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Subcommittee

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Hearing on Afghanistan: Historical Lessons

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Executive Summary

The Soviet Union fought a disastrous war in Afghanistan, but its invasion and withdrawal were effective and successful operations. Up to 1985, Soviet strategy was to hold the major centers of communications, limit infiltration, and destroy local strongholds at minimum costs to Soviet forces. In essence, the Soviet strategy was one where high technology, superior tactical mobility, and firepower were used to make up for an insufficient number of troops and to hold Soviet casualties to a minimum. Their war against the entire Afghan nation was in essence a very different war than the smaller, more legitimate conflict being waged by the 50 nations of ISAF and the elected government of Afghanistan against the Taliban and its supporters.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader and soon decided to end the war, which, he said, had become a “bleeding wound.” He replaced the ineffective Afghan leadership, effectively used his diplomatic tools, and had the Soviet military help the Afghans develop an effective transition, withdrawal, and force development plan.

The key elements of the Soviet transition were:

- A clear transition plan with military, foreign aid, and diplomacy generally pulling in the same direction;
- A reinvigorated host government with effective --- if not at times brutal --- leadership;
- Improved relations between Kabul, local power centers, and tribal militias; A stronger, more cohesive Afghan government fighting force; and
- Up to the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991, a reliable and generous source of foreign aid.

The Najibullah regime lasted for three years after the Soviet withdrawal. It folded in 1992, a few months after the Soviet Union itself disappeared. After the departure of Soviet troops, Afghanistan went from a war against an invader to a civil war, which came to a decisive --- but not final --- phase, when radical Taliban force seized Kabul in 1996. Soon after the Soviet withdrawal, the United States left the fight, well before the war ended. U.S. neglect after 1991 left the management of the conflict solely in the hands of Pakistan. This facilitated the advent of the Taliban, the development of an al Qaeda position of strength, and ultimately, the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Testimony

Chairman Wittman, Congressman Cooper, and Members of the Committee:

The Soviet invasion in late December 1979 was a well-executed operation. Previously infiltrated commandos moved on the palace and killed President Hafizullah Amin and his entourage. Soviet paratroopers seized major bases in and around the capital. Two motorized rifle divisions, filled with reservists from the Central Asia Republics --- one from Termez in the north central region and one from Kushka in the west --- brought the number of Soviet troops to 50,000 by the end of the first week of January 1980. Over time, the reservists would be withdrawn and the Soviet force increased to 130,000. (1)

Babrak Karmal, the Soviet-picked successor to the assassinated Hafizullah Amin, was not successful in unifying the government. The Afghan soldiers who did not desert continued to perform poorly, just as the resistance --- energized by the invasion --- moved into high gear. Soviet forces were not trained for counterinsurgency and, lacking recent experience in mountain warfare, did not perform well in the Afghan environment. Later, Soviet forces would move in large-scale operations to clear areas of strong mujahidin elements. They rarely held areas in the countryside and never tried to govern them systematically. They did not see their mission as one of protecting the population, nor did they exercise much care in the area of civilian casualties or collateral damage. Brutality toward insurgents and their supporters was part of their policy. Afghan refugees increased along with international outrage.

Soviet military efforts were hampered by slow learning within the Soviet Armed Forces. It would take five years before they began agile strike operations with air assault and airborne forces. A second problem was international isolation and significant support for the insurgents. The invasion of Afghanistan was a heinous act and even East European and Cuban communists were slow to help. China and the United States kept up a drumbeat of criticism. The United States instituted a grain embargo and boycotted the Moscow Olympics. Third, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States --- usually working through Pakistani intelligence --- came to the aid of the mujahidin, who

maintained sanctuaries in Pakistan. During the second Reagan Administration, the mujahidin were provided with shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles which took a serious toll on Soviet aircraft. At its height, U.S. aid to the mujahidin --- nearly all distributed by Pakistani intelligence --- rose to \$400 million per year. (2) Saudi Arabia reportedly matched our aid, dollar for dollar.

The deck was stacked against the Soviet military effort. As an avowedly atheist foreign power, it had allied itself with a hated Marxist regime, completely out of step with its own people. The government had no legitimacy and seemed determined in its first few years to alienate the population. The military tasks were daunting and the Soviet-installed Karmal government had little international support. Soviet and Afghan forces together had too few soldiers to control the countryside, so they limited themselves to sweeps, road security, or other clearing operations. The disunited but spirited mujahidin had a secure sanctuary in Pakistan and great amounts of international support.

Up to 1985, Soviet strategy was to hold the major centers of communications, limit infiltration, and destroy local strongholds at minimum costs to Soviet forces. In essence, the Soviet strategy was one wherein high technology, superior tactical mobility, and firepower were used to make up for an insufficient number of troops and to hold Soviet casualties to a minimum. In effect, Soviet policy was a combination of scorched earth and migratory genocide. (3) The deliberate creation of what became millions of refugees was a part of their policy.

In 1985, a new age dawned in the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev, a Communist reformer, became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and leader of the sclerotic Soviet regime, which had buried three of its previous rulers in as many years. A dedicated communist, he set out to unleash his program of new thinking, democratization, openness, and restructuring on a Soviet Union that found it to be very strong medicine. The war in Afghanistan fit Gorbachev's transformational agenda, to borrow Stalin's phrase, "like a saddle fits a cow."

As he grappled for a way forward, Gorbachev allowed the Red Army a year to step up its fighting in Afghanistan. He provided extra resources to the 40th Army, and encouraged its experimentation. In 1986, in a token unilateral withdrawal, he authorized

the swapping out of heavy units for more *spetsnaz* (special operations forces) and infantry units. The USSR also pushed the reform of the Afghan Army.

With the stalemate continuing, Gorbachev in February 1986 at an important Party Congress announced that Afghanistan was a “bleeding wound” and stated his intention to Afghanize the war and pursue international negotiations to end the conflict.

The Soviet Union moved quickly to shore up Afghan leadership. In May 1986, the increasingly ineffective Karmal was relieved, and the young and dynamic Najibullah --- a one-time medical student and the former head of the Secret Police ---- put in his place. He was not a man of scruples, but he was clever and got things done.

Najibullah tried to remove the communist taint from his government, changed the name of the governing party, and formed alliances with local militias, which created local ceasefires and alliances with over 130,000 tribesmen. This latter tactic paid great dividends. As the Soviet Army left the field in 1988 and 1989, many mujahidin and tribesmen felt that their work was done. The Soviet advisers and Najibullah’s cadres were successful in their last few years at building the Afghan Army, and other security forces, including a praetorian guard. Under the driving leadership of Najibullah, “the Ox,” all of these regime-favorable developments accelerated after the Soviet troop withdrawal.

For its part, the Soviet Union funded an increase in Afghan forces to over 300,000 personnel, more than half of whom were in the Ministry of Interior or the Khad, their intelligence service. The Afghan Air Force (AFA) was well taken care of, with 240 attack aircraft. (Today, the AFA has less than a dozen attack helicopters. Only a few dozen additional light attack, fixed wing aircraft are planned for the future.) By 1987, the USSR increased aid dramatically to over a billion dollars per year. In 1989, Soviet aid and equipment transfers amounted to over 2.5 billion dollars. In 1987, Afghan government casualties --- over 19,000 killed and wounded --- were nine times more than those suffered by the Soviet forces. In the two years of the withdrawal, 1988-89, the Afghans suffered 65,000 casualties, while the Soviet Union suffered less than 1,500. (4)

Gorbachev agreed in the Geneva Accords of 1988 to withdraw his forces --- then approximately 105,000 --- in about a year. The parties half-heartedly promised non-interference, non-intervention, and the return of refugees. Half of the Soviet forces were taken out by the summer of 1988. The Soviet Union completed the withdrawal of its

forces on schedule by February 1989. By the end of 1991, the United States stopped military aid to the mujahidin, but that did not prevent the insurgents from moving forward.

Most people thought that the war would end soon after the Soviet withdrawal. They were wrong. In the Spring of 1989, the premature mujahidin attack on Jalalabad was defeated by Najibullah's forces, but in 1991 the fighters seized Khost, a small, remote city, near the border in eastern Afghanistan. Factional fighting continued inside of Najibullah's government and there was a coup attempt in early 1990. In 1992, with the handwriting on the wall, General Dostam and the famed Uzbek Legion defected to the mujahidin.

Najibullah was able to continue fighting for three years after the Soviet departure. His regime, however, disappeared in 1992 a few months after Soviet aid money and supplies dried up. Najibullah was unable to escape. He took refuge in the UN compound in Kabul. Four years later, when the Taliban seized the capital, he was seized, tortured, and killed. The civil war continued after Najibullah stepped down, first as a war among the so-called Peshawar Seven groups, and then as a war between the rump of those groups and the Taliban. The civil war did not end when the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996. A part of the Northern Alliance, led by the valiant Ahmed Shah Massoud, continued to fight the Taliban in the north and east of Afghanistan right up to the American intervention in the Fall of 2001.

In all, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was a successful operation. While the situation today is vastly different, the keys to success are likely to be similar. Those keys to success were:

- A disunited, fractious enemy: the seven mujahidin groups;
- A clear transition plan with military, aid, and diplomacy generally pulling in the same direction;*
- A reinvigorated host government with effective --- if not brutal --- leadership;

* Both in the Soviet and American cases, the various departments had their favorites. The Soviet Armed Forces favored one Afghan faction, and the KGB, another. After the Soviet withdrawal, the U.S. Department of State and the CIA feuded over control of policy with the Agency clinging to its support of the mujahidin through the ISI, and the State Department favoring a more flexible approach toward more moderate groups, not favored by Pakistan

- Improved relations between Kabul and local power centers and tribal militias;
- A stronger, more cohesive Afghan government fighting force; and
- Up to the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991, a reliable and generous source of foreign aid.

While the mujahidin ultimately defeated the abandoned Najibullah government, they proved the adage that the results of war are not permanent. The fight for freedom in Afghanistan did not end with the downfall of his government. It reached a decisive phase in 1996 when the radical Taliban movement, backed by Pakistan, captured Kabul and most of the major urban areas. Sadly, the great work that the United States did in helping the Afghans fight the Soviet Union came to a dysfunctional end. In late 1991, the United States stopped its support of the mujahidin and by then, had also turned its back on Pakistan in a dispute over nuclear proliferation. In effect, guided by war weariness and other priorities, such as nuclear non-proliferation, the U.S. team left the field before the end of the game. With Pakistani help, the Taliban seized Afghanistan in 1996 and then fell in with Usama bin Laden and his al Qaeda cadres. Before long, Afghanistan was the world leader in only one thing: support for international terrorism. The United States paid for its abandonment of the mujahidin on September 11, 2001.

Finally, it is important to deal with a misperception that one often hears. Some pundits --- both American and Russian --- see the United States today in the same boat as the USSR in Afghanistan in the 1980s: two superpowers bogged down in the “graveyard of empires,” destined to meet the same fate. (5) This actually overestimates the effects of defeats in Afghanistan on Great Britain and the Soviet Union. While the “graveyard of empires” is an important warning, it should not be taken as a literal prediction for the United States and its coalition partners. (6) There are many surface parallels and potential lessons, but the essence of the Soviet and American policy and operations in Afghanistan were very different. (7)

The United States is a superpower, but it is not an empire. It does not need to occupy countries, or replicate American governmental structures or its political ideology to accomplish its long-term goals. In Afghanistan, after having been attacked by resident terrorists, the United States came to the aid of combatants fighting an unpopular government, recognized by only three countries in the world. We did not kill any of our

allies and replace them with puppets during the invasion. Soviet policy forced five million Afghans into exile, while the United States created conditions where the vast majority of them have returned.

In one sense, both the United States and the Soviet Union were unprepared for a protracted insurgency in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union, however, fought a nation in arms. When necessary, it unleashed a punishing fury in the countryside. War crimes and illegal punitive operations were daily occurrences. There was no talk about protecting the population; Soviet operations were all about protecting the regime and furthering Soviet control in Afghanistan. Today, the United States has in large measure adapted to the insurgency and is working hard to protect the people, who are being besieged by the lawless Taliban, itself a purveyor of war crimes and human rights violations.

Fighting alone, the Soviet Union's enemy in Afghanistan was the whole nation, defended by over 170,000 mujahidin. Today, the United States and its coalition partners --- 50 of them in 2012 --- are fighting an extremist, religious minority group of no more than 25,000 adherents whose national approval ratings rarely poll higher than 10 percent.

(8) Finally, the Soviet Union fought to secure an authoritarian state with an alien ideology, while the United States and its allies are trying to build a stable state with democratic aspirations, where people have basic freedoms and a claim on prosperity. In its beleaguered state, the Karzai regime has much more legitimacy than the Afghan communists ever did. Beyond the locale of the conflict, the importance of sanctuaries, and some tactical dynamics, there are not a lot of similarities between the essence of the Soviet Union's conflict and the war being fought by ISAF's 50 nations in Afghanistan.

In the end, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan cost 14,000 Soviet and a million Afghan lives, created a huge Afghan diaspora, left tens of millions of mines on the ground in Afghanistan, and hastened the end of the Soviet Union. It did not create a better peace. In fact, it did not create a peace at all. The United States has the potential to do much better, but only if it perseveres in the pursuit of a stable Afghanistan and our interests in the region. We must not again leave the field before the game is over.

Endnotes

1. Some sources put the highest Soviet troop strength at 115,000. On invasion and subsequent fighting, see Joseph Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (Lexington Books, 1986), pp. 77-164; Henry Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), pp.169-239; and on Soviet tactics, Lester Grau, ed., *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1995); and on mujahidin tactics, Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahidin Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998)
2. Bruce Reidel, *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2011), p. 27.
3. Joseph Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 145.
4. Data on Soviet withdrawal from various sources cited in David Fivecoat, "Leaving the Graveyard: The Soviet Union's Withdrawal from Afghanistan," an unpublished paper from the National War College, May 2012. For a précis of all of the Peshawar Seven groups, see Larry Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 189-93.
5. See, for an example, Artemy Kalinovsky, "Afghanistan is the New Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 2009 at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan_is_the_new_afghanistan. Kalinovskiy 's new book is considered one of the best works on the Moscow-level decision-making to end the war. Artemy Kalinovskiy, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
6. Two excellent books about contemporary war in Afghanistan use "graveyard of empires" in their titles. David Isby, *Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderlands* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010); and Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).
7. There are also articles trumpeting the Vietnam-Afghanistan parallel. For one example, see Tom Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Saigon 2009," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2009, at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/20/saigon_2009 . The Vietnam analogy does not carry water when the scope and scale of the conflict are taken into account. Another anomalous item in that comparison is the salience of Soviet and Chinese security assistance and the existence of a massive and highly professional North Vietnamese Army. This modern, mechanized army was the final instrument of defeat for the South Vietnamese government, not indigenous South Vietnamese guerrillas. There is no such factor in the current conflict in Afghanistan.

8. Brookings, *Afghanistan Index*, October 2010, Figure 4.12 shows Taliban approval ratings totaling 10 percent. See <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf> . The strength of today's Taliban is the author's estimate, based on conversations with various intelligence analysts. On current Taliban troop strength, see the Associated Press story: Slobodan Lekic, "Taliban Numbers Unaffected by Allied Troop Surge," *Boston Globe*, January 7, 2010 at http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2011/01/07/taliban_numbers_unaffected_by_allied_troop_surge/ .

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