

Why Did Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan After 1979 Fail so Catastrophically?

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The intervention in Afghanistan was a nightmare for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which contributed to its destruction. The failure of intervention involves four factors. First, although the Soviet Union intended to stabilize Afghanistan and consolidate its geopolitical interests, the decision to intervene was cursory. Second, the USSR encountered the failure of nation-building, including the unfavorable economic conditions, political struggles in Afghanistan, infighting between the USSR and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and Soviet advisors' arrogance and ignorance. In terms of the military aspect, the USSR could not attain military superiority due to the *mujahideen's* guerrilla tactics, and the Soviet army's cruelty in military operation alienated Afghan people. Fourth, the invasion left the Soviet Union isolated in diplomacy and boosted American and Pakistani support to *the mujahideen*. The USSR gained nothing from the withdrawal.

Keywords: unnecessary intervention, failure of nation-building, military failure, diplomatic failure

Introduction

On 25 December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and killed the Afghan leader Hafizullah Amin. After that, Babrak Karmal became the leader of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Four days after the intervention, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had controlled the main roads and cities in Afghanistan (Newell, 1980). The Soviet forces planned to garrison Afghanistan for a short time and withdrew when the situation was stabilized (Peng & Huang, 2000). However, the PDPA could never control Afghanistan, nor could they prevent infighting. As a result, the USSR had to commit more to Afghanistan, engaging directly in local military operations, facing more casualties, and spending more money. Besides, the intervention also led to unprecedented diplomatic pressure on the Soviet Union. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he realized that the Soviet-Afghan war was a "bleeding wound" and withdrew all his army in 1989 (Kalinovsky, 2011).

Over the 10-year period, 620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan from the armed forces, Committee of State Security (KGB), and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). A total of 13,833 died, and 69,685 were wounded (Shaw & Spencer, 2003). The war had a far-reaching consequence. It became an important factor leading to the destruction of the Soviet Union (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999). Those who grew up in the war went to the war on terror (Shaw & Spencer, 2003). Therefore, studying the Soviet-Afghan war helps people to understand the global political changes since 1979.

This paper aims at analyzing why Soviet intervention in Afghanistan after 1979 failed catastrophically. At first, introducing the background of Afghanistan helps readers to comprehend the USSR's motivation for intervention. If the USSR did not invade Afghanistan, they would not face setbacks here. The second section introduces the failure of the Soviet Union's nation-building in Afghanistan. The third section enquires why the Soviet Army was defeated in Afghanistan: The Soviet military campaign alienated Afghans and could not effectively eliminate *mujahdeen*. Finally, the diplomatic and military support from America and Pakistan made Afghanistan a quagmire for the Soviet Union.

Background of the Intervention

It is important to remember that the Soviet Union had intervened in Afghanistan before 1979. The military operation in Afghanistan in 1979 was just a radical form of intervention.

In 1965, the Afghan socialist leaders Nur Muhammad Taraki and Karmal founded the socialist party PDPA. However, the party split into two fractions in 1967. Taraki became the leader of Khalq, representing the mass lower class, while Karmal founded Parcham, building a close connection with bureaucrats. In the 1960s, King Zahir Shah ruled over Afghanistan. The Soviet Union found a good opportunity to strengthen its influence, supporting Zahir Shah's cousin Daoud Khan to seize power in 1973. To the surprise of the USSR, Davou Dhan advocated diplomatic independence and promoted the international relationship with Iran, Pakistan, and even America. In domestic affairs, although Daoud Khan built a close relationship with Parcham before his coup, he soon turned against Parcham and Khalq when he became the president. Daoud Khan's actions made the Soviet Union consider overthrowing him. Under the coordination of the USSR, the radical Khalq and conservative Parcham united in 1977. In April 1978, troops loyal to the PDPA upraised and killed Daoud Khan. The Saur Revolution was successful, and the Khalq leader Taraki had seized the country's power and established DRA (Peng & Huang, 2000).

Yet, the establishment of the DRA did not bring peace to Afghanistan, as the alliance of Khalq and Parcham broke down. Meanwhile, rifts were appearing within the Khalq. Both Taraki and Amin were Khalq members; they formed a close relationship in the late 1960s against Karmal's Parcham fraction. After the Saur revolution, Amin became the deputy prime minister of Afghanistan. As Amin expanded his power during the purge, Taraki felt that he was under threat. On 14 September 1979, he plotted to assassinate Amin. However, Amin survived and soon overthrew Taraki's regime (Peng & Huang, 2000).

Taraki was the puppet of the Soviet Union, who followed the foreign policy of the Soviet Union and won the favor of Leonid Brezhnev. The new leader Amin established diplomatic relations with the United States and killed Taraki. Brezhnev was angry about what Amin had done, and he worried if Amin would harm the Soviet's interest. On 12 December, he held a meeting with Minister of Defence Ustinov, KGB chief Andropov, Foreign Minister Gromyko, and chief party ideologue Suslov. After this meeting, they decided to send troops to Afghanistan (Bilibili.com, 2018).

There were some reasons for intervention. A loyal Afghanistan could secure the frontier of the Soviet Union and stabilize the Soviet Central Asia countries. Afghanistan was the bridgehead of the USSR against the Islamic world. If Afghanistan fell, then central Asia countries might get much Islamic influence and break up revolution, like Iran. Besides, the Soviet Union feared that Afghanistan would turn to America (Peng & Huang, 2000). At that time, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) deployed the US Pershing II missile. The Soviet Union had reason to worry about the deployment of missiles in Afghanistan if it fell into the Western

bloc. However, the decision to invade Afghanistan was rash. Without deeply considering the flood of misinformation or discussing with politburo, five people determined Afghanistan's future (Halliday, 1999). If the leaders were more cautious about intervention, the military catastrophe would probably not happen. Before the military intervention, Amin had asked Moscow to arrange a meeting with Brezhnev (Bilibili.com, 2018). Moreover, the Soviet Union could exert economic pressure on Afghanistan to force Amin to change his diplomatic policy (Newell, 1980). The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was unnecessary.

The Failure of Nation-Building

The biggest problem for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was the failure of nation-building because it could not build up a capable Afghan government and army to stabilize the country. The political and economic situation in Afghanistan was a challenge for regime builders. The Afghan had limited revenue for investment, and its state power was restricted in big cities and transportation lines (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). It was difficult to establish state power in the countryside because they were under tribal and religious leaders' control. These tribes concerned more about their interest and always refused to cooperate with the government (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). After the intervention, the PDPA effectively controlled at most a third of the country. Only five million out of 18 million Afghans were under the control of the government (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). Consequently, Soviet economic aid often did not reach its intended destination, as it was either re-sold to or captured by hijackers (Kalinovsky, 2010). Prolonged warfare seriously damaged the Afghan economy. From 1979 to 1987, agriculture production saw a dramatic reduction from 2.5 million tons to less than two million tons (Office on Drugs and Crime, 2003). Many factories collapsed for lack of raw materials and insufficient funds. Hyperinflation bogged down Afghanistan, which became more dependent on Soviet economic support (Peng & Huang, 2000).

The political struggle was common in Afghanistan. The PDPA fought with *mujahadeen*. Inside the PDPA, there was a conflict between Khalq and Parcham. Even in these fractions, individual figures, including "Karmalists," "Nurovists," "Wakilists," and "Keshtmandists," were constantly infighting (Kalinovsky, 2010). The Soviet Union initially supported Karmal and consolidated his regime; KGB even helped Afghanistan build the Committee of State Security (KHAD) in 1980 (Kalinovsky, 2010). When Karmal came to power, he removed Khalqis from the party and administrative posts despite Soviet advice of political compromise (Kalinovsky, 2011). As the Parcham members preferred to become apparatchiks, people did not support Parcham's leader Karmal (Kalinovsky, 2010). Besides, Karmal's regime was non-Pashtun, and his ethnic unfriendly policy caused many Pashtun refugees escaping from the cities, which weakened his public support in the countryside (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). The USSR suspected if Karmal had enough ability to rule the country. According to the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) dossier, Karmal was "emotional, and inclined to abstraction to the detriment of a specific analysis. He has a poor grasp of economic issues which interest him at a general level" (Iskon, 1999).

The Soviet Union decided to turn to Mohammad Najibullah, the leader of KHAD. In May 1986, Najibullah became the leader of PDPA. Then, in November, he deprived all of Karmal's positions. In 1987, the USSR even provided him more than 950 million rubles, more than other countries (Kalinovsky, 2011). The USSR had expected that Najibullah would follow its advice on national reconciliation. Yet Najibullah offered limited positions to the opponents and continued to fight with the *mujahadeen* (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). In the same year, Eduard Shevardnadze depicted a pessimistic situation of PDPA in the Politburo meeting,

“Najibullah ... not everyone supports him, even in the leadership.... The country’s economy is in ruins.... Not one problem has been solved to the peasantry’s advantage. The government bureaucracy is functioning poorly. Our advisers’ aid is ineffective” (Chernyaev, 1987).

The PDPA infighting intensified the conflict between KGB and the Soviet military. Soviet military officers supported Khalqis, while KGB endorsed Parcham. The conflict between KGB and the Soviet army officers expanded the political fragile in Afghanistan and impaired the Afghan state apparatus’s development (Kalinovsky, 2010).

The PDPA always undermined Soviet efforts and damaged the Soviet Union’s trust. In 1985, a KGB advisor persuaded an opposition leader to make peace with the government. The USSR promised that the PDPA would provide housing, employment and allow them to keep weapons. But the PDPA refused to offer them assistance and insisted on seizing the weaponry (Kalinovsky, 2010). In another case, the Soviet Union arranged a meeting to negotiate with the opposition leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. Out of Soviet surprise, an Afghan Air Force jet attacked the opponents, causing Massoud to call off the meeting (Kalinovsky, 2011).

Sometimes, the trouble took place because the USSR did not understand the situation in Afghanistan. The Soviet leaders were dissatisfied that Karmal and Najibullah did not share enough power with the opponents. It was not until 1987 Gorbachev understood that a wide range of national reconciliation policies was impossible for PDPA (but a moderate power-sharing was appropriate). If the PDPA shared too much power with their opponents, they would probably lose control because the Afghans disliked PDPA and the Soviet Union. When that happened, a new leader would probably hold an anti-Soviet attitude (Chernyaev, 1987). On the other hand, Soviet military war hawks rejected the reconciliation program, which was not conducive to national peace and stability (Kalinovsky, 2010).

The PDPA preferred to lay all the burden and responsibility to the advisers, but the Soviet advisers did not understand the situation in Afghanistan. After the intervention, the Soviets realized they should send more advisers for nation-building. However, most of the advisers did not receive systematic training and relied on their own experience. They were dogmatic and ignorant of local customs; even worse, they were arrogant and refused to learn about the local culture. For instance, an advisor had a mosque shut down with an excuse of Marxist dialectics. Such arbitrary behavior made Afghans hate the USSR; even the members of PDPA were dissatisfied with these advisers (Kalinovsky, 2010).

Military Failure

The military dilemma was another factor for Soviet failure. In 1979, the Soviet Army had not decided if they should fight against the opponents directly. Since January 1980, the Soviet forces were more drawn into skirmishes, and patriotic resentment amongst Afghans against the USSR increased (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). On 23 February, the Afghan opposition attacked the embassy and the camp, which became a turning point for the Soviet Union to cooperate with DRA forces against the opponents (Kalinovsky, 2011).

The opponents were mainly *mujahadeen*, the Muslims who were for the Islamic faith or the Muslim community (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2021). The *mujahadeen* guerrillas adopted a hit-and-run tactic with small units, so the Soviet forces could not operate counterinsurgency effectively. Subsequently, their quick and destructive ambushes were a considerable threat to the Soviet supply line. In March 1984, they destroyed 25 semi-trailers causing a fuel shortage in Kabul. As a result, the USSR had to deploy nearly one-third of the

troops to defend the road and reduce its operation army (Kalinovsky, 2011). Islam drove the *mujahadeen* to fight bravely. They attacked the Soviet forces closely at night, so the Soviets did not dare to use support weapons for fear of harming friendly troops. Besides, the *mujahadeen* fighters were good at recycling destroyed weapons and vehicles to make improvised ones. For example, they dug up mines planted by Russians, replanted them elsewhere, or used explosives for other tactical needs. The *mujahadeen* were so familiar with the terrain that they often attacked the Soviet troops from the unexpected side (Shaw & Spencer, 2003).

In contrast, the PDPA forces and the Soviet Army faced many problems. At the beginning of the war, the PDPA forces only had 40,000 soldiers, while their opponents had at least 80,000 (Peng & Huang, 2000). The DRA forces were weak in battles, and they could not resist the *mujahadeen* without the Soviet Army's help (Kalinovsky, 2011). Besides, some DRA officers were double-dealers. The Soviet army did not trust DRA forces; they either provided fake intelligence or informed the Afghans at the end of the operation. When things went wrong, they suspected and recriminated each other (Kalinovsky, 2011). The discipline of the Soviet army was also problematic, as a lot of unreliable central Asian soldiers frequently revolted. In September 1985, when the Soviet Army killed an Afghan, some central Asian troops were enraged to see their compatriot dying for an alien cause and fired at the Russians, destroying about 500 military vehicles. Moreover, many soldiers deserted or even sold equipment to the *Mujaheddin* (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999).

The Soviet Union adopted some strategies to deal with guerrilla warfare. They deployed highly mobile helicopters and battle planes to support friendly troops or bombard the *mujahideen*. However, according to Geoff Shaw and David Spencer (2003), the Soviet troops did not have enough helicopters against *mujahideen*. But the main problem was that the air forces could not help ground forces to occupy the area. The Soviet troops had not lost a battle in its war with the *mujahadeen*, but they faced the challenge of occupation. Once they retreated, the *mujahadeen* would reinfiltate. As a Soviet captain said, "Military operations began, soldiers and officers died ... when the operation was over, our forces would leave and everything would return to what it had been before" (Kalinovsky, 2011, pp. 37-40). In combat, airstrikes could effectively weaken the enemy. But it would sometimes destroy Soviet aid projects. Even worse, the success of the counterinsurgency cost many civilian lives, alienating the Soviet Union from Afghans (Kalinovsky, 2011).

A reporter recorded the atrocities of the Soviet Army,

We were struck by our cruelty in Afghanistan. We executed innocent peasants. If one of ours was killed or wounded, we would kill women, children, and old people as revenge. We killed everything, even the animals.... Once they entered a village where only old men and women with children were left, because whenever we went on a search-and-destroy mission all the able-bodied men had left the villages. The lieutenant ordered his platoon to herd all these women, children, and old men together into one room and throw in hand grenades. (Alexiev, 1988, p. 58)

The failure of the Soviet military operation not only pushed the Soviet Union to the opposite of the Afghan people but also stained humanity for political profit. The war was a moral defeat for the USSR.

Over time, the power of the opposition increased. The intervention united the *mujahideen* together. In May 1985, the seven Afghan *mujahideen* parties formed the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahideen (Peshawar Seven) against the Soviet Union and DRA forces (Kalinovsky, 2011). The living condition of the opponents also saw an improvement. In 1986, Massoud had a remarkable network of hospitals, schools, and services (Kalinovsky, 2011). The Soviet military operations in Afghanistan did not achieve the intended results.

Diplomatic Failure

The intervention of Afghanistan deteriorated the Soviet Union's international relations. In 1980, Soviet officer Bogomolov indicated five adverse consequences. At first, the intervention consolidated the anti-Soviet front. Secondly, USSR's influence on the Non-alignment Movement and the Islamic world was weakened. Thirdly, the intervention blocked Détente and destroyed the political prerequisite of arms control. Hence, the Soviet Union faced more economic and technological pressure. Finally, the intervention expanded the crack of the socialist countries (Bogomolov, 1980).

This invasion improved the relationship between the US and Pakistan because the Soviet Union and PDPA had become their common enemy. The US president Reagan saw anti-communism as a sacred responsibility and proposed the Reagan Doctrine. He opposed Soviet intervention and attempted to sabotage the PDPA regime. From 1982, Reagan increased military support to *mujahadeen* (Kalinovsky, 2011). From 1980 to 1987, the United States provided 1.8 billion US dollars in aid to the Afghan opposition. The *mujahadeen* acquired advanced weapons, body armor, and GPS. Since November 1986, America provided FIM-92 Stinger missile to the *mujahadeen*, which significantly improved their capability against the Soviet Air Force (Peng & Huang, 2000). For Pakistan, they protected the *mujahadeen* and sent them back to Afghanistan against PDPA and the Soviet Union (Baev, 2012). A complex terrain, tribal forces, and general confusion made the Soviet army impossible to seal the frontier, so guerrillas were free to cross the border (Halliday & Tanin, 1998). Diplomatic failure and military failure were closely connected. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan made America and Pakistan support *mujahadeen*, which eventually led to its military defeat.

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan left a dilemma for Soviet leaders. On the one hand, the Soviet Union's efforts in PDPA did not pay off. On the other hand, withdrawing from Afghanistan rendered the USSR was defeated, which would damage its reputation (Kalinovsky, 2011). When Brezhnev and Andropov tried to consolidate the PDPA regime, they were also seeking diplomatic reconciliation. However, the widespread distrust, frequent replacement of leaders, and the crash of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 made no real progress in peace negotiation. It was not until Gorbachev came to power in 1985 that the tension eased (Kalinovsky, 2011). Gorbachev advocated New Political Thinking, believing that the US and the USSR should reduce tension, oppose unclear war, and actively resolve regional conflicts (Chen, 2004). Gorbachev hoped to improve relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, but Reagan and Pakistan were still unmoved (Kalinovsky, 2011). In May 1987, Gorbachev finally realized that the USSR had no hope in Afghanistan. In 1988, he decided to make concessions to the US by declaring unilateral withdrawal (Kalinovsky, 2011). In April, Pakistan, America, the DRA, and the USSR signed the Geneva accords on Afghanistan. According to the accord, the Soviet Union would start withdrawal on 15 May, and the deadline was on 15 February 1989 (Peng & Huang, 2000). Gorbachev thought that America would stop supporting the *mujahadeen*. However, when Reagan realized that Gorbachev was eager to withdraw, he was more reluctant to make concessions (Kalinovsky, 2011). At last, Gorbachev gained nothing from his withdrawal.

Conclusion

In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan out of self-interest. They attempted to establish a regime loyal to the USSR, but they had not expected to be trapped in Afghanistan for ten years. After murdering Amin, the Soviet Union intended to consolidate the Karma regime from nation-building, military development, and

diplomatic reconciliation. Yet these plans all failed. Inadequate state power, party infighting, and the conflict between Afghans and the Soviets buried the possibility of nation-building development.

In the meantime, the Soviet military operation in Afghanistan was inefficient and resentful. The *mujahadeen* raided the Soviet Army with practiced guerrilla tactics. The Soviet forces called for airstrikes against the opponents, causing more civilian casualties. The DRA army and the Soviet Army's discipline was problematic, weakening the battle effectiveness and alienating local people. The Soviet Union won every battle in Afghanistan; nevertheless, it failed the war and could not stop the *mujahadeen*'s development and growth.

The USSR hoped for the West and the Islamic world to recognize Karmal or Najibullah's regime. But the intervention made the USSR notorious and isolated. The US and Pakistan supported the *mujahadeen* and did not believe that Moscow was looking for a deal. There was no progress in the negotiations until Gorbachev's unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan. Later, the withdrawal could not stop the US and Pakistan from supporting the *mujahadeen*. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan after 1979 failed catastrophically in political, military, and diplomacy.

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