

Why Peace Operations in Afghanistan Should Heed Soviet Lessons Learned

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Kimberly Marten Zisk

Barnard College and Council on Foreign Relations

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Common wisdom says that the United States has little to learn from studying the military lessons of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. U.S. military actions have been designed not to encounter the disadvantages that the Soviets faced in 1979. The United States has gone in better prepared, more knowledgeable about the terrain and opposition facilities because of its covert operations there in the 1980s, and availing itself of good military intelligence shared by Moscow. This time around, the intervention is multilateral, it has the support of Pakistan and other Afghan neighbors, and is not designed as an imperial exercise. Most important, the U.S. goal is not to prop up a particular regime or to occupy territory, but instead to do quick in-and-out strikes against well defined targets. Conventional wisdom concluded that this would not become a U.S. quagmire.

However the Soviet experience in Afghanistan does hold real lessons for the complex peace operations that will be put in place once the military campaign winds down. Three lessons in particular are relevant.

First: Outsiders cannot rid the country of rebel fighting. Afghanistan has been at civil war for thirty years, with factions changing sides repeatedly and the entire population caught up in the violence. This time around, Taliban leaders and their Al Qaeda friends will become the rebels challenging whatever coalition government emerges. Ambitious warlords who remain unsatisfied with whatever power-sharing arrangement is reached under UN auspices will join them. No matter how successful the U.S. military campaign is, never will all rebels defect to the winning side. The rebels who are left will not stop fighting, no matter how hard conditions get.

The Soviets learned this the hard way. Soviet forces targeted villages in order to drive the civilian population away, believing that if they could separate the rebels from their supporters, the rebels would run out of resources. The Soviets effectively deprived the rebels of easy access to basic supplies, burning down agricultural fields and food warehouses; yet the rebels kept on fighting anyway. They were so highly motivated to regain what they thought was rightfully theirs that they would not give up, no matter what. Soviet forces achieved a number of *defensive* successes against rebel attacks, and were able to protect their troops located inside cities better and better as time went on. Yet they gained few measurable *offensive* successes in terms of causing rebel activity to be curtailed.

This means that any United Nations peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan will have to include a strong military enforcement component, to protect both the UN mission and the

recognized Afghan government from rebel attack. Otherwise, the country will tumble once more into the anarchy that provides a hospitable base of operations for terrorism.

Second: The sympathies of neighboring states, especially Pakistan, will have to be maintained over the long-term to prevent rebels from resupplying themselves with weapons and ammunition. Although it is a myth that the Soviet forces were defeated by Stinger missiles—in fact, Soviet aircraft adapted quite well to their use, for example by using infrared decoys to confuse the Stinger targeting mechanisms—the success rate of Soviet operations unquestionably declined after U.S. weaponry started flowing into Afghanistan through Pakistan in 1985. The Soviets lost the air superiority that they had established in previous years, and were left unable to carry out complex air operations in valleys, because the decoys only worked against missiles fired from below, not from mountaintops. This gave the resistance a psychological advantage while weakening Soviet morale.

Because rebels will continue to operate in Afghanistan no matter what kind of government emerges there, keeping their weaponry as limited as possible will be important. This requires the cooperation of states where significant parts of the population are sympathetic to those rebels. In turn this means that the war against terrorism has permanently complicated U.S. diplomacy in the Central and South Asian region. Washington will have to continue giving support to Pakistan, even though its authoritarian military regime has taken aggressive action (and supported terrorist attacks) against the more democratic India, has flouted international law on weapons proliferation, and has trampled human rights. This could have unfortunate ripple effects on Pakistan's nuclear confrontation with India, leaving both sides with fewer incentives to act responsibly in return for U.S. support.

Third: Facing rebels successfully in Afghanistan requires strong political will and advanced military capabilities. The major reason that Afghanistan became a quagmire for Soviet forces was that they did not deploy very many troops there, and did not deploy enough of their best people. The peak Soviet deployment level was 120,000 troops per year, as compared to 600,000 troops per year at the peak of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and they used only one and a half of their available eight special forces divisions. However it was special forces that they needed for military victory, because maintaining conventional supply lines for water and fuel in Afghanistan's rugged mountain and desert territory is almost impossible. Reports that the Afghan rebels tortured their war prisoners to death so intimidated conventional Soviet troops that they tended to stay huddled inside their armored vehicles, rather than striking out in the kinds of small, independent formations that are required in counterinsurgency warfare. The Soviets never had enough highly qualified personnel on the ground at any one time to wage a successful fight.

The lack of Soviet political will is also demonstrated in their low casualty levels: the Soviets sustained only 14,000 deaths during 10 years, as opposed to the 58,000 Americans killed in one decade in Vietnam. In fact, the Soviet government tried to hide from its own population that any kind of war was occurring in Afghanistan at all. Too many soldiers coming home in body bags would have made the extent of fighting clear, even in the absence of a free press, and this led the Soviet leadership to be overly cautious in their tactics.

This means that whoever takes the lead enforcement role in an Afghan peace operation will have to be able to sustain domestic political will during the long term, and will have to be prepared to fight rebels using the hit-and-run techniques favored by U.S. and British forces during recent months.

Conclusion

The UN peace mission in Afghanistan will not be easy. Yet maintaining stability in that country is vital for the struggle against terrorism being waged by both the United States and Russia at the moment. Our future security depends on it, because failure to achieve calm in Afghanistan will reinvigorate Al Qaeda networks.

This means that the United States cannot afford to play a minor, supporting role in the UN mission. The U.S. and its western European allies, particularly Great Britain, have unique military capabilities and strong security motives to make a peacekeeping mission there effective in a way no one else can. The U.S. economy will weather the looming global recession better than most other countries will. The United States also has large reserve military forces to call on if needed, as well as immense popular support for the current antiterrorism campaign. The United States has the experience, the resources, and the political will to see a difficult peace enforcement mission through to the end, and it must step up to the challenge.

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