

TITLE: Soviet Counterinsurgency Capabilities

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*"Lessons" of Afghanistan***SOVIET COUNTERINSURGENCY CAPABILITIES**

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Has the experience in Afghanistan enhanced Soviet capabilities to conduct counterinsurgency operations elsewhere in support of client states? One approach in attempting to answer this question is to examine the "requirements" inherent in any capability for undertaking a counterinsurgency effort in a friendly nation. These can be defined in terms of a doctrine or strategy, an appropriate military force and supporting instruments, and the political will to employ the force when required.*

Strategy

A major difficulty for Soviet strategists and ideologists has been the attempt to reconcile the insurgency in Afghanistan—or in other friendly Marxist-oriented states—with their conceptions of the nature of local wars and wars of national liberation. Soviet military doctrine has held in the past that local wars and military conflicts in the Third World are an outgrowth of Western imperialism and its reactionary policy. Communist ideologists have long viewed the "national liberation process" as a positive and historically ordained trend and one in which the Soviet role is to champion peoples oppressed by colonial or foreign-dominated regimes. Over the years, the Soviets have gained much expertise in, trained thousands of foreign students for, and provided significant material, advisory, and political assistance to insurgent movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

On the other hand, the Soviets have had relatively little experience in supporting friendly Marxist governments threatened by insurgencies. The Soviets do not appear to have developed either a clear-headed analysis of the vulnerabilities of their Marxist client states like Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan to an insurgency or any significant new approaches to dealing with such insurgencies.

Militarily, the Soviet approach in Afghanistan has been a mixture of strategies employed by other nations in conducting counterinsurgency campaigns. These include "enclave," "attrition," and "consolidation" aspects. "Enclaves" have been a significant feature of Soviet military strategy since the intervention, as Soviet forces have sought to secure government control in Kabul and other major cities and along the main lines of communication. The Soviets have also regularly conducted joint and combined operations to search out and destroy insurgent groups, to disrupt insurgent base areas, and to hinder resupply of

* It should be clear at the outset that the point under discussion is the Soviets' capability to conduct counterinsurgency operations *with their own forces*. Soviet advisory efforts and use of surrogate forces have long been the normal Soviet approach to such situations. The focus of the present article is whether the Soviet combat experience in Afghanistan suggests itself as a model for a new level of Soviet assistance to client regimes in the Third World—i.e., a willingness to employ Soviet ground forces.

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insurgent forces. Finally, the Soviets have made efforts toward expanding and consolidating Afghan Government control in the countryside, but these have been constrained by the limited number of Soviet troops available and the unreliability of Afghan forces.

There is little evidence to suggest that the Soviets view these kinds of operations as distinctive or requiring a specialized "counterinsurgency doctrine." We do not have any evidence, for example, that such a discrete course is taught in Soviet military schools, nor have the Soviets published any books addressing the subject from their perspective.

This is not to say that the Soviets are failing to derive military benefit from the war or to "learn lessons" which might have applicability elsewhere. The opportunity for testing, evaluating, and modifying equipment under combat conditions in Afghanistan is, for example, relevant to Soviet war-fighting capabilities elsewhere. Moreover, the Soviet military press has published numerous accounts of tactical "lessons learned" from "training" activities in Afghanistan. Most of these "lessons" are not new, and most would appear to have a broad applicability not limited to the Afghan war or to counterinsurgency in general. Perhaps most notably, tactical experience being gained in combined-arms operations at company and battalion levels is helping to reinforce the development of the Soviet officer into a true "all-arms" commander.

Apart from such general military benefits, the Soviets do not appear to have gained new insights into the problems associated with combating an insurgency with conventional military forces. The Soviets have written extensively about problems that other nations have encountered in counterinsurgency efforts, but in Afghanistan have found themselves facing similar weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Their experience has probably been more significant in bringing home the reality of such problems than in helping to develop new solutions or to cope more effectively.

Forces

An effective military force for counterinsurgency operations should be light, specialized, and highly mobile; this does not describe Soviet forces in general nor the army which the Soviets have deployed in Afghanistan. The Soviets have, of course, attempted to "tailor" their units in Afghanistan to pursue the war more effectively. Divisional rocket battalions, for example, were returned to the USSR early in the war, and two of the three motorized rifle divisions in Afghanistan have eliminated their tank regiments as basically irrelevant forces for counterinsurgent operations. Additional helicopters have been committed to the war in order to improve mobility and fire support in difficult terrain and, more recently, further special purpose forces (Spetznaz) units have been deployed to conduct small-unit operations against the insurgents.

Other changes have been more creative, such as the formation of two independent motorized rifle brigades, each composed of a motorized rifle regiment, an air assault battalion, and a multiple rocket launcher battery. This move enhanced both the mobility and firepower of these units, making them more capable of conducting independent operations. Soviet forces in Afghanistan have also implemented organizational changes being adopted by front-line Soviet

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units in other areas; these include increasing the numbers of armored vehicles in motorized rifle regiments and assigning tanks to the divisional reconnaissance battalions.

While such measures show a degree of adaptability on the part of the Soviets, the overall impact has probably been to make the force heavier rather than lighter. The presence of tanks in reconnaissance battalions, for example, is probably a good example of an inappropriate "heavying" of the force in a counterinsurgency environment, as is the attachment of a tank battalion to the airborne division in Kabul. Even Spetznaz units in Afghanistan are more heavily equipped than their counterparts in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the general trend throughout the Soviet ground forces is toward creating a heavier rather than a lighter force. More tanks, more combat vehicles, and more artillery are being added to Soviet divisions and even the "lighter" elements of the force—the airborne divisions—have received a considerable amount of additional equipment over the past several years which makes them more difficult to deploy and more dependent on a larger logistic support structure.

Besides an appropriate organization, an effective counterinsurgent force requires specialized training. Training for Soviet forces in Afghanistan has emphasized the preparation of troops to fight in a mountainous environment without apparent reference to the type of enemy being faced. "Mountain training centers" have been established in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union to provide areas in which units can prepare for mountain warfare. The Soviets are concerned with overcoming the technical problems of handling equipment and operating weapons in the mountains and even more so with the physical and psychological conditioning of personnel for this kind of warfare.

None of this training appears to address specifics of counterinsurgency operations. Tactics taught reflect standard approaches to basic situations in mountain combat (e.g., conducting route marches, seizing passes, attacking enemy strong points) and do not appear to be "tailored" to a guerrilla war. Soviet defectors and prisoners of war from Afghanistan have reported that they received no specialized training prior to being deployed there. Moreover, the Soviets devote no effort—theoretically or practically—to training their forces for combat in jungle terrain and sub-tropical climates that would be applicable to the counterinsurgency environment in much of the Third World.

In addition to preparing their own forces, Soviet counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere require the Soviets to collaborate effectively with an indigenous regime's military force. A major feature of the Soviet approach to the war has been the attempt to keep the Afghan military involved in the fighting and to build up the capability and effectiveness of the Afghan Army. An estimated 3,500 Soviet military advisers operate with the Afghan Army down to battalion level, and some 2,000 Afghan military men receive training annually in the Soviet Union. Most operations against the insurgents are combined Soviet-Afghan efforts but are under control of a Soviet commander.

Despite these measures, the Soviets have been unable to create an effective Afghan military force, and we estimate that the Soviets are unlikely to succeed in this endeavor over the next five years or so. Afghan (and other Third World) military students returning from training in the USSR are often disenchanted

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with the Soviet system and are not eager to cooperate with or emulate the Soviets. In combat, Afghan units have frequently performed poorly despite the presence of Soviet advisers and support.

Finally, a capability to conduct a successful counterinsurgency campaign implies more than just a military effort; "security assistance" is only part of the game. Also required are appropriate levels and types of technical, economic, and political assistance to create and implement developmental programs in support of the friendly government. Soviet capabilities in this respect are quite limited, and Soviet assistance efforts in the past have concentrated heavily on military as opposed to economic programs. The overall Soviet experience in the Third World to date does not suggest that the Soviets are adept in applying non-military aid.

Will

Little direct information is available concerning the Soviet decision to send troops into Afghanistan, but evidence continues to accumulate that the decision was a difficult one for the leadership to make and one which continues to provoke frustration—at least among some middle level civilian and military officials. Then-General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev indicated in a *Pravda* interview as early as January 1980 that the decision to intervene had not been an easy one for the Soviet leadership to make. Several reports have suggested that some Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials disagreed with the decision to intervene, and there have also been reports of discontent within the KGB over the intervention. In the past two years, there have been reports of frustration among some military officers concerning the war—even to the point of questioning why the Soviet Army should be fighting in Afghanistan.

Against such a background of reporting, but given the continuing and even increasing Soviet military commitment, it is difficult to assess the impact of the Afghan experience on the national policymaking level. On one hand, the costs—domestic, economic, and political—have not been unbearable, although neither have they been inconsequential. On the other hand, the problems and shortcomings which have been revealed in attempting to wage a counterinsurgency campaign in an adjacent country can hardly have inspired the Soviet leadership in their capabilities to undertake similar operations in areas remote from the USSR—or even next door in Iran. Indeed, while some Soviet officials spoke in early 1980 about a new era of "no more Chiles" (i.e., implying a Soviet willingness to send forces abroad in support of friendly governments), this language quickly dropped from the Soviet lexicon as the difficulties in Afghanistan mounted.

For the Soviet military, Afghanistan is probably seen as a "mixed blessing" at best. The "positive" aspects of the war as a testing ground for equipment and a training environment for personnel are probably balanced by the necessity to allocate resources and the added stress placed on the military as they struggle to contend with a different type of war. Considering that the emphasis for Soviet military leaders is on central Europe and China, it is likely that the military bureaucracy would not necessarily be eager to undertake counterinsurgency operations in other Third World countries. Senior Soviet military leaders in the

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past, for example, have even been unenthusiastic about providing materiel support for major Soviet clients in the Middle East, and anecdotal evidence portrays this disinclination as a general perception among the Soviet military.

Implications

Despite its experience in Afghanistan, the USSR does not appear any better prepared to undertake counterinsurgency operations in a client state than it was in 1979. This is not to deny a somewhat improved Soviet capability to project power abroad, but to focus on the Soviet failure to develop specialized doctrine, forces, or training to conduct counterinsurgency operations.

Any political "lessons" are less apparent and will undoubtedly be influenced by the eventual outcome of the Soviet intervention. Even a complete "pacification" of Afghanistan—a prospect which appears to be remote—would be an outcome that Soviet leaders would probably be reluctant to generalize upon. The Soviet political stake in Afghanistan is much higher than it would be in a non-contiguous Third World country and, as noted previously, the military problems would be significantly greater.

In sum, Afghanistan does not suggest itself as a model for a new level of Soviet assistance to client regimes in the Third World, nor has the war there led to significant improvements in Soviet capabilities to implement an expanded counterinsurgency effort. Such "lessons" as the Soviets have learned appear to be militarily generic, and the counterinsurgency "trickle-down" potential marginal.

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