

The Myth of a Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan

by Christina Dameyer

Many Americans currently believe that the Soviet Union is serious about withdrawing from Afghanistan. Mikhail Gorbachev's much-publicized characterization of the occupation as a "bleeding wound" and a "running sore" has made many U.S. observers assume that Moscow regards it as a grievous blunder and now is only seeking the best way to extricate itself.

However, little attention has been paid to contradictory Soviet statements like that of the Chief of General Staff, Marshal Akhromeyev, who was quoted in *The New York Times* last October as saying that the Soviet military believes the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan "was not a mistake." Hopes rose especially high during the December Reagan-Gorbachev summit, but it produced almost no progress.

At the beginning of 1988, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze told Afghans that he hoped this would be the last year his nation's troops are in their country. Afghan resistance forces and the U.S. have reacted cautiously to this most dramatic sign to date that the Soviets plan to withdraw.

They have good reason to be cautious. As former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger pointed out with common sense, before the Shevardnadze announcement, "If they want

to get out of Afghanistan, it's the easiest thing in the world. All they have to do is leave." A Pentagon study has determined that a troop withdrawal would require no more than 30 to 40 days.

But the Soviets have long insisted on being allowed 4 years to pull out. Moscow's current offer to reduce the time frame to 12 months is contingent on the cessation of U.S. military aid to the guerrillas, which would then enable the Soviets to crush the resistance. Gorbachev has consistently stated that the Afghan problem can only be solved when "foreign interference" ends, but he makes no mention of his own country's interference in Afghanistan for the past 8 years, resulting in the deaths of more than a million Afghans and the exodus of a third of the population.

The token Soviet troop withdrawal in Fall 1986 was not an encouraging model. With maximum publicity and fanfare, 8,000 Soviet soldiers returned home. But these were construction and anti-aircraft units whose presence was superfluous, since their guerrilla adversaries have no airforce. Even before the carefully rehearsed farewell ceremony, 6,000 far more dangerous KGB personnel and Spetsnaz special operations commandos had arrived in Afghanistan to take their places.

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No Comparison to Vietnam

The Afghan resistance fighters, the Mujahedeen, charge that Soviet allusions to a complete withdrawal are likewise only a deceptive maneuver to placate world opinion and

undermine international support for the resistance. If the Soviets are sincere about finding a peaceful political solution, Mujahedeen leaders ask, why are they trying to impose a military solution? Each round of the Geneva talks between the Kabul regime and Pakistan has been accompanied by intensive bombings and shellings across the Pakistani border to intimidate Islamabad into closing down the resistance bases of operation. The Mujahedeen also observe that each successive Soviet leader from Andropov to Gorbachev hinted more broadly at a "new flexibility" or "fresh approach" to the talks, but Soviet military operations in Afghanistan escalated dramatically with each change of regime. The effectiveness of the attacks has also increased, partly due to the quadrupling of the number of the highly trained Spetsnaz forces since 1981.

✓ Yet almost from the beginning, Americans rushed to label the war "the Soviet Vietnam." Apart from the tenacious stubbornness of each guerrilla force, there is little similarity. The Afghan occupation's general unpopularity with the Soviet people is highly unlikely to influence, let alone compel, the totalitarian Soviet regime to withdraw. Americans have projected their own reaction to U.S. casualties in Vietnam onto the Soviets. Since Vietnam it has become almost a reflex reaction to pull out U.S. forces when American casualties are incurred, as in the immediate withdrawal of the Marines from Lebanon in 1983 after their barracks were blown up. When 37 crewmen of the U.S.S. Stark were killed in the Iraqi attack last May, strong pressures were applied for the U.S. to abandon its escort operations in the Persian Gulf.

But the Russian people have long been accustomed to absorbing large losses of life in war. One of the 3 most celebrated battles in Russian history was the fourteenth-century Battle of Kulikovo against the Tatars, in which 9 out of 10 Russian soldiers were killed. World War II claimed 20 million Soviet lives. In contrast, at most only 15,000 troops have died over the 9 years of the Afghan conflict, some of them from disease. Considering that this many lives have been lost in a single year of the Iran-Iraq war, which has continued nearly as long, it is clear that these casualties are sustainable by the Soviet Union with its far greater population. The majority of the Soviet troops

stationed in Afghanistan see little action: less than 15% are used in offensive operations, according to American military sources.

Few War Costs

While the Soviets have a substantial amount of equipment, most of it is obsolescent. For instance, the principal tank used in Afghanistan is the 27-year-old T-55, 3 models behind the current T-72s. The Red Army has such vast stocks of equipment—more tanks than the rest of the world put together—and the Soviet military machine continues to churn out so many arms that the losses do not pose a major problem.

The economic cost of the occupation is also more affordable than assumed. American experts on the Soviet military calculate that Moscow spends no more than 2-3% of its annual defense expenditure on the Afghan war. The Soviets partially off-set the expenditure by helping themselves to Afghan natural gas, minerals, dried fruit, Persian lamb pelts, carpets and cotton. No payment is made: the price is merely deducted from Afghanistan's enormous bill for Soviet aid. The Soviets pipe 95% of Afghanistan's natural gas production directly to the U.S.S.R., and even sell some of it abroad. Afghanistan has major deposits of high-quality copper, iron, chrome (all of far higher grade than the Soviets have), zinc, beryl, barite, fluorspar, bauxite, and uranium. According to one defector, a former official of the Ministry of Mines and Industry, the Soviets have confiscated large quantities of these, especially the uranium. He also said Moscow sells the prized Afghan lapis lazuli and emeralds, appropriated without compensation, at high prices on the international market.

A Soviet expert on Afghanistan, Yuri Gankovsky, head of the Near and Middle East department of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Soviet Academy of Sciences, went so far as to boast last year that the war didn't cost the Kremlin one cent, due to the natural gas and raw materials Afghanistan supplied. This comment was no doubt exaggerated with the aim of discouraging the West from trying to drain the Soviet economy by arming the guerrillas. But it is clear that the Soviet Union is not acutely suffering financially from the occupation.

The Case for Annexation

While most Soviet spokesmen concentrate on convincing the world that they are tired of the war and longing to go home, they assure their Afghan allies the opposite. An ex-Kabul regime official told of a meeting where alarmed Afghan Communist Party officials anxiously asked a top-level Soviet adviser if Voice of America reports that Moscow was contemplating withdrawing were true. The Soviet official responded, "Don't worry, we will never leave your country. We are one nation."

His words were revealing. Incorporating Afghanistan into the empire has been a goal of Soviet Politburos and Russian Czars alike for centuries. Although the immediate reason for the invasion was to shore up a sinking communist regime, domination of Afghanistan was essential for the long-term strategy of expansionism toward the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. Peter the Great clearly stated his wish to acquire "the land of Persia and India and beyond it to the sea to dominate the world." Warm water ports have become all the more essential for the modern Soviet Union, especially since becoming a global sea power.

The Gorchakov Doctrine of 1864 spelled out the Czarist rationale for conquering and absorbing the Central Asian khanates in the move south, and seems to apply to Afghanistan: "At times when a big power shares a frontier with a savage, uncivilized, seminomadic nation, then it becomes necessary to annex that nation to secure the frontier of the big power." The Russians justified their expansionism in language identical to that used about Afghanistan today. The khanate of Khiva and the emirate of Bokhara, they maintained, had requested the "limited contingent

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of troops," which were only temporarily stationed there to give fraternal assistance, not to conquer, and would be withdrawn whenever the governments desired.

Of course, Moscow consolidated its rule and thoroughly Sovietized the empire's new acquisitions, as it is now doing in Afghanistan. Furthermore, just as Moscow used what became the Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan S.S.R.'s as bases to penetrate Afghanistan, sending agents of those nationalities across the border for espionage and subversion, so Afghan

Pashtun tribesmen are being infiltrated into the Pashtun areas of Pakistan with the same mission.

'The Resurgence of Islam' Argument

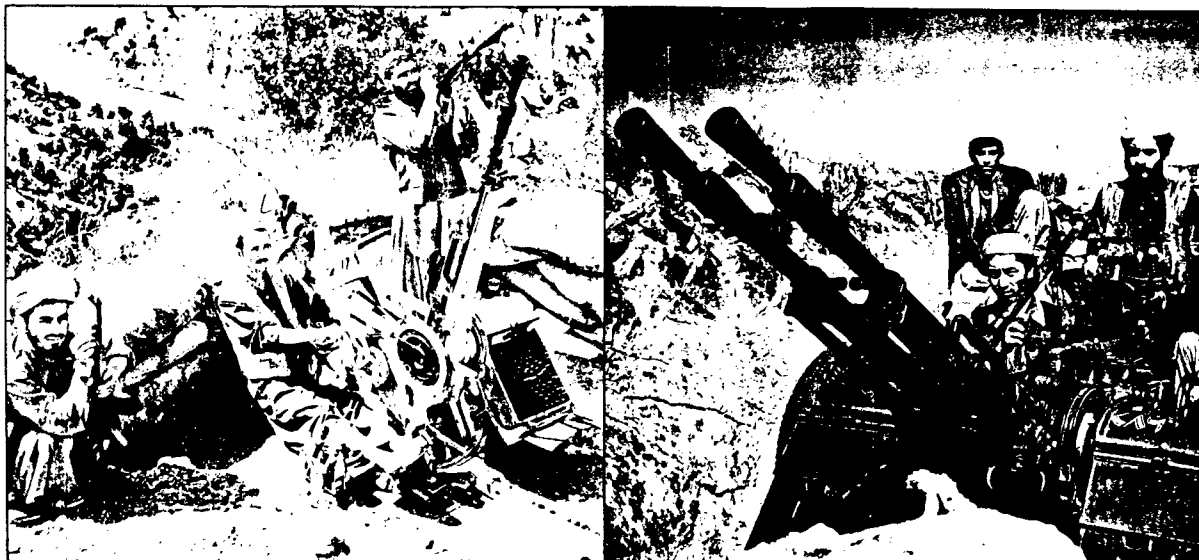
The motivation for the invasion of Afghanistan has usually been assumed to be a defensive rather than offensive one: the Soviets fear that Islamic fundamentalism would spill over into Soviet Central Asia. But this was at most only a minor consideration. The Afghans had had almost no contact with their ethnic cousins in what the Mujahedeen refer to as "Soviet-occupied Central Asia" until the war began. The Afghan Islamic fundamentalist movement was little threat to Soviet Turkestan. It had been based in Pakistan since 1973 and was composed primarily of southern Afghanistan Pashtuns. The Afghan fundamentalists were concerned with liberating their country from communist rule, not with spreading Islam in the region.

If the Soviets feared an upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism on their border in 1979, they would have invaded Iran. At that time, already under Khomeini's rule for almost a year, Iran



(C. Darneyer)

Different generations of Turkic Uzbeks from northern Afghanistan: Afghan exiles believe the program to indoctrinate the young is the "single greatest threat to the future of the country."



Mujahedeen fighters man anti-aircraft guns, on the alert for Soviet MiG-21s, in Paktia province. (C. Dameyer)

clamored for the export of the Islamic Revolution and directed inflammatory radio broadcasts to Central Asia urging Soviet Muslims to rise up against the atheist government of the "Lesser Satan."

Although the Afghans have since launched minor, sporadic raids across the Soviet border, this interpretation of the invasion seems more a reflection of America's own fear of Islamic fundamentalism. After all, the Chinese annexation of Tibet was never explained by Peking's fear of the spread of Buddhism to China. Tibet and Afghanistan were both inward-looking countries whose inhabitants were devout practitioners of their all-encompassing religions. As barren, mountainous, undeveloped countries with semi-feudal societies, they possessed little inherent value for their great power neighbors except a strategic location. Although the Chinese also met with strong opposition in their attempt to Sinify and communize the Tibetans, their determination to remain in Tibet was never doubted by the West. It was clear that Peking would not consider surrendering its newly acquired territory bordering India.

Strategic Bases

Similarly, the Soviets are unlikely to give up their strategic position on the road to the Gulf. They have built up a chain of military

bases along the western border with Iran, particularly in the southwest. The air force base at Shindand has been expanded and is now highly sophisticated. The Soviets are building several other bases in the area, including one near the corner where Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan meet. All these bases are clearly not necessary to fight isolated guerilla bands in the western Afghan deserts. However, they are conveniently located to support Soviet offensive action in wartime. Shindand is only half an hour's flight by jet fighter from the Straits of Hormuz, which could be attacked or mined to cut off two-thirds of the West's oil.

For the first time, the Soviets are constructing two large permanent bases in the east near the Pakistan border. Afghans are not allowed near the sites. Facilities are being expanded at existing bases throughout the country like Kiligai, a huge underground, all-Soviet tank repair depot halfway between Kabul and the Soviet border. In the north, especially, landing strips for jet fighters are being built and airport runways widened. The Soviets are clearly settling in for a long stay and, some experts believe, building up the infrastructure to support military intervention in the region.

Reportedly, SS-20 missiles, which have a range of 3,000 miles, are stationed in underground missile bases in the strategic Wakhan Corridor. This northeastern finger of Afghan territory reaches out to touch China. It was

annexed outright soon after the invasion. The Soviet forces based here are only a few miles from the Karakoram Highway connecting Pakistan and China. If the Soviets were to invade Pakistan, Western and Pakistani military analysts say, they could cut off Chinese intervention down the highway, which was constructed wide enough for heavy tank traffic.

Central Asian Cuba

As early as 1982, the Afghan then-Minister of Defense Abdul Qader revealed another dimension of the enhanced Soviet capabilities for power projection in Southwest Asia: by proxy. He stated that the Afghan Army would be used as a regional striking force, a sort of Central Asian Cuba. High-ranking Afghan Army officers who have defected more recently say that training for this will begin as soon as the Soviets consolidate their rule.

In the meantime, Moscow is using more indirect means to destabilize the region. Afghan agents are sent into Pakistan and Iran for terrorism and sabotage. It was reported that 2,000 new Afghan secret police (Khad) members returned from training in the Soviet Union for this purpose last year. On the political front, not only Afghans but radical Middle Easterners are to be used to spread ideas of communism and revolution in the region, Afghan analysts assert. They note that a large percentage of Kabul University's student body now consists of Marxists from Pakistan, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and even North Korea.

The Afghans themselves are generally taken to the Soviet Union, where it is felt they can be better indoctrinated. However, the success rate varies markedly with different age groups, say exiled Afghan intellectuals. They explain that Afghans in their twenties and thirties usually are disillusioned with the difference they find between communist theory and practice and quickly develop antipathy for the Soviet system. Most hide their feelings, anticipating a high-salaried government position upon return to Kabul or resolving to escape to Pakistan, but some who are overheard making critical remarks mysteriously disappear. A Foreign Ministry defector who dealt with the student and cultural exchanges disclosed that more than 50 Afghans

had been killed or imprisoned in the Soviet Union, but their relatives were told they had drowned or died of illness.

However, younger Afghans in their early teens are far more malleable. Rather than wasting time reeducating the older generation, the Soviets are concentrating most on those aged 15-16. Afghan exiles view this program as the single greatest threat to the future of the country. Throughout their stay, the Afghan boys are plied with good food, large quantities of vodka and even young women to weaken their will and are given intensive indoctrination. Their parents are shocked to find them hardened, ruthless, and often dependent on alcohol upon return. The boys preach about communism and atheism and scorn traditional Afghan and Islamic ways.

Thorough Integration Planned

The Soviets are working hard also among Afghans at home to extinguish pride in the national culture and history and awareness of a national identity, say Afghan and Pakistani scholars. Not only have Afghan history books been rewritten to Soviet taste, but the Soviets are encouraging a resurgence of nationalistic feeling in each of numerous Afghan ethnic groups. Employing the same divide and rule strategy they used to subdue their own Central Asian nationalities in the 1920-30s, the Soviets are stirring up animosities between the groups so that each can be isolated and brought under control, says Professor Rasul Amin, former Dean of Social Sciences at Kabul University and now head of an exile writers' organization. Ties between the northern Afghan groups and corresponding nationalities across the Soviet border are emphasized. Historically, northern Afghan Tajiks have more in common culturally with Central Asian ones than western Tajiks, who are more linked to Iran. The Turkic Uzbeks, Turkmens and Kazakhs are more similar to their Soviet cousins than to the Indo-European Tajiks and Pashtuns who are dominant in Afghanistan.

This campaign is seen by some observers as part of a general plan to integrate northern Afghanistan into the southern Soviet republics. Not coincidentally, the north has the vast majority of the country's natural gas and mineral resources as well as the most fertile

soil. The Soviets, who dictate Afghan economic planning, have placed top priority on the development of energy and mineral resources. The capital of the north, Mazar-i-Sharif, reportedly receives electricity directly from the Soviet Union. It has become the practice for trade and cooperation agreements to be made directly between the Afghan northern provinces and Central Asian S.S.R.'s.

Soviet-Afghanistan trade arrangements are strongly to the Soviet benefit. For instance, most of the high-grade fertilizer and cement produced by Afghan petrochemical plants and factories is exported to the U.S.S.R. For their own needs, the Afghans are forced to buy inferior quality cement from Moscow and fertilizer from the West. The cement and large quantities of other imports from the Soviet bloc (with which three-fourths of Afghanistan's foreign trade is conducted) must be paid for in full at the time of order, but delivery is often as much as a year late.

Party Rules Supreme

In addition to the integration of the Afghan economy into the Soviet one, most branches of the Afghan government are tightly controlled by the Soviets. An internal passport system more stringent than the U.S.S.R.'s has been instituted. Afghans must obtain permission from the secret police to travel to another town and show proof of business or relatives there.

Abdul Ghias Popal, a Supreme Court judge who sought asylum in Pakistan in late 1986, disclosed that the chief justice of Afghanistan is a Soviet adviser. However, the legal system is irrelevant, he said, since decisions of the Soviet advisers supercede Afghan law. Cases involving Russians cannot even be brought to court, despite frequent crimes committed by Russian soldiers, the ex-judge stated. Afghan refugees allege too that that Soviets on patrol at night often break into shops and storehouses and steal goods. Guerrillas and refugees relate stories of having been on buses stopped at checkpoints by Soviet soldiers who demanded money and valuables from passengers and hashish from the drivers.

Groups of Afghans have been sent to the Soviet Union for training as judges. Until they return, Mr. Popal said, Afghan Communist

Party members are filling in because all qualified judges have fled the country. He gave the example of a tailor appointed in Helmand province because his idea of implementing justice was to imprison anyone suspected of opposing the regime.

Poorly qualified officials chosen solely on the basis of their Communist Party membership and personal connections are now the norm in the Kabul regime, defectors further maintain. One who was with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cited as typical a deputy director of his ministry with only a high school education in music. The only foreign language such officials speak is Russian, he said. He and two other Foreign Ministry defectors agree that out of about 300 officials, there are no more than 10 left who are not Communist Party members, and some of these are suspected of being government informers. The former deputy to the Afghan ambassador to Moscow, Abdul Majid Mangal, maintained that the diplomats sent to non-communist countries are nearly all Khad agents, while less trusted officials are sent to the East bloc where they are better kept under watch.

Many army officers are illiterate and some are unable to sign their names, revealed Colonel Mir Hashamuddin Mohtashemi, who defected last year. There is runaway title inflation, he said. A lieutenant was promoted to general in 8 years; a captain became one in 5 years. Both were conspicuously lacking in ability but known to be working with the KGB. Promotions in the armed forces are made entirely by the Soviets, who move their proteges into positions of power to consolidate their control, he and other ex-army officers observe.

Of Communists and Kings

If the Soviets can build up the Communist Party's power enough, they may eventually take a less overt role in running the country to allay international criticism. This appears the only change likely to occur. Until aircraft losses from the U.S.-supplied Stinger missiles become far more punishing, there is little to induce the Soviets even to make concessions to the Mujahedeen, let alone to withdraw from Afghanistan. They are extracting many valuable resources, especially at a time when the output of the Soviet Union's mining industry is



Afghan guerrillas undergo training courses at camps on the Pakistani-Afghani border.

(C. Dameyer)

falling and the quality of its minerals, never as good as Afghanistan's, is declining.

The diplomatic costs have not been great. Despite the ritual annual condemnations of the Soviet invasion by the U.N. General Assembly, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement, Soviet trade with the West has expanded and contacts with the Islamic world have increased. With the exception of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, few Arab countries have offered material or even substantial verbal support for the Afghan resistance.

Militarily, the Soviets have forced the Afghan forces to take the vast majority of the casualties in the fighting, while gaining valuable experience themselves in counter-insurgency and mountain warfare.

The Kremlin is on its way to successfully Sovietizing a strategic country which can be used as a stepping-stone to the Persian Gulf in the years ahead.

For their part, the Mujahedeen insist that the Soviets leave Afghanistan at once without conditions, since they should not be rewarded for the subjugation and occupation of a sovereign country. The option often mentioned in the West, that the Soviets could withdraw once a stable communist-dominated coalition government is set up, does not exist. (Reportedly, the Soviets have dropped their demand for power-sharing by the Communist

Party after their departure, but the issue continues to arise in negotiations with Pakistan.) The guerrillas say they would not participate in a regime with even one Marxist. Even if they did, all sides know that the minute the Soviets left, the communist members would be killed and the government overthrown.

The most conceivable compromise figure to preside over an interim government would be the former Afghan king, Zahir Shah, who was overthrown and exiled in 1973. However, the Mujahedeen are bitterly divided on this issue. Many, especially the fundamentalists, rightly hold him responsible for allowing Russian influence to build up in the country during the 40 years of his rule. The king's opponents complain that he has never spoken out against the Soviet invasion and has spent the war growing roses in Rome while the Afghan people have suffered and sacrificed.

But others feel that despite his deficiencies, the king is the sole authority figure with widespread acceptability among Afghans and recognition abroad. His support is strongest among the older generation and members of the Sufi religious orders, whose leaders were tied to the old regime.

Many younger Afghans, however, would prefer a completely new leadership coming from the ranks of those who participated in the military or intellectual struggle to liberate their country. ■