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LESSONS FROM THE SOVIET OCCUPATION IN AFGHANISTAN FOR THE UNITED STATES AND NATO

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Already in its seventh year in Afghanistan, U.S. and NATO forces appear as if they will approach and likely surpass the decade-long occupation by Soviet troops. Currently, Afghanistan is far from becoming stable and even reaching the normalcy of developing-nation status. As the Spring 2008 NATO summit illustrated, it represents an important test of commitment for the trans-Atlantic alliance. This article will examine some of the military and political lessons from the Soviet experience and identify those that can be applied to the present period. Drawing on a number of transcripts from Politburo sessions and other significant Soviet documents from the 1979-1989 period, this article argues that despite the distinctions between 1988 and 2008 a number of common experiences and mistakes emerge. As the Taliban continues to fight an insurgency campaign and patience wears thin among Afghans for President Karzai's government and the international community to deliver results, these lessons might be useful in informing U.S. and NATO policy. Ultimately, Afghans, especially in rural areas, must be offered tangible gains from siding with the current government, and a political solution must accompany military efforts to overcome the challenges that confront Afghanistan and its allies.

INTRODUCTION

More than six years after U.S. forces toppled the Taliban, thrusting Hamid Karzai into power first as the Chairman of Afghanistan's Interim Administration and then later as its democratically elected president, U.S. and NATO forces are approaching the duration of the Soviet Union troop presence in Afghanistan, and they appear likely to surpass it. The Netherlands announced its troops will stay in Afghanistan until 2010, the United States and United Kingdom continue to increase troop levels, and most NATO forces show no signs of quick departure (Ministry of General Affairs of the Government of Netherlands 2007). The question then arises: what lessons, if any, from the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-1989 can be applied to the present period?

The U.S. and NATO operation in Afghanistan, otherwise known as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), chose early on to extend the work of the Bonn Agreement in December 2001 and operate within existing power structures to bring all major power brokers, the Taliban and al Qaeda excluded, under the national government. Consequently, former militia leaders and regional warlords with little experience in national administration now hold key posts in Karzai's government. However, the security situation continues to deteriorate with the increased strength of the insurgency in the provinces. The United Kingdom and the United States are increasing their force contribution from 6,000 to 7,700 and from 26,000 to 29,000, respectively, to respond to an upsurge in violence in 2007 (United Kingdom Ministry of Defence 2007). The United States is deploying 3,000 more Marines ahead of an expected spring offensive by the Taliban (Scott-Tyson 2008). However, most NATO members show diminished appetites for increasing troop levels and using already deployed forces for more robust military operations against the insurgency. President Karzai is facing sliding support among Afghans, though he will likely remain in power past the next presidential elections in 2009 due to the absence of viable alternatives.

Drawing from the Soviet experience, this article will highlight military and political experiences that are relevant for the United States and NATO and areas where policy should be adjusted. The article will avoid normative judgments on the legitimacy of the presence of Soviet versus U.S./NATO forces and instead focus on specific challenges and the consequences of some Soviet policy choices during their occupation of Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND

The Soviet Union's decision to intervene in Afghanistan was made somewhat reluctantly in December 1979 after eleven requests from the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1987, 23-26 February). The PDPA took power from Mohammad Daoud's regime in a coup in April 1978 and were unable to quash the armed conflict, which subsequently broke out around the country. In addition to preventing the collapse of the PDPA government, the main goal of the intervention was to support the Afghan army with new communist leadership that could fight the insurgency once Soviet troops withdrew (Weinbaum 2007, 24). The Red Army's troop levels in Afghanistan peaked at over 100,000, though nearly a million Soviet soldiers served during the ten-year intervention (Hammond 1984, 190). The Soviets used brutal tactics to confront the *mujahideen* and showed little concern for average Afghans. Heavy firepower, chemical weapons, and indiscriminate firing killed many civilians during Soviet efforts to root out insurgents. The Red Army razed entire villages in areas where ambushes had occurred, wiping out inhabitants and destroying crops without, ultimately, diminishing the strength of the resistance (Bradsher 1983, 211). The last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan on February 14, 1989 after Mikhail Gorbachev and other Politburo leadership realized the U.S.S.R. could not continue to sustain such large financial and human costs when the quagmire appeared to have no end in sight. Eight major lessons emerge from why they were not able to defeat the resistance and consolidate power for the PDPA.

LESSONS FROM THE SOVIET OCCUPATION

Lesson One: Afghan government urgently needed to establish legitimacy

Afghans would not wait indefinitely for the government to prove its value and capacity to provide tangible results of the socialist revolution. Though some Soviet analysts predicted the defeat of counter-revolutionary forces would take no less than five years even under favorable circumstances, they did not appreciate early on the presence of a tipping point in the minds of Afghans concerning their patience for a foreign occupation and for the establishment of good governance (Shchedrov 1981). In 1986, Chairman Gorbachev spoke to the Soviet Politburo of his "intuition" that they "should not waste time" in "measures directed toward national reconciliation, strengthening of the union with the peasantry, and con-

solidation of political leadership of the party” (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1986, 13 November). His message is striking because his speech was intended to stimulate the council to take more decisive action – as if it were not already altogether clear that time was running out. In an open letter to Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov, Colonel Kim Tsagolov wrote in 1987 from Afghanistan that the window of opportunity for the revolution to succeed had already closed. He was later expelled from the Red Army for making his criticisms public.

The protracted character of the military struggle and the absence of any serious success, which could lead to a breakthrough in the entire strategic situation, led to the formation in the minds of the majority of the population of the mistrust in the abilities of the regime. That objectively led to demoralization of the masses, and to the erosion of the social base of the revolution (Lyakhovsky 1995, 344-348).

The lack of support among Afghans for the PDPA had many causes, but none less obvious than the absence of improvement – and sometimes deterioration - in the lives of those in the provinces and rural areas in comparison to the pre-revolutionary period. Soviet policy makers during Politburo sessions called attention to the “benefits of the revolution” not reaching the “peasants” in the provinces, who composed 80 percent of the total population: “Over eight years of the revolution agricultural production has increased by only seven percent, and the standard of living of peasants remains at pre-revolutionary levels” (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1986, November 13). This is hardly surprising given the estimate by Politburo member Yuli M. Vorontsov that only five million out of eighteen million Afghans were under the control of the government.

Lesson Two: Border region with Pakistan played an important role

Transcripts of Politburo sessions throughout the Soviet occupation reveal intense discussion of the role that outside powers were playing in supporting the mujahideen. The U.S., Pakistani, and Saudi contributions to the resistance have since been heavily documented, but at the time the Soviets were unable to prevent this interference (Coll 2004). Their concern centered on the importance of safe-havens and sanctuaries in Pakistan for the predominantly ethnic Pashtun insurgents. Yuri Andropov, who played a key role in the Politburo in arguing for the intervention as head of the

Committee for State Security (KGB), estimated in 1979 that three thousand insurgents and “religious fanatics” were being directed into Afghanistan from Pakistan (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1979, 17-18 March). This number grew over time due to the actions of the Soviet Army, whose tactics in the provinces created millions of internally displaced persons (Hammond 1984, 190). By 1983, an estimated three million Afghans had fled their homes to another country. Many refugees went to Pakistan and thousands of young men became trained as Islamic militants and returned to Afghanistan to fight in the resistance. The Soviets exacerbated this problem by purposefully creating impossible conditions in rural areas so the mujahideen would find themselves without food or shelter and thus stop fighting. This policy, also called “migratory genocide,” led more than one-third of the Afghan population to be displaced from their homes by 1985 (Bradsher 1985, 279).

Afghans, including those in the conservative Pashtun tribal belt, are not naturally inclined toward political Islam (Bartfield 2004, 15-17). To the extent that extremism finds root among Pashtuns, it is imported from Pakistani madrassas – the “Grand Central Station” of modern Islamic militancy, as British intelligence experts refer to it (Observer 2007). This extremism continued to be imported during the Taliban period by Afghans as refugees in Pakistan were raised under the influence of militant Diobandi Islamic orthodoxy (Weinbaum 2007, 25).

Lesson Three: Conventional military tactics were poor counter-insurgency tools

Soviet troops had absolutely no anti-guerrilla training. Their tanks and armored cars were highly vulnerable on Afghan terrain. Conventional tactics that would have been adequate for fighting on the plains of Europe were ineffective in the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan (Bradsher 1983, 203). In a letter toward the end of the conflict to all communist party members, the Politburo acknowledged this fact:

We do not want to say it, but we should: at that time, we did not even have a correct assessment of the unique geographical features of that hard-to-enter country. That found its reflection in the operations of our troops against small highly mobile units, where very little could be accomplished with the help of modern military technology (Lyakhovsky 1995, Appendix 8).

The strategy of the insurgency was to avoid direct confrontation and concede territory, only to return to control the area again later once the

Soviet troops returned to their bases. Employing tactics of “hot pursuit” of the rebels was intended to remove the base of support for the resistance. However, this drew fierce criticism from the local population because it meant the destruction of houses, agricultural fields, and the death of many civilians. Even so, it did not change conditions, as the rebels would return and control the territory again. Use of these tactics meant Soviet soldiers often found themselves fighting against the civilians they intended to protect.

One approach that produced positive results in some areas was moving mobile or permanent units of the Afghan army forces closer to those provinces. This often happened after villagers from regions controlled by the rebels approached provincial centers and asked for help in creating units of defense under the condition that these units would have close protection from the retaliatory attacks of the resistance (Shchedrov 1981).

Ultimately, the Soviets proved unable to control the provinces. In a powerful and poignant speech during a Politburo session in 1986, Sergei Akhromev, the deputy Minister of Defense, emphasized the significance of this failure:

Military actions in Afghanistan will soon be seven years old. There is no single piece of land in this country which has not been occupied by a Soviet soldier. Nevertheless, the majority of the territory remains in the hands of the rebels.... There is no single military problem that has arisen and that has not been solved, and yet there is still no result. The whole problem is in the fact that military results are not followed up by political [actions]. We control Kabul and the provincial centers, but on occupied territory we cannot establish authority. We have lost the battle for the Afghan people. The government is supported by a minority of the population. It is now in a position to maintain the situation on the level that it exists now. But under such conditions the war will continue for a long time (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1986, 13 November).

Lesson Four: Ethnic tensions were underestimated

Policy efforts toward national reconciliation foundered due to underestimating the role of ethnic tensions within Afghan society. The two main factions in the PDPA, the Parcham and Khalq, could not overcome their preexisting ethnic tensions. Other Afghans did not support national reconciliation efforts precisely because they did not support the source, the

PDPA, which was not established at the village level (Lyakhovsky 1995, 344-348). Repression always appeared to be the dominant feature and default option of Soviet strategy and the communist regime purposefully avoided giving control to traditional centers of power. Only just prior to the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 did the PDPA in Kabul attempt to co-opt local leaders and fighters by promising representation to the diverse set of ethnic and ideological factions (Weinbaum 2007, 24).

Lesson Five: Afghans were highly intolerant of foreign troop occupation

When Chairman Leonid Brezhnev and the Politburo were contemplating sending troops into Afghanistan only a small number of voices came forward to express opposition. Among them was Chief of General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, who called the decision to send 75,000 to 80,000 troops “reckless” due to its insufficiency in being able to stabilize the situation. He also argued among the small Politburo circle of three key members (KGB head Yuri Andropov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov) and Chairman Brezhnev that the Afghan problem should be decided by political means because of the “traditions of the Afghan people, who never tolerated foreigners on their soil” (Lyakhovsky 1995, 109-112). Political and military leaders were surprised to later observe the influential role that Islam played in Afghan society, which treated the Soviets as foreign invaders and infidels rather than a progressive anti-imperialist force.

Religious motives aside, the presence of foreign troops and the toll suffered by the tribes was an affront to their honor and a violation of the *Pukhtrunwali*, the Pashtun code or way of life. The first and greatest commandment of the code is *badal* – revenge, which obliges a Pashtun to take revenge for a wrong inflicted against him (and by extension against his family and tribe) to defend pride and inflict retribution (Spain 1963). Nearly ten years after Ogarkov’s warning, the Politburo acknowledged this cultural and historical factor in the reasons for their withdrawal in Afghanistan:

In addition, [we] completely disregarded the most important national and historical factors, above all the fact that the appearance of armed foreigners in Afghanistan was always met with arms in the hands [of the population]. This is how it was in the past, and this is how it happened when our troops entered [Afghanistan], even though they came there with honest and noble goals (Lyakhovsky 1995, Appendix 8).

Lesson Six: Soviet solutions for Afghan problems did not work

Soviet leaders also realized too late that their advisors working in Afghanistan were mistaken in attempting to re-create Soviet society and apply their own solutions to a vastly different context. Soviet advisors, who were accustomed to forming plans within a society accepting of a centralized approach, failed to appreciate the permanence of the tribal system and its inherent resistance to national administration and organization of basic elements of life. PDPA leaders, who were lost without a roadmap in their own country and struggling to remake Afghan society in the Soviet image, became increasingly reliant on outside solutions that promised to deliver results:

Often our people, acting out of their best intentions, tried to transplant the approached we are accustomed to onto the Afghan soil, encouraged the Afghans to copy our ways. All this did not help our cause; it bred the feelings of dependency on the part of the Afghan leaders in regard to the Soviet Union both in the sphere of military operations and in the economic sphere (Lyakhovsky 1995, Appendix 8).

Lesson Seven: Imminent departure of Soviet troops bolstered resistance

The public announcements by senior Soviet leadership that it planned to withdraw their troops undermined ongoing efforts for national reconciliation. The resistance had little reason then to negotiate and compromise when it believed it simply needed to wait until the Soviets left before they could have what they wanted. Colonel Tsagolov's letter to Defense Minister Yazov makes this point, "At the same time, one has to keep in mind that the counter-revolution is aware of the strategic decision of the Soviet leadership to withdraw the Soviet troops from the DRA . . . The counter-revolution will not be satisfied with partial power today, knowing that tomorrow it can have it all." (Lyakhovsky 1995, 344-348). Plans of withdrawal were hard to conceal, however, as the process took several years to complete. As part of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Gorbachev permitted and even publicized some public discussion within Soviet society which called for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. The resistance interpreted this as signs of imminent victory and dismissed efforts by the PDPA to reach out to local and regional leaders and win their allegiance through power sharing agreements.

Lesson Eight: A military solution proved to be insufficient

Eventually, Soviet policy makers realized that a military solution to the protracted conflict was not possible and that a solution must be political in nature. Viktor Chebrikov, a member of the Politburo and head of the KGB from 1982-1988, made this point to his colleagues during a November 1986 session: "It is necessary to look for the means to a political solution of the problem. The military path for the past six years has not given us a solution (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1986, 13 November). Earlier in 1985, Gorbachev delivered this same message to President Babrak Karmal when he informed the Afghan leader that he could no longer count on any reinforcements of additional troops and needed to take drastic action:

We'll help you, but with arms only, not troops. And if you want to survive you'll have to broaden the base of the regime, forget socialism, make a deal with the truly influential forces, including the Mujahideen commanders and the leaders of now-hostile organizations. You'll have to revive Islam, respect traditions, and try to show the people some tangible benefits from the revolution. And get your army into shape, give raises to officers and mullahs. Support private trade, you won't be able to create a different economy any time soon (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1985, 17 October).

Of course, by then the mujahideen wasn't interested in compromises from the PDPA and believed they only needed to outlast the Soviet occupation in order to win the conflict.

LESSONS RELEVANT FOR THE UNITED STATES AND NATO

Most observers agree the security situation in Afghanistan is currently deteriorating. The Taliban has a permanent presence in an estimated 54 percent of the country's territory (Senlis Afghanistan 2007). The United States is responding to an upsurge in violence last year and an expected spring offensive by the Taliban by sending 3,000 more Marines, indicating they failed to draw additional troop commitments from other NATO members (Scott-Tyson 2008). Moreover, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that opium production grew 34 percent from 2006 to 2007. With the exception of China in the nineteenth century, whose population then was fifteen times larger than today's in Afghanistan, no other country in the world has ever produced narcotics on such a massive

scale (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2007). Most development projects and reconstruction efforts are located in the North and West under more benign security conditions than in the East and South. The ethnic Pashtuns in the South, while less accustomed to a strong government presence than ethnic minorities in the North, have traditionally prospered most from a relationship with the state (Shahrani 1984). The insurgents have increasingly been able to capitalize on grievances, particularly among the Pashtuns, who perceive they are being denied the benefits of reconstruction that others are seen as receiving (Weinbaum 2007, 33). Currently, Pashtun tribes compose the majority of the base of support for the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It is in this context that a number of lessons from the Soviet experience have resonance in present-day Afghanistan.

First, the importance of controlling the rural areas and improving lives in those regions is as relevant in 2008 as it was in 1988. As in the Soviet period, the Taliban and other resistance forces take refuge from NATO in the hard-to-reach rural areas. Seth Jones, a political scientist at RAND, believes history is in danger of repeating itself:

Russia controlled the cities, not the rural areas. They lost. This is the challenge that faces the U.S., NATO, and the Afghan government today. It's the fight over the hearts and minds in the rural areas. The U.S., NATO, and the Afghan government are losing. Not in Kandahar City or Kabul. The cities are held by military forces. But there is deep penetration by the Taliban in rural areas. Not many people see that (Godges 2007, 14).

One military official from NATO, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, believes the concept of fighting for hearts and minds is misguided. Instead, the main goal should be to defeat the insurgency and build the capacity of the Afghan government, not to win hearts and minds. The local population will never be completely won over by foreign troops who are occupying their country (Personal interview 2007, 17 November). However, the challenge remains in the rural areas to hold ground after battles, as the British proved unable to do after a 2007 battle in Helmand province. The victory was so decisive that there was not one NATO casualty, but the resistance has since retaken the lost ground.

ISAF's has attempted to establish a presence in the provinces and rural areas through provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), which are civil-military units that seek to extend the reach of the government in the provinces by initiating development, reconstruction, and political collaboration with

provincial leaders. The influence of PRTs in the region was expected to extend outward over time, much like the spreading inkblot metaphor used in counter-insurgency theory. PRTs, which often numbered no more than 50 to 150 personnel, represented an effort to reach the provinces under tight resource and troop constraints. Critics dismissed PRTs early on as “an attempt to provide the ISAF effect on the cheap,” and for providing a false impression that they were a sufficient response to needs (Stapleton 2007). Former United Nations envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi said the expansion of ISAF through PRTs was “second best to a straightforward extension of ISAF, as we have been calling for ever since we arrived in Kabul at the end of 2001” (UNA-USA 2004). Though many of the twenty-five PRTs currently operational in Afghanistan have achieved measured success in their initiatives, the personnel working in PRTs and the resources at their disposal are too small to have more than a marginal impact on the larger challenges in Afghanistan.

Recommendation One: U.S. and NATO forces should seek to move out of the cities and establish a greater presence in rural areas, despite the significant logistical challenges.

Second, the issue of limited time and the presence of a tipping point in the minds of Afghans are crucial and do not sufficiently concern most NATO members. The primary concern of the NATO official interviewed is the prospect of the local population deciding that support of the present Afghan government and NATO countries is joining a losing side (Personal interview 2007, 13 December). Seth Jones, who has undertaken extensive travels to nearly all areas of Afghanistan since 2004, shares this concern:

In 2001, there was hope and expectation that the Afghan government, with international assistance, could make life better for Afghans, bring electricity where there was none, increase the flow of water to villages, provide essential services that the Taliban government did not do, increase the basic economic and health and other conditions in the country. My biggest fear is that the Afghan population will eventually give up on the government’s ability to provide these services. It’s already happened in some places (Godges 2007).

Indeed, the number of insurgent initiated attacks in Afghanistan rose by 400 percent from 2002 to 2006, with a six-fold increase observed from 2005 to 2006 (Human Rights Watch 2007). The Afghan government manages only 20 percent of foreign aid coming into Afghanistan with the rest

handled by NGOs and international agencies. An argument can be made that if the local government managed a larger portion of the development aid then they would increase their legitimacy as the primary political actors and receive more support. But regardless of who is controlling aid money, the actual volume of this aid coming into Afghanistan is low by historical standards. Spending during U.S. interventions in Bosnia was \$679 per capita, \$526 in Kosovo, and \$206 in Iraq. In Afghanistan, the figure is \$57 per capita and falls far below the minimum \$100 per capita formulation created by James Dobbins and other analysts at RAND in a comprehensive review of nation building efforts (Dobbins 2005).

Recommendation Two: Sufficient resources should be provided for development and assistance projects in the provinces so that villagers feel their lives are improving instead of remaining the same or getting worse.

Third, NATO does not have enough troops and too many troops come with caveats. Afghanistan has a population of thirty-two million people and the total security forces number 124,000 – including 70,000 Afghan personnel, 28,000 NATO personnel, and 26,000 U.S. personnel (Scott-Tyson 2008). This amounts to approximately .35 percent of the population. At 54,000 personnel, U.S. and NATO troop presence is approximately .17 percent of the population. Soviet troop presence peaked in 1983 at just over 100,000, not including the Afghan army, though some estimated at the time that it would take at least 400,000 troops to completely eliminate the resistance (Hammond 1984, 190). Troop levels in Afghanistan are low by Soviet comparisons, and even lower in comparison with other U.S.-led cases of nation building. In Iraq, the military presence per capita ratio was seven troops for every 1000 people. This ratio in Kosovo and Bosnia is twenty and nineteen, respectively. In a highly complex security environment proximate to the world's training field for violent Islamic extremism, it is not difficult to appreciate the challenge of producing a stable security environment with a ratio of 1.7 U.S. and NATO soldiers for every 1000 people. Moreover, NATO troops often come with operational caveats – there are eighty-six in total – that preclude them from taking certain actions and from being opportunistic in the field.

Dobbins proposes using a “gold standard” of 20 security personnel per 1000 inhabitants – 2 percent of the population – which would mean 620,000 troops in Afghanistan (Dobbins 2005). A minimum standard, where the security situation is relatively stable, could be set at 10 soldiers per 1000 inhabitants, which would still mean 310,000 troops for Af-

ghanistan and far above present standards. It is hard to imagine current political realities in NATO countries allowing for 600,000 or even 300,000 troops being deployed in Afghanistan, but this does not erase the need on the ground.

Recommendation Three: As the security situation stabilizes in Iraq, the U.S. should seek to move available fighting units, police advisors, and other military personnel to Afghanistan in order to bolster troop levels.

Fourth, U.S. and NATO forces face the same problem of being perceived as foreign occupiers as did soldiers in the Red Army. There is little comparison in terms of brutality of force and tragedy of consequence between the Soviet occupation and the current ISAF mission, but Afghans still bridle at the presence of even benevolent foreign forces. With the prospect of deploying into some of the more hostile regions, the Government of Afghanistan and NATO are presented with a difficult trade-off: attempt to increase security through a credible display of force but risk stretching the already low tolerance for the presence of foreign militaries. Pashtun tribes have taken up arms against foreign occupiers for centuries; however, they still need assurances of protection against reprisal attacks in order to be compelled to switch allegiances from the Taliban to the Government of Afghanistan.

Recommendation Four: To mitigate the problematic optics of foreign occupiers who are expanding deeper into the provinces, embed Afghan soldiers within NATO forces to create mixed units. This can serve as a force multiplier while also facilitating the training of the Afghan Army.

Fifth, the border region in the South and East with Pakistan still plays an important role by providing a safe haven for the resistance and a staging ground for supply and training purposes. The Soviet occupation and the millions of Afghans who took refuge in this region left a legacy where now these “United Taliban Emirates” are the “most defensible terrorist safe haven the world has ever seen” (Observer 2007). The National Intelligence Estimate concluded in July 2007 that the strategy for fighting al Qaeda across the Afghan border in Pakistan had largely failed, and that safe havens in Pakistan had allowed it to significantly strengthen in the past two years (National Intelligence Council 2007).

Given the inaccessibility of this territory and the political crisis in Pakistan, few good options currently exist to tackle this problem. Fortu-

nately, significant differences exist between the Taliban in Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Historically, Afghan mujahideen have taken money and arms from militants in Pakistan but only followed orders to the extent that interests aligned.

Recommendation Five: The Government of Afghanistan should attempt to strip away the Pashtun tribes from the Taliban support base through a credible national reconciliation program and an offer of amnesty, supported by the international community.

1988 and 2008: Favorable distinctions

The five factors described above all cast shadows on the prospects for a successful outcome of the present situation in Afghanistan. The applicability of these factors from the Soviet period to today is worrisome. However, there are several important distinctions between the Soviet and NATO contexts that provide some measured optimism for the future. Ethnic differences still remain important political factors, but the stakes are lower and differences more negotiable as they primarily concern the distribution of offices and externally provided resources. "Absent are the disputes over possession of great sources of wealth, such as oil, emotionally-charged sectarian conflicts, or ideological divisions reflected in radically divergent agendas for Afghanistan," notes Marvin Weinbaum. "The deep left-right cleavage that was so ruinous to the country from the 1960s through the 1980s is gone" (Weinbaum 2007, 29). Also, Afghanistan now has a constitution and the rudimentary foundations for holding democratic elections of a president and national *jirga*. Madrassas and the Diobandi religious network in Pakistan are financially backed, in part, by wealthy donors from Gulf Arab states such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. However, a major power with sizeable resources is not supporting the resistance, like the United States actively did against the Soviet Union.

The most committed members of the Taliban and other parts of the armed resistance will likely seek to wear out the patience of the United States and NATO, continuing to raise the costs of their presence and provide no sign of finishing the conflict. In a deteriorating security situation, the Taliban have less reason to accept a political deal of amnesty because it may believe it will eventually be able to retake the country. However, there are signs that some elements of the Taliban are tired of the fighting. After winning Afghanistan's first democratic presidential election in late 2004, Karzai extended amnesty to fighters and supporters of the Taliban movement so long as they accepted the new constitution, excluding about fifty to one hundred al Qaeda members and those who

have committed terrorism. “The rest are welcome to participate in the making of the country,” Karzai announced (Richburg 2004). The olive branch has largely been rejected, but recently the Afghan government announced a former Taliban commander in the strategically important Helmand province switched allegiances in exchange for being named the district’s top government official (Synovitz 2008). The event changed the tenor of Afghan politics, and the Government of Afghanistan is hoping more moderate Taliban members might turn as well.

As mentioned in recommendation five, NATO members will need to express support for a larger reconciliation program in order for this type of deal to be credible. This would be challenging for many NATO heads of state that believe this is tantamount to negotiating with the enemy. Prime Minister Gordon Brown assured the British Parliament that reconciliation negotiations would not include the senior Taliban leadership, though Karzai has admitted to meeting with a number of senior Taliban commanders to try to negotiate a mass defection (Starkey and Brown 2007). In any case, it appears there is a real prospect of more defections, and this could be quickened if additional security and development were provided in the provinces. This would improve Karzai’s negotiating position and achieve the kind of political solution that proved elusive in the final years of the Soviet occupation.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Life expectancy is approximately forty-two years for both men and women. Alliances have shifted during the decades of conflict. Authority is exercised and justice is exacted at the tribal level. Optimists predict it will take years, if not generations, to transform Afghanistan; pessimists say such changes are not possible. By the time the Soviets realized that only a political solution could end the conflict they had lost the ability to negotiate. The security situation in Afghanistan is currently deteriorating. Though the U.S. and NATO members may continue to win battles, they will not likely have the patience necessary to win the war militarily. The prospect of gracefully orchestrating a political solution between the armed resistance, Government of Afghanistan, and the international community is real. This effort has the greatest chance for success if the lessons from the Soviet experience and their corresponding recommendations are followed. At stake is the legitimacy of Karzai’s government, the credibility of the United States and NATO, and the wellbeing of millions of Afghans. The effort to bring an end to the conflict and set Afghanistan on a more positive trajectory must

be attempted with an eye toward history and a sober understanding of the consequences of failure.

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