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A Well Worn Path:

The Soviet and American Approaches to the Critical Tasks of Counter Insurgency

by Bart Howard

The conflict in Afghanistan is clearly at the top of the list of U.S. foreign policy challenges. Each year more and more resources are committed to the effort to stabilize and secure Afghanistan. The cost of this effort is more than just monetary. U.S. “blood and treasure” is being spilled as Americans debate the potential success or failure in this enigmatic and distant country. Soon all discussion and debate will intensify on the concept of “transition” sometime in the near future.

Afghanistan has been called a “graveyard of empires” because of the long list of nations that have previously attempted to conduct military campaigns that have ended in failure.¹ The most recent super power to wage a counterinsurgency in Afghanistan was the Soviet Union, which fought an expensive and costly campaign spanning from 1979-1989. Although Russia committed billions of dollars and lost thousands lives in the undertaking, the resulting withdraw and eventual collapse of the Afghan government was perceived as a humiliating defeat for Russia.

After nearly a decade of very mixed results, the United States must ask the inevitable question, is this working? Although the records of other nation’s adventures in Afghanistan are dismal, it does not mean that history will merely repeat itself, but it does bring to light the importance of looking at the efforts of the current campaign in Afghanistan through the lens of history. The experience of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan should not be dismissed; in fact it should be seriously examined to reveal if there are key lessons that can be gleaned in the conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign.

How did the Soviet Union and the United States approach two critical tasks in conducting a counterinsurgency; *Denying sanctuary to insurgents* and *Building effective host nation forces to conduct counterinsurgency operations*?

These critical tasks are derived from *United States Army Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, also known as Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No 3-33.5. This publication generated much intellectual discussion when it was first produced and was the first military manual reviewed by the New York Times.² The theories in the publication came after extensive research of numerous counterinsurgencies and full vetting of drafts by a wide

¹ Jones, Seth, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co, 2009.

² “Counterinsurgency By the Book” Richard H. Schultz and Andrea Dew, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/07/opinion/07shultz.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=FM%203-24%20Counterinsurgency&st=cse Accessed 11 May 2010

audience.³ For basis of analysis, this manual describes the doctrine for U.S. military ground forces conducting counterinsurgency operations and as such describes “the fundamental principles that guide the employment of US military forces in coordinated action toward a common objective.”⁴

For the sake of brevity, this paper will examine two critical operational tenets outlined in chapter one; *Deny sanctuary to insurgents and Train military forces to conduct counterinsurgency operations*.⁵ Although there are numerous tasks to accomplish in conducting a counterinsurgency if the enemy has access to external resources and a safe haven and there is no effective host nation capability to defeat the insurgents, the ability for the host nation to emerge victorious is impossible.

Background⁶

Afghanistan is a country of diverse geography, from the mountainous Hindu Kush in the center, to the lush eastern regions and the more commonly known desert west. For over 2500 years, it has been the location of a clash of civilizations. Around 330 BC, Alexander the Great suffered terrible losses against fierce Afghan tribes. Due to its location between India, a Britain possession and Russia to the north, Afghanistan was the site of hegemonic struggles in the 19th century, the site of the *Great Game* between rival empires. From 1839-1842 British forces suffered defeat in the *First Anglo-Afghan War* in which the legend is told of one column of 16,000 being reduced to one lone survivor. The British continued to engage in the region, but never fully subdued the fiery and independent Afghans.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Afghanistan emerged as an independent but poor and isolated country. The country was remained in relative peace nominally “ruled” by King Zahir Shah from 1933 until a bloodless coup in 1973. This coup unleashed decades of power struggle and bloodshed. In 1978 the Afghan military engineered a coup that transferred power to Nur Mohammad Taraki who established the *Democratic Republic of Afghanistan* or DRA. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Russia was the number one foreign investor in Afghanistan and closely monitored its activities and provided a communist model for education and military aid. Taraki’s reforms, although secular in nature were unpopular and soon he was killed by a rival named Hafizullah Amin in a now familiar pattern of intrigue and internal rivalry. Unpopular reforms and repression caused instability and open insurgency, especially with the fiercely independent tribal leaders.

Faced with the collapse of a neighboring communist state and unable to influence events by political means, Soviet advisors drew up plans for military action, looking to use the relatively quick model of interventions into Czechoslovakia and Hungary a few years before. In

³ Nagl, John, “The Evolution and Importance of Army/Marine Corps Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency” accessed at: <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/841519foreword.html>, accessed at 11 May 2010.

⁴ Joint Publication 1-02, “Definition of Doctrine” accessed at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/data/j/5003.html 11 May 2010

⁵ U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, page 1-29 Table 1-1.

⁶ Two highly recommended sources on an overall history of Afghanistan are Tanner, Stephen, *Afghanistan: A Military History From Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, Da Capo Press, 2002 and Ewans, Martin, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics*, New York, Harper Collins, 2002

December 1979, Soviet conventional forces entered Afghanistan at the “invitation” of Amin, with the goal of bolstering the weak Afghan security forces and preventing a total collapse of the DRA. Soviet forces assassinated Amin and replaced him with a more acceptable Communist leader named Barak Karmal. For the next 6 years Karmal oversaw a continually degenerating situation where both Russian and weak Afghan security forces attempted to restore governmental control. A powerful counter insurgency grew, fueled by the miscalculated anger of having foreign forces on Afghan soil and fed by massive covert support. The diverse anti-government forces were known as the Mujahedeen (Freedom Fighters) and received extensive monetary and material support from the U.S channeled through the sanctuary of Pakistan.

By 1986, weighted by growing casualties, high economic cost and domestic pressures, the Soviets announced a withdrawal of military forces and the former head of Afghan secret police, Muhammad Najibullah replaced Karmal. By 1989, the last Russian units returned to the Soviet Union as part of a formal UN brokered peace agreement. Najibullah immediately launched an ambitious plan of “national reconciliation”. The Soviet Union continued to provide enormous material and financial support to the DRA and remarkably, Najibullah clung to power in Kabul. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of military aid in 1991 it was only a matter of time until rival Afghan factions entered Kabul and Najibullah was brutally executed in public view.

The formerly united insurgents now grew into openly warring rivals. The country experienced even more death and suffering in a bloody civil war. The world witnesses a huge exodus of Afghan refugees. Rival warlords grappled for control in Kabul. One of these rivals was led by a shadowy religious figure named Mullah Omar. His young and fiercely idealistic religious students or *Talibs* eventually prevailed and took control over most of the country and ruled by draconian measures. Although some have characterized the following years as abandonment by the United States, there was little appetite left in Congress or a viable, legitimate Afghan government to fund. All that was left was humanitarian aid for the growing camps of refugees displaced by now decades of conflict. Meanwhile the tattered land became the breeding ground of terrorism.

The epic events of 911 drew the U.S. back to Afghanistan to find and attack the Al Qaeda mastermind, Osama Bin Laden who had used southern Afghanistan as his sanctuary. The U.S. quickly defeated the Taliban by the literally contracted use of rival Afghan Warlords known as the Northern Alliance. Using locally armed tribes, augmented with the application of precision air strikes and a small footprint of Special Forces advisers, the Northern Alliance quickly, albeit chaotically, routed the Taliban.

In a show of exceptional international agreement, a new government formed under a charismatic and well spoken Pashtun named Hamid Karzai. Soon international aid began to flow in. However, starting in 2003, military operations in Iraq drew enormous resources from the U.S. and by 2006, violence levels in Afghanistan surged, indicating a resurgence of Taliban extremists who had used the gap in U.S. pressure and sanctuary in Pakistan to rebuild. By 2009, the U.S. acknowledged that the nature of Afghan war had changed and President Obama authorized a nearly 50% increase of U.S. forces.

At the current time, there is open speculation of the political legitimacy of Hamid Karzai, the effectiveness of Afghan security forces, resolve of the international community and potential nature of Afghan “reconciliation and reintegration plans.”

Deny Sanctuary to Insurgents

Access to external resources and sanctuaries has always influenced the effectiveness of counterinsurgencies.⁷ Counterinsurgency doctrine clearly recognizes through historic analysis that campaigns that allow *open borders, airspace, and coastlines* will not succeed. A casual student of the Vietnam War would remember that the Viet Cong had near uninterrupted supplies that flowed through neighboring countries and the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” was a source of continuous frustration for senior American policymakers. Years later, U.S. Intelligence reports credit this covert resupply effort as “one of the great feats in military engineering of the twentieth century.”⁸ Both the Soviet Union and the U.S. have grappled with the problem of preventing the insurgent militias from receiving support and sanctuary in Pakistan.

During the Soviet-Afghan conflict, the United States covertly funneled millions of dollars of aid and material with the aid of Pakistan. This effort to cause severe damage to the Soviet effort by proxy has become the stuff of Hollywood scripts as seen in the movie *Charlie Wilson's War*, but is clearly documented by such journalists as Steve Coll.⁹ The Soviets recognized this vulnerability and the active participation of Pakistan. Moscow engaged in direct talks with Pakistan and in April 1988 formally signed The “Agreement on the Settlement of the Situation Relating to Afghanistan.”¹⁰ Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, and the United States, signed the document in which Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed to not interfere in each other's nations, while the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to provide the guarantee for the agreement. All parties agreed to seek a settlement of the situation in Afghanistan, effectively allowing the Soviet Union to withdraw. Not only did the Soviets recognize that they had to address U.S. and Pakistani support for the insurgents, they had obtained a workable agreement to end the Afghan Civil War.¹¹ Even though Pakistan and the U.S. violated its treaty obligations, the U.S. did suspend support to the belligerents, the Kabul regime briefly survived the Soviet withdrawal, and Moscow was able to claim an honorable exit.¹² In hindsight, it appears that the Soviets recognized that they could not seal off the endless supply of manpower and weapons, to include high technology air to air systems.

Today the U.S. finds itself in a very similar position. The Bush Administration was extremely slow to recognize the resurgence of the Taliban and the use of Pakistan as a sanctuary. By early 2007 Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, the senior American commander in Afghanistan was still in the process of convincing senior U.S. policymakers that the Pakistan military was literally co-located with the Taliban in Pakistan's Federally Administrative Tribal Areas or FATA.¹³ Today, the news is full of stories of daily drone attacks on insurgents in Pakistan by U.S. Predator systems but it would be hard to argue that such precision strikes can seal off the 1600 mile long Afghan-Pakistan border. Periodic video messages from Osama bin Laden nearly nine years after 9/11 send embarrassing reminders that extremists migrated from

⁷ Fm 3-24, p. 1-16.

⁸ Hanyok, Robert J., *Spartans in Darkness*. Washington DC: Center for Cryptographic History, NSA, 2002, p. 94. Accessed at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/nsa/spartans/spartans.pdf>, 15 May 2010

⁹ Excellent source of the secret history of CIA support is in Pulitzer Prize winning *Ghost Wars* by Steve Coll, London, Penguin Books, 2005.

¹⁰ See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/ungomap/background.html>

¹¹ Adams, David, Norton, Kevin and Schmitt, Christopher, “*Follow the Bear*” Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute, February 2010, p. 18

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jones, Seth, p 223. Also see *Descent into Chaos* by Ahmed Rashid, New York, Viking, 2008.

Afghanistan to Pakistan. Official U.S. documents clearly indicate that past Pakistani governmental support or at least open toleration of the Taliban, yet the U.S. continues to provide large monetary support to Pakistan.¹⁴ The current Pakistan Counter-Insurgency Fund which is used to train and equip Pakistani military and security forces – will go from 700 million dollars this year to 1.2 billion dollars in 2011.¹⁵ Debate in Washington continues on the most effective way to deny sanctuary to the Taliban. If Taliban leaders such as Mullah Omar can continue to operate out of Quetta, it is hard to envision how the campaign can succeed.¹⁶

First the Soviets and now the U.S., have been unable to address the destructive effects of Pakistani sanctuary on efforts to conduct COIN operations. Both the Soviet Union and the United States have been unable to reverse a known unsuccessful counterinsurgency practice of using a neighboring country to rebuild and reorganize in relative impunity. In the end, the Soviets recognized that they would have to find a political solution and they pursued it. The United States has late in a campaign of nine years, now realized that Pakistan is part of the equation to success and is taking a more holistic approach to the region. Unfortunately, there is little hope that increased expenditures will bring about changes in the scope and intensity that the U.S. desires. Finally, the long term effect of the incredibly destructive flooding throughout Pakistan will probably last for decades and a new generation of young Pakistanis will grow up in poverty and despair, ripe recruits for extremist ideology.

Train Military Forces to Conduct Counterinsurgency Operations

FM 3-24 concludes that the *key to (Counterinsurgency) is developing an effective host-nation security force.*¹⁷ Without security, host nation governments cannot provide services to their people and soon lose in a struggle of public confidence between insurgents and host nation. Both the Soviets and the United States have placed great efforts in building an effective Afghan Security Force. Many Americans may have little understanding of how much the Soviets invested in building the Afghanistan Ministry of Defense. When the Soviets arrived in force in 1979 *their intent was not to confront the insurgents directly, but to provide the Afghan army with the logistical and combat support it would need to fight the “reactionary” insurgents themselves.*¹⁸ The Soviets had begun formal training of the Afghan military as early as 1956 which included apprenticeships in professional military academies.¹⁹ Numerous educational agreements existed between the two countries and *tens of thousands of young people were sent in the Soviet Union or Eastern European countries for short or prolonged periods of education.*²⁰ Thus, in the 1980s, Afghan human capital was at a level that would be enviable to present day planners. However, despite this technical training and massive material support, there were steady desertion and loyalty issues due to the growing religious nature of the insurgency. Hampered by high desertion rates, DRA forces still grew to approximately 310,000 by 1988. To

¹⁴ Coll, p. 62-65.

¹⁵ Lobe, Jim and Clifton, Eli, *Obama Calls for More Development, Counterinsurgency Aid*”, Inter Press service, 1 Feb 2010, accessed at: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=50188>

¹⁶ See: Schmitt, Eric and Mazzetti, Mark, “Taliban Haven in Pakistani City Raises Fears”, New York Times, 9 Feb 2010, accessed at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/world/asia/10quetta.html> 15 May 2010

¹⁷ FM 3-24 p. 6-1.

¹⁸ Minkov, Anton and Smolyne, Gregory, “3D Soviet Style: Lessons Learned from the Soviet Experience in Afghanistan”, Centre for Operational Research and Analysis, Ottawa Canada, 2007, accessed at: http://www.thecornwallisgroup.org/workshop_2007.php 12 May 2008, p. 175

¹⁹ Borovik, Artyom, *The Hidden War*, New York, Grove Press, 1990, p.12

²⁰ Minkov, p 184.

aid in manpower requirements, the DRA imposed conscription to fill the ranks. By all measures *the core of the Soviet strategy to strengthen the Afghan regime was to rebuild and increase capabilities of the DRA security forces.*²¹ To do this, the Soviets spent billions of dollars and by 1987 only Vietnam and Cuba had received more support in terms of military assistance.²² In a striking footnote of history, Soviet support was not all free and in return, the Afghans provided the Soviet Union with millions of dollars of natural gas and agricultural products.²³ *In the end the Soviet Union supplied \$36 billion to \$48 billion dollars worth of military equipment to the communist regime in Kabul from 1978 to the early 1990s. Over the course of the Soviet phase of the war, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and China supplied \$6 billion to \$12 billion worth of weapons and military supplies to the mujahedeen.*²⁴

Despite years of training, surges in equipment, advisors and equipment superiority, *throughout the war, the Afghan Army was weak, divided and frequently unreliable. Factionalism within the Afghan government hindered the development of military cohesion and smothered the emergence of competent, dependable commanders.*²⁵ The Afghan Security Forces grew more and more ineffective and the Soviets turned increasingly to using local militias for security.²⁶ A CIA summary of 1987 made a chillingly accurate assessment of where the Soviets stood in 1986.

Seven years later, the Soviets find themselves bogged down in a guerrilla war, the Soviet-installed regime in Kabul remains weak and ineffective, and the Afghan military remains incapable of quelling a resistance that has grown substantially in numbers, effectiveness and popular support. Soviet officials now privately concede that their leadership miscalculated the difficulties of achieving their goal and underestimated the long-term costs of their involvement in Afghanistan.²⁷

When the United States re-entered Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, *Afghanistan boasted some of the worst living conditions and statistics ever recorded. The country ranked 172nd out of the 178 countries on the UN Development Programs Human Development Index, effectively tying for last place with several African countries.*²⁸ Kabul lay in total ruins and the Bush Administration was uncertain of what level of support they wanted to commit to rebuilding the nation or its defense capability. In May 2003, Secretary Rumsfeld rejected the idea of expanding the International Security Force (ISAF) saying it was the idea of people “mostly on editorial boards, columnists and at the UN.”²⁹ The task of building a security force from the ashes of civil war was daunting. Afghan officials wanted a large Army of two hundred thousand, but this was completely unrealistic and a figure of sixty thousand was agreed upon.³⁰ Simultaneously, the German government took on the task of training a national police corps.³¹

²¹ Minkov, p. 186.

²² “The Cost of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan”, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Estimate, February 1987, p. 10, accessed at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us.html>, 12 May 2010.

²³ “The Economic Impact of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan, U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, May 1983, p. 2, accessed at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us.html>, 12 May 2010.

²⁴ Goodson, Larry, *Afghanistan's Endless War*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2001, p. 99.

²⁵ Jones, p. 26.

²⁶ Minkov, p. 178.

²⁷ “The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan” p.1.

²⁸ Rashid, Ahmed, *Descent into Chaos*, London, Penguin, 2008, p. 130.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 200.

³⁰ Ibid p. 202.

³¹ The German government took on the mission of training the Afghan National Police. The program was underfunded and under resourced. This led the U.S. to de facto assume the task, but then there was disagreement if this was a DOS or DOD Mission. It is

By the time of the resurgence of the Taliban in 2006, the Afghan Army numbered only 37,000 and suffered through numerous problems such as 20-40 percent illiteracy and desertion rates as high as 25 percent.³² Senior leaders were furthermore frustrated by the apparent lack of priority placed by the Pentagon on training Afghan forces. The mission was given to the Army National Guard and activated reservists.³³ This practice is clearly identified by U.S. Army doctrine as “unsuccessful” i.e. *placing low priority on assigning quality advisors to host-nation forces*.³⁴ In comparison, the Soviets also denigrated advisor duty. Such duty was seen as “hardship” by Soviet officers and not considered a stepping stone to promotion.³⁵ Building an Afghan Army that can operate independently continues to be a daunting task.

Forward to 2010 and the Afghan Army strength stands at 112,000 troops with an annual sustainment cost of 2.2 billion dollars.³⁶ After billions of dollars and more than seven years of effort, the Afghan Army has little capability to field any forces than can operate independently. The much publicized Marja offensive highlighted that the Afghan Army performed poorly and despite public praise from senior commanders, imbedded journalists and small unit commanders paint a very different picture.³⁷ It is hard to see how the United States will fair any different from the Soviets considering the growing strength of Islamist extremism and an incredibly large stream of funding found in the lucrative illicit drug trade of Afghanistan’s poppy trade.

One could legitimately ask the question, “How good does the ANSF have to be to combat the Taliban”? How did the Northern Alliance comprised of ill disciplined and poorly equipped bands of young men achieve such success? This is not to argue to return to the use of warlords, but only to ask “What is good enough in Afghanistan”? In the end it may come down to the one quality that cannot be bought, contracted, or imported by NATO, that is the will to fight.

It is the conclusion of this paper that both the Soviet Union failed and the United States is failing in achieving two of the most critical tasks of conducting a counterinsurgency; *Denying sanctuary to insurgents* and *Building effective host nation forces to conduct counterinsurgency operations*. The Soviet Union was never able to reverse the effects of Mujahedeen sanctuary in Pakistan. This insured that there was a constant stream of men and material flowing into the Afghan counterinsurgency. When the Soviets changed tactics and began to use more helicopters and air power, the Mujahedeen obtained modern U.S. Stinger missiles. Likewise, the U.S. finds itself frustrated by the apparent invulnerability of the Taliban’s “Quetta Shura”, the lack of aggressiveness of Pakistan, even after billions of dollars of funding and finally a central Kabul government that is reluctant to use its existing security forces against a force that it clearly overmatches.

Both countries made enormous efforts to build and sustain effective Afghan Security Forces. After billions of dollars and years of training, the Afghan Army is not even close to performing independently and shows discouraging signs of lack of discipline and poor

now part of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan Command. This lack of a complementing police force has been identified as a major failing of the campaign and is discussed in detail in Jones, *Graveyard of Empires*.

³² Ibid p. 203.

³³ Jones, p. 128.

³⁴ Fm 3-24 p. 1-29.

³⁵ Grau, Lester and Gress, Michael, *The Russian General Staff, The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2002, p. 52.

³⁶ Afghanistan Conflict Monitor accessed at : <http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/securityforces.html>

³⁷ See Chivers, C. J., “Marines Do Heavy Lifting as Afghan Army Lags in Battle”, New York Times, 20 February 2010, accessed at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/world/asia/21afghan.html>, 15 May 2010.

leadership. During the 1980s, the Afghan Army conducted large scale operations involving thousands of troops and the use of aircraft and supporting arms. In 2010, Coalition Forces praise simple operations at the platoon and company level.

For the United States, the stakes are high and the mission is not over, yet one begins to see strong parallels to the Soviet experience that ended in “honorable withdrawal” and extensive reconciliation with belligerent factions. The United States, no matter how noble they believe in the mission, now finds itself along a worn path of which there are many ghosts, both Afghan and Soviet. Only time will tell if the ending is dramatically different.

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