Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education

Vol. IV, Issue No. VIII, October-2012, ISSN 2230-7540

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AN INTERNATIONALLY INDEXED PEER REVIEWED & REFEREED JOURNAL

www.ignited.in

Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education
Vol. IV, Issue No. VIII, October-2012, ISSN 2230-7540

Approaches, Armed Service Operations and Problems: A Case Study of Soviet – Afghan Conflict

Mohd Sarwar Farahi

Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya

Abstract – The breakdown of the Soviet Union surprised most scholars of international relations, comparative politics, and Soviet politics. Existing explanations attribute the breakdown of the Soviet Union to the reformist leadership of Gorbachev, and/or to systemic factors. These explanations do not focus on the key contribution of the war in Afghanistan.

This is surprising since many scholars view wars as key causal factors in empire breakdown and regime change. We argue that the war in Afghanistan was a key factor, though not the only cause, in the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The war impacted Soviet politics in four reinforcing ways: (1) Perception effects: it changed the perceptions of leaders about the efficacy of using the military to hold the empire together and to intervene in foreign countries; (2) Military effects: it discredited the Red Army, created cleavage between the party and the military, and demonstrated that the Red Army was not invincible, which emboldened the non-Russian republics to push for independence; (3) Legitimacy effects: it provided non-Russians with a common cause to demand independence since they viewed this war as a Russian war fought by non-Russians against Afghans; and (4) Participation effects: it created new forms of political participation, started to transform the press/media before glasnost, initiated the first shots of glasnost, and created a significant mass of war veterans (Afghansti) who formed new civil organizations weakening the political hegemony of the communist party.

The Soviet-Afghan War was a remarkable event in history. Like their ancestors, the Afghans battled a hostile, invading force that attempted to dominate their homeland. But for the first time, Afghanistan would become the center of a modern pan-Arab Jihad (Holy War). Like their ancestors who fought in the Anglo-Afghan Wars, the modern Afghans fought a war of attrition. But the use of modern weaponry would beget casualties and emigration of greater proportions. Like their ancestors, the modern Afghans triumphed over their oppressors. But for the first time, they would triumph with the help of a large and complex global coalition of superpowers, middle powers, and regional powers.

This conflict triggered a chain of events which would plunge Afghanistan into almost three decades of brutal warfare. By the end of the war, the U.S.S.R. was on the verge of collapse; the Afghans and their allies appeared to have won a major victory. So what caused this unexpected upset? It appears that the Soviet Union lost the Soviet-Afghan War due to its own mistakes, the committed involvement of an international "Coalition" which supported the Mujahedeen, and the contributions made by the Mujahedeen and the Afghani people.

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INTRODUCTION

Next to the two world wars, the rise and the breakdown of the Soviet Union are probably the most important political events of this century. This breakdown is often attributed to systemic and/or leadership factors. The Afghanistan war, as a key factor for the breakdown, is not emphasized. Systemic explanations suggest that collapse was inevitable due to domestic problems (such as inefficient central planning and ethnic problems) and/or structural problems (such as the Cold War and the increasing economic gap between the Soviet Union and the West). Leadership based explanations emphasize the roles of political leaders (particularly Gorbachev and Shevardnadze) and the Soviet elites.

Yet systemic and leadership-based explanations inadequately address two key sets of questions. First, why did the physical break-up begin towards the end of the 1980s and the Soviet Union finally collapse in 1991? Why only in the mid-1980s did the Soviet leaders acknowledge the impossibility of sustaining their economic and foreign policies? Though the Soviet economy had deteriorated in the 1980s, it was not on the verge of an immediate breakdown.

Moreover, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviets were, for the first time, on military parity with the United States.

On Christmas Day, 1979, the Soviet 40th Army crossed the U.S.S.R.'s border with Afghanistan at Kushka & Termez.4 The 40th Army had allegedly come to save Afghan President Hafizullah Amin's socialist revolution.5 The true intentions of the U.S.S.R. did not become apparent until two days later, when an explosion destroyed the main communications hub in Kabul's city center.

At this signal, 5,000 Soviet troops left Kabul International Airport and stormed Amin's presidential palace. While the time and fashion of his death remain uncertain to this day, "President Amin's bullet-ridden body was displayed to the half-jubilant, half- petrified leaders of the new Soviet client state."7 Airborne divisions of the 40th Army seized both Kabul International Airport and Bagram Air Base within hours of Amin's death, forming an air bridge with the Soviet Union.8 In the early hours of December 28th, The Soviet Union installed Barbrak Karmal as the Prime Minister of the newly-formed "Democratic" Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), cementing Afghanistan's status as a client state.9 According to historian Mark Galeotti, "After years of detente, the U.S.S.R. was once again back on the offensive."

Approximately nine years later on February 5th, 1989, Boris Gromov (the commander of the 40th Army and the last Soviet soldier in Afghanistan) would cross the Friendship Bridge at Termez into Uzbekistan. One of his sons was waiting for him at the other end with a bouquet of flowers.11 In Islamabad, Pakistan, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Station Chief Milton Bearden sent a two-word cable to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia: "WE WON."12 Bearden's celebration was echoed in the headquarters of intelligence agencies from Singapore to France.13 The Soviet Army, which had not lost a war since the Soviet-Polish war of 1919-1921, had been brought to its knees by decentralized groups of Afghani guerrillas who collectively called themselves "The Mujahideen" (The Holy Warriors).

Several historically relevant questions rise from the ashes of the U.S.S.R.'s defeat. How could the mighty Red Army be bested by a loose confederation of guerrilla fighters? What other factors contributed to this defeat? Would it have been possible for the U.S.S.R. to win the war? Finally, and most importantly, what conclusions can be drawn about the Soviet-Afghan War when it is studied from a 360-degree perspective? This essay will attempt to answer these questions by compartmentalizing and analyzing the roles that the U.S.S.R., the "Coalition," and the Mujahideen played in the war. In each section, there will be an examination of the faction, its individual motivations, its actions, and its successes. Additionally, in Part 1: The Soviet Union, there will also be a counterfactual examination of whether or not it was plausible that the Soviet Union could have won the war. The final section will attempt to draw contextualized conclusions about the various factions in the Soviet-Afghan War.

PROSPECTS FOR THE RESULTS OF THE CONFLICT

Afghanistan's results to date have been mixed, and no concrete end of the war is yet in sight. Despite the achievement of some major political milestones—including ratifying a new constitution and holding presidential and parliamentary elections—progress to date in extending the rule of law, establishing effective governance, and furthering economic development has been relatively limited. Meanwhile, for several years, practitioners and observers have expressed concerns about a worsening security situation on the ground, including the greater frequency and sophistication of attacks, exacerbated by the ability of insurgents to find safe haven across the border in Pakistan.

Experts differ on the further prospects for the Afghanistan effort and the war's likely outcome, in part because they pose the question in different ways. One approach addresses the relatively short-term goal of defeating the insurgency—that is, ensuring that insurgents cannot directly challenge the authority of the Afghan state.

As of late 2009, few if any practitioners or observers expected the war to end in a clear Taliban victory, including Taliban control of the state of Afghanistan. Some suggested that a more likely worst-case scenario would be a reversion to the civil war and chaos of the early 1990s, including warlordism, a general lack of stability and opportunity for ordinary Afghans, and a proliferation of ungoverned spaces that might be used by terrorists as safe havens. To some extent, these conditions are currently manifested in parts of southern Afghanistan.

In late 2008, as a rule, U.S. and other international senior officials in Afghanistan expressed measured optimism regarding near-term results of the counterinsurgency effort. They pointed to some recent progress breaking down insurgent networks and expected further gains, particularly if more resources were made available and greater cooperation from all parties, including neighboring states, achieved. As a rule, international officials did not argue that without more resources, the COIN effort would fail, but rather, that without more resources, the effort would cost more money, more time, and more lives.12 In August 2009, General Mc Chrystal's report carried a notably less optimistic assessment, raising the possibility of failure without timely and adequate resourcing of the allied counterinsurgency efforts.

PRESENT FACTS OF THE SOVIET UNION'S BREAKDOWN

According to systemic explanations, the Soviet system of the 1970s was facing a severe crisis due to inefficient central planning and principal-agent problems inherent in gargantuan bureaucracies. These factors increased economic and technological gaps between the Soviet Union and the capitalist West. To bridge this gap, systemic reforms were needed. These reforms, once initiated, spun out of control and led to the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

Fukuyama asserts that the collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable given the inherent superiority of democracy over totalitarianism and of capitalism and free markets over communism and centralized planning.9 Others argue that in the 1980s, the Soviet economy had stopped growing almost entirely and that economic imperatives led to its collapse. Since the Soviet economy could not meet the demand for consumer goods from the rising urban middle class, it began losing their support.

Incremental economic and political reforms were sabotaged by an alliance of corrupt central and regional leaders. Perestroika, a large-scale systemic reform, was initiated to overcome these obstacles. However, it turned into a Frankenstein, causing the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

Other systemic explanations emphasize the high costs that the Cold War imposed on the Soviet Union. For example, Ikle argues that the 'Soviet system, in harness with communism, destroyed the Soviet economy and thus hastened the selfdestruction of the Soviet empire'. Other scholars argue that the Soviet Empire was overstretched, emphasizing the large military forces required to hold it, the economic

burden associated with subsidizing the Eastern European economies, the cost of curbing unrest in Eastern Europe, and the financial support provided to third world countries. Finally, some scholars attribute the collapse to internal ethnic tensions.

Once glasnost permitted some freedom, secessionist voices grew stronger. Secessionists perceived Moscow's attempts to accommodate their demands as a sign of Moscow's weakness, and choosing to exploit this weakness, they demanded independence.

SOVIET INTERVENTIONISM

Afghanistan had recently undergone a socialist revolution. The pro-Moscow People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), led by Nur Muhammad Taraki, had successfully orchestrated a coup d'état in September of 1978. However, President Taraki's reforms, including land redistribution and the advancement of women's rights, "were not supported by members of the government, the Army, or the people... and brutally repressed the intellectuals, tribal leaders, and Islam." As a result, Taraki's Prime Minister, Hafizullah Amin, seized power on October 14, 1979. Instability rocked the country as it plunged into civil war. Despite requesting Soviet military advisors and troops to combat the insurgency, President Amin remained fiercely independent from Communist control. An American charge d'affaires recalls Amin stating, "If Brezhnev himself should ask him [Amin] to take any action against Afghan independence...he would not hesitate to sacrifice his life in opposition to such a request."

The Brezhnev doctrine clearly stated, "When forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem of the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries." The Soviet Politburo was concerned that Amin "may change the political orientation of the [Afghanistan's] regime." Amin's contact with Western officials and his decision to remove "pro-Soviet officials from sensitive positions" embodied the Soviet Politburo's fears.34 The Brezhnev doctrine, which had justified successful Soviet interventions in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, was now being used to justify an intervention in Afghanistan. Additionally, the intervention was in line with Soviet expansionist policies.35 Afghanistan was viewed as a "stepping stone" to the warm water ports of Pakistan and the oil fields of the Middle East. The Soviet Politburo anticipated "a quick, neat show of military force, the installation of a docile new leadership and prompt withdrawal."

THE AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT AND THE SOVIET FALL

Major wars critically impact domestic politics by producing durable social changes and by redistributing political power among groups.19 An established literature explains how major wars may make as well as break states. Surprisingly, the extant explanations on the Soviet breakdown underemphasize the impact of the Afghanistan war.

The Soviets intervened in Afghanistan in December 1979. In retrospect, it was unthinkable in 1979 that the Soviet empire could collapse, let alone fall apart almost within a decade. Though the Afghanistan war initially was visualized by Soviet leaders as a small-scale intervention, it grew into a decade-long war involving nearly one million Soviet soldiers, killing and injuring some tens of thousands of them. During the early 1980s, the official Soviet media maintained that the Afghanistan Government had requested Soviet military assistance for humanitarian and noncombat tasks. Notwithstanding the media censorship, as the conflict escalated, and well before Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), stories about

combat casualties and the problems of disabled soldiers began appearing in spite of censorship.

We view 1986 as the turning point in the Afghanistan war and, accordingly, as marking the second phase of Gorbachev's reform agenda. In 1986, the Mujaheddin (Afghan freedom fighters), now well armed with US-supplied surface-to-air missiles, rockets, mortars, and communication equipment, won many confrontations with the Soviet army. As successful ambushes of Soviet convoys became a daily phenomenon, the number of Soviet casualties mounted, the number of disabled soldiers seen in Soviet cities grew substantially, and the war veterans (Afgantsy) increasingly became part of the Soviet urban landscape. Since many Afgantsy belonged to the non-Russian nationalities, opposition to the war from citizens in non-Russian Soviet republics increased. Since their presence often was not acknowledged by the authorities, who wished to play down Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, these Afgantsy became bitter and openly critical of the Soviet leaders.

CONCLUSION

The disintegration of the Soviet empire started toward the end of the 1980s when Eastern Europe left the Soviet bloc. The Cold War ended in 1989, and in 1991, the Soviet Union itself disintegrated. This collapse of this particular great power was unexpected in its timing, magnitude, and speed. The existing explanations attribute this collapse to leadership and/or systemic factors. The contributions of the Afghanistan war have been under-emphasized, if not altogether ignored. We have argued that the Afghanistan war was a significant factor leading to the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Further, to answer the two puzzles raised in the introduction to this article—why did the collapse take place only towards the end of the 1980s, and why did the Soviet leaders not employ the army to suppress the secessionist movements—a better appreciation of the impact of the Afghanistan war on Soviet politics is required.

That the Afghanistan war was critical in the collapse of the Soviet Union resonates well with theories emphasizing major wars as key factors in the demise of empires. Major wars among great powers reorient the domestic politics of the warring parties by weakening powerful groups and enfranchising less powerful groups. As the hitherto less powerful become more assertive, the domestic sociopolitical equilibrium gets disturbed, often irreversibly leading to the collapse of empires. However, are such major wars possible in a world where the great powers possess nuclear weapons? If not, then will major wars no longer remain a key cause of empire breakdowns? Or, do we have to redefine major wars in terms of their implications for domestic politics, and not in terms of the characteristics of the participating actors or the scope of the war? 81 While the Afghanistan war may not be categorized as a major war involving a direct and wide-scale clash of great powers, it was certainly a major war in terms of impacting Soviet domestic politics.

Hence, we interpret the key contribution of the Afghanistan war in the collapse of the Soviet Union as only an overlooked case, and not as an exception to those theories that highlight the role of major wars in the demise of empires.

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