

The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989

In the late 70s, reassured by its success in Czechoslovakia and sure of its superiority, the Soviet Army was considered as one of the most powerful forces in the world. When the Soviets entered Afghanistan on December 27th, 1979, the country was in a disastrous political state and in the grip of a civil war. Afghan resistance groups got organized against the central power. Coups succeeded to each other, leaving a government unable to rule the country. Wishing to restore a new stable Afghan government with a communist feature and strengthen the relations between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, so invaluable within a cold war context, the Soviets got committed on the basis of the friendship treaty dated December 5th, 1978.

BY MISS MARIE-PAULINE SALIN - SEARCHER IN TRAINING IN THE CDEF/DREX¹

Late on Christmas day 1979, the 40th Soviet Army carried out a conventional assault onto Kabul and onto other key points in Afghanistan: operation STORM 333. On December 27th, 1979, the Soviets deposed President Amin and a Soviet sympathizer, Babrak Karmal, was appointed the Chairman of the new Revolution Council, Prime Minister to the Afghan government and secretary of the Afghan communist party². On December 28th, the new Afghan government officially required “*political, moral, economic, and military support*” from the Soviet Union, on account of provocations coming from all the “foreign enemies of Afghanistan”.

In April 1980, the Status of Armed Forces Agreement was signed between the Afghan government and the USSR on President Karmal’s initiative. During the first three years, the Soviets extended their control over the country, but two thirds of the regular Afghan Army deserted. In front of the extreme determination of the mujahidins, the Soviets soon gave up their control over the whole territory and they limited themselves to conquered areas.

In 1986, Khad commander Mohammed Nadjibullah³ replaced Babrak Karmal⁴ at the head of the Afghan State.

According to the principle of an Afghan Perestroika, he started to negotiate with the rebels through a national reconciliation process. In 1986, the mujahidins started to get US ground-to-air FIM-92 Stinger missiles, which resulted into the Soviets losing air space control. The balance of forces changed.

In February 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev decided to withdraw, a decision supported by the international community during the Geneva agreement. **The withdrawal of Soviet forces came into effect one year later, on February 15th, 1989.**

What are the lessons learned that we can draw from this war?

Does the analysis of this crisis management enable to highlight the difficulties that all Western armed forces are confronted to, when they are facing guerilla despite an undisputed force and power?

An inappropriate Soviet military analysis?

In Vietnam, the Americans endeavored to control the whole country. In Afghanistan, **the Soviets limited themselves to occupy and protect key communication axes and areas, after**



Lessons learned

they had in vain tried to destroy resistance groups. The basic purpose consisted in gaining undisputed victory on the ground and hence, in creating favorable military conditions to establish an Afghan communist party. Far away from their initial will, just to retain their influence and their presence while limiting the cost in equipment and human lives, the USSR committed itself into **an attrition war in which the Soviet military doctrine kept being harmed.**

An inadequate employment doctrine

The Soviet doctrine supporting a major offensive materializes with a rapid victory resulting from a **massive use of firepower.** Populations and resistance fighters are then compelled to find shelter in the mountains. Yet, the Soviets regularly suffer situation reversals.

From the very start, the Soviet Army held the important axes and the major key points of Afghanistan, rapidly defining the **concept of “useful Afghanistan”.** Thus, the looked-for aim consisted in completely controlling some areas of the country considered as sensitive. This reasoning was **completely inappropriate compared with local distinctive features:** important rurality, dispersed mujahidin forces and especially environment. Initially, the Soviets were determined to rapidly destroy guerilla through major offensives. These actions were carried out according to a COA (Course of Action) corresponding to battlefields located in Central Europe, but in no way according to counter-guerilla warfare in Central Asia. For that reason and according to Soviet doctrine, criteria which were supposed to be critical throughout a successful operation were indeed ineffective. Major offensives carried out by the Soviets, in particular those which took place in Panshir, had **no enduring successes.**

Adapting too slowly to guerilla techniques

The Soviet Army was held in check because it was **unable to adapt itself**

to the tactics of counter-guerilla warfare in the mountains. The Red Army was about to change the structure and the operating environment of its units and gradually adapt its divisions' equipment: a massive use of helicopters, among others the MI-24 Hind and an increased use of SFs (Special Forces): the *spetsnaz*. Despite that fact, it did not thoroughly change the general aspect of its forces in Afghanistan and globally, its equipment remained unsuited to its needs.

The Soviets could not impose themselves without using armored vehicles. But these vehicles could not be used very often because of highly mountainous areas. As regards the Soviets, the major difficulty was the **unwieldiness of equipment and their lack of light infantry units.** For that reason, a static surveillance of the country by enormous armored columns appeared to be fruitless.

A failing co-operation

The Afghan Army which operated alongside the Red Army constituted **one of the reasons why the Soviets were unable to control the whole country** and to impose a stable communist regime. Indeed, this armed force on which the Soviets had to rely was also unreliable, whereas the support of the Afghan Army would have considerably reinforced the Soviet legitimacy and imposed an outlaw status for the mujahidins. The fact that the government and the armed forces were only puppets in the eyes of the Afghans also contributed to reinforce the determination of the population and of the freedom fighters. **Several factors explain the reason why the Afghan Army failed** in its support and legitimacy roles.

- confrontation with its own peoples;
- the fact that the Afghan Army refused to operate under the Soviets;
- the weakness of the Afghan government;
- its structure (lack of officers, of trained and proficient soldiers);
- frequent mutinies and desertions;
- weapons smuggling;
- Collusion with the enemy.

Wrongly managing the relations with the Afghans

The Soviets knew neither their enemies nor the Afghan natural environment. This deficiency was the cause of basic errors. Thus, they ignored the nature of the conflict they were about to start and they lacked initiative. The Soviet armed forces were too often **limited to a defensive role because of lack of information on the Afghan rebels.**

Insufficient awareness about the population and the enemy

For the Afghans, the Soviet intervention appeared as the worst challenge in their history. Indeed, this foreign aggression was about to stress their best qualities, “their love for independence and their abnegation in front of death”⁵. The Soviets shattered the fragile structures and the institutions of the Afghan State, which had gradually modernized from 1919. As for this country, it imploded into several ethnic groups, tribes and seigniories. Only **a couple of common and essential factors** (from previous centuries) **were left to the Afghan resistance movement: Islam and ethnic solidarities.**

Afghan traditions were absolutely not understood by the Soviets. Then, communism was opposed to Islamism and to the refusal of any interference. We could think that a better knowledge of this Afghan “culture” would have enabled the Soviets to have their initiative supported by the populations.

The Afghans did not lack **experience and techniques on a terrain favorable to asymmetrical warfare** carried out for centuries: guerilla warfare in the mountains. Unlike the Soviets, they operated in the mountains without any difficulty. This mountainous area (85 % of mountains) with a harsh climate (on average, temperatures ranged from -14°C to 52°C) made living conditions very difficult to the Soviets. Guerilla tactics relied on intelligence, ambushes, cunning⁶ and sabotage. In the case of an unpopular foreign occupant like the Soviets in Afghanistan, resorting to guerilla



points, the Soviets implemented **violent** - more or less efficient⁷ - **destruction policies**, induced starvation and the displacement of populations towards neighboring countries.

These actions resulted into “emptying some areas”⁸ and they contributed to strengthen mujahidin opposition.

The use of force - according to brutal and indiscriminated techniques - **only drove the population into the mujahidins’ arms.**

1 Research & Lessons Learned Division of the CDEF (Forces Employment Doctrine Center).

2 PDPA: People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

3 Khad: Afghan secret service.

4 As his policy against guerilla had not been very efficient, he was gradually considered as incompetent.

5 Michael BARRY *The kingdom of insolence: Afghanistan between 1504 and 2001* page 40, Flammarion.

6 According to Sun Tsu, war is the art of deception. It was opposed to the Clausewitz concept that strongly recommended an unlimited use of brute force (a point of view shared by the Soviets).

7 **“Search and destroy”**: operations pertaining to harvest destruction, and intensive bombing of areas and valleys.

8 **“Free Fire Zone”**: zone where fire is opened on any people within this area, without any distinction between mujahidins and the local population.

warfare made the cost of a military presence prohibitive and it compelled them to withdraw.

Gradual retrenchment of the Soviet Army

The Soviets carried out **a relatively constant defensive warfare**. During the first months, the rebels only attacked government infrastructures and communication lines. Consequently, the Soviets had to protect facilities by themselves: they built 862 outposts that mobilized 20,200 personnel i.e. 1/5 of the Soviet Army. Thus, the Soviets took refuge inside protected camps to keep roads and key points, which deprived Soviet soldiers from any contact with

the population. Inevitably, it resulted into a deterioration of their links and it hindered them to negotiate with the enemy through the Afghan population.

Very quickly, the “legitimacy” of **the intervention force** disappeared. For the Afghans, it **became an occupation force.**

Operations reinforcing the determination of the enemy and of the population

The Red Army contributed by itself to its inability to apprehend the enemy and especially to control the populations, a favored breeding ground for enlistment within the mujahidins. In order to protect occupation areas and strategic

For ten years, the Red Army had occupied the country and fought against mujahidins. It was commanded and controlled by a generation of military leaders convinced of the relevance of their commitment doctrine and reluctant to any change. When the Soviet armed forces got committed in December 1979, they were strengthened in their beliefs thanks to a lack of any resistance from the Afghans. However, at the outcome of this conflict, the Red Army was no longer the same, shaken in its beliefs; it was the very image of the USSR that had fallen into decline.

Should there have been a failure, it mainly came from the basic mistake of the Soviet Union that had carried out a political and military assessment that did not correspond to the realities of this country. Indeed, the Soviets lacked information and knowledge about the enemy and the country. Shifting from a cooperation force to an occupation force, the Soviets were then doomed to failure.

Eventually, guerilla fighters were not destroyed, communism did not set up and Islamic extremists, the Taliban, seized power a few years after the Soviet withdrawal.

Currently, the coalition force in Afghanistan should draw lessons from these ten years of Soviet occupation, not to be considered, in its turn, as an “occupation force”.