Leaving Afghanistan

Enduring Lessons from the Soviet Politburo

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Back to the Future

The longest U.S. war officially came to an end in a subdued ceremony at the former headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul on 28 December 2014, more than thirteen years after the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation of this conflict-ridden country. Despite the departure of major U.S. and Coalition combat forces, a continued substantial role in Afghanistan and vested concerns for its future were far from over for the West. Ongoing commitments of U.S. and Coalition military advisers and counterterrorism forces, promises of long-term multilateral foreign aid, and, ultimately, enduring strategic interests in Afghanistan and the region ensure that the future of this troubled country will remain an important concern for U.S. policymakers and the international community. For more than fifteen years, Afghanistan has been embroiled in civil war. Rampant corruption, a resurgent Taliban, and a weak central government have stymied international efforts to stabilize the country and will continue to create daunting challenges in the years ahead. Since the withdrawal of major combat forces, the United States and the West have been forced to pursue their interests with diminished influence, relying on economic aid and security assistance to the nascent democratic Afghan government. They seek to avert conflict escalation but must prepare for contingencies in case of failure. The Soviet Union nearly 30 years earlier had a coherent and pragmatic withdrawal strategy from Afghanistan. The lessons of the Soviet withdrawal remain useful for U.S. policymakers and scholars.

In the midst of an ongoing insurgency, economic travails, and political strife on the ground in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, Soviet leaders also withdrew their combat forces from Afghanistan after a decade of costly occupation that had left them short of accomplishing their original ambitious objectives.

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Soviet leaders were well aware that the years following the withdrawal of their troops would determine whether they would achieve their latent minimalist goals as well as define the lasting legacy of their intervention. In top secret Politburo meetings on the eve of their troops' departure, senior Soviet leaders acknowledged: "Everybody understands that the main fight is still ahead" and that "the Afghan Side must thoroughly prepare for the decisive struggle to hold power."[1] Soviet intelligence and diplomatic leaders warned, "In case of [our] Afghan friends' misfortune, Islamic fundamentalists are most likely to come to power."[2]

The Soviet and U.S. interventions differed, but the fundamental challenges encountered by both superpowers—and the minimal objectives they ultimately settled on in response—were similar.[3] Both countries faced Afghanistan's unforgiving physical terrain, the complex social and religious fabric of Afghan society, a long history of resistance to foreign occupation, asymmetric insurgent tactics, traditional limitations on the reach of central government's rule in the countryside, and regional security dynamics involving cross-border safe-havens and support for insurgents. In turn, despite pursuing more ambitious early goals, both the USSR and the United States were obliged to reduce their policy objectives to that of disengagement and

1. "Regarding Measures Related to the Upcoming Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan," Top Secret (Special Folder) Memorandum to the CPSU Politburo from E. Shevardnadze et al., 23 January 1989, Excerpt from Minutes #146 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 24 January 1989, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii, Fond (F.) 89, *Opis'* (Op.) 14, *Delo* (D.) 39. The Afghanistan-related documents in Fond 89 appeared in English translation in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* in the mid-1990s and more recently in Katya Drozdova and Michael Samoilov, "Mining Afghan Lessons from Soviet Era" (MALSE), Translated Documents Collection, 2018 (subsequent references to documents in Fond 89 cite the MALSE translation, followed by the appropriate F., Op., and D. numbers; e.g., "MALSE, 89-14-39"); and D. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan," 30 January 1989, Report to the CPSU Politburo, Excerpt from Minutes #147 of the Meeting of the CPSU Politburo from 9 February 1989 (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-22.

2. USSR Foreign Minister E. Shevardnadze and KGB Chairman V. Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction" 11 August 1989, Report to the CPSU Politburo, Excerpt from Minutes #164 of the CPSU Politburo Session from 16 August 1989 (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-46.

3. The most notable difference between the two interventions is their strategic context: the Cold War in the case of the Soviet intervention and the post-September 2001 counterterrorism efforts that motivated the U.S.-led intervention. Whereas early Soviet strategies focused more on enemy-centric heavy-handed use of force, the United States focused more on population-centric counterinsurgency approaches aimed at winning hearts and minds. Both evolved into a similar mix of strategies, as is shown in Figure 1.

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withdrawal when attempting to prevent Afghanistan's turn to extremist rule. Figure 1 provides a comparative framework.[4]

In neither case did the counterinsurgent forces or the insurgents suffer defeat. Rather, facing a military stalemate and a lack of political will to continue their military campaigns, foreign political leaders chose to withdraw while pledging continued support for the Afghan central government they had helped set up and were now leaving behind.

Soviet-trained Afghan security forces held off the insurgents, and the Soviet-backed Afghan government survived for more than three years—empowered by sufficiently capable indigenous leaders and stabilizing measures of local autonomy. Local powers were won over with conditional aid for at least nominal loyalty to Kabul, and Soviet economic and security assistance propped-up the central government, which maintained itself in power until after the Soviet Union collapsed. Only after the USSR disintegrated did the Afghan government fall as a result of internal factional strife, key leader

4. We employ a structured-focused comparison methodology for systematic qualitatively rigorous case studies, a methodology established in political science to identify important factors for theory development and accumulate policy-relevant knowledge about the general phenomena of which the cases are informative instances. According to this methodology, the analysis is "structured" around general research questions and procedures, and it is "focused" by dealing only with certain aspects of historical experience examined within a comparative framework. This approach enables "contingent" or "analytic" generalizations such as lessons that may conceptually extend beyond a particular case. See Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014); Katya Drozdova and Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, "Reducing Uncertainty: Information Analysis for Comparative Case Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (September 2014), pp. 633–645; and Katya Drozdova and Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, *Quantifying the Qualitative: Information Theory for Comparative Case Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016). In contrast, much of the existing scholarship on the Soviet experience in Afghanistan uses different interpretive lenses and narrative approaches. For example, Rogers offers a straightforward chronology: Tom Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Analysis and Chronology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992). Roy argues for analyzing trends rather than events: Olivier Roy, "The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War," *Adelphi Paper*, Vol. 31, No. 259 (1991), p. 16. Saikal and Rasanayagam cover regional history: Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004); and Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005). Urban pursues a military focus: Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988). Bradsher focuses on politics while including military history: Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001). Dorronsoro focuses on Afghan society: Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Giustozzi focuses on government: Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan: 1978–1992* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000). Among the relatively few works to combine political science methods with Russian-language archives are Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); Sarah E. Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (London: Yale University Press, 1995); and Amin Saikal and William Maley, eds., *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

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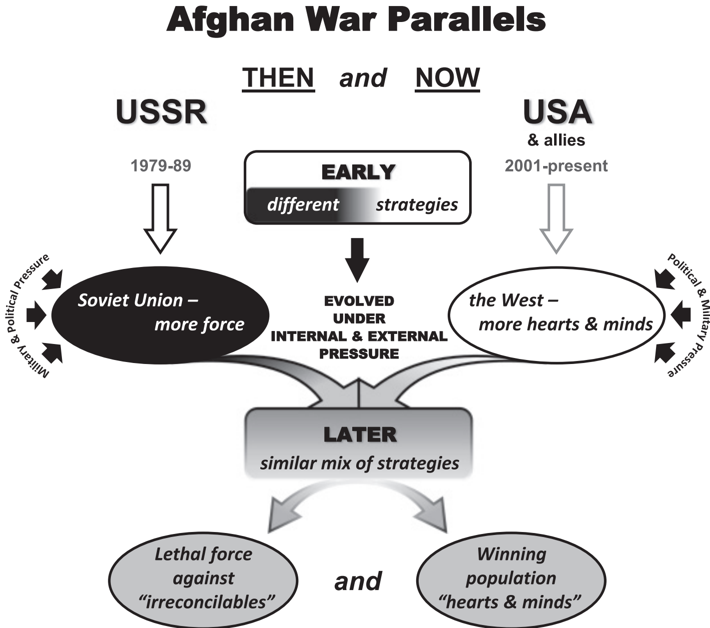

Figure 1. Relevance of Soviet Lessons: Afghan Wars in a Comparative Perspective.[5]

betrayals, untenable deals with insurgents, and the post-Soviet Russian government's decision to cut off aid. Both Afghan and Soviet leaders correctly anticipated the international security threats and destabilizing influence of radical Islamist rule should a more moderate tradition-based government fail.

Soviet and U.S. leaders grappled with many of the same uncertainties. At what pace can foreign forces leave without "pulling the rug out" from under the security situation? Will the indigenous national security forces have the capacity to secure their population? How can the government survive after foreign troops withdraw, and what are the most salient stability factors?

In this article, we examine how Soviet leaders assessed and responded to the evolving situation in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in late 1979. We focus on the formulation and implementation of their exit strategy—from the drawdown and departure of Soviet troops in 1989 through the continued provision of aid that facilitated the survival of the Soviet-backed Afghan government three years beyond Soviet withdrawal and even months after the USSR's

5. Figure 1 was created by Michael Samoilov, IntelSOC; reproduced with permission.

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dissolution in late 1991. Our central research question is: What structures and incentives constitute an effective exit strategy, how did it fare in the Soviet case, and what systematic lessons may apply to contemporary challenges faced by the West and potentially in future cases of great-power withdrawal?

Our assessments and analyses are based on records of the highest decision-making body of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the Politburo. These records include excerpts of transcripts of internal Politburo sessions and of meetings involving political, military, intelligence, economic, and diplomatic officials, as well as dialogues with Afghan and international participants.[6] We contribute to rich traditions of policy-relevant scholarship and archival research with our new, detailed compilation of Soviet exit strategy and our evaluation of this strategy for enduring lessons.[7] Our cross-sectional analysis of the Soviet case identifies multiple factors affecting the efficacy of

6. Copies of the original documents, culled mainly from the Russian Presidential Archive, have been available since late 1992 in Fond 89 at the archive in Moscow now known as the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI). Chadwyck-Healey microfilmed Fond 89 in the 1990s in conjunction with Stanford University's Hoover Institution, and we used the microfilms at the Hoover Institution Archives. (Many other universities and libraries in North America purchased copies of the microfilms from Chadwyck-Healey.)

7. In particular, our article fills two gaps in the extant research literature. First, by focusing on geopolitical strategy, we add new and complementary insights to the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Lester Grau on the Soviet military experience in Afghanistan. Whereas such prior work tends to use Soviet military sources and post-factum assessments, we draw on the policy discourse of the highest-level contemporary strategic decision-makers. See, for example, Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1995); Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Studies, 1998); Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Cress, trans. and eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); and Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April–June 2007), pp. 235–261. Second, although many other scholars have studied the Soviet experience and used Fond 89, not all of the useful information has been fully exploited, and no comprehensive explanation of Soviet exit strategy has been developed prior to this article. Recent studies that draw on Fond 89 documents among other archival sources include Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Vladimir Snegirev and Valerii Samunin, *Virus "A": Kak my zaboleli vtorzheniem v Afganistan* (Moscow: Rossiyiskaya Gazeta, 2011); Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Harper, 2009); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Douglas J. MacEachin, *Predicting the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: The Intelligence Community's Record* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2002); Mendelson, *Changing Course*; M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); and Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994). Valuable archival resources available online include, among others, large volumes of materials made available by the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and by the National Security Archive (NSArchive) at George Washington University, a private, non-governmental repository. Examples of English-language studies that have used

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the exit strategy and contributes to a better understanding and new theorizing about the more general phenomena of great-power retraction from foreign interventions.[8]

Our findings challenge widely held views of the Soviet experience of leaving Afghanistan as somewhat adrift—a defeat or an abject failure that was largely irrelevant to the West.[9] The internal mechanisms of Soviet disengagement (as gleaned from the Politburo archives) were more coherent and informative than often recognized. Contrary to popular perceptions, Soviet political leaders had a comprehensive exit strategy—which employed incentives and aid to enact a set of interconnected political, military, economic, and diplomatic initiatives.[10] Moreover, Soviet officials were realistic, adaptable, and relatively quick to find a serious partner in ruling Afghanistan. Only after leaders in Moscow articulated realistic goals for Afghanistan and identified the minimal strategic objective they sought were they able to devise and execute a strategy that achieved their objectives—at least as long as the Soviet Union existed and maintained the strategy. Short of such clear and limited

CWIHP and NSArchive collections include Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*; and Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*.

8. Our approach differs from and complements existing studies of "exits" that tend to focus on military redeployment or other more narrowly defined perspectives; for example, Robert Johnson and Timothy Clack, eds., *At the End of Military Intervention: Historical, Theoretical and Applied Approaches to Transition, Handover and Withdrawal* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Richard Caplan, *Exit Strategies and State Building* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012). In contrast, we explore geopolitical "exit strategy" as a set of activities and incentives across multiple domains, including political, military, economic, and diplomatic. Conceptually, our approach is informed by a theoretical view in political science and international political economy called the "strategic perspective." See, for example, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, SAGE Publications, 2014); and Jeffry A. Frieden, David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz, *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, Institutions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012). Our methodology enables us to draw theoretical insights from systematic case studies.

9. Problematic or incomplete accounts range from scholarly and policy to popular media and textbook coverage. For example, important academic work by Kalinovsky suggests that Soviet policy went "adrift" and that, "If Moscow had a clear Afghan policy in February 1989, we have no evidence of it. Indeed, it seems that Soviet leaders were unsure to what extent they needed to continue supporting Najibullah." See Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, pp. 178–179. Conversely, we point to evidence of ongoing policy and sound exit strategy. Some media and security/policy experts have incorrectly noted that the mujahideen defeated the Soviet force. See, for example, Quil Lawrence, "Chaos after Soviet Withdrawal Gave Rise to Taliban," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 7 December 2010, https://www.npr.org/2010/12/07/131884473/Afghanistan-After-The-Soviet-Withdrawal; and David Petraeus and Michael O'Hanlon, "Take the Gloves Off Against the Taliban," *The Wall Street Journal*, Eastern Ed. (New York), 21 May 2016, p. A9. Common textbook coverage also incorrectly suggests that international pressure forced the Soviet Union to withdraw. See Robert W. Strayer and Eric W. Nelson, *Ways of the World* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015), pp. 951–952. We explain how the Soviet Union decided to leave and developed a reasonable exit strategy.

10. An example of one popular perception is Thom Shanker's comment that "What mostly is remembered about the withdrawal is the Soviet Union's humiliation." Thom Shanker, "With U.S. Set to Leave Afghanistan, Echoes of 1989," *The New York Times*, 2 January 2013, p. A3.

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strategic goals, Soviet military successes succumbed to political failure and regional security deterioration.

The article begins with an assessment of how Soviet leaders evaluated their interests and identifies the ultimate policy goals and minimum realistic objectives they settled on at the time of withdrawal. They devised a viable strategy for achieving these goals and objectives. In the main section, we outline the multifaceted Soviet exit strategy articulated in CPSU Politburo records and highlight key lessons in areas of political governance, military and security assistance, economic and humanitarian aid, diplomacy and regional engagement, as well as management of information and perceptions. We conclude with a synthesis of the most salient lessons for U.S. policymakers as they confront the challenges of stabilizing Afghanistan in the years following the withdrawal of Western combat forces. We emphasize how this particularly instructive case can contribute to the development of the theory of great-power retraction from international intervention and occupation in general.

Soviet Policy Goals and Minimum Objectives in the Aftermath of Withdrawal

When invading Afghanistan in 1979, Soviet leaders wanted to maintain a friendly Communist Afghan state supportive of Soviet policy in the region. Large sectors of the Afghan population, however, rejected basic features of the Communist system and the perception that it was being imposed from outside. An increasingly violent insurgency emerged against the pro-Soviet Afghan regime. Brutal political persecution by Afghan Communist leaders intensified the resistance.[11] Insurgents exploited deep-rooted societal discontent and age-old opposition to foreign occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Better Late Than Never—Setting Realistic Objectives

Soviet goals for Afghanistan became less ambitious over time. Lack of progress on the ground, waning leadership commitment, and economic stringency in the Soviet Union combined to lower Soviet leaders' expectations of what was achievable. Military gains by the Soviet armed forces proved to be inconsequential as follow-on governance efforts failed across the captured territories.

11. See, for example, Sylvain Boulouque, "Communism in Afghanistan," in Stéphane Courtois ed., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. and ed. by Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 705–726.

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Resistance to economic and political changes and foreign troops' presence as well as government corruption and factional strife undermined prospects for enduring peace and stability.

Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Moscow in March 1985, he began changing the Soviet approach and adjusting expectations. The original invasion goals gave way to the priority of withdrawal short of military victory while leaving behind a non-hostile regime that would contain Islamist threats. These more modest goals reflected the Soviet realization that military accomplishments were short-lived apart from political gains. The new course toward withdrawal was solidified during a top secret CPSU Politburo meeting, chaired by Gorbachev on 13 November 1986, at which the highest Soviet policymakers reflected on the quagmire and lack of political progress. Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, the chief of the Soviet General Staff, soberly explained why military gains were insufficient:

> Combat activities in Afghanistan will soon reach seven years' duration. In this country, there is not one piece of land unoccupied by the Soviet soldier. Nonetheless, the majority of the territory remains in insurgent hands. . . . There is not one military objective that has been posed and not achieved, but there is no result. The problem is that military results are not being reinforced by political ones. There is power in the center; but not in the provinces. We control Kabul and provincial centers, but on the captured territory we cannot establish power. We have lost the fight for the Afghan people. A minority of the people supports the government. Our army has fought for five years. And still even now it is capable of maintaining the situation as it is. But under these conditions, the war will continue for a long time.[12]

Gorbachev was notably frustrated with the lack of progress made by the Soviet military-centric campaign and attempted to blame the military for political shortcomings:

> My intuition is that we must not waste time. . . . In Afghanistan, we have already been fighting for six years. Without changing approaches, we will be fighting there for 20–30 more years. This would cast a shadow on our abilities to influence the development of events. And we must tell our military that they have learned poorly in this war. What, maybe there isn't enough room for our General Staff to maneuver? Basically, we haven't found the keys to solving this problem. Are we going to wage war forever, signing off on our troops' inability to handle the situation?[13]

12. Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo Chaired by M. S. Gorbachev, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986, in MALSE, 89-14-41.

13. Ibid.

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Another member of the Politburo, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, demanded realistic goals:

> We must pose a strategic goal. Not long ago, we talked about sealing the Afghan border with Pakistan and Iran. Experience has shown that we have not been able to do this because of complex terrain and the existence of hundreds of mountain passes. Today we must clearly state that the strategic objective is to move toward ending the war. . . . It must be ended such that Afghanistan is a neutral state. Apparently, on our part, we had not taken into account all of the difficulties, when we gave the Afghan leadership our agreement to provide our military support. Social conditions in Afghanistan made it impossible to solve the problem in short order. We have not received internal support there. . . . Our strategic goal is—to make Afghanistan neutral, prevent its transition to the enemy camp. It is important, of course, that we also preserve what we can socially. But most importantly—to halt the war.[14]

Politburo documents reveal that, for Soviet leaders, the term "enemy camp" by this time did *not* mean its Cold War adversary, the United States. Instead, it referred to the "Islamic fundamentalists" whom they saw as a more formidable challenge in this evolved strategic context. Gorbachev agreed with Gromyko and insisted that the war end as soon as possible: "We must issue a statement on the necessity to end it within a year—maximum two years."[15]

Understanding the Regional and Strategic Context of Withdrawal

Long before Soviet combat forces withdrew in 1989, Soviet leaders viewed the rise of Islamism in the region as a serious threat, and one that was dangerously exacerbated by the situation in Afghanistan. Gromyko's successor as foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, and the chairman of the Soviet State Security Committee (KGB), Vladimir Kryuchkov, sent a joint memorandum to the Politburo stipulating that if extremists came to power in Kabul, this "turn of events, in addition to the consequences for our Afghan friends and our positions in Afghanistan, would have a negative impact on the situation in Central Asia, where Islamic attitudes of fundamentalist type are already strengthening today."[16] Many of the people living in the USSR's Central Asian republics shared historical, ethnic, and cultural ties with neighboring Afghanistan, including their Islamic faith, which the atheist Soviet state had brutally repressed

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. E. Shevardnadze and V. Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

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after vanquishing the anti-Soviet Basmachi jihadists in the 1920s and 1930s. Renewed intelligence reports concerned Soviet leaders: "Pakistani special services with the help of Afghan opposition groups are attempting to expand anti-Soviet pro-Islamic propaganda on USSR territory. Along with this, even ideas of reintroducing an Islamic state with a capital in Bukhara are being promoted."[17] In the 1980s, Bukhara was a major city in Soviet Uzbekistan, but in earlier centuries the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates had been glorious symbols of the Muslim world, memories of which still stirred jihad adherents, and Russian Tsarist forces had a long history of military engagements in the region.[18] The Khanate of Bukhara was the last Central Asian Islamic state to fall to Bolshevik rule in 1920. The last emir of Bukhara fled to Afghanistan, from whence he supported anti-Soviet activities until his death in 1944.[19] By 1989, Soviet Uzbek leaders recognized that "extremist elements in Uzbekistan . . . are watching [Afghanistan] very carefully," and they saw Afghanistan's potential fundamentalist turn as a "direct alarm" of threats to the entire region.[20]

The Politburo members who were responsible for stabilizing Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal also reasoned that "[t]he situation may be further complicated by Iran which, at least in the nearest perspective, will continue as a fundamentalist state. Fundamentalist attitudes are also strong in Pakistan and notably growing in Turkey."[21] Central to solving this challenge was finding a delicate balance of both international and inter-Afghan forces: "In terms of diplomacy, active work must be further pursued with Iran, Pakistan, as well as the USA and Saudi Arabia, in the direction of ceasing military activities in Afghanistan and facilitating inter-Afghan

17. Ibid.

18. See, for example, Vasilii Potto, "O stepnykh pokhodakh," *Voennyi Sbornik*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (April 1873), pp. 229–266; No. 5 (May 1873), pp. 5–36; No. 6 (June 1873), pp. 209–236; and No. 7 (July 1873), pp. 33–62. See also 'Abd al-Rahman (Amir of Afghanistan), *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, Vol. 1, ed. by Mir Munshi Sultan Mahomed Khan (London: John Murray, 1900), p. 150.

19. Yurii Tikhonov, *Afganskaya Voina Stalina: Bitva za Tsentral'nuyu Aziyu* (Moscow: Yauza, Eksmo, 2008); and Seymour Becker, *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865–1924*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2009).

20. As reported by Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov to the Politburo, based on their meetings with Islam Karimov and other Uzbek leaders en route to and from Kabul. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "About Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

21. Ibid.

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dialogue."[22] They also pondered "how to connect India to the task of settling" the conflict politically.[23]

The Soviet Union approached Afghanistan in a regional and global strategic context. Leaving Afghanistan was accurately perceived as a pivotal step in the USSR's long-term foreign policy and one that had domestic implications. Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost policies of greater openness allowed previously censored news about Afghanistan to reach the public at home. Knowledge of combat casualties added to growing dissatisfaction with protracted conflict as well as with declining standards of living in the USSR. Internationally, Soviet leaders wanted to avoid impressions of "running away" from Afghanistan. A perception of weakness would undermine their prestige and strategic standing amid nuclear arms control negotiations at a time when the Soviet economy was burdened by high military expenditures.[24]

Hence, even though Soviet officials were eager to pull all troops out of Afghanistan, they wanted to do so in a way that would leave the country stable enough to contain internal and external threats. Their solution hinged on the survival of the Kabul regime and a political settlement to end the war. These objectives were underscored in a memorandum to the Politburo on 11 August 1989 from Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and KGB head Kryuchkov:

> Our state interests are served by the preservation of the current regime in some form, even if transformed. . . . The line toward strengthening the viability of the current regime assumes further provision of broad, multifaceted support to the government and president of Afghanistan, including material support. Herewith, [we] must undoubtedly take into account that our assistance, while facilitating the maintenance of regime stability, thereby also lowers the opposition's chances for possible victory, and therefore increases the probability of achieving a political settlement. After all, protracted war in Afghanistan is not in our interest.[25]

"Achieving this will not be easy" but is "sufficiently realistic," Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov conceded: "It will demand most serious efforts not only by

22. Ibid.

23. Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986.

24. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989. Likewise, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan at a time when it was engaged in sensitive nuclear negotiations with Iran and was dealing with challenges affecting its domestic economy and international stature.

25. Ibid.

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the Afghans themselves, but also on our part."[26] Soviet leaders thus resolved to commit long-term resources to Afghanistan, justified by its geopolitical importance. The Soviet exit strategy was designed to channel these resources to recipients who would support Soviet strategic objectives. Soviet leaders expected waste and corruption and recognized that simply sending aid would be insufficient to accomplish their goals of preserving a non-hostile Afghan state while containing regional threats and advancing their global interests. An analysis of Soviet policy deliberations—combined with records of civilian and military aid as well as diplomatic efforts linked to military withdrawal—reveals a remarkably comprehensive exit strategy.

Developing and Executing an Exit Strategy: Enduring Soviet Lessons

The Soviet Union executed a carefully devised exit strategy that initially succeeded more than the international community expected. CPSU Politburo documents provide a greater understanding of this strategy—based on what the Soviet leaders saw, did, and said at the time as they planned, carried out, and assessed their work. Our analysis of these documents reveals key lessons and implications for what contemporary forces with similar minimalist goals can anticipate in the aftermath of military disengagement in comparably challenging environments.

The Soviet exit strategy's minimal objectives, once initially achieved, could be maintained as long as several critical requirements remained in place for the strategy to succeed. Our analysis of Soviet policymakers' deliberations, resource allocations, and facts on the ground identifies these requirements, which created a system of four interrelated components: (1) political governance, (2) military and security assistance, (3) economic and humanitarian aid, (4) diplomacy and regional engagement, including information operations. We discuss each of these, show how they interacted within the strategy, and indicate the enduring lessons, which are summarized by subsection titles below.

Political Governance

After years of failing to transform Afghanistan, Soviet leaders eventually sought solutions rooted in local traditions. These measures to let Afghans run

26. Ibid.

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their own affairs increasingly prevailed after hopes of foreign-brokered peace, modernization, and broad-based reconciliation faded.

Recognize the Limits of National Reconciliation in a Fragmented Society

Despite publicity to the contrary, reconciliation efforts largely failed. Soviet leaders learned the limits of a foreign occupier's power to reconcile Afghan factions. At a CPSU Politburo meeting on 13 November 1986, Gorbachev said: "there is a reconciliation concept, we approved it, but in practice the problem is not being solved." He then asked Akhromeev whether the Army "will solve it." The marshal replied "No, this can't be solved.[27] Other officials at the session pointed to underlying problems. First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Yuli Vorontsov asserted that Afghanistan was 80 percent rural and traditionally fragmented along tribal, ethnic, and religious lines. The population, he said, benefitted more from being left alone or even from insurgents than from the central government. "In eight years of the revolution [since Afghan Communists came to power]," he remarked,

> agricultural production increased by only 7 percent, the peasants' subsistence remains at the prerevolutionary level. As [the Afghan leader] Cde. Najib as well as [Afghan] Politburo member Zerai have admitted in conversation with me, the [Afghan Communist] party "has not yet reached the peasantry, the land-water reform has failed and has not been realized . . . the peasant has not received substantial material benefit from the revolution."[28]

Vorontsov continued,

> According to the statement by the [Afghan] Politburo member responsible for the economy and agriculture, Cde. Zerai, "for various reasons the peasants' status in the government's zone is in some ways worse than in the regions, where counterrevolution [the anti-government insurgency] is active." In response to

27. Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986. Despite the skepticism and failure of Gorbachev's own reconciliation efforts, decades later he recommended the same solution to the West, which has also failed to overcome Afghan society's deep-rooted factionalism. (Indeed, this factionalism has repeatedly been underappreciated by foreign forces, Soviet and Western alike.) This is but one example of how actual Soviet experiences in Afghanistan have been obfuscated by disinformation, propaganda, or inaccurate assessments. See Mikhail Gorbachev, "Soviet Lessons from Afghanistan," *International Herald Tribune: The Global Edition of the New York Times* (Paris), 5 February 2010, p. 6.

28. Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986, in MALSE. (Najib was the original name of the Afghan official who later became known as Najibullah, the last Soviet-supported Afghan central government leader, who was later murdered in grisly fashion by the Taliban.)

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> the question of how to explain this, Cde. Zerai told me that "the regions under counterrevolutionary control are better supplied with essential goods (there, these goods are delivered as contraband from Pakistan). This is the situation in Khost, Uruzgan and other border regions. Sometimes even a paradoxical situation occurs when peasants in the regions we control, said Comrade Zerai, receive goods not from us, but from the zone of armed bandits." Immediate measures must be taken regarding this highly important issue—measures to improve the peasants' situation in the government zone.[29]

In stark contrast to the central government's lack of rural support, insurgents gained and held control over rural areas, if not by coercive force and intimidation, then through more attractive means, such as providing for the population's basic needs unmet by Kabul, delivering swift—even if brutal—justice, and upholding traditions. Soviet leaders ultimately realized that sustaining a non-hostile Afghan state in the absence of foreign troops would require compromise on ideology and the coopting of existing power structures through aid and incentives.

Empower Competent Leadership with Autonomy to Lead

Preparation for political transition from large-scale Soviet interference to Afghan self-governance began nearly three years before the 1989 final troop withdrawal. After previously cycling through three Afghan leaders—from Nur Muhammad Taraki, who proved incompetent, and Hafizullah Amin, who showed competence but betrayed Moscow by killing Taraki, to Babrak Karmal, whose lack of both competence and loyalty eventually disappointed Soviet officials—Moscow finally found Najibullah acceptable. During the Politburo session on 13 November 1986, Vorontsov summed up Soviet confidence in Najibullah's ability to lead: "Many NDPA [People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan then in power] leadership members lack initiative, they became accustomed to waiting for recommendations from our advisers and became somehow without hands. Apparently, our advisers must have 'slapped their hands' too often early on. Comrade Najib is not like this."[30] Najibullah managed fickle Afghan politics by navigating complex ethnic, social, tribal, and political relations. The Soviet Union's next step was to let him lead. "He must be given freedom to make decisions," Shevardnadze told the Politburo.[31]

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

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"Najib must be given freedom," Dobrynin echoed.[32] With Vorontsov's caution, the Politburo agreed:

> He gives an impression of a talented and decisive person. He must be allowed to make decisions on his own, but we must keep an eye on him to make sure that, given his young age, he doesn't get carried away with extremes. He must have an opportunity to create his own "team."[33]

For the Soviet Union to permit a client—and a foreign surrogate at that—to exercise such a high degree of autonomy was unusual. That this move was taken at all underscored the need for extreme measures. Afghanistan prevailed even over Soviet ideological preferences, which gave way to strategic interests tied to settling the conflict.

Acting on this implicit mandate, Najibullah largely abandoned Communist ideology and turned his attention instead to exploiting Afghan ethnic politics and cultural traditions to consolidate his leadership and stabilize the government. He appealed to Islam and abandoned atheist Communist dogma, which was previously enforced through persecution of believers and religious authorities. He also reinstated the *Loya Jirga*, the traditional council of Afghan tribal elders that effectively governed the tribes and influenced local power brokers.

Induce Local Powerholders to Support Government Stability

Another crucial stabilizing measure taken by the Soviet Union was the creation of incentives for local powerholders to align with the central government or, at least, refrain from rebelling against it. Afghan leaders believed that regime survival was threatened more by internal strife than by anti-government insurgents. On 30 January 1989—two weeks before the 15 February withdrawal deadline—Afghan State Security Minister Ghulam Faruq Yaqubi warned the Soviet Politburo that the insurgents "will not be able to defeat the people's order through military force, 'if nothing happens with us internally.'"[34] Soviet policymakers learned that stability in Afghanistan, with its many independently functioning tribes and social formations, required devolving power to local authorities and balancing competing interests.

In a move uncharacteristic for the centralized USSR, Soviet leaders ended up supporting the devolution of power in order to stabilize Afghanistan. The

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan," 30 January 1989 (see note 1 supra).

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CPSU Politburo decided to create the autonomous alliances of self-interested parties that were described in a report of 11 August 1989 from Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, based on their working visit to Afghanistan:

> Creation of local coalitions and regional agreements may turn out to be sufficiently achievable at this stage, which later may grow into a system of agreement-based relations between the center (Najibullah's government in Kabul) and near-autonomous as well as autonomous local formations.[35]

Under this approach, local formations had an incentive to secure and stabilize their own areas, and the central government had an incentive to maintain local autonomy provisions. Conditional aid from Kabul aligned local incentives with regime survival, reinforcing the system. Najibullah and his close associates used Soviet aid to stabilize Afghanistan in ways more consistent with Afghan cultural and traditional norms. This included efforts to balance many groups and competing interests under traditional Pashtun central leadership—allowing various groups certain autonomy but preventing any one from gaining so much power that it would rise above all others to destabilize the system.

Alignment of incentives turned aid into an effective policy lever. Soviet leaders used it to influence intra-Afghan factional strife to their advantage by clearly demarcating who would or would not receive aid. On 30 January 1989, Soviet Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov emphasized:

> In conjunction with the pronouncement [quoted above] by Cde. Yaqubi, and to all other Afghan participants of our discussions, it was clearly stated that the Soviet Union unequivocally supports the regime headed by President Najibullah in Afghanistan. Any change of the existing authority will not be recognized by us, support and aid will not be provided to it as well.[36]

This included economic aid to feed the people and help Kabul sustain the country's precarious balance of power in its favor. Najibullah's position also necessitated continued military aid to enforce order in the absence of Soviet troops. Soviet conditional aid, both economic and military, thus bolstered the survival of Najibullah's regime by helping him align the incentives of lower-level officials not to defect.

35. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

36. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan," 30 January 1989 (see note 1 supra).

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Focus on Critical Transition Period but Prepare for the Long Term

Measures to empower competent leaders and bolster regime survival paid off during and after the transition. Only six months after withdrawal, an on-the-ground assessment by senior Soviet leaders, including the foreign minister and the KGB head, documented significant progress in a report from 11 August 1989:

> Clearly visible is the growth of [Afghan] self-sufficiency, self-confidence, ability to evaluate the situation correctly, i.e. all that, which they lacked during our military presence in Afghanistan.
>
> This process is developing uneasily, of course; [Afghans] must overcome the difficulties related to the absence of necessary experience and the habit, which has taken root over many long years, of receiving already made decisions from our advisors. But the initial, most critical from this perspective period of transition from one state to another has already passed, and now Afghan friends are becoming more established as people who are themselves responsible for the situation. . . .
>
> The entire sum of presently available information, including opinions and assessments of the Afghan leadership as well as Soviet representatives in Kabul, speaks to increasing impact of factors that work to the regime's advantage. During the period of Soviet troops' presence in Afghanistan, these factors largely remained as if in the background. The main factor among them is the growth of patriotic feelings and strengthening of national self-awareness of the Afghans, whose sharp tip increasingly points against interference by Pakistan, the USA and Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Earlier, these attitudes were subdued by Soviet military presence and, to a certain degree, thanks to our adversaries' propaganda, were turning against such presence.[37]

However, Afghan political elites anticipated that decisive struggle would be waged after the departure of foreign forces. Najibullah had warned about this, as noted in a Soviet memorandum of 24 January 1989: "The opposition has currently even somewhat lowered its military activity, accumulating forces for the subsequent period. Cde. Najibullah reckons that, following the Soviet troops' withdrawal, the opposition intends to embark on actions

37. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

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simultaneously in several key directions."[38] Substantial Soviet military assistance was deemed necessary for overcoming the expected rebel surge:

> Afghan comrades are voicing their understanding of the decision to withdraw Soviet troops and reconfirming it, but . . . soberly assessing the situation, are noting, that they will not be able to fully do without our military assistance. . . . The most important, as our Afghan friends underscore, is to withstand even the first three-four months after the departure of Soviet troops, and then the situation may gradually begin to change in their favor.[39]

Military and security assistance therefore figured prominently in the Soviet Union's exit strategy.

Military and Security Assistance

Soviet leaders pledged comprehensive military aid—ranging from material support to training, mentoring, advising, and morale-boosting efforts—which the Afghan government sought and welcomed as a practical necessity.[40] Politburo documents detail the structure and training of Afghan forces. When matched against lists of military equipment deliveries and other aid, political discussions also reveal the priority the Soviet Union placed on focusing primary capacity-building efforts.

Creating an Elite Afghan Commando Force Followed by Conventional Military and Local Forces

The top priority was the creation of a highly capable, reliable, and lethal Afghan commando force—a *spetsnaz*-type "special guard." This force was intended to be small and highly selective. It received a disproportionate share of state-of-the-art weaponry and equipment, which was mostly provided by the Soviet KGB. Special guards were highly capable, "maneuverable groups [with] on-call shock assets—artillery, battle helicopters" equipped with modern weaponry, intelligence, and reconnaissance assets, according to CPSU

38. E. Shevardnadze et al., "Regarding Measures Related to the Upcoming Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan," 23 January 1989, memorandum approved per excerpt from Point #146 of the CPSU Politburo Session from 24 January 1989 (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-16.

39. Ibid.

40. Politburo records meticulously document Soviet provisions. Highlights include aircraft, hardware, vehicles, radio stations, and other communications equipment, as well as intelligence and reconnaissance assets, propaganda bombs, and other items from Scud missile launchers to socks.

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Politburo records from 30 January and 22 July 1989.[41] Their primary purpose was to handle difficult combat operations, engaging insurgents wherever they were found en masse.

Afghanistan's conventional military was the next priority, and this effort was supported mainly by the Soviet Defense Ministry. The military was to be large enough and of sufficient capability to project power and serve as a deterrent or, in serious hostilities, as a stopgap measure until the more capable commandos could be deployed. Police and security organs also needed to be large enough for the central government to project power. However, these units were given only relatively meager amounts of low-quality equipment by the Soviet Internal Affairs Ministry, and expectations for the quality of these forces were lower than for the commandos. Tribal formations and other armed detachments provided local security and reserves.[42] Local ethnic militias were particularly loyal and motivated when defending their own people and lands but were less reliable if sent to other places. To facilitate compliance, these military arrangements cohered with the Soviet strategy of political reciprocity, whereby support for the regime was rewarded with greater local autonomy.

Soviet officials anticipated leaving behind substantial Afghan armed forces. At the time of withdrawal planning in late 1986, Akhromeev estimated that the government of Afghanistan already had "significant armed forces: 160 thousand people in the army, 115 thousand—in *Sarandoy* [Internal Affairs Ministry] and 20 thousand—in state security organs."[43] These numbers fluctuated over time. By the 1988 transition—one year before the withdrawal—Afghan armed forces numbered approximately 342,300 in total—a number that included 148,000 Ministry of Defense troops, 80,300 KhAD state security operatives (11,500 of whom were special guard), and 105,000 *Sarandoy* troops, as well as tribal, local, and other formations. By 1989, the estimates were around 329,000, rising to 400,000 by 1990.[44] Desertions tended to far outweigh combat losses.[45]

41. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan" (see note 1 supra); and Excerpt from Minutes #163 Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 22 July 1989, "About Additional Supply of Spec[ial]-Property to the Republic of Afghanistan" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-39.

42. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan" (see note 1 supra).

43. Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986, in MALSE.

44. Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan*, Table 27, p. 266.

45. Alexandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i doblest' Afgana* (Moscow: Iskona, 1995), Prilozhenie 14, "Poteri lichnogo sostava afganskoi armii."

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Create Incentives for Afghan Forces to Defend Themselves

Soviet troops trained and equipped Afghan forces and then turned over a number of major population centers for the Afghans to defend, including the garrisons of Jelalabad, Gardez, Ghazni, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, Kunduz, and Faizabad, with critical support from Soviet aviation assets. This "tough love" transition compelled Afghan forces to defend themselves as well as civilians in the cities, which they did.

On 30 January 1989, two weeks before the official withdrawal deadline, Defense Minister Yazov relayed to the CPSU Politburo his assessment of the capabilities of Soviet-trained and -equipped Afghan security forces based on his working visit to Afghanistan on 27 and 28 January:

> We heard reports from representatives of the USSR Defense Ministry, the chief [Soviet] military adviser in the Republic of Afghanistan, the command of the 40th army, and the heads of other Soviet agencies. These reports indicated that the military-political leadership of the Republic of Afghanistan, in spite of certain escalation of the circumstances in numerous districts of the country, connected with the stirring up of rebel activities, as well as with the beginning of the final stage of the withdrawal of Soviet troops, is stably controlling the situation in the country.[46]

Yazov also pointed out that Afghan government forces, while conceding influence to anti-government insurgents in many rural areas, had retained control over key garrisons and other critical infrastructure in major cities: "More than half-a-year has elapsed since Soviet troops were withdrawn from the garrisons of Jelalabad, Gardez, Ghazni, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, Kunduz, Faizabad, however the rebels after all were unable to realize their plans for their capture."[47] Yazov emphasized the importance of capable and loyal leaders to the success of the Afghan forces responsible for providing internal security in the wake of the Soviet departure:

> Government troops are steadfastly defending these garrisons and are holding onto the airfields. All of this demonstrates that, in the presence of unified firm leadership, the squadrons and units of the [Afghan] republic's Ministry of Defense, MGB [Ministry of State Security] and MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs], having prepared cadres, modern weaponry and various reserves, are able to solve the challenges of the reliable defense of the [Afghan] regime on their

46. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan" (see note 1 supra).

47. Ibid.

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> own. Besides that, a significant reserve in solving this challenge could be represented by the armed detachments of NDPA members and tribal formations.[48]

Soviet air support was crucial for Afghan forces, allowing them to prepare their own air escorts and pilots. Soviet aircraft specialists were brought into Afghanistan to help the Afghans repair damaged aircraft.[49] Soviet forces continued to fly in supplies and aid to Kabul and also began providing air-power capability in the form of Su-22 bombers, MiG-21 fighters, An-12 military transport planes, and Mi-35 multipurpose attack helicopters. Arrangements were made to train Afghan pilots and pilot trainers, as well as commanders and crews for missile and tank units and other personnel, on Soviet territory. Various parts, equipment, fuel, weaponry, and ammunition were regularly supplied to Afghanistan until the USSR collapsed.[50]

Soviet Politburo archives include detailed reports on the quantities and types of weapons supplied by Moscow. This information sheds light on the broader strategy Soviet leaders developed for defending the government they left behind in Kabul against insurgents who had access to rural and cross-border safe havens. Soviet weapons systems were less discriminating and more prone to inflict collateral damage, but they were effective against insurgents hidden in caves or dispersed across vast areas. Scud missiles and rocket launchers such as the Uragan could also reach into Pakistan, a point of concern in Islamabad, which helped deter major external interference and pressure Pakistan to curb its support of insurgents. Internally, the presence of devastating Soviet weapons helped dissuade the Afghan populace from harboring insurgents and bolstered government forces, as the CPSU Politburo discussed on 24 January 1989:

> Serious meaning is given by the Afghan side to having at their disposal such powerful types of weapons as R-300 missiles and Uragan multiple rocket launchers. On these issues, obviously, a differentiating approach is needed regarding one or another type of weapon, but [we ought to] hold the general line toward fulfilling the requests of our Afghan friends as fully as possible. It must be kept in mind

48. Ibid.

49. Memorandum from Army General M. Moiseev to the CPSU Politburo, Secret Letter, 21 March 1990, in MALSE, 89-2-10.

50. Ibid; Excerpt from Minutes #152 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 10 April 1989, "Regarding Providing Additional Assistance to the Republic of Afghanistan in April-May of 1989" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-30; and Excerpt from Minutes #163 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 22 July 1989, "On Additional Supplies of Special Property to the Republic of Afghanistan," in MALSE, 89-10-39.

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> that the very fact of having such types of weaponry is strongly sustaining our friends psychologically, [and] giving them certainty about their strengths.[51]

To support the transition, Soviet military forces continued counterinsurgency operations aiming by "military means to go on proving to the opposition the futility of [its] calculations toward continuing the war."[52]

Meanwhile, to secure the strategic route used for their own withdrawal as well as for supplying the Afghans, Soviet officials arranged for safe passage between Kabul and the USSR via Uzbekistan (Khairaton). As Yazov explained on 30 January 1989:

> During the time of my stay in Kabul, most attention was paid to additional assessment of the unfolding military situation in Afghanistan and to providing assistance to the Afghan Side in solving defense issues, above all pertaining to the safeguard of the strategic highway Khairaton-Kabul, as well as the restricted area around the capital and the capital airfield. . . .
>
> [Senior Afghan officials] understand as one of the main tasks for the preservation of people's rule—that they must reliably provide for the functioning of the Khairaton—Kabul highway and the organization of consistent transport on it of material goods, coming in from the Soviet Union. They report that . . . measures have been taken, directed at the timely replacement of Soviet troops previously responsible for these tasks. . . .
>
> I stated that the Soviet side was ready to provide the Afghan comrades with comprehensive aid in organizing such safeguard by transferring of guard pickets and posts, created by our forces, with their regimental weaponry, communication system, stores of all necessary types of material goods and other property.[53]

Soviet forces then withdrew from major cities, turning them over to the Afghans, and consolidating troops into fewer, larger, and better-defensible (e.g., on higher elevation) rural bases designed to draw opposition forces into the open. The aim was to deny the insurgents their preferred asymmetric advantages, such as the tactic of hiding among civilians, while simultaneously giving emphasis to the Soviet forces' superior firepower. A counter-tactic of the insurgents was to wait for the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops before

51. Excerpt from Minutes #146 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 24 January 1989, "On Activities in Conjunction with the Upcoming Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-16.

52. E. Shevardnadze and D. Yazov, "On the Provision of Additional Military Aid to the Republic of Afghanistan," 3 August 1989 Report to the CPSU Politburo (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-41.

53. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan" (see note 1 supra).

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stepping up their combat operations. Although this may be seen as a threat, it gave Afghan security forces more time and space to develop their capabilities, still largely working toward their advantage, albeit at greater risk.

By spurring Afghan security forces to defend population centers and vital roadways in order to survive themselves, and by allowing the Afghan government to claim the credit, the Soviet exit strategy linked security incentives with political and aid rewards within a self-reinforcing system capable of functioning without a Soviet presence.

Plan for Contingencies and Continued Special Operations

In January 1989, the CPSU Politburo approved the assessment by Soviet diplomatic, defense, and KGB leaders that, "after the completion of withdrawal of Soviet troops, a strong escalation of the situation in the country cannot be ruled out, in particular in its northern provinces, as a result of actions of armed Afghan opposition."[54] In response, Soviet leaders made contingency plans for special operations to continue—including combat, aid distribution and protection from strategic threats—on the eve of withdrawal (24 January 1989):

> Based on appeals from the leadership of Afghanistan and in accordance with the CPSU Central Committee . . . toward the goals of providing security of the Soviet Union's state border and stabilization of the situation in northern provinces of Afghanistan, USSR KGB Border Guards numbering up to 8 thousand were sent as far as 100 kilometers into the country, including provincial centers except for the cities of Herat, Kunduz and Faizabad.
>
> Building on connections with authorities, local influential figures, and the population, Soviet Border Guards have actively participated in the conduct of combat operations against irreconcilable bands of armed opposition, provided cooperation in the distribution of the gratis Soviet aid and the solution of some population-economic problems, thwarted provocations at the Soviet-Afghan border.[55]

The strategic importance of the shared border and concern about "extraordinary circumstances threatening the security" of the USSR induced Soviet leaders to plan for the KGB Border Guards to carry out operations along and

54. E. Shevardnadze, D. Yazov, V. Kryuchkov, "On Using the KGB Border Guards of the USSR to Provide Support to the Republic of Afghanistan After the Withdrawal of the Limited Contingent of the Soviet Army," 23 January 1989, attached to Excerpt from Minutes #146 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 24 January 1989 "Question of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, USSR Ministry of Defense, and USSR State Security Committee" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-4.

55. Ibid.

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even deep inside Afghanistan, including military support to the Afghan government, "medical and other assistance to residents of near-border population locales of Afghanistan during the course of natural disasters," and the facilitation of economic aid.[56] Meanwhile, the Afghan government's own ability to maintain order depended crucially on material help.

Boost Morale with Material Support

Military aid from the Soviet Union provided Afghan security forces with an enduring material advantage over the less well-trained and -equipped (but potentially more motivated) mujahideen insurgents, and it also offered a significant morale boost and psychological edge to Afghan forces after Soviet troops had withdrawn. A top-secret memorandum from high-ranking officials to the CPSU Politburo on 23 January 1989 emphasized that these two purposes of Soviet aid were not lost on the Afghans: "This aid, in their [Afghan comrades'] opinion, . . . [offers] serious support in a practical and psychological sense."[57] Soviet leaders gave priority to the development of competent Afghan security forces and the continued provision of military assistance after their own troops withdrew. They saw such steps as a necessary but not sufficient condition for Afghan forces to succeed. The loyalty of these forces, along with that of political elites, would prove to be the key factor in determining regime survival. Recognizing this risk, Soviet officials channeled their economic and humanitarian aid to bolster loyalty to the regime they supported.

Economic and Humanitarian Aid

Soviet policymakers used aid as a tool to accomplish strategic goals both during and after the withdrawal of Soviet military forces. Although much of Soviet assistance was provided gratis or on terms very favorable to recipients, it was not mere charity. Rather, the aid was carefully structured and disbursed to help attain strategic objectives. Documents submitted to the CPSU Politburo show that aid was conditioned on maintaining support for the Afghan government and was designed to create incentives for stability and other outcomes deemed to be in the USSR's long-term interests. Not all of these designs came to fruition. In particular, logistical challenges stifled timely delivery of aid, and the result in some cases was that perishable goods went to waste. Additionally, the Afghan government's dependence on aid generated pressure

56. Ibid.

57. Shevardnadze et al., "On Activities in Conjunction with the Upcoming Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan," 23 January 1989 (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-16.

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for accelerated deliveries of even more resources into often corrupt or murky distribution channels. The Soviet Union ended up providing more aid than anticipated; and Afghan officials continued to request more.

Tie Aid Mechanisms and Incentives to Desired Strategic Outcomes

Soviet aid was effective when it reinforced the exit strategy. The USSR developed a "method of effective aid."[58] Soviet officials sought to integrate aid incentives with the political and military aspects of the exit strategy by allowing Afghan leaders to distribute aid as they saw fit—as long as the distribution was consistent with Soviet goals of regime preservation. Shevardnadze and Yazov told their colleagues:

> With regard to the recipients of the supplied materiel and hardware, it appears justifiable that Afghan leaders should distribute these supplies to ministries and agencies, based on the practical advisability and on the tasks facing them.[59]

The Soviet Union's aid levers ranged from positive monetary and material reinforcement, to mutually beneficial import-export relationships, to political pressure in the form of aiding only those aligned with the government's survival. After Soviet forces withdrew, Soviet leaders continued to see aid as a key indirect means for reaching their strategic goals:

> Unlike in the past [during the military intervention], we are now using for the achievement of these important goals, not direct involvement in Afghan affairs, but a method of effective aid to our friends in the neighboring country for the defense and stabilization by the Afghans themselves of a regime that is friendly to us.[60]

When deciding on specific aid packages, Soviet officials designed incentives that would foster lasting self-help and mutual cooperation "toward the goal of creating normal conditions for trade in 1992 and subsequent years," as Soviet Minister of Foreign Economic Relations Konstantin Katushev emphasized in a memorandum on 31 July 1991 to the Soviet deputy prime minister who served as the chief Soviet representative on the permanent intergovernmental Soviet-Afghan commission on economic cooperation:

58. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989, in MALSE.

59. Excerpt from Minutes #164 Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 5 August 1989, "Regarding the Provision of Additional Military Aid to the Republic of Afghanistan" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-41.

60. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989, in MALSE.

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> The resolution of the USSR Council of Ministers from 8 April 1991 #148 has provided exporters with certain incentives (freedom from payment of the export tax, reduction of the income tax, realization by the Soviet [Ministry of Trade] for enterprises-exporters of imported consumer goods and foodstuff on the account of means of their clearing foreign currency funds etc.). . . . [Further measures] envision freeing suppliers from taxes on export, providing discount in the amount of 50% from the normal bank rate when crediting exports etc. . . . [and negotiating conditions of] cooperation in the building of industrial and other objects, including oil extraction and oil-processing, within the framework the long-term cooperation program.[61]

Import-export relationships were established as a form of foreign aid tied to expectations of domestic economic benefit. In cases such as purchasing Afghan natural gas, however, agreements were not necessarily economically efficient for the Soviet Union, which possessed abundant natural resources of its own. Instead, the goal was to stimulate the Afghan economy. Even barter operations were approved. Soviet Politburo records show that, even though Afghan obligations were only partly met, Afghan requests and pressure to increase aid mounted considerably in the post-withdrawal years.[62]

Provide Essentials to Keep the Government in Power

The Soviet government sought to stabilize the Afghan government and calm the Afghan population by sending economic and humanitarian aid that could provide sustenance to people and help secure their allegiance, especially in Kabul and other locations critical to the regime's survival. Much of this aid was free or given without expectation of loan repayment. Such generosity was motivated by Soviet leaders' concern not only about insurgent military actions but also about an economic blockade of Kabul by insurgents "to elicit discontent and even direct revolt by the population," which was "already being perpetrated by means of robberies, intimidation and bribery of cargo drivers by the opposition forces."[63] Comprehensive aid thus included a wide array of necessities, from grain, meat, and other food items to basic consumer products, fuel, and transport vehicles for hauling cargo, together with security arrangements.

61. K. Katushev, "On Certain Urgent Questions of Trade-Economic Cooperation with the Republic of Afghanistan," 31 July 1991, in MALSE, 89-22-78.

62. "Appeals of the Afghan Side, Voiced during the Time of Stay of the CPSU Delegation in [Afghanistan] Headed by Yu. A. Manaenkov," 31 July 1991, submitted to the CPSU International Department on 2 August 1991, in MALSE, 89-22-78.

63. Shevardnadze et al., "On Activities in Conjunction with the Upcoming Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan," 23 January 1989 (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-16.

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The Khairaton-Kabul highway was the main land route used in delivering supplies and withdrawing combat troops. Another major supply line was the so-called "air-bridge to Kabul," an aviation route provided by Soviet forces. Aviation and logistics support efforts not only facilitated military resupplies and combat operations but also enabled the distribution of economic and humanitarian aid. Underscoring the critical importance of logistics, aid was often squandered as it awaited shipment, which exacerbated the already troubled bilateral relationship as well as the volatile situation in Afghanistan. The CPSU Politburo was briefed about these problems on 28 July 1989:

> At present because of the unsatisfactory organization by the Afghan side of the outgoing movement of cargo from the port and transit base in Khairaton, more than 40 thous. tons of foodstuff accumulated, as well as a significant quantity of soap. Because of the lengthy storage period, these goods are spoiling and losing marketable appearance and quality. This especially relates to the 10.4 thous. tons of edible fat located there since last year.[64]

The scale and nature of supplies reflected the formidable problems faced by Afghanistan, which lacked even basic foodstuffs on a regular basis. These challenges revealed critical breakdowns of the central government despite more than a decade of significant support, as Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov emphasized in August 1989:

> During meetings with Cde. Najibullah and the leadership of the republic and armed forces, the Afghan friends have expressed gratitude to the Soviet Union for the large selfless assistance and spoken about the necessity of preserving it at the existing level, underlining that at the present operations to counter the armed opposition are possible only because of this aid. . . . However there are problems, which the Afghan side is incapable of solving without additional material aid on the part of the Soviet Union.[65]

Afghanistan's problems were not only internal. The Afghan government faced multiple strategic actors in the region that had their own, often competing, designs on Afghanistan's future. In turn, the Soviet government tried to

64. Excerpt from Minutes #163 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 28 July 1989, "On the Provision of Additional Economic and Financial Aid to the Republic of Afghanistan" (Top Secret), in MALSE, 89-9-9. The document notes that before the end of 1989 the Soviet Union will have provided "14.9 thous. tons of edible fat, 10 thous. tons of rice, 11.6 mln. chicken eggs and 17.6 thous. tons of soap."

65. Excerpt from Minutes #164 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 5 August 1989, "Regarding Providing Additional Military Aid to the Republic of Afghanistan."

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shape this strategic environment through diplomacy and other efforts to help Afghanistan survive on Soviet terms.

Diplomacy and Regional Engagement

As part of the exit strategy, Soviet leaders were cognizant of the larger strategic context affecting the region and their country's standing in the world. They began planning their withdrawal with an appraisal of its regional and strategic import. As time progressed and challenges mounted, they attempted to save face by securing favorable terms of withdrawal through the international Geneva Accords, as well as by shaping perceptions through information operations and propaganda pursued at all levels from Afghan villages to the United Nations (UN). Soviet policymakers eventually claimed to have completed their self-appointed "internationalist duty" of helping Afghanistan, and they withdrew under the cover of a victory ceremony as the troops crossed the border over the "Friendship Bridge" and back into the USSR.

Use Diplomacy and International Mechanisms to Facilitate Constructive Afghan-Pakistan Relations

The Soviet withdrawal deadline was formalized as part of the 1988 Geneva Accords—a UN-facilitated series of agreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan, undersigned by the United States and the Soviet Union. In essence, Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to stop interfering in each other's affairs and to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict, whereas the United States agreed to halt support for the mujahideen and the Soviet Union committed to withdrawing all of its troops by 15 February 1989. Although many observers recognized the difficulty of enforcing Pakistan's cooperation, the agreement would have been infeasible without the involvement of Pakistan, a key shadow player in the Soviet Afghan war. Throughout the war, leading Sunni mujahideen had maintained their political headquarters, recruiting grounds, and supply lines in and around Pakistan (something that happened again during the U.S.-led Afghan war). On 24 January 1989, Soviet leaders discussed Pakistan's involvement in the conflict:

> Pakistani border troops are actively participating in military operations on Afghan territory. Nearby Afghan regions are being shelled from Pakistan, which is the source of a continuous flow of weaponry, and armed bands also cross over unimpeded from there. In Peshawar and other cities, as before, Afghan opposition parties' headquarters, training centers, and bases also continue to function unimpeded. All this is done by inertia, started back during Zia ul-Haq's

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> time. B[enazir] Bhutto is unlikely to be able to change this situation in the near future.[66]

This was not a new problem, nor was it one that could be easily solved. When the CPSU Politburo met on 13 November 1986 and approved the decision to withdraw, Marshal Akhromeev warned that "50 thousand Soviet soldiers are deployed to seal the borders, but they are unable to seal all the channels used in transporting cargo across the border. . . . We must approach Pakistan."[67]

Leaving the Afghan government intact and keeping regional conflicts contained required Pakistan's engagement, and the Geneva Accords provided some levers in the form of international pressure. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov explained:

> Thanks to Geneva and the Afghan government's subsequent external political steps, which we supported, Pakistan and the USA ended up in an unfavorable situation in the eyes of the international community. Responsibility for the continued war in Afghanistan is being placed on them. This became especially evident during the UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan in April 1989. The international prestige of the RA [Republic of Afghanistan] has noticeably grown, which, in turn, prevented the so called "transitional government" of the opposition from reaching broad-based recognition by other states.[68]

Anticipating that diplomatic influence might not be sufficient, Afghan leaders also sought, and the Soviet Union provided, "fiery influence"—missiles capable of reaching Pakistan's territory—which facilitated compliance by providing a credible threat.[69] This "deterrent influence upon the Afghan opposition and Pakistan" explicitly linked the diplomatic and military aspects of Soviet exit strategy.[70] The Soviet documents show that the provision of such weapons

66. Excerpt from Minutes #146 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 24 January 1989, "On Activities in Conjunction with the Upcoming Withdrawal of Soviet Troops from Afghanistan."

67. Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986."

68. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, " On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

69. The Russian-language term used in the documents is *ognevoe vozdeistvie*, which can also be translated more literally as "impact by firepower." See, for example, Excerpt from Minutes #158 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 13 May 1989, "Regarding Additional Measures of Influence upon the Afghan Situation" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-35; and Excerpt from Minutes #159 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 19 May 1989, "About Providing Additional Assistance to the Republic of Afghanistan" (Top Secret, Special Folder), in MALSE, 89-10-36.

70. Excerpt from Minutes #158 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 13 May 1989.

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was part of a strategy to spur self-interested cooperation between parties to the conflict in the absence of Soviet combat troops.

For the USSR, the Geneva Accords shaped international perceptions of an "honorable" exit, framed as the fulfillment of the Soviet mission in Afghanistan. On 11 August 1989, Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov emphasized the "important role played and still being played by the Geneva agreements, which legitimized the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. Nobody is talking about the Soviet army 'running away.'"[71] This assessment, however, was self-serving and exposed Soviet leaders' awareness that they were leaving Afghanistan short of victory and thus leaving insurgents to fight another day. Nonetheless, even though the mujahideen later claimed that they had defeated a major power, this formal international agreement helped legitimize Soviet positions.

Pursue Strategic Regional Engagement

The Soviet Union had strategic reasons for engaging Afghanistan's neighbors, including Iran and Pakistan. Iran supported numerous Shia insurgent groups operating inside Afghanistan, whereas Pakistan (as well as the United States and Saudi Arabia, among others) supported Sunni groups.[72] Soviet leaders worried about the destabilizing influence of fundamentalist Islam reemerging within the USSR. Although they differed on ideology, Soviet and Iranian leaders shared the common ground of anti-Americanism. However, the Soviet Union wanted to prevent Iran from drifting closer to U.S.-supported Pakistan in a possible post-withdrawal realignment of interests in the region. These concerns were expressed on 11 August 1989 by Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov: "In light of the tangle of contradictions among the fundamentalists themselves . . . probability may increase that, at some stage, the interests of Iran, which has been neutralized so far to a known degree, would coincide with the interests of Pakistan."[73] In response, Gorbachev personally sought closer relations with Iran as a means of counterbalancing the U.S. relationship with Pakistan in order to sway Afghanistan's stabilization terms in favor of the Soviet Union.

71. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

72. For a concise summary of major belligerents and developments from the start of the Soviet-Afghan war through U.S. withdrawal, see Katya Drozdova, "War in Afghanistan," in G. Kurt Piehler and M. Houston Johnson V, eds., *Encyclopedia of Military Science* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), pp. 1598–1609.

73. Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov, "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction" 11 August 1989.

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Evidence from the Shevardnaze-Kryuchkov document indicates that Iran had taken "a more constructive position in Afghanistan affairs":

> To a large degree, this is a result of the work of developing Soviet-Iranian relations. As shown by the negotiations between M. S. Gorbachev and A. A. Hashemi-Rafsanjani in Moscow, as well as the most recent discussions in Teheran, the Iranians are becoming more receptive to the idea about participation of the current republican regime in the Afghan settlement. . . .
>
> It is important to move ahead further with the Afghan settlement via the UN. The propaganda work must not weaken in exposing Pakistan's violations of the Geneva agreements. Purposeful work with Iran must continue. In a form consistent with our propaganda, including along closed [covert] channels, the thought must be conveyed that the center of gravity for the political solution of the Afghan problem is increasingly moving to Teheran, facilitated by the more sober position of the new Iranian leadership.[74]

Shape Perceptions to Facilitate the Effectiveness of the Exit Strategy

In addition to diplomacy aimed at casting the withdrawal in a favorable light, Soviet officials worked to shape international perceptions. They provided propaganda support to the Afghan government—including information dissemination equipment, training, supplies, advisers, and content—and coached allies in the UN, such as Fidel Castro who led the Non-Aligned Movement.[75] Increasing openness in the USSR under Gorbachev also prompted Soviet leaders to justify their policy domestically. At a session on 16 August 1989, CPSU Politburo members agreed with Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov that

> our mass media should focus the attention of Soviet society on the major significance for our national interests of preserving Afghanistan on positions that are friendly to us [and that we are now doing this through aid rather than direct involvement]. . . . It must be explained that the reactionary forces are interested in using the territory of Afghanistan to pursue destructive work from there, directed at creating a situation of instability in nearby regions of the USSR.[76]

74. Ibid.

75. Resolution of the Secretariat of the TsK KPSS, "On Additional Measures of Assistance to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in the Rollout of Ideological Work," 16 December 1980 (Top Secret), in MALSE, 89-46-74; and Excerpt from Minutes #187 of the Meeting of CPSU Politburo from 10 March 1980, "On Our Further External Political Line in Connection with Afghanistan and About Response to F. Castro's Correspondence" (Top Secret), in MALSE, 89-34-5.

76. "On Negotiations in Kabul and Our Possible Further Steps in the Afghan Direction," 11 August 1989.

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Having started with a candid appraisal of Soviet goals and the strategic environment for the Soviet Army's withdrawal, officials in Moscow planned and executed a multifaceted exit strategy. This strategy aligned multiple internal and external players to act consistently with Soviet interests, framed by their narrative of an accomplished mission and underwritten by shared investment in future success.[77] The Soviet approach of integrating political, military, economic, and diplomatic incentives into a coherent plan of action offers enduring lessons. It further emphasizes that the effectiveness of an exit strategy pursued by a major power depends as much on perceptions as on execution.

Looking Ahead

What are the key lessons for the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, and how could U.S. policymakers best heed them to create and execute exit strategies that will be better than the Soviet strategy—or at least no worse?

Related Objectives and Planned Paths to Achieve Them

Implementation of Soviet strategy to maintain influence in Afghanistan and to safeguard interests in the region for the long term was truncated by domestic upheaval in Moscow and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR less than three years after Soviet troops left Afghanistan. Conditions were admittedly tenuous at best in Kabul and throughout the war-ravaged country in the aftermath of the Soviet departure in 1989. Insurgents pressed the fledgling Soviet-trained-and-equipped Afghan security forces, and various warlords and political rivals jockeyed for power and undermined Najibullah's government. However, the documents in Fond 89 show that Soviet policymakers did plan and begin to implement a carefully crafted and nuanced exit strategy that tied security assistance, aid, and other incentives into a powerful support framework for the government they sought to keep intact.

How would events in Afghanistan have unfolded over time if the Soviet exit strategy and its accompanying plans for continued security assistance, conditional economic and humanitarian aid, and limited presence of advisers been sustained over the long term? Evidence from the planning and initial

77. The United States has faced the same challenges but in an environment in which even economically and militarily disadvantaged groups have access to worldwide cyberspace, information, and media channels to effectively spread counternarratives to their advantage. This may be an enduring characteristic for future cases of great-power withdrawal.

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execution of this strategy suggests that Soviet leaders might have continued to achieve their minimalist goals had it not been for the abrupt demise of the USSR.

With the departure of major U.S. combat forces from Afghanistan in 2013–2014, the United States began a new phase in its long struggle to stabilize Afghanistan. U.S. policymakers have had the chance to observe in real time the efficacy of their plans to safeguard U.S. interests in the region in the absence of a substantial military presence. Although the specific circumstances surrounding the military redeployments differ between the two cases, many of the underlying conditions and challenges that both great powers faced—as well as the objectives they settled on and the general path they initially believed could achieve them—were similar. However, the two governments' approaches to reaching the desired minimal security conditions and stability differed markedly. The Soviet Union in many respects had a coherent and pragmatic strategy that can inform contemporary U.S.-led efforts.

Both the Soviet Union and the United States were mired in costly stalemates in Afghanistan at the time their troops left, with insurgents unable to defeat government forces as long as the latter received significant external support. Soviet economic and security assistance was substantial, as was the U.S. contribution to Afghan security and reconstruction.[78] Both superpowers pledged to maintain their aid and hoped this would buy time and help generate incentives to sustain the Afghan government each favored. In both cases, leaders expected that the absence of foreign occupiers would help placate the Afghan populace and erode support for anti-government forces.

Soviet leaders tempered their hopes with realistic expectations. As our analysis reveals, they accurately anticipated that a "decisive struggle" would follow their troops' departure, and they planned accordingly.[79] Their strategy heeded the Afghan state security minister's prescient warning that regime survival was endangered more by intra-government factional strife than by insurgents, who would fail "if nothing happens with us internally."[80]

78. "Adjusted for inflation, U.S. appropriations for the reconstruction of Afghanistan exceed the funds committed to the Marshall Plan, the U.S. aid program that delivered billions of dollars between 1948 and 1952 to help 16 European countries recover in the aftermath of World War II." Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Afghan Reconstruction Funding Exceeds Real Cost of Marshall Plan*, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 July 2014 (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2014), p. 5, http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2014-07-30qr.pdf.

79. Yazov, "On the Working Visit of the Minister of Defense of the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan," 30 January 1989 (see note 1 supra).

80. Ibid.

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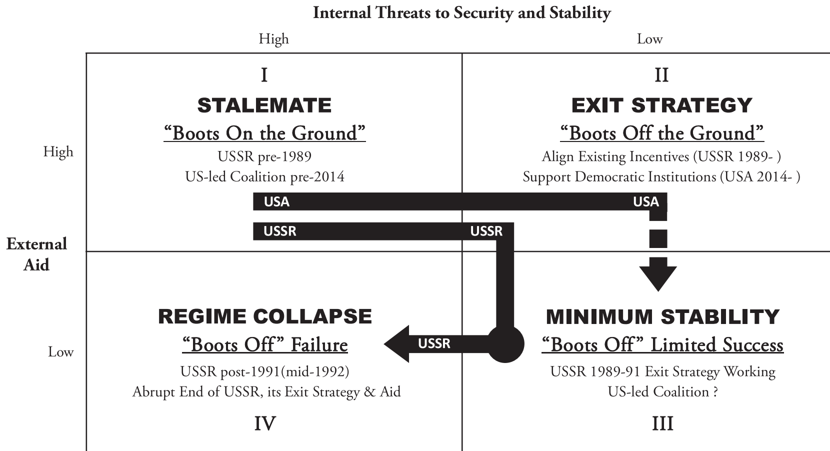

Figure 2. Leaving Afghanistan: A Framework for Comparing Exit Paths.

Both Soviet and U.S. planners envisioned that at least a modicum of stability could be achieved—but they pursued it in different ways. U.S. leaders largely hoped that, with stronger, more democratic, and less corrupt institutions, economic conditions could improve and insurgent threats as well as rival political factions would be neutralized or held at bay. Yet, facilitating the development of such institutions proved slow and difficult if not impossible. In contrast, the Soviet Union eventually gave up on modernizing Afghan institutions in favor of a more practical approach based on aligning existing incentives and native societal institutions with the objective of regime survival.

Figure 2 lays out the conditions in Afghanistan, with threats to security and stability shown along one dimension and external aid, including military and civilian assistance, along the other. The figure depicts the path Soviet leaders intended Afghanistan to take from the stalemate of early 1989 to minimum stability that could be sustained without a significant foreign troop presence and with eventually decreasing aid. U.S. leaders arguably envisioned Afghanistan following a similar path after the large majority of U.S. combat troops departed in 2014. However, unlike Soviet officials, who withdrew their forces completely, the U.S.-led Coalition maintained a limited military presence beyond its publicly announced deadlines.[81]

81. Stephen Biddle argues that the military stalemate that existed in Afghanistan upon the U.S. troop withdrawal could continue with the help of foreign aid and security assistance but will not address the underlying political sources of instability and challenges to governance facing the country. See Stephen

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The USSR's exit strategy aimed to move from the stalemate that existed during the Soviet military occupation (I), through the stable exit of Soviet troops (II), and toward a period of sustained minimal stability in the absence of Soviet military forces on the ground (III). This transition period would be characterized by the continued viability of the Najibullah regime, with acceptable stability buttressed by significant economic aid and security assistance. A relative lull in internal threats was expected as the opposition waited out the withdrawal. Both Soviet and Afghan government leaders anticipated that, after the departure of foreign forces, insurgents would escalate attacks but ultimately fail to destabilize the country militarily as long as the government in Kabul remained intact. Eventually, by empowering traditional local authority structures with autonomy and aid contingent on at least minimal support for the Kabul government, Soviet leaders believed that this "boots off the ground" period could lead to a reduction in threats to internal security and evolve toward sustainable stability with tolerable political conditions that could be maintained with reduced foreign aid and assistance.

Our analysis of Soviet leaders' deliberations explains the comprehensive exit strategy they developed for a transition from the stalemate of military occupation toward the achievement of minimalist objectives. Soviet policymakers expected the incentives built into their strategy—and enhanced through targeted, conditionally disbursed aid and assistance—to foster and sustain an acceptable degree of stability, an outcome they conceived as the survival of a non-hostile regime in Afghanistan. This strategy was initially successful in meeting minimum objectives, but whether it could have been sustained and ultimately have prevented the regime's collapse cannot be known because the strategy ran out of time with the demise of the Soviet Union.

Moving from a "boots on the ground" stalemate (I) to a highly subsidized "boots off the ground" phase (II) and eventually to some form of sustainable stability (III), while minimizing the costs required to achieve it, was the Soviet objective in 1989. The United States has embraced similar goals and minimal objectives for Afghanistan and anticipated achieving them on a similar path following the withdrawal of the majority of U.S. combat forces in 2014. However, the two countries differed in how they proceeded along this path. The USSR settled on aligning existing incentives in favor of regime survival, allowing Najibullah to distribute Soviet aid in ways that won support for his regime from rival authority structures and political factions. In contrast, the

Biddle, "Afghanistan's Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37 (Summer 2014), pp. 73–86.

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United States built or promoted democratic institutions and favored multiple distribution channels and sources of aid, including government as well as international, non-governmental, and private donors. Soviet conditional aid created practical policy levers for influencing the recipients of that aid and stimulating as well as rewarding the outcomes the Soviet Union desired. The U.S. approach enabled greater flows and more variety of aid, but it had fewer and less enforceable conditions. This largely constrained U.S. policymakers' ability to coordinate, influence, and ensure the intended effects of their aid.

Regime collapse (IV), precipitated by the cessation of Soviet aid after the dissolution of the USSR, was ultimately also the fate of Najibullah's regime. Time must tell whether the U.S. approach will fare better—by transitioning from the U.S. "boots off the ground" phase (II) to a sustainable minimal level of stability (III)—or suffer a fate similar to that of the Soviet strategy. In the U.S. case, an abrupt cessation of aid and assistance, as happened in 1992 after the Soviet Union disintegrated, could result from a loss of domestic support and would likely have similar effects on the security situation in Afghanistan. By learning from the Soviet case, U.S. leaders could invest in understanding and developing a more effective self-sustaining system of incentives, whereby self-interested factional behaviors could be better aligned with preventing regime collapse even with diminished external resources.[82]

The Soviet strategy for moving from stalemate to stability with continued aid would have been a difficult and uncertain transition to make, but Soviet leaders did have a deliberate plan to get there. Their intended path and expected pace to traverse it was solidified by pragmatic objectives and realistic assessments of what was achievable in a complex and evolving strategic environment. Their plan succeeded, at least in part, during the three years when key components of the Soviet exit strategy lasted and worked together as a system. Soviet strategy successes as well as failures are instructive for the United States and other cases and are especially relevant to U.S. policy decisions regarding Afghanistan as leaders contemplate alternatives such as increasing troops, shifting toward an entirely or largely "boots off the ground" phase subsidized by continued foreign aid and investment, or other potential options. The Soviet experience with an elaborate exit strategy provides a rich case from which to draw lessons that are relevant to the challenges the

82. Analyses of post-Soviet approaches to regional stability include Sultan Akimbekov, *Afganskii uzel i problemy bezopasnosti Tsentral'noi Azii* (Almaty: Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies, 1998); and Mikhail Zygar, *Vsya Kremlevskaya rat': Kratkaya istoriya sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: OOO Intellektual'naya Literatura, 2016).

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United States can anticipate in Afghanistan, as well as for developing theory applicable to future cases of great-power retraction.

A Synthesis of Salient Lessons from the Soviet Withdrawal

The Soviet lessons in the areas of political governance, military and security assistance, economic and humanitarian aid, diplomacy, and regional engagement—as well as how these factors facilitated the exit strategy—have clear relevance to contemporary and anticipated challenges facing the United States in this most recent case of great-power withdrawal from the region. The following is a synthesis of the most salient Soviet lessons for U.S. strategy formulation and policy execution as the United States pursues at least minimum stability with "boots off the ground" in Afghanistan.

1. "Good enough" for Afghanistan can be sufficient to maintain minimum security and stability.
2. Internal divisions and shifting loyalties are a greater threat than the insurgency to regime survival.
3. Targeted aid and security assistance can buy cooperation and time, but lasting stability requires strategic alignment of incentives.

Lesson 1

The Soviet Union left in place Afghan security forces of approximately the same size as those that remained when major U.S.-led Coalition forces departed in 2014 (although with the near tripling of the Afghan population since 1989, the Western-trained forces had far more people to protect.)[83] In neither case did Afghan forces match the quality of modern Western militaries. But the more appropriate standard to use when judging the Afghan security forces' readiness for the post-withdrawal period is the degree to which

83. During the 2013 transition, the year before withdrawal, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reported 344,500 Afghan National Security Forces—a sum that included 185,300 Afghan National Army (including 11,000 special forces), 152,600 Afghan National Police, and 6,600 Afghan Air Force. "Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)," NATO Media Backgrounder, October 2013, https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2013_10/20131018_131022-MediaBackgrounder_ANSF_en.pdf. Total estimates rose to 352,000 around the time of U.S. combat troops withdrawal. See, for example, "Statement of John F. Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction," in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, *Assessing the Capabilities and Effectiveness of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Hearing*, 114th Sess., 2nd Sess., 12 February 2016, esp. p. 6 n. 15 referring to "DOD, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, 12/2012, p. 56; USFOR-A, response to SIGAR data call, 12/14/2015," https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/testimony/SIGAR-16-17-TY.pdf. For population estimates, see The World Bank, World Development Indicators, https://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators.

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they are more capable than the Taliban, the Islamic State, and other likely security threats Afghanistan may face in the future. Afghan security forces will likely continue to cede swaths of territory in the countryside to the Taliban in the absence of troops from the United States and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and their more responsive logistics and firepower. However, this does not necessarily portend imminent defeat or collapse. As the Soviet Union experienced, security forces capable enough to hold Kabul and other population centers can provide the stability sufficient to prevent regime collapse. Given Afghanistan's tumultuous history and rare periods of uncontested central government control, aligning interests of factional powers in favor of regime survival may be "good enough" for Afghanistan to provide the minimum stability outcome both the Soviet Union and the United States sought upon withdrawal. This is a much lower bar to meet and a standard that is arguably achievable despite the shortcomings of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).[84] Also encouraging, with the moral hazard of an assumed security guarantee lifted, the ANDSF may have a greater incentive to demonstrate self-sufficiency, as did Soviet-trained Afghan security forces after the Soviet withdrawal.

Lesson 2

When fighting as a reasonably cohesive organization, Soviet-supported Afghan security forces demonstrated a capacity to defend key cities and garrisons and to prevent a power grab in Kabul by any of Najibullah's rivals. The biggest threat to stability in the country after the departure of U.S. forces hinges less on the actual capabilities of Afghan troops and more on the potential for ethnic, political, or other divisions to fracture it. Threats to security and stability are defined more by internal political alignment than by more readily identified dangers posed by armed insurgents. Afghan security forces left behind by the U.S.-led Coalition have the potential to be a powerful part of the solution in securing Afghanistan in a "boots off the ground," post-U.S.-withdrawal environment if they remain cohesive and loyal to the chain of command. But if they disintegrate and their members splinter off to support anti-government elements, they will be—perhaps disastrously—a crippling problem. The outcome will be determined by political conditions and by the consequent ability of the state to maintain civilian control over the ANDSF—not by the actual tactical and operational prowess of Afghan armed forces themselves.

84. This expectation hinges on continued security assistance funding and combat support from the United States and NATO in the near to medium term.

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Lesson 3

As the Soviet Union also experienced, the vast influx in foreign aid distributed in Afghanistan since the U.S. invasion led to the "purchasing" of a certain amount of cooperation among key individuals and factions, as they were, in a sense, rewarded for compliance and non-belligerency. Conditional aid can be the glue that temporarily binds cooperation and provides incentives for would-be rival factions to support the established government in the near term. As investments from the United States and the international community decline, these incentives will be diminished, and significant aspects of cooperation among potential rivals will be harder to sustain—unleashing the sort of strife that destroyed Najibullah's regime. The Soviet Union made concerted efforts up through the "boots off the ground" phase of their intervention in Afghanistan to make aid and assistance conditional on support for the government they favored. Their exit strategy reinforced this government by making cooperation attractive as a rational choice of self-interested parties. Whether the Soviet approach to maintaining minimum stability in Afghanistan could have been sustained is unknown, but it does offer a relevant precedent for U.S. policymakers to consider.

Conclusion

The vital showdown between the government and its opponents will occur not on the battlefield but in efforts to provide effective governance accepted by the population. This challenge was as critical in Soviet times, when the CPSU Politburo fretted about losing "the fight for the Afghan people"—as it is today.[85] In the words of Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States, "We must win the people. That has been the missing link."[86] Notably, the Taliban first came to rule Afghanistan by meting out relative peace and justice, albeit brutally. War-weary Afghans largely acquiesced in the Taliban takeover in the aftermath of the intra-insurgent war that had followed the collapse of the Soviet-supported central government. Whether the U.S.-led intervention results in a better outcome remains to be seen.

This analysis of the Soviet Politburo's candid assessments and decision-making not only is relevant to contemporary U.S. challenges but also helps

85. See Top Secret Meeting of CPSU Politburo Chaired by M. S. Gorbachev, "On Further Measures Regarding Afghanistan," 13 November 1986.

86. Hamdullah Mohib, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the United States (2015–2018), Remarks, "Sixteen Years and Counting in Afghanistan: What's Next for America's Longest War?," The Wilson Center, Washington, DC, 5 October 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/sixteen-years-and-counting-afghanistan-whats-next-for-americas-longest-war.

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remedy the dearth of theory and cases for explaining the dynamics and outcomes of great-power retraction from foreign interventions. Realist theories maintain that states' capacities to project power and pursue interests through foreign military intervention and occupation are well predicted by aggregate wealth and resources.[87] However, the capabilities of states to withdraw military forces—effectively retracting power—while safeguarding their interests are more difficult to predict, especially with existing theories. The Soviet exit strategy, analyzed here using archival evidence, contributes to our understanding of this phenomenon. Rigorous analyses of other cases are also needed for the development of theory on what promises to be a topic of enduring importance to international relations and security studies as well as practice.

The Soviet strategy for withdrawing from Afghanistan was more comprehensive and effective than often recognized. Although the U.S. case is still unfolding, comparative analysis with Soviet experience offers policy-relevant insights that can aid current and future decisions by leaders confronting similar challenges going forward. The Soviet case, chronicled from the perspectives of high-level policymakers, also provides useful context for assessing and interpreting the complex dynamics associated with other cases of great-power withdrawal from foreign interventions. Leaders in Moscow failed to secure longer-term gains in Afghanistan because their strategy ran out of time when the USSR dissolved. Western governments should not fail to apply the many relevant and enduring lessons of the Soviet experience. History shows that getting out of foreign intervention in Afghanistan can be more challenging than getting in. When Soviet troops departed, Soviet leaders recognized that the decisive struggle remained ahead. The same is true for the United States and the broader West. Leaving Afghanistan is easier said than done.

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87. The Soviet Union was a superpower at the time its leaders decided to invade Afghanistan with a state-of-the-art military possessing expeditionary capabilities and a major industrial base. Assessing capabilities and probabilities of success in cases in which strong states are projecting power can be informed by existing theory and metrics. Kenneth Waltz provides an influential structural realist assessment of how a state's resources and relative material advantages predict its ability to prevail in conflict between states. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

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