

Similarities and Differences Between the Soviet and US Invasions of Afghanistan

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Afghanistan represented the longest war for both the Soviet Union and the United States.¹ Both superpowers lost their wars due to the resistance from the Afghan people and the skills of the Taliban fighters to consolidate control over the provinces and tribes. Both wars resulted in the Taliban rising to power and ruling the country.²

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 and left the country in 1989 after ten years, having failed to achieve its objectives. The United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, and US left the country in 2021 after twenty years, also without achieving its objectives. Despite the lack of geographical

benefits—such as sea access, waterways, abundant fertile land, roadways, or railways—the country of Afghanistan has found itself in the middle of wars, invasions, and civil wars over the past fifty years, including invasions by the two greatest superpowers in the world.³

In Afghanistan, 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Afghanistan is largely tribal, with almost 80 percent of the population residing in rural areas outside urban centers. The country has over sixty different tribes and subtribes and eight major ethnic groups, making it a complex society. Over one-third of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) is estimated to come from the



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drug economy, and Afghanistan has produced 90 percent of the world's opium supply.⁴ The Taliban's funding comes from the drug trade, which generates an estimated 20–40 percent of its revenue.⁵

Two of the world's greatest superpowers made similar strategic mistakes, leaving the Taliban to regain control—twice. In a span of fifty years, both the Soviet Union and the United States were unable to defeat and take control of Afghanistan. The Taliban ruled the country from 1996 to 2001 and, as of 2025, continues to govern after the US spent approximately \$2.3 trillion and lost more than 6,500 US lives. Despite these efforts, little has changed.⁶ Both the Soviet Union and the United States tried unsuccessfully to install a new government—one communist, the other democratic.

The similarities and differences between the Soviet and US invasions of Afghanistan will be examined, specifically whether the US applied any lessons learned from the Soviet experience. It will be shown that there are many more similarities than differences and that the US failed to learn from the Soviets' mistakes.

The Soviet Union Invasion

The original reason for the Soviet inva-



Babrak Karmal in 1980.
Photo from United Press
International. Public domain.



Babrak Karmal in 1980.
Photo from United Press International. Public domain.

murdered the co-leader with whom he shared power in Afghanistan, and communist officials were concerned that he was leaning toward the West for assistance. The communist leaders also harbored a suspicion that Amin was a CIA collaborator.

sion of Afghanistan was regime change, installing Babrak Karmal, a communist leader trusted by the Politburo, in power to replace Hafizullah Amin. Amin had recently



Hafizullah Amin



Hafizullah Amin.
Public domain; source:
Robinson Library.

It was never the Soviets' intention to fight the insurgency for the Afghans. The Soviets planned to invade the country, put a new government in place, train an army, and leave, providing financial and logistical assistance to the new administration going forward. The US assumed at the time that this plan would fail.⁷ In an internal cable prepared by the CIA, it was made clear that the Soviet Union would use whatever force

necessary to crush the resistance and establish control in Afghanistan. The Soviets planned to achieve this objective very quickly without involving a protracted military involvement.⁸

There was an upheaval of protests within Afghanistan as the communist government attempted to implement communist programs such as land reform. Afghanistan made numerous requests to Moscow for assistance in the form of troops to help the government fend off an insurgency going on in protest against the government and its communist programs.

Finally, the Union of Soviet Socialist Re-

publics (USSR) relented after a year of requests and sent troops to support the Afghan government. Moscow anticipated that this mission would only take a few months to complete, but due to a gradual shift in objectives during the military campaign, commonly referred to as mission creep, the invasion ended up lasting longer than Moscow intended. It turned out to be the longest war in the history of the Soviet Union.^{9, 10}

Another goal of the Soviet invasion was the stabilization and retention of Afghanistan under Moscow's sphere of influence. The



Afghani Protesters, Los Angeles, 1986. Photo by Sarah M. Brown, UCLA Library, CC BY 4.0.



USSR planned to have an orderly political transformation and steady economic development leading to a serviceable socialist state. However, the invasion ended with the Taliban ruling the country, the rise of the terrorist group al-Qaeda, and Islamic extremism in the Soviet Union.

There were several reasons for the expansion of the Soviet mission. First was the expansion and mission of the USSR's training and advisory roles. Second was the insertion of substantial ground forces to secure Afghan cities and military bases to fight the insurgency. Third was the challenge of Amin's disposition and his replacement with Karmal.

The invasion did not achieve its original or expanded goals of stabilizing Afghanistan's government and keeping Afghanistan under Moscow's control.¹¹ The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began in December 1979. The last Soviet troops left Afghanistan in February 1989. A total of 15,000 Soviet and Afghan soldiers and 800,000 civilians died because of the Soviet intervention.¹²

United States Invasion

On September 11, 2001, terrorists flew two commercial aircrafts into the Twin Towers

in New York and flew one commercial jet into the US Pentagon. A fourth commercial aircraft crashed before it was able to get to its intended target, the US Capitol. It was found that the terrorists who perpetrated these attacks were part of al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, based in the country of Afghanistan. This attack began the US War on Terror. The US's original mission in Afghanistan was to destroy al-Qaeda and capture or kill Osama bin Laden. This led the US to invade Afghanistan.



United Airlines Flight 175 striking the South Tower, New York City, 2001. Photo by Robert J. Fisch; derivative by upstateNYer; CC BY-SA 2.0.

It was planned that these missions would not take long to complete, but because of mission creep, the war was not a short one. It turned out to be the longest war in US history.

The US invasion occurred in October 2001, with an initial bombing campaign followed by the deployment of troops. The last US troops left Afghanistan in August 2021. By 2021, after the US spent \$2.3 trillion and lost around 6,500 US lives and over 45,000 Afghan lives, nothing had changed.¹³

Failures and Mistakes by the Soviet Union

The Soviet invasion failed to securely put Afghanistan in the communist camp as Soviet Politburo had planned.^{14, 15, 16} Some people believe the invasion contributed to the demise of the USSR because of the financial, economic, political, and reputational costs on the already declining empire.¹⁷ Several lessons can be taken from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that could have been applied to the US situation in Afghanistan.^{18, 19}

Decision Making

The Soviets' decision to invade Afghanistan was made by a small group of government officials, and the decisions were made in anger, emotion, and haste.^{20, 21} The Soviets feared that Afghanistan would fall to the West and that they would lose a Soviet socialist satellite. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader who ordered the invasion of Afghanistan, was also

angered with Amin for having just arrested and murdered Brezhnev's close friend Taraki, the general secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and a leader in the Afghan government.²²



Leonid Brezhnev, 1972. Public domain.

There was a fundamental misunderstanding about whether Afghanistan could be developed into a reliable communist country. Decision makers did not understand what they were getting into. They planned a quick-in, quick-out operation that would only last months, not years. They imagined that the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan would not take long, nor would it be bloody or



costly.²³

Mission Definition & Mission Creep

The Soviets' initial mission was to do three things: prop up and secure the communist government in Afghanistan, replace Amin, and provide support to the government forces fighting the insurgents.²⁴ Over time, the mission expanded to fighting the insurgents directly and becoming fully involved in the civil war between the government forces and the insurgents.

The greatest mistake the Soviets made was becoming directly involved in the civil war instead of only providing training, military aid, and financial support. In addition, there was no timeline established for Soviet assistance, nor did the Soviets establish an exit strategy.

International Reaction

One error the USSR made with the invasion of Afghanistan was not anticipating the international response, which sparked swift and condemning reactions from the rest of the world, ostracizing the Soviet Union by most countries.²⁵ There were also sanctions put into place against the USSR on grain and other imports. The USSR did not anticipate such a strong reaction. In contrast, the US invasion

was supported to the point of allies sending troops to assist through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Culture and Religion

An invading country needs to understand the people they are fighting. The Soviets were unfamiliar with Islam and its cultural practices. They did not understand the social, cultural, political, religious, and historical context of the country. There was no Soviet recognition of tribes, plans to collaborate with them, or the warlords. Neither did they accurately assess



Afghanistan, 2016. Photo by Mirahmad Kouhnavard, CC BY-SA 4.0.

the resistance they would encounter from the Afghan people.²⁶

The USSR did not understand many basic tenets of the Afghan culture. The culture could not be stabilized by an external force.

Foreign interference and occupation were not welcomed by the people of Afghanistan because of the ingrained resistance to a central authority. Eighty percent of the country is rural and countryside. This land is fragmented along tribal, ethnic, and religious lines and prefers to be left alone to work out issues among themselves rather than a central government attempting to force policies and programs on them. They could not be transformed into a communist economy.²⁷

The Soviets never did take into consideration that to induce tribes to support the occupier and the central government, the tribes must be paid or compensated in some way.²⁸ The changes made in the national government

by the Soviets compared with their changes to the villages, tribes, warlords, and provincial governors played a major role in their defeat. Failure to properly understand the tribes' power and social structures, including the social, religious, and cultural aspects of the country, caused resistance to the communist changes the Soviet Union was trying to implement.²⁹

Fierceness of Resistance

The Soviet Union did not understand the fierceness of the resistance they were going to encounter. The Afghans were fighting not just to retain their country but also for Islam, a religion with a strong cultural resistance to occupation and the Afghan identity. In the end, the Afghans were more willing to die for



Pashtun and Hazara elders in a tribal meeting, Khas Uruzgan, Afghanistan. Photo by ResoluteSupportMedia, CC BY 2.0.



their beliefs than the soldiers they were fighting. This commitment to their beliefs is why the better-trained and better-equipped Soviet occupation forces consistently lost to the Afghans.³⁰

Security Forces

The security forces trained by the Soviets held off the insurgents, allowing the Soviet-backed government to survive for another three years after the Soviets left, due to the capability of the indigenous leaders, local autonomy, and the financial aid paid to local powers.³¹ However, the security forces were unable to sustain resistance to the insurgents once the economic and military assistance ended when the Soviet Union collapsed. The Afghans were never able to create a stand-alone military force capable of defending the country.

Implementing Communism

One of the failures of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was its attempt to implement Marxism-Leninism philosophy in the strongly Islamic country of Afghanistan.^{32, 33} USSR leadership misjudged the challenges of introducing and implementing communism in their black-and-white way of thinking; they believed that any nation-state was conducive to communism. The Soviets misunderstood the difficulty

of implementing communism on the barren, mountainous Afghan soil in a traditional, agrarian, tribal society. Additionally, large sectors of the Afghan population rejected the basic features of communism. The implementation of reform went so poorly that it created uprisings among the people.

Battlefield

The Soviet Union troops had been trained for and had experience with European and Russian terrain; they did not have experience fighting on rocky, mountainous terrain. So, the battlefield put them at a disadvantage.³⁴

³⁵ The local insurgents, on the other hand, were



Rocky terrain near Markhanai, Afghanistan, 2002. Public domain.

experts at fighting in the mountainous terrain and were able to strike the Soviet troops and retreat into the mountains.

Soviet equipment, such as jeeps, troop carriers, and tanks, was not designed for the

mountainous terrain, putting the Soviet troops at an even greater disadvantage, including the lack of roads interrupting supply convoys.³⁶ The porous international borders in the countries surrounding Afghanistan were an advantage to the insurgents, like the border shared with Pakistan, which would serve as a haven for the insurgents to rearm and regroup.

Governance

The Soviet Union figured out late in its occupation that in Afghanistan, the real governing power resides at the local level and runs its own affairs locally.^{37, 38} They eventually began to work with local leaders and grant aid to those locals who would support, or at least not attack, the new government.

The Soviets’ National Reconciliation Program (NRP) was also an attempt by the Soviet-occupied government to unify the country, which included construction projects and other programs. The government eventually recognized the limits of NRP in the fragmented society, which is why the reconciliation efforts failed.³⁹

Failure and Mistakes by the United States

The US was met with more resistance, and the fighting lasted longer than planners

had defined. The lessons learned by the US are many and come from several sources.

Decision-Making and Planning

The US decision to invade Afghanistan was made with rage and revenge, with President Bush writing, “My blood was boiling” and “We were going to find out who did this and kick their ass” in his memoir *Decision Points*.⁴⁰ In the US, the speed at which the decision was made to go to war was so fast that it would



George W. Bush in the Oval Office following the September 11 attacks, 2001. Public domain.

not have allowed time to consult with experts or understand the lessons learned from the Soviets’ experiences in Afghanistan.⁴¹

The decision to invade came from the top by a small group of leaders with little discussion of the consequences or impacts of the war.⁴² No contingency plans were developed, nor

were any plans for a post-Taliban Afghanistan developed. The US never thought that it would be occupying Afghanistan; so, no plans for occupying the country or for nation-building were ever created.⁴³

Mission Creep

The gradual shift in objectives during the military campaign was a significant problem as the military’s mission in Afghanistan continued to change and expand.⁴⁴ Mission creep was one of the US’s greatest mistakes. On the one hand, there was global mission creep on a geopolitical level. The mission in Afghanistan was to eliminate al-Qaeda and those involved in 9/11. However, the mission grew into other conflicts, including the invasion of Iraq and the use of air power against countries across Africa



Then-al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri (who became leader after bin Laden’s death in 2011) in 2001. Photo by Hamid Mir, CC BY-SA 3.0.

and the Middle East, based on Congress’s joint resolution.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the specific mission in Afghanistan continued to grow and change, resulting in a much greater mission than what was originally envisioned. The mission in Afghanistan began as a mission to defeat and eradicate al-Qaeda and grew into a full-blown nation-building mission for the first half of the US’s time in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ This mission creep, the confusion over the mission, and the changing nature of the objectives hindered the US efforts to fully accomplish its goals and to disengage from the mission.

The initial US mission was to get rid of al-Qaeda, so they were no longer a threat to the US. Then, the US mission expanded to eliminating the Taliban because of their relationship with al-Qaeda. Later, the US had decided to eliminate the groups related to the Taliban. Finally, the US mission was expanded as the US said the exit strategy was going to be a stable government in Afghanistan.⁴⁷ Along the way, the strategy changed in Afghanistan from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency to rebuilding a secure, fully functioning country.

The Iraq War



Camp Liberty, Baghdad, Iraq, 2006. Public domain.

One of the significant mistakes the US made was to shift its focus and resources from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2003 before the mission in Afghanistan was complete. Washington, DC’s pivot from Afghanistan to Iraq shifted personnel and resources from Afghanistan to Iraq, as well as shifted the focus of the military and the country’s leadership.

The shift of attention from Afghanistan to Iraq resulted in near-simultaneous military action as policymakers took on military objectives beyond their capability. Attention shifted to Iraq and planning for two near-simultaneous wars. For Iraq, though, the US did not think they would be there long enough to require any detailed plans, as they assumed a

short timeline for the invasion of Iraq.⁴⁸

Security Forces

Another mistake, the US was in no way prepared to take on the effort of building an Afghan army and police force that could protect the country. The US military was capable of training recruits but not capable of building a military or police force from the ground up.⁴⁹

Pakistan

The Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to move freely between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and neither the US nor NATO could do anything militarily.⁵⁰ There were initial mistakes made in dealing with the Pakistani interference in Afghanistan, particularly regarding the Taliban. Pakistan took US aid while providing



a sanctuary to the Taliban, allowing the Taliban to rebuild and recruit freely.⁵¹ The Karzai government had made repeated claims that Pakistan was supporting the Taliban, but these claims were ignored by the US until 2006.

Similarities Between the Two Invasions' Failures

The most significant similarity between the Soviet and US invasions was the outcome of both—neither achieved its objectives, both spent a great deal of money, manpower, resources, and lives, and in the end, the Taliban ended up running the country of Afghanistan anyway. Essentially, nothing changed.

Both failed to think through the consequences of a long, bloody, and costly war or even consider the possibility of such war. Those who started the wars assumed that they would not last long and would be neither bloody nor costly.⁵²

The USSR and the US both installed new leaders in Afghanistan as part of their invasion of the country. The USSR elected the easier-to-control Babrak Karmal as the replacement for Amin after the USSR became concerned about Amin's erratic behavior and their concern that he was a CIA collaborator.⁵³

The US installed Hamid Karzai as the leader of Afghanistan after the Taliban was removed from power. Both faced pushback from the Afghan people in following a central government, preferring their tribal structure.⁵⁴

The reasons for each country's invasion were different. The USSR invaded Afghanistan to effect regime change, maintain a communist government, and ensure Afghanistan remained



Withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, 1989. Photo by A. Solomonov, RIA Novosti archive, image #58833, CC BY-SA 3.0.

under Moscow's wing. The US invaded Afghanistan to eliminate the al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks and remove the Taliban from ruling Afghanistan.

The decision-making process for both the Soviet and US invasions was flawed from

the beginning. Both countries' decisions were made by a small group of government officials, and the decisions were made in anger, emotion, and haste.⁵⁵ The Soviets feared that Afghanistan would fall to the West, and they would lose a Soviet socialist satellite. Neither gave much forethought to the consequences of their invasions, how to prevent mission creep, or how they were going to withdraw from the war.

The Soviet invasion and the US invasion were both faced with fighting the same Islamic fundamentalists, backed in differing degrees by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with no clear understanding of Islamic tribal culture, relationships, and motivations.⁵⁶ They did not understand the Afghan culture and practices.

Both dealt with the same mountainous terrain and lack of roads, and each believed a quick victory was possible. Finally, both failed at nation-building.⁵⁷

Both the Soviets and the US had to deal with Afghanistan's unforgiving mountainous terrain and the country's complex social, religious, and tribal structures. A long history of resistance to occupiers, limitations on the central government's influence, and control of the rural countryside were also factors. Additionally, neither country effectively dealt with the cross-border dynamics with neighboring countries that allowed safe havens and support for the insurgents.

For these reasons, both the US and the Soviet Union had to lower their expectations as



Soldiers from the last convoy out of Iraq line up at Camp Virginia to turn in their weapons and equipment, 2011. Photo via Defense Visual Information Distribution Service. Public domain.





U.S. Army Cpt. Charcillea Barrett distributes new backpacks to Iraqi elementary students, 2008. Photo by Sgt. Gustavo Olgiati, U.S. Army. Pubic domain.

to what could be accomplished in Afghanistan, which made disengagement from the conflicts there difficult. The Soviet-backed Afghan government was able to fend off the insurgents for three years, but the US-backed Afghan government fell to the Taliban immediately after the US withdrawal.⁵⁸

Differences Between the Mistakes of the Two Invasions

The reasons for each country's invasion were significantly different; there were many contrasts in the decision-making process used by the Soviets and the US. The USSR invaded Afghanistan to effect regime change, maintain a communist government, and ensure Afghanistan remained under Moscow's wing. The US

invaded Afghanistan to eliminate the al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks and remove the Taliban from ruling Afghanistan and install a new, centrally elected government. In addition, the world turned against the Soviet Union and its invasion, resulting in embargoes, restrictions on imports, and the boycotting of the Olympic Games that were held in Moscow. World opinion was much more receptive to the US invasion, even to the extent of building a coalition of countries that would provide troops and assistance in the US efforts.

For the US, a difference was the shift in focus from the war in Afghanistan to engaging in the war in Iraq.⁵⁹ The goals of nation-building between the two invasions differed. The

Soviets were trying to prop up a communist leader of their choosing and attempting to install communism as the way of government.

The US nation-building and reconstruction program included building out all branches of government, building roads, schools, and other infrastructure and attempting to build an army and police force to maintain order and defend against insurgents. The Soviets relied entirely on their own troops to fight off the insurgents.

The US spent a great deal more money than the Soviets, with the Soviets spending \$100–\$150 billion dollars over the course of ten years on the war, versus the US spending of \$1.5 trillion dollars over the course of twenty years, including the war and the subsequent rebuilding efforts.^{60, 61} Lastly, the approaches between the two interventions were their strategic context: the Cold War in the case of the Soviet intervention and the post-September 2001 counter-terrorism efforts that motivated the US-led intervention.

Conclusion

There are many similarities and differences between the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the US's invasion of Afghan-

istan. It has been demonstrated that many of the challenges faced and lessons learned by the Soviets during their invasion were not taken into consideration by the US in its invasion.

The summer of 2021 saw the Taliban take over most major cities and provinces, and two weeks before the official US withdrawal on August 31, 2021, the Taliban took over the capital of Kabul, forcing the Afghan president to flee the country and causing the collapse of the Afghan government. From July 2021 to June 2022, Afghanistan experienced high inflation, causing the price of goods to increase 50 percent. In January 2022, the United Nations (UN) made its largest single-country appeal



Taliban fighters and truck, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 17, 2021. Photo via Voice of America. Public domain.

for aid assistance for Afghanistan. By March 2022, 95 percent of Afghan households did not have enough food to eat, and more than 3.5



million children needed food. By August 2022, 6 million Afghan people were on the brink of famine.

Obtaining external assistance was complicated by resistance from the West to being seen as supporting the Taliban regime. Since regaining power, no foreign country has formally recognized the Taliban. Assistance has also been hindered by harassment from the Taliban of aid workers and a ban of female aid workers. The UN envoy responded to a Taliban request in 2023 for assistance stating it was nearly impossible to provide aid as long as the Taliban maintained its extreme restrictions and laws on women and girls.

From August 2022 to December 2022,



Afghan women dressed in full-body coverings. Photo by Jan Chipchase, CC BY-SA 3.0.

the Taliban instituted a series of extreme laws and restrictions on females, including barring them from secondary schools, forcing women to cover their faces, and banning women from

parks and gyms. Flogging, public amputations, and executions have also been reintroduced.

The World Food Programme predicted that the drop in aid over donors' protests over the Taliban policies toward women and girls would deprive an additional 9 million Afghans of food assistance. Further exacerbating the problem, the Taliban had cracked down on opium production, cutting production by 80 percent, depriving many Afghan communities of revenue needed to purchase food.

As feared, a 2023 Pentagon report found that the Islamic State is again using Afghanistan as a base for planning and coordinating attacks around the world. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K) has increased its attacks in Afghanistan, and both al-Qaeda and ISIS-K are gathering strength again despite Taliban efforts to eradicate them from the country.⁶²

The United States and the Soviet Union made many of the same mistakes in their incursions into Afghanistan. Both spent significant lives and resources in order to achieve their objectives in the country, but those objectives were not realized. The threat of terrorism from Afghanistan, which the US

attempted to eliminate, is growing once again as terrorist organizations are using Afghanistan as a base for their operations. It may very well be that the US will have to invade Afghanistan again to eliminate the terrorist threat. We can only hope they apply the lessons learned in the last incursion.



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