

Comparing the U.S. and Soviet Experiences in Afghanistan

By Bruce Riedel

A COUNTRY RARELY fights the same war twice in one generation, especially from opposite sides. Yet that in many ways describes the U.S. role in Afghanistan today. In the 1980s, the Central Intelligence Agency, working from a safe haven in Pakistan, engineered the largest covert operation in its history to help defeat the Soviet 40th Red Army in Afghanistan.¹ Today, the United States is fighting a Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan that operates from a safe haven in Pakistan. Many suggest that the outcome will be the same for the United States as it was for the Soviet Union—ultimate defeat at the hands of the insurgency. Pakistan's role as a safe haven is remarkably consistent in both conflicts, but focusing exclusively on that similarity misses the fundamental differences between the two wars. This article will address those differences, and will also assess how Pakistan's role is impacting the United States' possibilities for success today.

Goals and Objectives

The first and perhaps most critical difference between the two wars is over goals and objectives. The United States intervened in Afghanistan in 2001 on the side of the Northern Alliance to topple the Taliban Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan only after the

1 The story of the first Afghan war has been told from many angles. George Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of how the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of our Times* underplays Ronald Reagan's and Bill Casey's role but is full of insights into the U.S. side of the war. Robert Gates' memoirs *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How they Won the Cold War* has a more balanced view. Also important is Milt Bearden's two books on the war, *The Main Enemy: The Inside Story of the CIA's Final Showdown with the KGB* and *The Black Tulip: A Novel of the War in Afghanistan*. Bearden was the CIA chief of station in Islamabad at the end of the jihad. The Soviet side of the war has long been neglected but finally received attention from Gregory Feifer in *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. Most important is the Pakistani version, written by the ISI commander of the battle, Mohammad Yousaf, with Mark Adkin in *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story* in which the CIA is a duplicitous and timid partner for the ISI.

country had been used as a base for the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The U.S. goal, endorsed by the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was self-defense against a government that had allowed its territory to be used for an act of war against another state. From the beginning, the United States has had no ambition to dominate or subjugate the Afghan people, or to stay in Afghanistan once the threat posed by al-Qa`ida and the Afghan Taliban is defeated. President Barack Obama reiterated this fact in his speech outlining the new U.S. policy for Afghanistan and Pakistan on March 27, 2009.²

The Soviet invasion in 1979 was a different matter. It is now understood that Moscow blundered into Afghanistan with little appreciation of the difficulties it would face.³ Its goal was to shore up a communist regime that was on the edge of collapse in the face of a national uprising. The Soviet leadership wanted an Afghanistan that would be similar to other Soviet satellite states and under virtual Soviet imperial rule with only the façade of independence. The Soviets may also have had ambitions to use Afghanistan as a base to project authority further south.

The Soviet invasion and the attempt to impose communism on a rural and largely illiterate Islamic country with a history of xenophobia produced the predictable result: a mass national uprising. With the exception of small pockets of the urban middle class and a few minority regions—most notably the Uzbek province of Jowzjan where a tough local warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, raised a pro-Soviet militia—virtually the entire country was

2 In his March 27, 2009 speech, President Obama said: "We are not in Afghanistan to control that country or to dictate its future. We are in Afghanistan to confront a common enemy that threatens the United States, our friends and allies, and the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered the most at the hands of violent extremists. So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future." See "President Obama's Speech on Afghanistan and Pakistan," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 27, 2009.

3 Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

violently opposed to the new occupation and its atheist ideology.

In contrast, polls show most Afghans have supported the coalition forces that overthrew the Taliban, although that support is now dwindling as the coalition has failed to provide law and order and reconstruction.⁴ The Taliban are not widely popular either; support for the Taliban is mostly restricted to the Pashtun belt in southern and eastern Afghanistan. It has virtually no appeal to the 60% of Afghans who are not Pashtun. Therefore, the Soviets' most difficult battlespace—the famous Panjshir Valley, home of the legendary Ahmad Shah Massoud (the Lion of the Panjshir)—is today quiet and devoid of Taliban because it is an exclusively Tajik area.

In short, while the Soviets faced a national uprising, the U.S.-led coalition faces a minority insurgency that is segregated from much of the country. Moscow's task was much more difficult than the one facing NATO today.

Tactics and Support

The Soviets responded to Afghan opposition with a ferocity and brutality that made the situation even worse. At least 1.5 million Afghans were killed, another five million or so fled the country to Iran and Pakistan (one out of three Afghans), and millions more were displaced inside the country. A country that began the war as one of the poorest in the world was systematically impoverished and even emptied of its people. The Soviet Air Force carpet bombed cities such as Kandahar, where the population fell from 250,000 to 25,000.⁵ Millions of land mines were planted all over the country, with no records kept of where they had been laid. Nothing even approaching this level of horror is happening in Afghanistan today.

In part because of that brutality, the Soviet invasion was condemned by virtually the entire world except for its client states. The campaign to assist

4 Anthony Cordesman, "Afghan Public Opinion and the Afghan War: Shifts by Region and Province," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 13, 2009.

5 On the cost of the war, see Robert Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pp. 184-188, 223.

the Afghan insurgency, the mujahidin, enjoyed the backing of countries around the world including China, the United Kingdom, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and others.

NATO forces in Afghanistan today have the support of the United Nations and operate under a UN Security Council mandate. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), created by the United Nations in 2001, has troops from 41 countries currently in Afghanistan, including U.S. forces, NATO contributions, and troops from non-NATO states such as Australia, Sweden and the United Arab Emirates. Efforts are underway to get more states, especially in the Muslim world, to send troops.

Much of the hardest fighting in the current war has been conducted by non-American troops. The British in Helmand Province, the Canadians in Kandahar and the Dutch and Australians in Uruzgan have been fighting for the last several years in the heartland of the Taliban's Pashtun belt. They have taken considerable casualties in the process. Indeed, for much of the last five years the principal battle against the al-Qa`ida enemy that attacked the United States in 2001 has been fought by American allies, while the United States' primary focus has been on al-Qa`ida in Iraq.

The Role Played by Pakistan

If the differences between the American and Russian experiences are significant, there is at least one major similarity: the role played by Pakistan. In the 1980s, President Zia ul-Huq agreed to support the mujahidin insurgency despite the enormous risk involved in provoking the Soviet Union, then the world's largest military power. The Soviets responded with an intense covert campaign to foment unrest inside Pakistan, especially in the border areas and in the refugee camps. Both the KGB and its Afghan ally, the KHAD, conducted terrorist attacks to bring pressure on Zia.⁶ Moreover, the Soviets

⁶ One of the most famous such attacks was on a logistics supply base the ISI had near Rawalpindi for the mujahidin, which was blown up by saboteurs in April 1988. More than 100 Pakistanis were killed, 1,000 injured and 10,000 tons of arms and ammunition destroyed. See Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Bear Trap*:

used military power, especially its air force, to intimidate Pakistan.

Zia insisted that outside support for the mujahidin had to flow through Pakistani hands, principally via the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate of the Pakistani Army. The ISI sought exclusive access to the mujahidin. Outside players had little choice but to accept Zia's rules. Consequently, Pakistan served as the safe haven for the mujahidin, its logistical supply line and its advocate on the world stage.

Ironically, today Pakistan again acts as the safe haven for Afghan insurgents and their logistical supply line. The ISI is again the instrument by which Pakistan maintains its links to the Afghan Taliban and other extremist organizations.⁷ This should come as little surprise since in the 1990s the ISI was a critical factor in the creation and development of the Taliban; it only reluctantly agreed to distance itself from the Taliban after 9/11 under enormous U.S. pressure. It is now clear that the distancing is far from complete. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen has said, the ISI "has been very attached to many of these extreme organizations and in the long run they have got to completely cut ties with them in order to move in the right direction."⁸

The key leadership node of the Afghan Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan is the Quetta *shura* council, named after the capital of Balochistan where the senior Taliban leadership, probably including Mullah Omar (the Taliban's leader since its founding), resides.⁹ Quetta, a city of some two million, provides excellent cover for the Afghan Taliban leadership to operate and lead the insurgency. It is close to the Afghan border but remote from outsiders; few Westerners have access to the area.

Afghanistan's Untold Story (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2002), p. 220.

⁷ Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt, "Afghan Strikes by Taliban Get Pakistani Help, U.S. Aides Say," *New York Times*, March 26, 2009; Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan and Terror: The Eye of the Storm," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618:1 (2008).

⁸ Mazzetti et al.; Riedel.

⁹ Ibid.

Even more ironically, Pakistan serves as the major logistical supply line for NATO forces in Afghanistan. More than 80% of the supplies U.S. and other coalition forces depend on arrive via Pakistan from the port of Karachi. Geography effectively precludes another alternative unless the alliance is willing to rely on Russia or Iran to control its supply lines. Moreover, the ISI is also a key partner in the struggle against al-Qa`ida. The ISI has helped capture or kill several senior al-Qa`ida operatives, despite declining ISI assistance since the early years after 9/11. Without Pakistan's cooperation, many operations against al-Qa`ida would be much more difficult today.

Therefore, Pakistan has unusually strong leverage on both sides of the war in Afghanistan. President Obama's new policy explicitly recognizes the critical role played by Pakistan and elevates the importance of working with Pakistan to shut down the safe havens in Balochistan and elsewhere along the Afghan-Pakistan border. He has promised to triple economic aid to Pakistan and provide military aid that is focused on counterinsurgency requirements such as helicopters for air mobility in the rugged border region.

For a number of reasons, Pakistan retains links to the Afghan Taliban despite the rising incidence of jihadist violence inside Pakistan. Most important is the army's calculation that Washington and Brussels do not have the political will to persevere in Afghanistan. It is assumed by many in Pakistan that American and European patience to fight it out in Afghanistan is eroding, an assumption reinforced by polls that show support for the conflict steadily declining on both sides of the Atlantic. Supporting the Afghan Taliban is thus a useful hedge in case NATO decides to withdrawal and give up the struggle. Pakistan would then have a relationship with the Pashtun future of southern and eastern Afghanistan and would have an asset in the struggle for post-NATO Afghanistan.

Changing Pakistan's Calculations

If the United States and its partners in Afghanistan demonstrate their resolve, especially with the additional forces en route to the battlefield this year, the calculation in Pakistan's military may

change. The alliance needs to make clear to Islamabad that the Taliban will not succeed on the battlefield.

Unfortunately, the politics in Islamabad are working in the wrong direction. The Pakistani Taliban are getting stronger and the political parties are squabbling over power. The army remains preoccupied with India. Pakistan must recognize that the existential threat to its freedoms comes from the jihadists. Only when the key players in Pakistan, both in the political parties and in the army, come to that conclusion will change occur. The United States needs to engage intensively to convince them of this reality.

There is no inherent reason why the NATO and U.S. war in Afghanistan must follow the pattern of the Soviet war. The differences between the two outweigh the similarities, especially in what most Afghans want for their country. While pundits may find the cliché that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empire simplistically attractive, there is every reason to believe that smart policies can avoid such an outcome.

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