in the USSR (along with 2,000 military trainees) will form the nucleus of a new military and party apparat that will rule Afghanistan after the resistance has fallen. Many Afghans, of course, think that this program is counterproductive.

Diplomatic maneuvers and military pressure against Pakistan are another part of Soviet strategy. These measures—including air, artillery, and terrorist attacks—

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are designed to keep support for the resistance movement at a manageable level and to create discord between Pakistanis and the refugees. Soviet and Afghan air and artillery attacks against Pakistan in 1984 killed 104 people. There were over 200 violations of Pakistani airspace in 1985, and the total violations for 1986 exceeded 700. In March and April 1987, around the same time as peace negotiations were under way in Geneva, Afghan aircraft killed over 150 people in Pakistan. The Soviets have also maintained a steady flow of propaganda against Iran for assisting Shiites and other groups in Afghanistan. Since 1982, punitive raids have occasionally been undertaken by the USSR and Afghanistan in border areas.

Despite the high costs of the Soviet war in Afghanistan – before 1987, at least 12,000 killed, 25,000 wounded, 1,000 aircraft lost, 4,000 vehicles destroyed, and annual costs of at least $3 billion – they have not impeded Soviet operations. Apparently, the Soviet investment of prestige has been too great to abandon their "fraternal allies" in Afghanistan. Moreover, the international outrage in response to the Soviet invasion has decreased considerably. The greatest political costs (the grain embargo and the Olympic boycott, for example) have been paid in full. Neither the lack of battlefield progress nor 500,000 Afghan deaths have deterred the Soviets. As Charles Dunbar, the former United States chargé d'affaires in Kabul, noted in October 1983: "Soviet diplomats [in Kabul] have been free to admit that the Soviet position in Afghanistan was very poor and that anything other than a long-term solution was unlikely. They always said, though, that it was Soviet policy to pursue such a long-term solution."[9]

Soviet Military Performance

One can argue that the invasion is not a fair test of the capability of the Soviet military. The army is designed for offensive combat on the plains of Europe and then employed in a counterinsurgency in the mountains of South Asia. But close observers have given Soviet forces low marks in nearly everything from individual deportment to small-unit tactics. A distillation of the scattered, though consistent, information that is available reveals a number of facts.

First, the invading divisions – except the airborne units – were low-readiness units, manned primarily by Central Asian reservists. These units were poorly trained and, in some cases, politically unreliable. Collusion with the resistance occurred in some instances. The reservists were withdrawn a few months after the mission.

Second, the initial complement of regular Soviet forces was not trained in counterinsurgency or mountain-warfare techniques. In December 1981, a Soviet source 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."[10] The Soviets are attempting to solve this problem by establishing a number of mountain-warfare centers in Soviet Central Asia. As noted below, progress in this area, despite much command emphasis, has been slow by Soviet accounts.

Third, interviews with Soviet prisoners of war and defectors indicate widespread

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discontent among Soviet forces, a condition aggravated by the terror and boredom of combat operations, by the low pay, and by the availability of drugs. Disease and poor sanitation may have already caused more casualties than the resistance. Numerous, unconnected sources have confirmed the widespread use of hashish and other drugs, sometimes acquired by trading military equipment, ammunition, or weapons.

Fourth, up to 1983, Soviet tactics overrelied on motorized rifle and tank troops employed in sweep or "hammer and anvil" operations. The mountainous terrain and the poor off-road conditions severely degraded the effectiveness of these units. Air assault and airborne operations – usually of company or battalion strength – are now being conducted more frequently and with a greater degree of success and skill than the ground operations.

Fifth, Soviet operational security – the ability to conceal one's plans, intentions, and movements – is generally poor. Not only do their Afghan allies often "leak" information but the Soviets seem to advertise impending offensives by openly building up their forces near objectives and by lengthy air and artillery preparations, many of which are ill-conceived and poorly targeted. In the Panjsher Valley campaign in 1982, even the *Pravda* military correspondent noted that the resistance apparently had the Soviet battle plan before the operation had begun. The onset of their 1984 campaign was predicted in Western newspapers a week before the battle began.

Sixth, since the Soviets still tend to be road bound and highly predictable, resistance ambushes have proved to be very effective. Apparently, Soviet forces have no counterambush drills as do Western armies. Soviet forces prefer to let the resistance have the vehicles that they have disabled and to move the rest of the convoy to safety. A few eyewitnesses have reported that Soviet tanks, after having moved from the ambush site, will turn and shell the disabled vehicles. Also, villages close to the ambush site will normally be bombed shortly after the ambush.

Finally, even the Soviet air force has its critics. Although the heavily armed Hind gunship and the Su-25 attack aircraft remain the most feared weapons, many eyewitnesses have noted that the use of primitive air-defense weapons by the resistance will cause Soviet and Afghan pilots to take evasive actions, severely degrading the effectiveness of their bombing or strafing run. The recent increase in Stinger and Blowpipe missiles to the resistance has raised problems for the Soviets. From October 1986 to December 1986, the resistance shot down ninety Soviet or Afghan aircraft.

Soviet forces have been rated badly by the resistance. A former Afghan colonel who worked for the resistance and had previously been trained in the United States and in the USSR closely observed Soviet performances. He characterized them as "oversupervised," "lacking initiative," and addicted to "cookbook warfare," in which proven "battle recipes" are mechanically applied to diverse situations. In December 1985, the Peshawar, Pakistan–based *Afghan Information Center Monthly Bulletin* noted that Soviet soldiers are generally "demoralized, isolated, badly treated by their officers . . . and reluctant to fight. . . . However, they are eager to find

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hashish or take money, watches and transistors from civilians." Although Soviet forces, except the airborne and air assault units, have been given low marks by the resistance, these opinions have become subject to more qualification as the Soviets – under Gorbachev – have begun to conduct more aggressive operations with some improvement in skill and even greater ruthlessness.

Attempts at Adaptation

The lack of progress has spurred the Soviet military to change the way its army operates in Afghanistan and to attack the problems identified above. The Soviet military press includes articles discussing mountain training and exhorting leaders to pay more attention to developing initiative and physical fitness among their subordinates.

Since the strong command emphasis began in 1981, one might expect that seven years after the invasion mountain training would be highly developed and efficient. Such is apparently not the case. In the Soviet military writings about the war in Afghanistan, although the amount of training literature has increased, the terrain and environment appear as formidable enemies. In May 1983, an unsigned editorial in *Voenny Vestnik* (Military Herald), an important military journal aimed at middle-ranking officers, severely criticized mountain training in the Soviet ground forces. Citing the importance of World War II experiences (a ploy that simultaneously makes the subject more important and conceals the fact that it is a current topic), the 1983 editorial stated that, although there had been some improvements recently, "there are still units in which this training is conducted without a concrete plan. Exercises are sometimes held in a formalistic fashion, with insufficient material support. Due importance is not always attached to the psychological and physical conditioning of soldiers and sergeants, who consequently display a lack of aggressiveness and self-confidence in carrying out tasks." The article concluded that "we cannot be satisfied with what has been achieved" and that "units must improve training on mountaineering techniques, operations on separate axes, and operations with air-landed forces."[11] A less authoritative though similar complaint appeared in the Ministry of Defense daily newspaper, *Red Star*, in January 1986.

The lessons of World War II are not the only source of experience guiding Soviet actions in Afghanistan. The efforts to pacify Soviet Central Asia, the war against *basmachi* "counterrevolutionaries" during the 1920s, is used as an analogous case for the war in Afghanistan. One recent article in a military journal, without mentioning Afghanistan by name, recounted the efficient and "enlightened" leadership of the legendary Marshal M. W. Frunze, who demanded that his soldiers – unlike what their modern contemporaries are doing in Afghanistan – "inspire in the population a love for and faith in the Red Army." As in Afghanistan today, however, Marshal Frunze noted that, while military operations are relatively simple undertakings, "the difficulty is in getting the . . . Muslim population to understand that the *basmachi* are their enemy . . . and that it is the Red Army

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and not the *basmachi* which provides protection and support for the laboring people."[12]

More conventionally, the Soviet press, perhaps to counter rumors and to quell the growing uneasiness among the Soviet people, has been telling the story of the "limited contingent of troops" in Afghanistan. Three tendencies dominate the media's treatment of Afghanistan. First, there have been renewed efforts to explain why the limited contingent is in Afghanistan, usually emphasizing the defense of the homeland and the needs of a great power. One such treatment appeared in 1985 in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, a publication aimed at intellectuals. It noted that the limited contingent was performing the same task as their grandfathers had in Spain and in Mongolia, fighting small wars in foreign countries to forestall larger wars and preserve the country or its resources. The author argued that today theaters of military operation are interconnected and that safe borders in Afghanistan are as important in combatting a global threat as nuclear submarines on patrol. Second, in 1983, the media began publicizing Soviet heroes. The audience here is primarily the Soviet youths. One such hero, Sergeant Nikolai Chepik, has become (in the words of the *New York Times*) "an icon," who was "venerated" at more than forty displays in schools throughout the Soviet Union.[13] Throughout all of the "hero" articles, the message is clear: the "boys" are performing in the highest traditions, under very difficult circumstances, against a barbaric enemy backed by the United States, China, and other countries. Third, the press has highlighted the 500,000 veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War. Some of these articles glorify the veterans, others describe their adjustment problems. One series of articles drew over 2,000 letters. Despite the new openness on the war, one subject remains taboo: the costs of the Soviet occupation. One American expert on the war in Afghanistan estimated that the Soviets have acknowledged only 150 casualties in everything that they have printed about the war.[14]

Prospects for Change under Gorbachev

Mikhail Gorbachev appears frustrated by the lack of progress in Afghanistan and possibly concerned about the return on the Soviet investment there. Since his appointment as general secretary, Gorbachev has undertaken a number of measures to advance the situation. The USSR has increased the number of offensive operations, added more firepower, appointed a new theater commander, increased pressure on Pakistan, and, in May 1986, brought in a new Afghan ruler.

All of this – along with Gorbachev's sham "withdrawal" of six regiments from the limited contingent and his new initiatives toward China – suggests a new determination to move the war toward a favorable conclusion. Gorbachev is unsure whether this conclusion will be reached by attrition, by the collapse of Pakistani and Iranian support for the resistance, or by an imperfect peace. He is keeping his options open and will pursue the objective of a secure, pacified Afghanistan under Soviet domination. The only thing certain is that the level of Soviet determination remains high.

The previous examination of Soviet motives reveals why there has been little

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change in Soviet determination. The potential for the disintegration of the PDPA is still high, and the threat, in the Soviet view, to its own security remains as well. Indeed, considering the cultural constraints, it is unlikely that a new, non-PDPA regime would ever behave "neighborly" toward the Soviet Union. The threat of an encirclement by hostile powers is still present, and so is the possibility of lost prestige. It endangers one's prestige to desert an ally, but even more damaging is to attempt to salvage the relationship and then fail. Moreover, a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan would solve few international problems for the USSR. The Soviet presence in Afghanistan is the least important of its major troubles with China. Similarly, a withdrawal would not heal all the wounds between the USSR and Iran or the USSR and the United States. After a Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan would remain oriented toward the West, and relations between India and the USSR would continue to flourish. Although the war is a "bleeding wound" according to Gorbachev, one must consider his carefully chosen words at the Twenty-seventh Communist Party Soviet Union Congress to describe the importance of Afghanistan: "It is in our vital, national interest that the USSR invariably have good and peaceful relations with all contiguous states. This is a vitally important goal of our foreign policy."[15]

The long-term prognosis for Soviet policy is not necessarily grim. International pressure has subsided, and, even with the ritual condemnations of Soviet policy and a few thousand casualties every year, the costs of the war in comparison with the value of Afghanistan remains high but reasonable to the Soviets. They know that they are not winning now, but they remain confident that the resistance, denied easy access to food and increasingly harried by Soviet forces, may exhaust itself or, perhaps more likely, its benefactors. The indirect peace talks may then provide the Soviets the needed legitimacy and respite to deploy the thousands of young Afghans being trained in the USSR to build another Communist satellite on the Soviet periphery, relatively free from a major insurgency.

The resistance forces must be able to raise the costs of Soviet occupation so high that the Politburo will be convinced that the costs far outweigh the benefits. This is, of course, easier said than done. The Soviet political system does not require an immediate solution or even one in the near future. As a French doctor, himself a veteran of the war, noted: "The Russians do not need smashing victories to announce to their citizenry. . . . Catastrophes . . . do not incite an outcry in Moscow for Soviet 'boys' to come home. The Soviet Army can wait it out as long as it did for the Basmachi revolt to end—and it waited for that for twenty years. It can wait even longer if necessary."[16]

Notes

1. "World Communist Solidarity with the Afghan Revolution," *New Times*, Jan. 1980, 10.
2. R. A. Ul'yanovskiy, "The Afghan Revolution at the Current Stage," *Voprosy Istorii KPSS* (Questions of History of the CPSU), Apr. 1982, trans. in Joint Publications Research Service 81313, July 1982, 15.
3. *Pravda*, 31 Dec. 1979, 4.
4. Ibid., 5 Dec. 1978, 1.

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5. Ibid., 3 Mar. 1980, 5.
6. Ibid., 15 May 1986, 4.
7. *Afghan Information Center Monthly Bulletin*, Dec. 1985, 7–8.
8. *Pravda*, 21 Dec. 1985, 4.
9. Interview with the author, Cambridge, Mass., Oct. 1983.
10. *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*), 31 Dec. 1981, 2, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Daily Report – Soviet Union, 6 Jan., 1984, D4.
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12. L. Shershner, "In accordance with a Party Assignment," *Kommunist Vooruzhennykh Sil*, Dec. 1985, trans. in Leon Goure, *Strategic Review* (Spring 1986), 88–90.
13. *New York Times*, 16 Jan. 1985.
14. Henry S. Bradsher, "The Soviet Union in the Third World: Afghanistan" (Paper presented at the Harvard Russian Research Center, Feb. 1986), 12.
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