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## Afghanistan: more echoes of the Soviet experience

LSE Ideas

By Dr Artemy Kalinovsky

Over at Slate, Frank Kaplan [writes](#) that NATO forces in Afghanistan are starting to shift their focus from the state-building aspects of COIN to more traditional military operations. Not that the state building effort is dead, writes Kaplan, but “U.S. and NATO officers, intelligence analysts, and other officials and advisers now believe that our objectives in the Afghanistan war can no longer be accomplished in sufficiently short time through COIN alone or even through a COIN-dominant strategy.”

For those who believe the US is better off withdrawing most of its troops as soon as possible, this might be good news. A focus on state-building suggests a longer-term commitment; a shift away from state-building and back towards more traditional military operations reflects a desire to strike some blows and convince the Taliban that they're better off working with Karzai than fighting NATO.

Not to sound like a broken record, but the shift did remind me of the Soviet's decision to pull out most of their non-military and intelligence advisers in 1986. As I've written about [here](#), the Soviet counter-insurgency in Afghanistan was accompanied by massive state-building operations, involving party advisers, technical specialists, and experts from almost every area of the Soviet government (and Warsaw Pact allies). The hope was that by building the capacity of the regime in Kabul they could help it win over the population and rob the insurgency of support.

By 1986, however, Soviet decision makers had lost faith in what their advisors could achieve. The war had been dragging on for six long years, and all the presence of advisors seemed to be doing was encouraging complacency within the Afghan leadership. As Gorbachev and his advisers plotted a new approach to the Afghan problem, one of their first moves was to recall the advisors. (This was around the same time that they were effecting a change of leadership, replacing the ineffectual Babrak Karmal with Mohammed Najibullah.) The Soviet army and intelligence services would continue to fight and train their counterparts for several years, but the broader “state-building” was more or less finished.

What effect did this have? Soviet officials certainly felt that their Afghan counterparts became more independent and decisive once the advisors were gone. Indirectly, the departure of party advisors may have even helped Najibullah gain legitimacy as an independent ruler (and not a Soviet puppet) and thus survive the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. But the departure of technical specialists was harmful for the Afghan economy. Soviet specialists had helped operate the gas fields in the north of the country, for example, keeping the Afghan government solvent through most of the 1980s. Once they departed, the gas works stopped working, and the government struggled to maintain any source of revenue, eventually becoming unable to pay the various militias that had helped it keep the mujahedeen at bay.

Of course, nothing quite as dramatic is underway in the shift currently taking place. For the US and NATO, this is a shift of emphasis rather than of overall strategy. And besides, the overall state-building effort involves dozens of NGOs and international institutions as well as non-military government agencies.

Elsewhere, it has been [reported](#) that NATO forces and US diplomats are helping to facilitate talks between the Karzai government and the Taliban. Facilitating talks with the major insurgent groups also became a big part of Soviet plans after 1986, as diplomats and officers sought a way to bring Soviet troops home without leaving complete chaos in their wake. For a number of reasons (among them internal Soviet disagreements about which opposition leaders it was best to work with – Ahmad Shah Massoud or Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) these efforts failed.

I won't pretend to know what happens next. I am concerned, though, that when the time comes (and it's coming very soon) to make some hard decisions about the future course of US efforts in Afghanistan, Obama is going to find it very hard to maneuver. Gorbachev still had most of his political capital when he announced the Soviet withdrawal in 1988; he also had the support of his military and most of the Politburo. Obama, by contrast, seems to be oozing political capital, and may be in a position closer to that of Gorbachev's in early 1991 (in terms of political room, not his country tearing apart at the seams) after November 2.

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