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## Obama and Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War.

LSE Ideas

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If President-elect Obama makes good on his campaign promise to withdraw troops from Iraq, it would be a serious mistake to ship them to Afghanistan. The situation there requires a more comprehensive approach that emphasizes politics and diplomacy. Mr. Obama could do worse than to draw some lessons from the Soviet effort to find a political solution in the late 1980s.

In its own entanglement, Moscow was supporting a quasi-communist government and fighting a counterinsurgency financed and supplied by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and a number of others, primarily through Pakistan. Soviet diplomats, military officers, and security officials worked tirelessly to find an international agreement as well as to win over mujahadeen leaders and convince them to join a coalition government.

The Soviets faced formidable challenges: the party they were supporting was internally divided, the opposition was well supplied for a variety of sources, and the U.S. drove a hard bargain by refusing to stop sending weapons until the Kabul government stepped down. While Moscow wanted to end the war that was a drain on resources, men, and morale, it had to do so without leaving a vacuum or a hostile government on its southern border.

When the USSR invaded Afghanistan it did not expect to create a communist state there. Rather, the goal was to create a stable and friendly government in Kabul. The thousands of party advisors sent to assist in spreading government authority, however, often ignored local traditions; by 1986 Moscow realized they were doing more harm than good. Moscow ultimately concluded that even the generous amount of technical and political assistance it was providing would not end the civil war there if major opposition leaders could not be brought into the government.

The U.S. invaded Afghanistan to strike at the heart of Al-Qaeda; once there, it engaged in a massive democratization program. The results of its efforts have been mixed, but it is clear that the country is becoming less stable, and the distinctly anti-democratic Taliban are gaining the upper hand. Given the circumstances, it is time to recognize that the U.S. should devote its energies primarily to creating a potentially undemocratic but nevertheless stable Afghanistan, something Mr. Obama is reportedly [considering](#).

Even this more limited goal will prove difficult to achieve. However, the Soviet experience suggests the following steps will be necessary. First, finding a strong leader who can unite enough of Afghanistan's various forces to keep the country from spinning out of control. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in part to remove the erratic and bloody-minded Hafizullah Amin, then spent six years trying to prop up the ineffectual Babrak Karmal before overseeing his replacement with Mohammed Najibullah. For all his faults (and he had many) the new leader proved strong enough to hold his own party together while using his clan links to open dialogue with some opposition leaders.

Second, it will mean taking an active role in bringing former enemies into the fold. Moscow got into this game a little too late, and its efforts were hampered by internal divisions about which mujahadeen leaders would be acceptable partners for the the Kabul government. In this sense the U.S. is somewhat better positioned – it already has similar experience in Iraq, where General David Petraeus was able to reach out to Sunni leaders in the Anbar province.

Third, it will mean forging a regional consensus on Afghanistan which includes Iran, Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian States. In general the U.S. has been able to cooperate with each of these countries to a greater or lesser degree from the start of the NATO operation there in 2001. However, the Bush administration's failure to constructively engage Iran and Russia, as well as its miscalculations in Pakistan, have created a murky picture in the region. (Needless to say, improving relations with Iran is doubly important if Obama is serious about withdrawing from Iraq.)

The Harvard realist [Stephen Walt](#) argues that going through with a planned expansion of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan may not be the best idea because of the relative costs involved. I would add that it is unlikely the U.S. or its NATO allies will

commit the numbers necessary to pacify all the regions where the Taliban is active. If NATO were to take a more active role on the Pakistani side of the Pushtun tribal belt, which serves as a refuge for Taliban fighters, it would likely do more harm than good. It is useful to remember that Moscow also experimented with increasing troop numbers even as it was looking for a way out of the conflict in 1985, but ultimately Soviet leaders saw that the “surge” was only deepening their involvement, not leading to a resolution. It is safe to say that Afghanistan will only become stable once enough Taliban are co-opted to make a central government viable and the Afghan military (and tribal militias) are able to fight the remainder with U.S. supplies.

Soviet leaders were aiming for a similar scenario as they sought a way to withdraw their troops between 1986 and 1991. Almost all of the former participants (both people on the ground and at the center of decision-making in Moscow) I have spoken with believe they came close to succeeding. When the [Geneva Accords were signed in April 1988](#), it was far from clear whether the Soviet backed government in Kabul would last more than a few months after the withdrawal. Yet after February 1989 the Afghan army, which rarely took a leading role in battles while Soviet troops were there, proved able to face down mujahadeen offensives on its own. Not only did the Kabul government hold most of the territory previously held primarily by Soviet forces, but the regime actually outlasted the USSR by four months!

Many Soviet officers realized early in the war that the task of creating a stable Afghanistan could never be fulfilled through military means. Eventually their superiors in Moscow came to believe the same thing and began pursuing both international diplomacy and internal reconciliation. When I spoke to Nikolai Kozyrev, the chief Soviet negotiator at the Geneva Accords and a specialist on the region, he highlighted this as the main lesson to draw from the Soviet experience. “Diplomacy allowed us to withdraw our troops,” he said, and pointed out that talks with the Taliban were absolutely necessary. In the end, the reconciliation would be up to by the Afghans themselves.

#### Further Reading:

*For the current situation in Afghanistan and how it developed, I highly recommend the work of Dr. Antonio Giustozzi at the Crisis States Research Centre, including [this paper](#). The veteran journalist Ahmed Rashid recently released a useful book on the situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan, pessimistically entitled [Descent into Chaos](#). A number of useful reports are available from the [International Crisis Group](#). Finally, there was an interesting discussion on Iraq and Afghanistan this weekend in the [New York Times](#).*

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