

The Soviet Military Experience in Afghanistan: A Precedent of Dubious Relevance

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The Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s had been largely forgotten until last month, but it is now back in the news. The attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11 and the start of the U.S. air campaign over Afghanistan on October 7 have raised the prospect that U.S. ground forces might be sent to Afghanistan to destroy the terrorist strongholds of Osama bin Laden, who is widely presumed to be responsible for the September 11 attacks. Soviet operations in the 1980s against Afghan guerrillas are generally deemed to have been a colossal military failure, and the guerrillas themselves are seen as formidable warriors capable of repulsing any foreign invader. Over the past few weeks, a number of former Soviet generals and servicemen have recalled their own encounters with Afghan fighters and warned that the United States would fare no better if it embarked on ground operations in Afghanistan. Their warnings have been echoed by many Western observers, who argue that the Soviet experience in Afghanistan underscores the need for great caution.

These admonitions contain a grain of truth, but they are misleading in two key respects. First, they understate how well Soviet troops performed against the Afghan guerrillas after making some early adjustments. Second, they overstate the relevance of the Soviet war to prospective U.S. strikes against terrorist strongholds. The objectives that U.S. forces would pursue, the quality of the troops who would be involved, and the types of operations they are likely to conduct bear little resemblance to the war waged by the Soviet Army in the 1980s. An accurate appraisal of the Soviet military experience in Afghanistan is essential if we are to avoid drawing the wrong lessons for current U.S. policy.

The Soviet Experience

When Soviet forces moved into Afghanistan at the end of 1979, they made some costly mistakes and failed to protect their logistical and communications lines. Within a few months, however, Soviet commanders rectified most of these shortcomings and brought in better troops, including helicopter pilots specially trained for mountain warfare. From mid-1980 on, the Afghan guerrillas were never able to seize any major Soviet facilities in Afghanistan or to prevent major deployments and movements of Soviet troops.

By mid-1983, when Soviet commanders shifted to a no-holds-barred counterinsurgency strategy emphasizing scorched-earth policies and the use of small, heavily armed units of special operations forces, they began making much more rapid progress against the guerrillas. Over the next few years, Soviet forces gained increasing control of Afghanistan, causing great bloodshed and upheaval. Had it not been for the weapons, training, and other support provided to the guerrillas by the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, and Pakistan, Soviet troops undoubtedly would have been able to crush the resistance and achieve an outright victory.

Indeed, even with the large amounts of military assistance that poured in, the Afghan guerrillas were often unable to cope with the Soviet onslaught. Deep raids by Soviet airborne and helicopter forces against guerrilla positions proved especially effective. In late 1985 and 1986, Soviet troops inflicted huge losses on guerrilla units in the Kunar Valley and Paktia province and captured large swathes of strategic territory. The army of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, which had earlier been ineffective, played a valuable supporting role for Soviet forces in the Kunar and Paktia offensives by launching massive artillery barrages and armored assaults. In a detailed assessment of these battles and other Soviet gains as of mid-1987, an expert on Soviet military activities in Afghanistan, Yossef Bodansky, concluded that Soviet forces were proving “devastatingly effective against the Afghan resistance,” were “presently winning in Afghanistan,” and were “very close to crushing the resistance.” These judgments in retrospect may seem wide of the mark, but in fact they were an accurate description of where things stood at the time.

Although the Soviet Politburo led by Mikhail Gorbachev announced in early 1988 that it would pull Soviet forces out of Afghanistan within a year, this decision was based solely on political and diplomatic considerations, not military necessity. Gorbachev had described Afghanistan as a “bleeding wound,” but the “bleeding” had occurred overwhelmingly on the Afghan side. During the nine years of fighting, more than 2.5 million Afghans (mostly civilians) were killed or maimed, and millions more were displaced and forced into exile. By contrast, only 14,453 Soviet troops were killed, an average of 1,600 a year. This was not a trivial number, but it was certainly bearable for the Soviet Army, which numbered over 4 million soldiers.

It is also worth emphasizing that when the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989, the situation in that country was relatively favorable for the Soviet Union, in part because the Soviet Air Force had launched ferocious, sustained bombing raids to accompany the withdrawal. A staunchly pro-Soviet regime, led by a former Afghan secret police chief, Najibullah, remained in power in Kabul for the next three years, supported by massive inflows of Soviet weaponry. Although Najibullah’s brutal Communist regime was out of sync with the sweeping reforms under way in the Soviet Union itself, his ability to stay in power after the Soviet troop presence ended represented a notable success for the Soviet war effort. Not until 1992, after the Soviet Union had collapsed and the new Russian government cut off military aid to Afghanistan, was Najibullah left vulnerable to the guerrilla forces. His regime fell in April 1992.

The Marginal Relevance of the Soviet War

What relevance does the Soviet war have now for prospective U.S. ground operations in Afghanistan? Very little. The goals of the Soviet war were completely different from what the United States will be seeking. Soviet troops invaded and occupied Afghanistan and sought to install a Communist regime that would do Moscow's bidding. Although the number of Soviet troops deployed in Afghanistan at any one time never exceeded 120,000, the Soviet forces laid waste to the entire country, killing and displacing millions.

By contrast, the United States today is interested mainly in destroying the al Qaeda terrorist strongholds of Osama bin Laden. U.S. troops will not need to occupy Afghanistan, and they certainly will not engage in the scorched-earth policies that characterized the Soviet occupation. The complete removal of the ruling Taliban—a violently tyrannical regime that has systematically dehumanized women and imposed a barbaric form of Islam—would be highly desirable, and the destruction of the al Qaeda network will greatly facilitate that goal. Initially, however, the United States will be focusing on the elimination of Osama bin Laden's terrorist network.

The U.S. troops who carry out this mission will be much better trained, better equipped, and better motivated than their Soviet counterparts were in the 1980s. Although Soviet forces achieved far greater progress against the Afghan guerrillas than is often alleged, the dearth of training and equipment clearly hampered the Soviet war effort. No such problems will confront the United States. U.S. and British special operations forces are the finest in the world, and they will be equipped with the finest weapons and support devices.

Similarly, the context for Soviet operations in Afghanistan was fundamentally different from the situation now facing the United States. Large-scale external support for the Afghan guerrillas was vital in allowing them to avert annihilation. Had the outside support not been forthcoming, the Soviet Army would have had a vastly easier time. Today, by contrast, external support for terrorists based in Afghanistan and for the Taliban has been almost totally cut off. Pakistan, which had been the main supporter of the Taliban, has joined ranks with the United States. Although some Pakistanis strongly oppose their government's policy and will try to thwart any operation against Afghanistan, the United States can ensure that external support for bin Laden will not be resumed. In the absence of outside backing, the terrorists and the Taliban will be much easier to destroy.

To the extent that the Soviet war in Afghanistan *is* of relevance to future U.S. military action, it is mainly in an operational sense. The Soviet experience underscored the crucial importance of intelligence, a factor that will play an even greater role in strikes against Osama bin Laden, as U.S. officials have rightly emphasized. The Soviet experience also highlighted the enormous potential of attack and transport helicopters for deep raids against guerrilla positions, and it reaffirmed the value of using small, flexible units of

heavily armed special operations forces to carry out rapid strikes, backed up in some cases by massive air power. The meticulous preparations under way for sustained attacks against the al Qaeda network and the Taliban power structure suggest that U.S. military officers are fully mindful of these lessons.

Most important of all, the Soviet war in Afghanistan demonstrated that the Afghan guerrillas were not invincible and that well-designed counterinsurgency operations could inflict grave damage on them and send them into turmoil. Despite committing numerous mistakes during the early stages of the war, the Soviet Army soon gained the initiative against the guerrillas and strengthened the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. Soviet forces almost certainly would have wiped out the guerrillas and achieved a clear-cut victory if external support for the resistance had been cut off.

At present the United States, with its narrower objective of eliminating terrorist strongholds in Afghanistan (and thereby getting rid of the Taliban) and its ability to choke off external military backing for Osama bin Laden, faces a much more propitious situation. Unlike the Soviet Union, which inflicted wanton destruction on the Afghan population, the United States will be carefully tailoring and implementing its combined ground-air operations, relying on sound intelligence and advanced weaponry for lightning strikes against terrorist positions, backed up where necessary by unrelenting aerial bombardment. There is of course no guarantee that these operations will succeed. Casualties are bound to result.

Nonetheless, the United States can prepare for necessary ground action in Afghanistan without being dogged by spurious “lessons” of the Soviet war. Contrary to the advice offered by former Soviet generals, there is every reason to believe that the terrorists and the Taliban can be defeated through the use of military force. Although the Soviet Union was not able to achieve an outright victory in its full-scale war in the 1980s, the United States today can accomplish its narrower mission of destroying Osama bin Laden’s strongholds in Afghanistan once and for all.