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## U.S. Armor in Afghanistan: Worth the Effort?

by Irvin Oliver

With the arrival of 14 U.S. Marine M1A1 tanks in Afghanistan, it may be worth considering the wider role of armor and mechanized forces in irregular warfare. For many, the initial view may be that mechanized forces have little or no place in Afghanistan for several noted reasons – the logistical burden of mechanized forces will further strain an already fragile supply chain; the Soviets used mechanized forces and failed; mechanized forces limit the effectiveness of counterinsurgency. While there may be some validity in all of these criticisms, they are flawed or incomplete arguments that rely on shaky assumptions. The primary consideration of the introduction of armor and mechanized forces into a situation like Afghanistan should be the means of employment and terrain considerations.

### *The Question of Logistics*

U.S. supply lines to Afghanistan must transit a third country – via two central land routes through Pakistan, and using the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan. While there are other potential routes, these three have seen the most U.S. and NATO activity. Militants have increased their attacks against vulnerable supply routes, and a cursory look at the additional burden of mechanized forces to Afghanistan would appear to be somewhat non-sensical.<sup>1</sup> Tanks may be non-mission capable for significant periods of time due to a lack of repair parts or fuel, considering the security risk along supply routes; or logistics convoys may be at greater risk because of their support of the tanks. Possibly, but putting the USMC tank deployment in the wider context of theater support changes the picture considerably. Repair parts have only a limited effect on the logistical tail of deployed forces. For example, the largest component for repair would be the engine and transmission – the power pack, which weighs 2,500 lbs. Heavy trucks could carry multiple packs if needed, but repairs typically require much smaller parts than the whole. In the worst case, a C-130 Hercules could deliver the several packs in a single lift.

In the harsh environment of Iraq, the M1 has shown to be durable, and the environment of southern Afghanistan is similar with its hot, dusty conditions. Both Army and Marine Corps units report high operational readiness rates for mechanized and armored vehicles despite high usage.<sup>2</sup> Crews and maintenance teams have been able to routinely repair vehicles that have sustained battle damage within a relatively short amount of time. One must also keep in mind that the likely method of the employment of the M1A1 will be in the form of platoon and section-

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<sup>1</sup> Unattributed, "Key NATO Supply Route Hit Again in Pakistan," *The Telegraph (UK)*, October 3, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/8040318/Key-Nato-supply-route-hit-again-in-Pakistan.html> (Accessed December 2, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> William M. Solis, "Preliminary Observations on Equipment Reset Challenges and Issues for the Army and Marine Corps," Testimony Before the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, March 30, 2006, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06604t.pdf> (Accessed December 6, 2010).

level detachments to other units, which reduces the maintenance burden as the tank company can ensure it is able to meet mission requirements.

Fuel is the biggest logistical constraint when considering mechanized forces. With the well-documented fuel inefficiency of the M1, clearly refueling is a major consideration. Based, however, on some basic calculations and estimates, fuel for a company or two of tanks is minor. High-end use of use of a tank company requires approximately 350,000 gallons per month.<sup>3</sup> To put that number in context, a Marine Corps brigade-sized force<sup>4</sup> uses 500,000 gallons of fuel per day.<sup>5</sup> Considering that the area of operations for the USMC tanks is in the southern portion of Afghanistan, the less precarious Chaman route through southwestern Pakistan should reduce the concern; logistics convoys on the route have experienced less activity in the south. While the amount of fuel and the costs of logistics support are high, the added requirements of a small mechanized force are not infeasible or unsuitable.

### ***The Flawed Soviet Use of Armor***

The claim of failure on the part of mechanized forces during the Soviet War in Afghanistan does not take into account tactical and strategic errors the Soviets made during the war. Soviet forces were slow to recognize the utility of airmobile operations, and prior to their use the Soviets regularly sent mechanized units into severely restrictive mountainous terrain only to see their systematic destruction. Mechanized Soviet forces, even their infantry, were habituated with fighting from their vehicles.<sup>6</sup> This mitigated the infantry's ability to provide protection to the mechanized and armored elements. The Afghan mujahedeen would simply isolate the largely road-bound units and wait until the Soviet units ran out of fuel or ammunition to close with and destroy them. As the Soviets adopted airmobile tactics and integrated mechanized forces with their airmobile units, they saw greater successes even in the eastern part of Afghanistan. Of course, much of their success ended with the introduction of the Stinger missile, but tactically and operationally the Soviet Army made several catastrophic missteps in the utilization of their mechanized forces in Afghanistan.

The bulk of the Soviet forces that fought in the earlier part of the war in Afghanistan consisted of conscripted soldiers. With the exception of the airborne forces, most soldiers were Category III reservists called to active duty for 90 days from the Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics (CASSRs). This part of the Soviet Army has little combat training and questionable loyalty to the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> These conscripted reservists made up the majority of both tank and service support units during the early phases of the war. The Soviet Army experienced ethnic divisions, with these conscripts facing racism on the part of Russian leaders and troops. In Afghanistan, these conscripted forces faced significant numbers of desertions due not only to the racism they experienced, but to 'stop-loss' beyond their initial 90-day call-up and the Soviet propaganda efforts that failed once the CASSR conscripts saw whom they were fighting.<sup>8</sup> Many

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<sup>3</sup> I based this figure on the calculation of one M1-equipped tank company requiring a twice daily refuel for all 14 tanks of 400 gallons for each tank. For a tank company, this works out to 11,200 gallons/day and 336,000 gallons/month.

<sup>4</sup> Consisting of a reinforced MEU. See: *U.S. Marine Corps Concepts and Programs*, 2009, p. 247.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Mufson and Walter Pincus, "Major Challenge for Pentagon is Getting Fuel to U.S. Troops in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/14/AR2009121403123.html> (Accessed December 2, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Steven J. Zaloga, *Inside the Blue Berets*, Presidio Press, 1995, p. 242.

<sup>7</sup> Leo J. Daugherty III, "The Bear and the Scimitar: Soviet Central Asians and the War in Afghanistan," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, March 1995, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Daugherty, p. 81.

individual soldiers fraternized with the mujahedeen, even providing supplies in some cases. Compounding the problem, the Soviet Army segregated its forces, placing its majority Central Asian soldiers into separate units.<sup>9</sup> Eventually the Soviets replaced these Category III soldiers with better-prepared forces from other parts of the USSR, but the damage was done.

The Soviet force that occupied Afghanistan was primarily a mechanized force including the airborne forces that brought their BMD – the airborne infantry fighting vehicle.<sup>10</sup> Through at least the first four years of the Soviet war, offensive operations often consisted of motorized rifle and tank division attacks following heavy preparatory artillery or air-delivered fires.<sup>11</sup> While the Soviets shifted their operations away from large-scale mechanized sweeps through swaths of mountainous eastern part of the country in favor of airmobile operations, Soviet mechanized forces continued to play a major role in coordination with airmobile forces.

The 40<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army that invaded Afghanistan consisted of one airborne division and seven motorized rifle divisions – which included three tank regiments.<sup>12</sup> It concentrated its efforts on Kabul and the road network in the eastern and northern parts of Afghanistan, with only limited activity around Kandahar and southern Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Placing mechanized forces into regions of Afghanistan with few options other than remaining road-bound immediately placed them at a tactical disadvantage, which the mujahedeen seized upon. Soviet operations initially saw large attacks into Afghanistan's valleys using columns of armor, which made the attack almost completely exposed to topside RPG attacks.<sup>14</sup> Recognizing the limitations of the mechanized force in eastern Afghanistan, the Soviets tried to maximize their value by securing convoys with armor escorts.<sup>15</sup> Doing so, however, left the convoys vulnerable to anti-armor ambushes in the eastern valleys. Further, the units under the 40<sup>th</sup> Army suffered from abysmal maintenance of nearly all of its equipment.<sup>16</sup> This was simply another symptom of the personnel issues the Soviet Army in general inflicted upon itself.

It is a mistake to draw parallels between the Soviet experience with armor in Afghanistan and the United States current trial. The United States has now deployed armor to Afghanistan following seven years of hard-fought experience in employing armored and mechanized forces in irregular warfare. U.S. forces have shown the adaptability of mechanized forces in such a complex setting, with adaptations of both tactics and the modification of the equipment. U.S. forces also do not have the social issues that plagued the Soviet mechanized forces in Afghanistan. One must also remember the area of operations for the USMC tanks in Afghanistan; it is much less restrictive than the steep valleys and mountainous terrain of eastern Afghanistan. It would be a shock to see U.S. tanks operating in mountainous eastern Afghanistan.

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<sup>9</sup> Daugherty, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Zaloga.

<sup>11</sup> Drew Middleton, "Afghan War Isn't Over, But Soviets Seem to be Winning," *New York Times*, May 1, 1983, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/01/weekinreview/afghan-war-isn-t-over-but-soviets-seem-to-be-winning.html?scp=18&sq=soviets+tanks&st=nyt> (Accessed December 6, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Giradet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, St. Martin's Press, NY 1985, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, Palgrave MacMillan NY, 2002, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Giradet, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Maley, p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 201.

## ***Counterinsurgency Doctrine***

The last central issue in the M1 deployment to Afghanistan is the violation of counterinsurgency principles – specifically, separating the counterinsurgent force from the population they are there to protect, and from whom they are supposed to be separating the insurgent. Again, a superficial look would seem to validate this concern, but looking deeper should ease the criticism. The counterinsurgency doctrine represented in FM 3-24 does call for counterinsurgent forces to get as close as possible to the population, as they are the center of gravity in population-centric counterinsurgency. In this vein, the introduction of U.S. armor seems counterproductive, but after fighting two counterinsurgencies there are two points to consider.

First, experience and doctrine make clear that greater personal interaction between the counterinsurgent forces and the local populace is necessary for success, but mechanized forces have an inherent constraint in its ability to do this; they are optimal for direct combat. Acknowledging this, the ideal role for the M1A1 in Afghanistan would take advantage of its direct fire capabilities and optics, and to not place Marine tanks in a direct counterinsurgent role. This maximizes the capabilities of the tank while avoiding the key disadvantage. Mechanized forces can play a decisive role in the lethal engagements that are common even in counterinsurgencies. The Marines have extensive experience in employing the M1A1 in small, direct support roles to maximize their utility while reducing the tactical risks. It is unlikely the U.S. tank crews will find themselves conducting the civil engagement aspects of counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, nor would this be the ideal role for these troops and their equipment. These forces may not be ideal for population-centric tasks in COIN, but they have clear worth against insurgent and irregular forces.

Second, the value of mechanized forces in irregular warfare should be unquestioned after their documented use in numerous battles and engagements throughout the Iraq War. Both Soldiers and Marines have used tanks and mechanized forces to great effect against irregular forces. These forces provide a different form of asymmetric warfare – it provides capabilities irregular forces are unable to match. The direct firepower and precision of mechanized forces can serve a critical function in support of infantry forces when artillery and air-delivered fires are unable to support or pose too high of a risk in collateral damage. The tactical mobility of mechanized forces can provide a marked advantage. Their ability to conduct route reconnaissance, support route clearance, and to traverse unbroken terrain at greater speeds than lighter units adds a complementary dimension to the U.S. forces deployed to Afghanistan. The shock effect is real and critics are mistaken not to give it its due. The appearance and direct employment of tanks and mechanized forces can have a demoralizing effect on enemy forces, helping to act as a deterrent prior to direct contact or as a means to halt the momentum of an enemy assault. In the case of the USMC deployment, critics may have seriously underestimated the M1A1 and its 120mm cannon.

## ***Conclusion***

The USMC deployment of M1A1 tanks to Afghanistan may be partially in response to the withdrawal of Canadian and Dutch armor within the next year, but these countries had a fair amount of success with tanks in the same region that will become familiar to the M1 Abrams tank. The added benefit that the Canadians and Dutch did not have are the experienced crews and

leadership who have gained valuable experience with armor and mechanized forces in the complex environment of irregular warfare. Leaders, staffs, and crews will be able to call upon a trove of lessons learned and intuition gained from their combat and counterinsurgency experiences over the last seven years in Iraq. While the terrain, civilian, and logistical landscapes are different, the principles are the same. The experience, adaptability, and innovation of U.S. forces will probably lead to a much more positive outcome than the Soviet experience critics use in comparison.

U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine places a premium on boots on the ground and direct, personal engagements with the civilian populace to win their trust and confidence. Employed with little creativity or forethought, U.S. tanks in Afghanistan could be forgettable at best and disastrous at worst. Mechanized forces, specifically tanks, may not be the ideal type of forces to conduct counterinsurgency operations, but when deployed as a complement to light forces they may bring a unique capability to the battlefield an enemy force must account for. When integrated with dedicated counterinsurgent forces, mechanized forces can provide timely and critical direct fire support when needed, support security operations, and complicate the calculus for enemy forces.

Mechanized forces, in this case U.S. Marine Corps M1A1 tanks, have utility in irregular warfare. Counterinsurgencies do not simply consist of meeting with tribal leaders and handing out soccer balls to kids; there is a very lethal element to them as well. Even successful counterinsurgencies have had episodes of violent exchanges, and having mechanized options available present an additional complication for insurgents in Afghanistan. We should be wary of dismissing armor in Afghanistan and irregular wars; there is clear utility. Terrain should be the primary driver with logistics also having an influential voice. In this case, neither poses an insurmountable challenge given the small package deployed.

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