Research report

Forum: Historical Security Council

Issue: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989)

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# **Introduction**

*“We cannot afford to lose Afghanistan”*

— Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, 1979, quoted in Svetlana Savranskaya and Malcome Byrne, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan a Case of Mission Creep, According to New Book and Original Soviet Documents

Often, when historians proclaim the end of the Soviet Union, and the triumph of the West in their dissolution of the Soviet Union, the decision to invade Afghanistan decided in 1979 is seen as the main cause. This pivotal moment is largely marked as one of the most significant miscalculations of the Cold War. Initially, an attempt to stabilize a neighbouring socialist government soon turned into a costly conflict that drained the Union.

The invasion was driven by a combination of factors, such as the ideological commitment to hold onto *Communist Principles* and the want to decrease the spread of Islamic fundamentalism alongside the southern borders of the USSR to suppress dissidence. Success sharply turned into a quagmire, with Soviet forces encountering resistance from the Mujahideen, a sharp coalition of Afghan Gorilla fighters aligned with the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and more. This conflict exposed the soviet Union's weaknesses and its lack of adequacy in terms of leadership, as well as military strength, contributing to the Soviet Union's collapse.

This report will examine the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, in the light of geopolitical, military, and humanitarian lenses. This will explain how a decision made in 1979 to secure a once strategic ally in Afghanistan spiralled into altering the course of the Cold War. The question of why Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko stated, “We cannot afford to lose Afghanistan” will then be answered.

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# **Definitions of key terms**

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### **Bipolar World**

### When there are two main spheres of global influence, scholars state the only true example of a Bipolar world was the Cold War era, with the spheres of the USA and USSR.

### **Brezhnev Doctrine**

### A Doctrine that justified the use of Soviet military interventions abroad in which socialist rule was seen as under threat.

### **Détente**

A period of relaxed tensions between the USSR and the United States during the 1970s concluded with the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.

**Domino Theory**

A Cold War Era belief that the fall of one nation to a communist regime would lead to the subsequent fall of its neighbours (like a row of dominoes). This theory influenced the United States foreign policy throughout the Cold War.

**Guerrilla Warfare**

A form of warfare in which small groups of combatants use violent military tactics, such as ambushes, sabotage, bombings, etc, to fight larger forces (such as military groups)

**Islamic Fundamentalism**

Advocating the return to fundamental principles of Islam, such as nations governed by Shariah Law. The rise of this fundamentalism in Afghanistan was seen as a leading cause of the Soviet Invasion.

**Mujahideen**

A coalition of Afghan guerilla fighters who opposed the invasion, and the Communist government. They were supported by several powers, including the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

**Proxy War**

A conflict where two opposing powers indirectly support different sides in another nation's war. The Cold War can be seen as a series of Proxy Wars.

**Scorched-Earth Tactics**

Military Strategy involves destroying any resource useful to the enemy, oftentimes leading to heavy civilian casualties and displacement.

# **General overview**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, from 1979 to 1989 was a key event in Cold War history. This invasion was marked by the USSR's attempt to assert control and power over neighbouring socialist Afghanistan, and the subsequent decades-long violent conflict which ensued. This period saw Afghanistan become the backdrop for a Proxy War, and the battleground for competing ideologies, resulting in devastating consequences for the nation.

**The Saur Revolution and the PDPA**

The Saue Revolution of 1978 can be traced as the roots of the Soviet Invasion. This brought the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a USSR-aligned party to power. The PDPA brought about radical reforms, popularising secularisation, and bringing about land redistribution. These radical policies were deeply unpopular amongst Afghanistan's conservative population. This discontent quickly turned to widespread unrest, with various opposition factions rising against the new regime.

Internal power struggles of the Khalq and Parcham factions within the PDPA further destabilized the government. Critically in September 1979, Hafizullah Amin, a leader of the Khalq faction seized power and ordered the assassination of the opposition. The USSR, concerned about the survival of its newly allied government, and the spread of fundamentalism along its borders, decided to launch a military invasion.

**The Invasion: Soviet Strategy**

On the 24th of December, 1979, Soviet forces led an invasion of Afghanistan with the objective of stabilizing the widely opposed PDPA government. Shortly following, Soviet forces executed Hafizullah Amin, replacing him with the deemed compliant Babrak Karmal, the leader of the Parcham faction. However, the Soviet invasion quickly turned to chaos as they faced fierce resistance from the Mujahideen, serving as a coalition of Afghan guerilla fighters. The Mujahideen gained support from notable international actors, most notably through the US-led Operation Cyclone, a covert CIA program to funnel weapons to the insurgents as a means of support.

The Soviet military strategy initially relied on conventional warfare tactics, such as large-scale offences and scorched earth tactics to root out the Mujahideen from hiding. However, the Mujahideen countered this by utilizing guerilla warfare tactics and exploiting their knowledge of Afhganistan's land and climactic conditions. The Soviets lacked the ability to gain a decisive advantage, this coupled with the human and material costs led to growing discontent and frustration within the soviet leadership.

**Root Cause: The Domino Theory**

Within the broader context of the Cold War, where both the USA and the USSR sought to expand their bipolar spheres. The Domino theory was a United States-created theory, to explain a nation's fall to communism. The Domino Theory posited that the fall of one country to communism would lead to the subsequent fall of its neighbours. This Theory was a key driver behind the US decision to back the Mujadeen. The conflict in Afghanistan became a proxy war between the US and its allies as they viewed the Soviet presence in Afghanistan as a direct threat to regional stability. In their eyes, the fall of Afghanistan could lead to the fall of many, which would be a direct threat to the global balance of power.

Furthermore, the invasion marked the end of detente, a period of relaxed tensions. The US's harsh response to the invasion with economic sanctions, a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and higher military expenditure proved this and led to a further escalation in Cold War Hostilities.

**A Path to Withdrawl: Gorbachevs New Thinking**

By the mid-1980s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought wide criticism. This was an increasingly unpopular and costly war, resulting in outrage from Soviet citizens. In 1985, the ascent of *Mikhail Gorbachev* brought about a new direction for Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev's “New Thinking” which emphasized reform, specifically the reduction of Cold War tensions led to the eventual revaluation of the Soviet role in Afghanistan.

April 1988 marked the end of the occupation, wherein the Soviet Union signed the Geneva Accords, agreeing to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. On February 15, 1989, the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan, officially marking the end of the occupation.

To do: add Operation Cyclone and more of a mujahideen and allies perspective.

# **Major parties involved**

# **1. Soviet Union (USSR)**

# Stance: Directly involved as the invading force.

# Policy:

# Backed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a communist party.

# Sought to support and stabilize the PDPA regime led by Hafizullah Amin (later replaced by Babrak Karmal).

# Aimed to preserve a pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan and prevent the spread of anti-communist insurgencies near its southern borders.

# Feared Afghanistan’s instability could weaken Soviet influence in the region and embolden Islamic uprisings in the Soviet Central Asian republics.

# **2. People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)**

# Stance: The ruling communist party in Afghanistan, is fragmented into factions (Khalq and Parcham).

# Policy:

# Khalq faction (led by Hafizullah Amin) held power in 1979 and pushed for radical Marxist reforms, which alienated many in the Afghan population.

# Aimed to modernize Afghanistan through land reforms, secularization, and social policies that were often seen as too extreme.

# Opposed by various Afghan traditional and religious groups due to its atheistic and repressive policies.

# **3.** **Afghan** **Mujahideen** **(Islamist** **Resistance)**

# Stance: Anti-communist insurgents fighting against the PDPA government and Soviet intervention.

# Policy:

# Composed of various groups, often divided by ethnic, religious, and political lines.

# Their primary objective was to overthrow the communist regime and expel Soviet forces.

# Embraced Islamic principles, rejected Marxist-Leninist ideologies, and sought to establish an Islamic government in Afghanistan.

# **4.** **United** **States of America**

# Stance: Opposed Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, part of its Cold War rivalry with the USSR.

# Policy:

# Indirectly supported the Afghan Mujahideen through covert operations.

# CIA initiated Operation Cyclone, funnelling arms, training, and financial aid to the Mujahideen through intermediaries (notably Pakistan).

# Aimed to weaken Soviet influence in the region and ensure that Afghanistan did not remain a Soviet satellite.

# **5.** **Islamic Republic of Pakistan**

# Stance: Opposed to Soviet intervention, allied with the United States.

# Policy:

# Provided sanctuary and logistical support to Afghan Mujahideen fighters.

# Coordinated with the U.S. in supplying weapons and training to anti-Soviet insurgents.

# Feared Soviet expansion into South Asia and was keen to keep Afghanistan as a buffer state.

# Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a major role in channelling support to the Mujahideen.

# **6. People’s Republic of China**

# Stance: Opposed Soviet intervention, part of its own rivalry with the USSR.

# Policy:

# Supported Afghan Mujahideen in coordination with the United States and Pakistan.

# Sought to counter Soviet influence in Afghanistan and the broader region.

# Provided military supplies to the Mujahideen, though less extensively than the U.S.

# **7. Islamic Republic of Iran**

# Stance: Opposed Soviet intervention, but with a complex position due to its own Islamic Revolution in 1979.

# Policy:

# Distracted by internal turmoil after the Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Shah and established an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini.

# Offered some support to Shia factions within the Afghan Mujahideen but was cautious about overt involvement due to internal instability.

# **8. The Kingdom of Saudi** **Arabia**

# Stance: Opposed Soviet intervention, aligned with the United States and Pakistan.

# Policy:

# Financially supported the Afghan Mujahideen, particularly the Islamist factions.

# Sought to promote Wahhabi ideology and counter Soviet communism as well as Shiite influence from Iran.

# Collaborated with the U.S. and Pakistan to bolster the Islamist resistance.

# **Timeline of Key Events**

### 1965 Afghan Communist Party forms in secret

### 1968 Brezhnev doctrine is introduced

1973 Afghanistan’s last king was ousted in a coup

1978 The communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan overthrows the government (Saur Revolution)

1978 The 1978 Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty.

1979 American Ambassador Adolph Dubs is killed. The United. States cut off assistance to Afghanistan

1979 Soviet Union began an invasion of Afghanistan

1982 Afghan guerrillas gained control of rural areas and Soviet troops held urban areas

1984 United Nations investigates reported human rights violations in Afghanistan.

1986 The Mujahadeen received arms from the United States, Britain, and China via Pakistan.

1989 The U.S., Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union signed peace accords in Geneva guaranteeing Afghan independence and the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops.

1991 Fall of the Soviet Union

# **Previous attempts to solve the issue**

United Nations Involvement 1980-88

The United Nations easily recognized the tensions and stakes within the conflict. Due to this, they attempted mediation missions. Throughout the 80s multiple rounds of negotiations were facilitated, aimed at securing a political settlement that would withdraw Soviet Troops. Due to mistrust, these efforts were often stymied, due to all the factions, and actors involved in the invasion.

Indirect Talks 1983-85

Mediated by Pakistan and the UN, early attempts to find a diplomatic solution entailed indirect talks between the Soviet Union and the USA. These discussions focused on finding a mutually beneficial agreement between both parties. One such solution included forming a new Afghan government, however, little progress was made due to tensions within the Mujahideen, the Soviet Union, and the USA.

The Role of Pakistan and Iran

Frontline states Pakistan and Iran made several attempts to solve the conflict. Pakistan facilitated the flow of arms to the Mujahideen, alongside Iran.

# **Possible solutions**

1. Negotiated Peace settlements including a Power-Sharing agreement
2. Immediate Ceasefire and demilitarisation
3. UN peacekeeping missions
4. A Non-Interference pledge

# **Further reading**

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