Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC)
Case Studies

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Afghanistan 1973–89

Executive Summary

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 began a decade-long insurgency between the Soviet Union and Afghan People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) forces and a disparate group of mujahideen Muslim–nationalist guerrillas. The war resulted in approximately 515,000 Soviet casualties (KIA and WIA) and an estimated one million Afghans killed during the conflict.[1]

In 1973, a bloodless coup led by leftist Mohammed Daoud (a cousin of the reigning King Zahir Shah) and aided by Marxist Khalq Party forces overthrew the Afghan monarchy.[2] A leftist government with Daoud serving as president and prime minister of a newly formed Afghan Republic replaced the 200-year-old Afghan monarchy.[3] Daoud's fellow Pashtuns saw him as a usurper, and his reformist policies made him unpopular with minority ethnic groups as well, resulting in unrest. Daoud's rule was short-lived. In April 1978, two opposition figures, Nur Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, staged a bloody coup with the support of the Soviet Union, which killed Daoud and replaced his government.[4] Taraki positioned himself as the new government's president, while Amin was selected as the prime minister. Amin's initial aims for his new government included progressive policies that displeased conservative religious leaders and landowners, the traditionalist power blocs of Afghanistan.[5]

The beginnings of the mujahideen resistance movements emerged in the early years of the Taraki/Amin government, as the traditional power structures of rural Afghanistan were threatened by the new social reforms. The Soviets, fearing Amin's unpopularity and possible connections to the CIA, advised Taraki to assassinate the prime minister.[6] In response, Amin staged a countercoup, which had Taraki assassinated. Amin filled the vacant Presidential seat.[7] Amin now supported Afghanistan's neutrality in the region, wanting to leave the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev, realizing that the mujahideen threat was growing and endangering Afghanistan's position as a Soviet satellite, hastily authorized a full-scale invasion in December 1979. The Soviet leadership was also concerned that a successful Islamist revolution in Afghanistan would encourage Muslim populations within the USSR to rebel.

Within days of the invasion, Soviet forces controlled most major population centers and roads within Afghanistan.[8] Soviet forces assassinated Amin and replaced him with the USSR puppet Babrak Kamal.[9] The ensuing decade of Soviet occupation and counterinsurgency against seven loosely aligned Sunni Muslim mujahideen groups largely controlled by Pakistan and funded by the United States and Saudi Arabia.[10] By 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the new Premier of the USSR, the war was going poorly for the Soviet Union. Gorbachev gave Afghan government and Soviet forces a one-year ultimatum to make substantial progress in the conflict.[11] Gorbachev increased the size of the Afghan 40th Army from 26,000 to 108,000 soldiers to aid in achieving a military victory, though desertions were a constant problem and the army never approached full strength. Gorbachev also increased military

aid and training for the Afghan security forces which had a nominal end strength of 252,900 men.[12] Most of the Afghan Army performed poorly, and it played a limited role in counterinsurgency operations.

In 1986, the Soviets replaced Karmal with Mohammad Najibullah, giving him a two-year ultimatum to defeat the mujahideen before the USSR withdrew support.[13] Most major combat operations were notionally handed over to the Afghan Army.[14] With Soviet air and artillery support, government forces launched extensive offensives into the Faryab, Paktya, Kandahar, and Logar Provinces.[15] The Afghan government struggled to consolidate military gains, and Najibullah announced a National Reconciliation process that included amnesty for guerrilla leaders, land reforms, and a national ceasefire.[16] The policy was too little, too late and the ongoing Geneva Accords undermined it.[17] In the face of failing domestic polices and unsuccessful military operations, Gorbachev signed the Geneva Accords in 1989, resulting in the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the eventual collapse of the Najibullah regime.[18]

Assessing the Five Factors

1. **Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?**

   No. The Soviets did not see Afghanistan as a unitary state.[19] The Pashtuns were the largest ethnic group in the country but did not comprise a majority of the population.[20] Soviet aims included weakening Pashtun power in the puppet government in favor of other ethnic groups.[21] In Afghan culture, tribal groups remain more loyal to their clan than the central government, and there is little sense of national identity. The Afghan government's leadership from 1973–89 attempted and failed to resolve this identity crisis through social reforms, but the reforms alienated the religious conservatives and large-scale rural landowners who dominated rural power structures in the country.

2. **Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

   No. Rural populations comprised an estimated 87 percent of the entire country at the onset of the war.[22] Most of the population aligned with the rural tribes, and the seven major mujahideen groups backed by Pakistan were able to exert powerful political influence in their regions. The central government was primarily supported by urban elites and some minority tribal elements.[23] By 1979, Amin had lost political control over an estimated 75 percent of Afghanistan.[24]

3. **Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?**

   No. In the initial Soviet invasion, government forces consolidated their hold on major urban centers. Approximately 87 percent of the overall population lived outside major population centers and avoided the direct administration of government forces.

4. **Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

   Yes. Neighboring Pakistan extended external sanctuary to the mujahideen fighters, allowing them to rearm and avoid Soviet counterinsurgency operations.[25]

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

   Yes. By the 1960s, the Soviet Union was the primary equipment supplier and training source for the Afghan Army. At the onset of direct USSR involvement in 1979, a small Afghan Army was in existence, though limited in its capacity to combat the insurgency effectively.

AFGHANISTAN 1973–89	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Government defeat. After the last Soviet forces withdrew in February 1989, Najibullah held onto power in Kabul until 1992.[26] During this time, the Afghan Army still controlled the major population centers and roads. The mujahideen forces' capture of Khost in 1991 signaled a decline in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's strategic holdings.[27] The following year, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to withdraw support of their proxies.[28] When the mujahideen captured Kabul in April 1992, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's government was officially overthrown and replaced with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.[29] This case supports the Five Factors theory.

Endnotes

1. Seth G. Jones, "The Age of Insurgency," in *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study*, vol. 4 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 25–36, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg595osd.11.
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11. David G. Fivecoat, "Leaving the Graveyard: The Soviet Union's Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Parameters* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 43, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol42/iss2/3/.
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24. Goldman, “Soviet Military Intervention,” 388.
25. Jones, “Age of Insurgency,” 26.
26. Fivecoat, “Leaving the Graveyard,” 47.
27. Fivecoat, “Leaving the Graveyard,” 47.
28. Fivecoat, “Leaving the Graveyard,” 47.
29. Jones, “Age of Insurgency,” 27.

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