

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Central Asia Series

06/29



**Phased Withdrawal, Conflict Resolution
and State Reconstruction**

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June 2006

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

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Abstract:

Coalition forces have now been operating in both Iraq and Afghanistan for the best part of three years, and a point in time has been reached at which possible withdrawal strategies inevitably begin to be discussed. In plotting such strategies, previous experience by other powers facing similar scenarios can offer clear lessons for the present. Perhaps surprisingly given the availability of new Russian memoir material, some excellent individual monographs, and a large variety of declassified documents, a full operational-political account of the Soviet Union's withdrawal strategy from Afghanistan has yet to be written. This article, utilizing openly published yet neglected sources, attempts to fill that gap.

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Introduction

The history of the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 has been the object of many studies in the past, but the vast majority of these studies have almost always focused either on the tactical or the grand strategic level.¹ This article will seek to study the closing stages of this war from an alternative angle, namely the operational-political level of war, whilst also advancing the idea that it was a previously neglected organization, the Operational Group (OG) of the Soviet Defence Ministry, which was most critical to the shaping and nature of planned Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since the planning of withdrawal was inevitably also shaped by the course of events that had gone before, the article begins by briefly summarizing the failure of Soviet-sponsored state centralization and counter-insurgency policies in Afghanistan between 1980 and 1985 before going on to detail the withdrawal policy itself.

The concept of planning withdrawal inevitably remains a topical one, given the present position of coalition forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Analysing and advising on the course of coalition policy-making in Afghanistan today has recently become something of a literary growth industry, with opinion almost completely divided on whether the prospects of future stability there remain positive or largely negative.² Whilst much of this present article inevitably remains a historical study given broader changes in the global political environment since 1991, there are inevitably lessons still to be learned from the Soviet experience at the operational level of war that remain applicable today. In 1985 after all, the Soviet Union faced dilemmas similar to present-day coalition forces', with the same ultimate regional objective - to leave behind a stable regime in Afghanistan, and to prevent the wider spread of fundamentalist Islamist terrorism throughout Central Asia.

This article contends that there are four broad general lessons to be drawn from the planning and execution of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. These are, in no particular order of importance - the operational virtue of having a clearly stated timetable; the importance of high-technology surveillance assets in *some* fields for those forces left behind; the vexed issue of interagency cooperation; and the need to better plan a shift from a 'war economy' to a 'peace economy'. Above all, the primary problems throughout this period were political and economic rather than military. Pro-government forces in Afghanistan in April 1992 still possessed astounding quantities of material military resources, including 930 tanks, 550 BMP-1s, 250 BRMDs, 1100 BTRs, over 1000 pieces of towed artillery, over 1000 mortars, and 30 Mig-23, 80 Su-17 Su-20 and Su-22 and 80 Mig-21 aircraft, amongst many others.³ President Najibullah was not brought down by the military threat presented by the *mujahidin*, but by divisions within his own government fed by the loss of Soviet

financial support, and by the implications of the very National Reconciliation Policy that was intended to resolve the conflict and ensure his own survival.

Shaping Factors behind Soviet Withdrawal, 1979-84

The reasons for the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, although still contested by some in the literature, are today reasonably well known, and will not be reiterated here.⁴ To fully understand the complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan itself however, it is necessary first of all to move beyond Western stereotypes of the PDPA government in Afghanistan as a 'puppet' or 'proxy' regime manipulated entirely by the Soviet government. Such explanations, popular at the time and even since, serve to cloud rather than illuminate our understanding of events in Afghanistan both before and since 1992, where much of the conflict arose through genuine differences between indigenous technocrats and Islamists.⁵ Indeed, a continual frustration for the Soviet command in Afghanistan was the inability or unwillingness of the indigenous Afghan communist government to unify and correlate their political efforts with the military assistance provided by the Soviet Union. Recruitment drives to increase the membership of the PDPA were largely ineffective, and military offensives to clear insurgents from selected areas were not sufficiently followed through by efforts from the PDPA to increase their political presence in the rural areas.⁶

Rather than attempt to make deals with local power brokers, the PDPA, whenever it did attempt to expand its influence in the countryside, imported naïve and often arrogant party workers from the cities instead, whose presence was often temporary, and who only alienated the local inhabitants from the central regime yet further. Even a relatively lavish Soviet aid programme was apparently squandered in many instances. Marshal Sokolov would later complain that in 1981 alone the Soviet Union had provided Kabul with 100 million roubles worth of free economic aid, but that 'it all stayed with the elite. In the villages there is no kerosene, [there are] no matches, nothing.'⁷ The only non-party organization specifically set up to draw the Afghan people together into a 'united front', create pro-government militias, and isolate the *mujahidin* in the countryside, the *Jebhe-yi Melli-yi Paderwatan* (National Front for the Fatherland), performed well amongst Uzbeks in the north of the country but had more mixed results nationwide, and was practically defunct after 1987.⁸ The problem of concerted and increasing external support to the *mujahidin* (from Pakistan, America, Iran and Saudi Arabia, amongst others) in the form of arms, money, and territorial safe havens, also presented significant obstacles to the conduct of a conventional counter-insurgency (COIN) effort. The failure of the PDPA to consolidate their grip in the countryside was further reflected in the ever-spiralling numbers of insurgents; if in 1981-83 alone some 45,000 *mujahidin* undertook active combat operations in the field against the Kabul regime, then by 1986 this figure had grown to 150,000.⁹

Continuing such a failed strategy was clearly unsustainable; in October 1985 USSR President Gorbachev summoned PDPA leader Babrak Karmal to Moscow and outlined to him a major change in Soviet official policy. The Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces (LCOSF) was to be withdrawn as soon as possible, and the Kabul regime would have to alter its domestic policies accordingly, including moves towards the encouragement of private trade, and greater reconciliatory measures towards tribal elders and clergy. Karmal's apparent inability to implement this task led to his enforced retirement and replacement in May 1986 by Najibullah, the KGB-groomed former head of KhAD, the Afghan security service. It was Najibullah who in 1987 then presided over the introduction of the National Reconciliation Policy, a strategy designed to open negotiations with opposition figures and create a

more pluralistic coalition government. The National Reconciliation Policy itself was founded upon four basic principles: the immediate cessation of hostilities, the meeting of local leaders from all sides at a round table, the creation of a transition government, and the holding by this transitional authority of free general elections.¹⁰

Planning withdrawal: the Soviet Operational Group and the operational and political implications of organized withdrawal

The job of securing a stable Afghanistan in the wake of a Soviet withdrawal became the personal mission of the Operational Group (OG) of the Soviet Ministry of Defence. The Soviet Union had deployed OGs periodically in Afghanistan ever since 1979, with the first, led by General S. F. Akhromeev, having arrived on 23rd December 1979, four days before the toppling of Amin. However the regular visitations of the OG headed by Deputy Defence Minister S. L. Sokolov and later by the First Deputy Chief of the General Staff V. I. Varennikov were to assume particular importance. Sokolov's group first visited the country between December 1979 and November 1980, and following Sokolov's promotion to the post of Defence Minister at the end of 1984, Varennikov took charge of the OG during its periodic visits to Afghanistan. These trips typically lasted between one and a half to six months, but on the 2nd January 1987 Varennikov's OG arrived in Kabul and stayed there until the 14th February 1989, effectively conducting just over two years of continuous military-political activity in the country. The role of the OG in Afghanistan was not to guide the military campaign itself so much as to provide operational oversight at the combined military, political and grand strategic level; to unify the actions of the various agencies engaged in the conflict as far as possible, and to provide a coordinating function at the political level between the PDPA and the Soviet leadership in Moscow. The OG also played a major role in pursuing ceasefires with, and encouraging defections from, the *mujahidin*. In September 1987 for example Varennikov met personally with Batyr, a *mujahid* leader in the Herat region, in a meeting that produced a local ceasefire.¹¹ This complemented the overall intended effect of the later National Reconciliation Policy initiated by Najibullah's government.

The National Reconciliation Policy itself represented a dramatic shift in official state policy, not only in terms of the COIN effort but also in terms of the whole state-building process. Having in effect tried and failed for nearly five years to consolidate a strongly centralized state with a socialist-style economy, the Kabul government was now gambling upon the viability of a radically decentralized state, founded upon multiple contracts between central government and individual regional actors, with relative local autonomy guaranteed in return for local ceasefires. Ethnic minorities in Afghanistan, already courted by the PDPA when they first came to power, benefited dramatically from this process. For the first time in Afghan history, the Shi'ite *ulema* had already been given official state recognition, with a Shi'ite of Hazara ethnicity, S. A. Kishtmand, having been appointed Prime Minister in Kabul between 1981 and 1988. Kishtmand in December 1986 had also personally helped to establish a Hazara regiment, the 520th infantry, which fought for the government cause.¹² This new degree of ethnic freedom for the Hazara tribe was also reflected in the establishment of the first independent publication, *Gharjistan*, in Hazara history, and the creation in 1987 of the first ever *jirga* (representative council) of the Hazara people.¹³ The Uzbeks of northern Afghanistan became another prominent beneficiary of this new reallocation of power, with the Jauzjani Uzbek militia of Abdul Rashid Dostum numbering 40,000 armed men by 1991. These Uzbek forces proved themselves to be fierce fighters for the regime and, officially re-labelled the

53rd Division by the time of the Soviet withdrawal, they came to answer directly to Najibullah, bypassing the central Ministry of Defence. Forming the regime's sole mobile reserve after 1989, they emerged, in the assessment of one analyst, as 'the only formation capable of aggressive offensive operations'.¹⁴

During the period of the continued Soviet presence before 1989 however, the National Reconciliation Policy itself bore disappointing results; in May 1987 Varennikov lamented to the Politburo that '[t]he policy of national reconciliation is dying out. [...] There are tendencies toward stagnation... [and more] could have been done in five months.'¹⁵ A year later, having again clashed with Najibullah over the policy, he continued to lament that '...a constant striving to solve all problems by military means is leading to a repetition of the mistakes of the past - to an aggravation, and not a rapprochement of the sides.'¹⁶ As Gilles Dorronsoro has adeptly pointed out, the full implications of the National Reconciliation Policy would only become apparent during the events that unfolded *after* February 1989.¹⁷

Varennikov himself played an important personal role in overall Soviet preparations for a withdrawal from Afghanistan, not least because his views on the Afghan situation differed markedly from those of his predecessor (and now direct superior) Sokolov. Whereas Sokolov's reports as head of the OG in Afghanistan had been aimed primarily at soothing Defence Minister Ustinov and portraying total military victory as within sight, Varennikov from a relatively early stage became a firm advocate of finding a political solution to the Afghan conflict. For this very reason, he fully supported promoting Najibullah to a position from which he could then catalyse real change in the local situation.¹⁸ According to his own account, Varennikov had begun to come to the conclusion that only political methods would facilitate further progress in the Afghan conflict towards the end of 1984, at a time when he was committed to helping implement the creation of an Afghan border guard service. The concluding stages of the Kunar valley operation in 1985 then led to Varennikov reaching a good will pact with local village elders, an experience that persuaded him that only such measures, practised on a much broader scale, would ultimately bring an end to hostilities nationwide. Varennikov later aptly compared the political naïveté of the PDPA in regard to the Afghan countryside with the excesses of the party workers who had conducted collectivization drives in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁹ During the whole course of 1985, the recommendation that only an altered political approach would lead to an improvement of affairs in Afghanistan then became a constant theme of the reports from Varennikov's OG.

This marked the first steps towards formulating a definite withdrawal strategy undertaken since Andropov's death. By October this feedback led directly to Gorbachev summoning Karmal on his fateful trip to Moscow. The notion sometimes still propounded therefore that, on coming to power in March 1985, Gorbachev had to immediately set about 'pressing the reluctant Soviet military, KGB and Kabul regime to end the Soviet Army involvement' now appears to be a dramatic oversimplification in this context.²⁰ The need for greater political measures in Afghanistan within the context of an organized withdrawal was already a theme of the OG's reports when Gorbachev was still finding his feet in office. The personal attitude of the General Secretary himself meanwhile was also characteristically dithering - as late as April 1986 he expressed worry that too rapid a withdrawal would harm relations with the Soviet Union's other allies in the Third World.²¹ Only in November that year would Gorbachev himself ultimately take a firmer line on the need for withdrawal.²²

The OG played a further significant part in increasing the military proficiency and combat effectiveness of the Afghan armed forces prior to the Soviet withdrawal. Raising the capability of the Afghan army involved reducing the term a conscript was expected to serve, increasing pay and other incentives, and improving general training and preparedness. Issues of command and control were also critical in a state where the Defence, Interior and Security ministries each employed their own sizeable and independent armed forces. In 1987 the OG oversaw the creation of a Higher Command Staff in the DRA. This new body was intended to effectively unify a range of functions previously carried out independently and inefficiently by the three security ministries. Najibullah himself headed this Higher Command Staff, and meetings of the staff occurred daily from 8.00 a.m. onwards, with the heads of all the various ministries and Soviet representatives from the OG taking part.²³

Improvements in the quality and efficiency of the Afghan armed forces meanwhile were already visible from as early as 1986. That year saw the extensive and well-defended *mujahidin* cave complex of Zhawar near the border with Pakistan seized through a combination of commando troops in action on the ground itself and laser-guided bomb strikes from Su-25 ground attack aircraft into the cave mouths. This particular operation was notable at the time in that it was conducted on the ground almost entirely by the Afghan armed forces, with the assistance of a single Soviet Air Assault regiment.²⁴ A critical testing ground for the 'new' Afghan army, this operation was overseen and directed, at Karmal's personal request, by Varennikov himself, at no small personal risk. Varennikov's own concern throughout was to ensure that the Afghan armed forces performed as much of the operation as they could for themselves, so as to gradually inculcate less reliance on Soviet support.

As moves to withdraw the LCOSF from Afghanistan gathered pace, measures correspondingly accelerated to increase Afghan army capability yet further, including the setting-up of rocket forces, a branch of the armed services that had hitherto never existed in Afghanistan. Soviet troop withdrawal also had to be phased, with careful consideration of what territory the Afghan army could reasonably expect to hold on its own - in practice this involved the re-concentration of Afghan forces around selected areas such as Barikot, Panjsher and Badakhshan, and the heavy reinforcement by Afghan troops of absolutely critical positions - such as Kandahar and Jalalabad - prior to the Soviet withdrawal from those same points. Varennikov himself felt that scattering the Afghan armed forces across the whole country was senseless, and a recipe for disaster - what was essential was the retention of several key provinces and two-three critical highways. This bold decision bore perhaps its strangest consequences for the Afghan border guard service - they were no longer tasked with guarding what had long proven to be a porous and difficult frontier, but were instead withdrawn and re-tasked with purely internal security duties. This reflected the fact that by this stage regime survival rather than the protection of full national sovereignty was seen as the most critical concern. It was anticipated that additional security duties outside the immediate security zone established around Kabul itself would be undertaken by pro-government militias formed under the new National Reconciliation Policy.²⁵

When Soviet troops finally did withdraw, newly installed SCUD missile systems became a critical strategic asset for the Kabul regime to conduct its ongoing war with the *mujahidin*. Between October 1988 and February 1992, over 2,000 SCUD missiles were fired in Afghanistan, the single greatest concentration of ballistic missiles launched in anger since the Second World War. The largest concentration of launches occurred during May and July 1989, just a few months after the

withdrawal of the LCOSF, whilst the launch of 6 to 8 SCUDs in a single day was not uncommon.²⁶ The overall amount of military material left to the Afghan armed forces upon the Soviet withdrawal meanwhile comprised some 85,000 tons of ammunition, fuel and other supplies, as well as material transferred from the departing 40th Army that included 990 armoured vehicles, 3,000 automobiles, 142 artillery pieces and 14,443 infantry weapons. Though corruption and inefficiency led to some of this material being lost *en route* to the 12 key garrisons it was dispersed to as the LCOSF withdrew, it nonetheless created a solid reserve for the Afghan army to draw upon.²⁷

Despite these measures, the engineering of the final two-stage withdrawal that then occurred in 1988-89 still proved complicated, not least since the Kabul regime made a number of attempts to delay or impede the departure of the LCOSF.²⁸ A new OG was now attached to the Kabul government to take over the tasks performed by Varennikov's group and the leadership of this new taskforce was assigned to Army General M. A. Gareev, a man who, like Varennikov before him, was a veteran of the Second World War with a reputation as one of the leading military intellectuals in the Soviet army. Expectations on all sides were initially low; Gareev later recalled that few within the Defence Ministry at the time demonstrated any enthusiasm about remaining involved in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the LCOSF, whilst within the Afghan army two military helicopters along with thousands of Afghan infantry defected to the *mujahidin* cause in February 1989 alone.²⁹ American intelligence experts for their part anticipated that the Kabul regime might collapse before the Soviet withdrawal was even completed.³⁰ Nonetheless, against all expectations, both in the Soviet Union and in the West, the Afghan army then rallied and gained a series of significant defensive victories, notably at Jalalabad, during the course of 1989. Between 1989 and 1992 in fact the Afghan army represented an enigma; its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the manner in which it became increasingly 'tribalized' under the National Reconciliation Policy, whilst still retaining modern military skills, would subsequently shape the whole future of Afghanistan. For a wide variety of reasons therefore, not least their pertinence to engineered withdrawal from similar scenarios today, the military-political sequence of events after February 1989 have for a long time demanded much closer scrutiny than they have traditionally received.

The ultimate failure of decentralization and the reconciliation process

Immediately following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the overall size of the Afghan armed forces stood at 329,000 men, 1,568 tanks, 828 armoured personnel carriers, over 4,880 artillery pieces of varying calibre, 126 combat aircraft and 14 military helicopters.³¹ These outwardly impressive figures however masked persistent and dangerous underlying weaknesses. Morale was poor, and the army was near-crippled by desertion; during 11 months in 1989 alone the army lost some 67,000 personnel, of whom just 5,033 were killed but 38,600 deserted. Desertion rates not only rendered active units critically understrength and created a stark shortage of reserves, they also led to a dramatic shortage of technical expertise. A staggering 30-50% of Afghan military equipment was regularly out of action due to lack of spare parts and unfinished repairs, whilst Afghan military book-keeping was riddled with corruption and inefficiency. With the withdrawal of the LCOSF, the Afghan armed forces also lacked critical intelligence assets, particularly in terms of aerial reconnaissance, and units on the ground were reduced to gaining tactical intelligence through the employment of binoculars and surveying compasses. This intelligence shortfall led in turn to excessive reliance upon the blanket use of air and artillery strikes, entailing a correspondingly profligate expenditure of ammunition. Gareev reported that between February and December of 1989 alone

some 51,012 tons of ammunition were delivered to Kabul, but that this figure was only just enough to meet existing needs, since the artillery batteries around Kabul alone expended an average of 800-1,000 shells daily against insurgent targets.³² Despite these weaknesses, Afghan officers had become notably more confident about the capabilities of their own armed forces, whilst instances of the *mujahidin* massacring captured Afghan soldiers, as occurred for example at Kunduz and Torkham in 1988, increased the will to fight amongst other Afghan formations.³³

It was this Afghan army, despite all its internal weaknesses, that comprehensively defeated a *mujahidin* offensive in the battle of Jalalabad. In March 1989 a force of around 10,000 *mujahidin* under Pakistani ISI guidance gathered outside this southern Afghan town and, aided by pre-arranged defections from the Afghan 11th infantry division, mounted a prolonged ground assault with the aim of seizing the town itself, creating an alternative governmental capital, and opening the road to Kabul. The town garrison mounted a stubborn defence however, and enjoyed effective close air support from Kabul, with 100-120 overflights a daily average. *Mujahidin* forward positions were bombarded by heavy SCUD missiles as well as by more precise aircraft-delivered cluster bomb munitions, and by April the *mujahidin* themselves were running low on ammunition. Between the very end of April and the 2nd May, General Gareev personally visited the town and helped direct and rally the defence. By mid-May *mujahidin* pressure had slackened considerably, and it became evident that they had suffered a severe battlefield defeat, incurring perhaps as many as 3,000 casualties. Afghan army morale soared accordingly, whilst the regime had now successfully survived the first months of full autonomy that had earlier been identified as the single most critical period by both Kabul and Moscow.³⁴

The first clear evidence that the Afghan army could also fight effectively in an offensive came the following year, in an operation in April 1990 to seize the fortified position of Paghman some 8-10 km north-west of Kabul itself. Occupied by the *mujahidin* since February 1985, Paghman had been converted into, by Afghan standards, a formidable defensive position, which the *mujahidin* used as a supply and gathering point from which to launch attacks on Kabul. A network of some 25 underground ammunition storehouses, alongside overground concrete bunkers and observation points, connected by tunnels and trenches, and arranged to a depth of some 10-15 km, rendered Paghman a formidable nut to crack. Some 3,500 *mujahidin* operated in the area, and they possessed an impressive array of armaments, including field artillery, rockets and Milan anti-tank missiles.³⁵ Nonetheless the Afghan armed forces between the 10th April and 10th May 1990 steadily seized the approaches to Paghman and then, between 10th May and 26th June, mounted attacks on the fortified main complex itself. The 53rd Division of General Dostum led the critical second stage of this fight, in which tanks supported dismounted infantry in a direct assault upon concrete strong points and trenches. Aerial reconnaissance was improvised using the AN-30 aircraft with artillery spotter teams on board to direct and correct the heavy bombardments that occurred during the battle. Some 3,300 aerial bombs and 66,000 shells had been expended by the time Paghman finally fell to government forces in June. Casualties on the government side appeared to justify such expenditure however, with 51 dead and 330 wounded in exchange for an estimated 440 *mujahidin* dead and 1,000 wounded.

By the end of 1990 therefore, the Afghan army had demonstrated that the work of Soviet advisers over the course of previous years had produced a real, though still-fragile local achievement; despite numerous continuing imperfections, this was an

army now capable of mounting independent defensive and offensive operations, and it was able to soundly defeat the *mujahidin* on a number of occasions. The reasons why Najibullah then faced a political crisis in 1992 that led to the fall of his own government were not related to the military balance of power, but were rather due to social, political and economic conditions in the country.

In political terms, the first shadow on the landscape fell in the form of the rebellion of Defence Minister Tanai, a key actor in the Kabul government, in early 1990. Tanai was alienated from Najibullah both because his fellow Khalq party members were rapidly losing power and influence at the time, and because the National Reconciliation Policy itself implied a 'tribalization' of the conflict that offended his professional military ethic.³⁶ Entering into secret talks with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Tanai launched a coup bid against the Kabul government on 6th March 1990 that came close to killing Najibullah himself.³⁷ The subsequent repression of the disaffected army elements loyal to Tanai compelled the Kabul government to mount rocket attacks on its own airfields, seriously damaging 46 aircraft in the process, of which only 34 were subsequently repaired.³⁸ Tanai fled to Pakistan, leaving behind him a regime considerably shaken. The greatest long-term damage from this turn of events however came from the fact that it led Najibullah to abolish the Defence Council and effectively abandon the structure of the Higher Command Staff. Najibullah's propensity for entrusting positions of responsibility and decision-making to his own narrow personal cabal, always a feature of his personality which Soviet advisers had sought to combat, became practically a pathological instinct following the failed coup bid.³⁹

The economic situation in the country also soon came to undermine the achievements of Najibullah's regime. The economy was already in near-terminal decline at the time of the Soviet withdrawal, with natural gas exports declining after 1984 and the gas wells themselves capped in 1989. Kabul was compelled to print money to try to meet its needs, leading to a spectacular increase in the amount of paper money in circulation - from 112.5 to 222.7 billions of Afghanis between 1988 and 1990. Already by 1988 state borrowing from the Central Bank financed 43% of all expenditures.⁴⁰ The heavy burden of inflation was compounded in 1991 when the Soviet Union could no longer meet its annual commitment to supply 230,000 tons of food, at the same time as domestic Afghan wheat production suffered from a particularly high deficit for that year, amounting to 450,000 tons. Najibullah spoke of an 'ugly economic crisis', in which food prices had shot up, and the dollar was now trading in the black market at about twenty times the official rate.⁴¹ An identical crisis in the provision of fuel had a direct impact on the combat capability of the Afghan armed forces, and by January 1992 the Afghan air force, so vital in previous battles like Jalalabad, was grounded due to lack of fuel.⁴² The events following the August 1991 coup bid in Moscow led not only to the unravelling of the Soviet Union, but to Yeltsin's new foreign policy team announcing the ending of direct financial and material support to Najibullah. Desertions within the Afghan armed forces, by now racked both by food shortages and declining logistical support, and with wages months in arrears in many units, rose dramatically by 60% in 1991 by comparison with the previous year.⁴³

These economic and social problems were further compounded by the growing strength of the pro-government militias, which had become the main beneficiaries of the National Reconciliation Policy both immediately before but especially after the Soviet withdrawal. During Gareev's term in office in 1989-90, over three-quarters of the forces guarding Herat and Shindand in the north were already tribal militias rather than regular troops.⁴⁴ The growing influence of the militias was reflected in their increasing demands for sophisticated weaponry, including tanks, armoured

personnel carriers, rocket batteries and heavy guns, demands that the government felt increasingly compelled to satisfy.⁴⁵ Militias also increasingly became a law unto themselves, engaging in narcotrafficking, highway robbery, rape, looting, and fratricidal conflict. During the period of increasing economic decline in the country after 1989, the capacity of these individual militias to become kingmakers naturally increased, and in early 1992 this latent threat was ultimately realized when the alliance of General Dostum with Ahmad Shah Massoud led to the fall of the Kabul government.

Conclusions

As one or two studies have already noted, the Soviet approach to planned withdrawal from Afghanistan between 1985 and 1989 contains a number of lessons for international actors attempting to perform similar tasks today, some of them positive, some of them negative.⁴⁶ The Soviet attempt to reconstruct and stabilize Afghanistan was permanently dogged by a perceived lack of international legitimacy, and by a non-benign regional security environment in which China, Iran, Pakistan and the United States conspired to varying degrees to undermine the whole Soviet effort.⁴⁷ Nonetheless despite the public prominence of the *mujahidin*, the main problems that the Soviet Union faced in Afghanistan were primarily political and economic rather than military. Phased withdrawal in this context represented an operational strength rather than a sign of weakness, since waiting upon wider regional security guarantees was clearly unsustainable. The formulation and careful execution of a timetabled withdrawal allowed the Soviet Union to put in place a clearly regulated series of measures that prevented Afghanistan descending into immediate anarchy upon their withdrawal. The success of such measures also gave the Kabul government itself a vital breathing space, often neglected in the literature, in which it proved that, with sufficient external support, it could adequately fight its own battles, at least in the military sense. A phased withdrawal plan also gave an essential tool of leverage for the Soviet leadership to deal with the still very recalcitrant leadership of the PDPA, a tool noticeably lacking in Iraq and Afghanistan today. Current operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan would positively benefit, not suffer, from a similar level of clarity and openness at both the national and international level.

In terms of military lessons, the campaign underlines the viability of using conventional military equipment which may appear outdated by European standards when stabilizing third-world states. What was important from the point of view of the Afghan army, as Stephen Blank has pointed out, was not its *absolute* efficiency but its *relative* superiority over its most likely opponents.⁴⁸ Excessive media attention upon the 'revolution in military affairs' has distracted attention from the fact that this extremely expensive technology is neither essential nor necessarily even desirable for stabilization operations in the former 'Third World'. In terms of training local forces, equipment and technology needs to be appropriate for the local tactical environment, not for the still-theoretical cyber-warfare of the future. Reported recent talks to re-equip the Afghan army with £215 million worth of Soviet-era military equipment from Russia reflect the fact that these lessons may have been well learned.⁴⁹ However the closing stages of the campaign also demonstrated that air-to-ground strike assets form significant 'force-multipliers' for the regime left behind in such scenarios, requiring the careful re-tailoring of older generation fighting platforms in some areas. Modern intelligence assets are particularly important in counter-insurgency scenarios; therefore, despite the sensitivity surrounding their handover, the militaries expected to maintain stability in the wake of foreign withdrawal have to be provided and trained with all such

means, up to and including UAVs, if they are to take the war to the enemy. This area was one of the major weaknesses faced by the Afghan Army after 1989. Stabilization operations also remain expensive, even where a direct military presence no longer exists; Soviet aid to the Najibullah government was calculated by western observers in 1990 to amount to between two to six billion dollars annually.⁵⁰

It is in the political and economic regions of planning withdrawal that the Soviet experience provides deeper lessons however, forming as it does a classic example of the dilemmas surrounding longer-term sustainability in post-intervention scenarios. Providing the Afghan army with a decade's worth of military equipment in almost one shipment, as is now tentatively apparently being proposed, risks repeating the Soviet pattern of almost excessive military support without parallel developments along other lines of activity, with recurring risks if the transition from a war economy to a peace economy subsequently breaks down. In the earlier period, 1990 in this sense was a critical year of missed opportunities as well as significant gains.⁵¹ Tanai's coup bid deterred Najibullah from continuing to fully utilize the structure of the Higher Command Staff that his Soviet advisers had left him, reverting instead to the older methods of juggling positions and influence, a game he was destined ultimately to lose. At the same time, the attempt in May 1990 to build a more authoritative coalition government largely failed, due to the refusal of significant local players to participate in the reconciliation policy. The failure of the National Reconciliation Policy as a whole to bring about all the results anticipated, and the catastrophic loss of the state monopoly of force through the increasing employment of mercenary tribal militias as a conflict resolution tool, continues to merit attention even now. Afghan officials of long experience today rightly fear any proposed re-creation of rapid-reaction 'special units' as an attempted answer to Afghan internal security problems.⁵² Although Iraq is in many ways a very different society from Afghanistan, the need to normalize state relationships with rogue militias when contemplating withdrawal also forms a common denominator. Moving from a 'war economy' to a 'peace economy' in general also forms one of the greatest hurdles to managing withdrawal for intervention forces around the world today, and leaving 'the market' to sort it out clearly remains an inadequate solution.⁵³

The proposed solution to the militia problem that presently exists in Iraq revolves around the incorporation of existing militias into the Iraqi Civil Defence Force (ICDF); the command and control of these militias by the central government depends upon the same delicate patterns of economic stability and personal contact that earlier proved so treacherous in Afghanistan. Given the severe economic challenges still facing the Iraqi economy, with state debt officially standing at \$200 billion, general economic prosperity dangerously dependent upon a single resource, and an IMF-led cutback of Iraqi government subsidies on petroleum products and food rationing, the potential pitfalls of the economic-militia matrix are obvious. Though the American authorities themselves have expressed concern over the use of militias and the level of autonomy they presently enjoy, the now-independent Iraqi government has proven noticeably more open to the employment of such forces. In groups such as the Shi'a-affiliated 'Wolf Brigade', now much-feared in Iraq today, the Iraqi government clearly sees a mobile and well-motivated reserve equivalent to Dostum's 53rd Division in Afghanistan, a hardly heartening prior example.⁵⁴ In the case of contemporary Afghanistan meanwhile, President Karzai has since early 2005 engaged on his own tentative 'Reconciliation Policy' with former Taliban, with results that are at present just as mixed and unclear as when Najibullah first began his campaign.⁵⁵ Horizontal rather than vertical bonds of loyalty continue to predominate in both modern-day Iraq and Afghanistan, and continue to possess the potential to ultimately destabilize the state itself.

A final lesson of the Soviet withdrawal strategy lies at the operational level of war. Here the role of military and political advisers on the ground is absolutely critical. The Soviet OG in Afghanistan performed a roughly comparable role to that of the American CORDS teams in Vietnam and the later US Military Support Group (MSG) in Panama in 1989-90, and they exhibited similar strengths and weaknesses.⁵⁶ Though effective enough in planning bases, constructing strong points, and overseeing the necessary phasing of operations, they were inadequate tools for managing interagency conflict which blighted (and blights) reconstruction and reconciliation efforts in many of these theatres. Afghanistan in many senses became a proxy battleground for Soviet security ministries to continue their domestic bureaucratic conflicts. Gareev later spoke bitterly about meetings within the Higher Command Staff where Soviet representatives failed to agree even amongst themselves on a definite policy line before then engaging with their Afghan partners; Varennikov also found himself engaged at times in stormy arguments with KGB representatives during his own service in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ One of the last official Soviet reports on the Afghan situation, written in July 1991, noted that policy towards that country continued to suffer from a lack of unanimity amongst the representatives of the various Soviet agencies towards these issues, and in its conclusions it highlighted the need for the creation of a cross-agency committee on the problem that would be directly answerable to the President.⁵⁸ Similar conclusions in a different context were made retrospectively over the performance of the American MSG in Panama in 1989-90.⁵⁹ The presence today in Baghdad of what is reportedly the largest overseas station in CIA history, working side by side with what is still even now a large conventional military force, presents similar dramatic challenges in terms of interagency cooperation and achieving truly holistic solutions, whilst the present preference for the widespread use of NGOs in many governmental functions may actually complicate and exacerbate these problems yet further.⁶⁰ Though the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan occurred very much under the conditions of the late Cold War therefore, many of the issues it raises retain relevance when contemplating disengagement by intervention forces in the Greater Middle East even today.

Endnotes

¹ On the grand strategic level see in particular: Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), Rizwan Hussain, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan*. (England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2005), Diego Cordovez & Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan. The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995) and Riaz M. Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal*. (Durham N. C.: Duke University Press 1991). Both Soviet and *mujahidin* tactics in the war have also been well covered in the past, see for example: Lester W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain. Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*. (London: Frank Cass 1998) and Grau & Ali Ahmad Jalali, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahedin Tactics in the Soviet Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: US Marine Corps, Studies & Analysis Division 1995) The nearest thing to a consistently operationally-focused history of the war is Mark Urban's *War in Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan Press 1990).

² For generally positive assessments of the present policy in Afghanistan, but suggesting further possible adjustments, see: Raymond A. Millen, *Afghanistan: Reconstituting a Collapsed State* (US Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute 2005), Sean M. Maloney 'Afghanistan Four Years On: An Assessment' *Parameters* (Autumn 2005) pp.21-32. For more negative assessments, see: Kathy Gannon, 'Afghanistan Unbound' *Foreign Affairs* 83 (May/June 2004) pp.34-46, Seth G. Jones, 'Averting Failure in Afghanistan' *Survival* 48 (1, 2006) pp.111-127 and Chris Johnson & Jolyon Leslie, *Afghanistan. The Mirage of Peace* (London/New York: Zed Books 2004).

- ³ Alesandr Kniazev, *Afganskii krizis i bezopastnost' Tsentralnoi Azii (XIX-nachalo XXIV.)* (Dushanbe: Donish 2004) p.105.
- ⁴ For the key primary source documents on the decision, see: Odd Arne Westad (ed.), 'Concerning the situation in 'A' : New Russian evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8/9 (1996): 128-184.
- ⁵ The points iterated here have only now begun to be objectively assessed in the West - see for example the populist work of Ralph H. Magnus & Eden Naby, *Afghanistan. Mullah, Marx and Mujahid* (USA: Westview Press 2002) pp.104-6 for a brief discussion of the issues, and for a more comprehensive approach, F. Halliday & Z. Tanin, 'The Communist Regime in Afghanistan 1978-1992: Institutions and Conflicts.' *Europe-Asia Studies* 50 (8, 1998) pp.1357-1380.
- ⁶ On recruitment drives during Karmal's reign, see: Halliday & Tanin, 'The Communist Regime in Afghanistan' p.1363.
- ⁷ Christain F. Ostermann (ed.), 'Gorbachev and Afghanistan' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 Winter-Spring (2003/04): 145.
- ⁸ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending. Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Company 2005) pp.182-7, A. Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan 1978 1992* (London: Hurst & Company 2000) pp.142-6.
- ⁹ Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i doblest' Afgana* (Iaroslavl': "Nord" 2004) p.496.
- ¹⁰ V. I. Varennikov, *Nepovtorimoe* 5 Chast' VII (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel' 2001) p.62.
- ¹¹ Evgenii Nikitenko, *Afganistan. Ot voiny 80-kh do prognoza novykh vojn.* (Moscow: AST-Astrel 2004) p.228.
- ¹² Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending.* 197.
- ¹³ Hussain, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan* p.146 and S. A. Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan. An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study* (London: Curzon Press 1998) pp.176-7. The long-term results of this policy can be seen even today: <http://www.gharjistani.com/NewTrends.php> accessed 25/09/05.
- ¹⁴ Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan. State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Yale: Yale University Press 2002) p.160, and A. Davis, 'The Afghan Army' *Jane's Intelligence Review* March (1993) p.136.
- ¹⁵ Ostermann (ed.) 'Gorbachev and Afghanistan' 148.
- ¹⁶ Christian F. Ostermann (ed.), 'More East-Bloc Sources on Afghanistan' *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 Winter-Spring (2003/04) p.262.
- ¹⁷ Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending* p.196.
- ¹⁸ Varennikov, *Nepovtorimoe* pp. 60-2, 141-2, 160-2.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-6, 200.
- ²⁰ The quote is directly from Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, p.xvi.
- ²¹ Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i doblest' Afgana* p. 523.
- ²² The text of the now-famous Politburo session of November 1986 can be found in: P. Allan (ed.), *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg* (Zurich: vdf Hochschulverlag AG an der ETH 1995) pp.434-50. This November 1986 session is still traditionally seen as the starting point of organized withdrawal measures from Afghanistan in much of the general literature.
- ²³ Nikitenko, *Afganistan* pp.217-22.
- ²⁴ Urban, *War in Afghanistan* pp.191-2.
- ²⁵ Varennikov, *Nepovtorimoe* pp.363-5.
- ²⁶ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. 'Ballistic Missiles in the Third World-Afghanistan 1979-1992' *Jane's Intelligence Review* February (1992) p.51.
- ²⁷ M. Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada (s Sovetskimi voiskami i bez nikh)* (Moscow: "Insan" 1999) p.75. On supplies provided to the Kabul regime after February 1989 see also the documents in: P. Allan (ed.), *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg* 526-544 and Isby, 'Soviet Arms Deliveries and Aid to Afghanistan 1989-91' *Jane's Intelligence Review* August (1991) pp. 348-54.
- ²⁸ One of the conditions that Najibullah attempted to impose before the final withdrawal of the LCOSF was that Ahmad Shah Massoud should first be eliminated. Varennikov refused to attempt this, urging instead (without success) that Massoud should be negotiated with and offered a share of power. Varennikov advocated a political approach on the grounds that: 'In the future Ahmad Shah might grow into an important political figure with whom the Soviet Union, in all probability, will have to cooperate, and it would be to our advantage to have him as an ally and not an enemy.' Ostermann (ed.) 'More East-Bloc Sources on

- Afghanistan' p.264. Following the Soviet withdrawal Najibullah then tried but failed to lure Massoud into government: Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*. p.156.
- ²⁹ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* pp. 78, 90.
- ³⁰ Hussain, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic militancy* p.144.
- ³¹ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* p.163.
- ³² For these and other notes by Gareev on Afghan army capability, see *Ibid.*, 169-77.
- ³³ Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839 to the Present. Battles in a Hostile Land* (UK: Brassey's 2002) p.187, Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention* p.311.
- ³⁴ Allan (ed.), *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg* 463-6.
- ³⁵ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* p.192.
- ³⁶ On Tanai's character, see: Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* pp.119-20 and Hussain, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy* p.149.
- ³⁷ The subsequent allegation by Anthony Arnold that the Tanai-Hekmatyar collaboration may have been the product of a conspiracy by Soviet intelligence is so bizarre and without foundation as to qualify as a serious attempt at strategic disinformation: A. Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble. Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire*. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press 1993) pp. 160-1.
- ³⁸ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* 126.
- ³⁹ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan* p.80, Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* pp.181, 241-2.
- ⁴⁰ Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* pp.163-4.
- ⁴¹ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*. p.233, Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* p.164 .
- ⁴² Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan* p.235.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 235-6.
- ⁴⁴ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* p.225.
- ⁴⁵ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan* pp. 210-12.
- ⁴⁶ See for example: Major Stephen D. Pomper, 'Don't Follow the Bear: The Soviet Attempt to Build Afghanistan's Military.' *Military Review* September-October (2005) pp. 26-29.
- ⁴⁷ Sanjay Singh Yadav, 'Failed Great Power War and the Soviet Retreat from Afghanistan.' *Comparative Strategy* 8 (1989) pp.353-368. Yadav's key thesis - that intervention by one state into another within an international context that is non-hegemonic is likely to fail - is highly problematic, not least because it is then difficult to point to any one period in world history when the international system has in reality *ever* been wholly hegemonic. Interventions in other states have nonetheless succeeded repeatedly in the past, even when the international system is multipolar, as the expansion of nearly all the major European and Asian empires repeatedly demonstrate
- ⁴⁸ Stephen Blank, 'Afghanistan and Beyond: Reflections on the Future of Warfare.' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 3, 3 (1992) p.228.
- ⁴⁹ Thomas Harding, 'Pentagon seeks £215m Russian arms deal for Afghans.' *The Daily Telegraph* May 22, 2006. 'Soviet-era' is an appropriate description in this case since the majority of equipment to be provided is of precisely that vintage, including T-62 tanks.
- ⁵⁰ Various estimates are given in Richard Weitz 'Moscow's Endgame in Afghanistan.' *Conflict Quarterly* (Winter 1992) p.30, Rasul Bakhsh Rais, 'Afghanistan after the Soviet Withdrawal.' *Current History* (March 1992) p.123 and Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* p.147.
- ⁵¹ The very real gains that were made in 1990 led Anthony Giustozzi to label that year Najibullah's 'annus mirabilis': Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*, 185.
- ⁵² <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/2006/05/07/1568671-cp.html> accessed 18/05/06
- ⁵³ On this theme, see: N. Cooper, J. Goodhand and M. Pugh (eds), *War Economies in a Regional Context: Challenges of Transformation* (USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc 2004). On the Iraqi market-driven reconstruction process, see: Bassam Yousif, 'Coalition Economic Policies in Iraq: motivations and outcomes' *Third World Quarterly* 27 (3, 2006) pp. 491-505.
- ⁵⁴ On the Iraqi militias, see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4454985.stm and <http://www.cfr.org/publication.html?id=8175> both accessed on 09/09/05.
- ⁵⁵ See on this: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp060205.shtml> accessed on 20/09/05.
- ⁵⁶ On Vietnam, see: Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, D. C.: Center of Military History United States Army 1982) and Richard A. Hunt,

Pacification: the American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds (Oxford: Westview Press 1995). On Panama: John T. Fishel, 'The Murky World of Conflict Termination: Planning and Executing the 1989-90 Restoration of Panama.' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 3, 1 (1992) pp.58-71.

⁵⁷ Gareev, *Afganskaia Strada* pp.232-3, Varennikov, *Nepovtorimoe* pp.183-4.

⁵⁸ Allan (ed.), *Sowjetische Geheimdokumente zum Afghanistankrieg* pp.734-6.

⁵⁹ Fishel, 'The Murky World of Conflict Termination,' p.67.

⁶⁰ Olivier Roy, 'The predicament of 'civil society' in Central Asia and the 'Greater Middle East.'" *International Affairs* 81, 5 (2005) pp. 1008-1012 and Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending*. pp.335-6.

Want to Know More ...?

See:

Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan 1979 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Company 2005)

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ISBN 1-905058-74-8

Published By:

**Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom**

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Defence Academy of the UK
Watchfield
Swindon
SN6 8TS
England

Telephone: (44) 1793 788856
Fax: (44) 1793 788841
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ISBN 1-905058-74-8