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*The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a mistake:  
lessons for today*

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## Executive summary

It is easy to dismiss defeat as uninteresting and unappealing, preferring instead the more intoxicating analysis of victory; yet wisdom is more often learned from defeat because errors have more power in questioning assumptions and ossified ideas.

A short analysis of the decision-taking process of the Soviet leadership that led to the invasion of Afghanistan on December 1979 shows a number of intertwined factors that led to the loss of the campaign and the country and ultimately contributed partially to the demise of the Soviet Union.

Here are the main components of a strategic mistake:

1. Assuming the US President Carter's weakness vis-à-vis a short Soviet intervention;
2. Wrongly fearing Islamic contagion by Iran in Central Asia;
3. Rightly fearing Islamic contagion by Iran in Central Asia Islamic contagion by Afghans in Central Asia (Basmachi precedent);
4. The dynamics putting interests vs. clear assessments. Assessments were obfuscated by the combination of political interests by the Ustinov-Andropov-Gromyko troika and of bureaucratic interests of intelligence agencies and important ministries;
5. Weakness of the voice of science in the political decision making process (the missed opportunity of the multidimensionality scientific paradigm in ranking fundamental policy choices and future options/scenarios);
6. Zero-sum game Realpolitik attitudes;
7. Soviet messianism in "civilising inferior cultures";
8. The hope to build a bridge between Communism and Islamic values within a syncretic Socialist framework, attracting other Third World countries to this new variant of local Socialism;
9. The initial assumption that the intervention would be a surgical blitz to remove Hafizullah Amin and then easily retreat;
10. The overruling by the Politburo of the professional judgement of top militaries. Their evaluation was ignored and not only intervention was approved, but the soldiers allocated

were 120.000 (a politically convenient number) instead of the 600.000 needed by a man-intensive COIN engagement (COunterINSurgency);

11. A political message towards the host country that was theoretically well crafted, but substantially was badly diffused and received.

This led to a propaganda and political backlash within the public that was supposed to be more friendly towards the USSR and also within the country.

One could yield to the easy temptation that this was the result of a fatally flawed Soviet system, but, once one forgoes the usual mantra about abstract democracies, one can easily spot very similar mistakes also in Western European countries and conclude that dismal situations at top level happen persistently also in the Euro-Atlantic area.

The following paras explain better the fallibility of well-schooled and trained elites that happened to be adversaries during the Cold War. The actual set of errors could be principally committed by much less professional politicians and their cabinets in the Euro-Atlantic context.

### **1. Wrong/half true political and cultural assumptions**

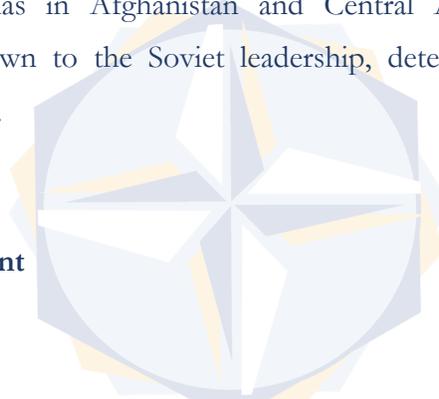
The most erroneous assumption made by the Soviet leadership was that the USA, under Jimmy Carter as President (1978-1979), would forbear a quick military intervention in the neighbouring country Afghanistan, without serious consequences of the USSR. This assumption relied mainly on the observation of the apparently weak foreign policy of the Carter administration, aimed at détente with the USSR.

In fact the US saw the invasion of Afghanistan as: a serious breach of peace; a shift of power to the advantage of the USSR and a dangerous Soviet encroaching towards the oil rich region of the Persian Gulf, a region deemed as strategically important for the US and its Western European allies. Moreover, an increasing number of Afghan refugees and adversaries – such as Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, China, Iran, Pakistan - surreptitiously harassed the Soviet military forces in Afghanistan. All of them cooperated effectively, jointly or individually, to counter Soviet military efforts and all of them contributed in different measure to the final defeat of the Soviet Union.

Soviet leaders initially deemed that revolutionary Iran, in particular, could determine a potential “Islamic contagion” in Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia; this proved incorrect because of the different confessions within Islam: Iran is Shia while the majority of Afghans and Central Asians are Sunnis.

What the Soviet leaders correctly envisaged was the possibility that Afghan rebels could bring the “Islamic infection” into the prominently Sunni Central Asia, as it happened in the period following the Russian revolution when the so called Basmachi (Muslim rebels of Central Asia, stemming mostly from Afghanistan) tried to wrestle independence from revolutionary Russia. History is not an idly academic tool in the hands of serious policy making.

The apparently reasonable fear of an “Islamic infection” spill-over into Soviet Central Asia has been one of the motivations for the decision of the Soviet leadership to invade Afghanistan, but only a very small percentage of Shias in Afghanistan and Central Asia were effectively prone to “contagion”. This fact, unknown to the Soviet leadership, determined a decision that severely damaged the country’s interests.



## **2. Interests vs clear assessment**

The picture is clearer than during the Cold War period, when a wrongly monolithic perception of USSR prevailed in the West. Basically the KGB had a vested interest in being more alarmist, both to enhance its role of guardian of the system against external and internal threat and to avoid criticism for failing to detect critically strategic patterns. In contrast the diplomats *and* the GRU military intelligence were more balanced; in fact Foreign Minister Gromyko was less convinced about an intervention, although in the end he approved it.

On the other hand the Defence Ministry, led by Marshal Dmitry Ustinov, had become a politically very influential post. Marshal Ustinov was instrumental in advancing Yuri Andropov, chairman of the KGB, to the post of Secretary General of the USSR Communist Party. He and Andropov himself were the fathers of the RYAN operation, the preventive joint KGB-GRU intelligence operation aimed at detecting the feared US preparations for a first nuclear strike. Both of them, together with the formidable Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko, formed the hard-line troika

that led USSR during the ups and downs of confrontation and disarmament dialogue with the USA. Putting together personal, bureaucracy vested interests and a hard-nosed Realpolitik shared approach was overall a solid premise for the development of a supposedly quick Afghan intervention.

### **3. The Soviet/Russian scientific community: knowledge, paradigms and ideology**

The Soviet scientific community had also cautioned about the risks of invading Afghanistan, but, notwithstanding its advice, the Politburo took the decision to invade the country. It is important to note that Soviet science was relatively independent from the overwhelming political and ideological propaganda.

In fact Soviet political analysis used the word *mnogokladnost*<sup>1</sup> (multidimensionality) to express the concept of a multi-layered structure and interpretation of society and to exclude the historical determinism of the Communist ideology of social progress and economic development. The presence of several possible stages of development and several possible outcomes that did not necessarily lead to the establishment of Communism or, at least, of Socialism, shows the importance of a subtle, all-encompassing and flexible ideology and the refusal of dogmatism and creed. But in the clash between Soviet Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, based on the Marxian *Fortschrittsglauben* (in German the the enlightening “faith in progress”) and scientific sophistication, won a third component: the mixture between bureaucratic and political interests, underpinned by the Soviet-way Realpolitik approach towards Third World issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Sevewryn Bialer *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union*. Cambridge University Press. 1982

#### **4. The ideological-cultural factor of the Soviet élite**

Thanks to their internal Muslim minorities in Central Asia, the so-called Turkestan, the Soviets tried to accomplish in Afghanistan an example or a pattern of coexistence between Marxist and Islamic values and worldview, to attract and coalesce the entire Muslim world around them.

Furthermore, a specific Russian Eurasian ideology sees the colonisation of Eastern, non-Christian lands, as a kind of “burden of the white man”, a civilization mission in the framework of Russian culture. Thus, besides considering obvious security and geopolitical concerns, Soviet leaders also saw their actions motivated by the idea of bringing the “advantages” of a Russian “enlightening” with its positive effects on the cultural growth of local populations. In their view, this inclusion in a “superior” Eurasian civilization, where the Russian element would prevail, even if unofficially, would bring culture to these “wild” lands that would strongly benefit from it.

Ideology has often played a role in the planning or decision-making process of invading another state but, even when not merely instrumental to the attainment of a geopolitical goal, it should be adjusted to the local reality. Though sometimes conducive to positive changes, “messianism” (such as the American exceptionalism, for instance) is a problematic ingredient in taking important political and strategic decisions.

#### **5. The Soviet Third World ideological prism**

Soviet culture saw the Third World through the prism of a very strong ideological and biased political factor and historical determinism, meant as predestination or messianism, which intended to replace local archaic structures with the enlightening source of Communism, a strong idealistic commitment to the spreading of good and social justice in the world.

As the clash between capitalism and socialism was considered predetermined, and therefore historically unescapable, the aim was to achieve a sort of Communist paradise that Third World societies should accept and implement for their own good. The underlying idea was to change the “correlation of forces” between the Communist Soviet Union and capitalist countries by pulling

Third World countries into the Socialist arena, not considering that the strength of a country is measured mostly by its economic and technological development and prowess and its political and cultural traction for other countries.

Another Soviet goal was to extend its model to Afghanistan by finding some sort of accommodation/merging with Islamic values, thereafter using this syncretic model to improve relation with the Islamic world that was becoming more of a political and geopolitical actor in the Eighties. The Soviet leaders understood well that the birth ratio differential between the Slavic population of the USSR and the Islamic component was rapidly turning in favour of the latter, so they thought that the invasion of Afghanistan, once the insurgency had been crushed and the country pacified under a stable and prosperous Soviet government, would serve as a role model both for the general Islamic world, as a binding “bridge” between the USSR and the Islamic world, and for the numerically steadily growing Islamic component of the USSR. But this assumption did not turn into reality, due to a numerous series of factors.

Nowadays, we can see the same kind of behaviour. President Putin tries to present Russia to the Islamic world as a Muslim-friendly country, especially in its secular component and anti-terrorist function, with obvious positive political and economic consequences for Russia. He also highlights the positive role Russia plays in the Islamic world and blames the US for their supposedly malignant role played in the Arab world (Iraq, Syria, etc.).

## **6. The Soviet “fog of information”**

The impossibility to resort to foreign sources, the absence of a free press that could provide meaningful insights into a very complex situation and, above all, the tendency to resort to a “zero sum game” scheme inevitably led to a failure in the decision process. It was a kind of extreme and roughly conceived social and political Darwinian victory of the strongest – and not of the fittest as in Darwin’s original quotation– with no possible mediation or political compromise on the part of the Soviet leaders. This happened despite an initial serious indecision by the Soviet leaders, months before the invasion, on whether to invade or not, that caused or, at least, substantially contributed to the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.

## 7. The political/military gap for the boots on the ground

In the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet leaders hoped to gain popular consent through a victorious military operation that also represented the cultural victory of the Communist worldview and the build-up from scratch of a new Socialist society in a deeply conservative Islamic country. The message of reform met stiff resistance from the population and the ruling class because of the ideological overload in the content of the message and the sheer absence of an encompassing ideology that aimed at finding a common ground between the different civilizations.

Such a difficult situation usually triggers a severe internal backlash, both politically and financially (in terms of a huge growth of national debt that can lead to a severe and often irretrievable financial unbalance, to an eventual breakdown or also to budget constraints in the planning and accomplishment of military operations and campaign). It indeed happened in the Soviet experience: against the backdrop of a silent but diffused dissent in the Soviet nomenklatura, a high rate of military casualties on the front prompts the population to ask the government for a swift withdrawal of troops.

The militaries tried to avoid this error when a leading Soviet general, Nikolai Ogarkov, and his colleague, Valentin Varennikov, sternly forewarned the Politburo of the relevant risks entailed in a full-fledged Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only to be brusquely reminded of their subordination to the political element. This decision-making problem is exacerbated when the system is dependent on the so-called “Soviet power vertical” and therefore lacks an extensive, sensitive and adjustable mechanism of checks and balances that might correct existential mistakes of the leadership or threats to the state before it is too late.

Counterinsurgency can be won only with an adequate number of soldiers on the ground. During the Soviet-Afghan war, Soviet General Command calculated that 600.000 soldiers would constitute the critical mass necessary to subdue once and for all the Afghan resistance. Political considerations though, pointed to the necessity not to increase the violence of the conflict and the growing, inevitable, even if not explicit, popular discontent opposing the war in Afghanistan and severe international repercussions. Hence, the Politburo decided to keep the soldiers in Afghanistan to a maximum of about 120.000 units, enough to continue the conflict but insufficient to crush the military resistance of the mujahidin by means of a definitive military victory. It is often the

underprivileged who end up fighting in these conflicts, raising the dissatisfaction of the lower layers of the population against the ruling élite. The internal, political and often strategic, and international consequences related to the sensitive issue of the deployment of the “boots on the ground” were present during the long Soviet-Afghan conflict and, unsurprisingly, after.

## 8. The political message and the host country

In the Afghan-Soviet war, when Russians brought infrastructures and medical help to gain a rapprochement between Third World Afghanistan and the Soviet Union and shift its political orientation from a relative neutral position to a Soviet leaning position, they were very wholeheartedly welcomed, but, when they invaded the country, the former friends very rapidly turned into relentless foes.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the Eighties brought with it the enlightened cultural background of progress and liberation of slaves and very poor peasants from their miserable conditions. It must be clear that most social strata living in archaic conditions, not to speak of the upper classes, were not ready to accept the idea of social revolution or even of change.

The ideal of change of cultural preferences through the change of social relations in Afghanistan, in the mentality of the Soviet leadership, was tightly linked with Lenin’s utopian idea of states and nations withering away and swept into the dustbin of history by a new universal community of proletarian class solidarity that would be able to cancel or erase cultural differences and therefore ethnic tensions.

According to the Soviet “trinity” model of *rastvet-sblizhenie-sliyanie* (flourishing-rapprochement-fusion), Lenin’s ideology and the consequent policies were predestined to the solution of ethnic and cultural tensions: we recall the industrialization of Soviet Central Asia that was meant both to fulfil the industrial needs of the Soviet Union and at the same time to involve Central Asian peoples in a process of industrialization and growing living standards of the local population as a way to boost the local population’s allegiance to the central and local Soviet government. This, in the Soviet leaders’ understanding could prove true also for Afghanistan, but the war disrupted such a rapprochement between Afghans and invaders. In these archaic cultural contexts instead, a breach in

the order of things, including social relations even if unjust, is often seen as breach of tradition and of faith, sacred legacies inherited by the ancestors and therefore not liable to any change.

In the literature it is evident the continuous oscillation of the Soviet leadership between a very realistic and absolutely pragmatic assessment of the situation in Afghanistan and its possible very detrimental developments for the USSR and a more utopian and ideological, idealistic and transformational vision of it. These two tendencies have been kept in balance for months and months before the final decision was definitely taken on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1979 and the order of invasion was planned and implemented on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1979.

### **Backlash: the endgame of adventurism**

During the Afghan conflict, the Soviet Union tried to rally the people in and outside Afghanistan on the righteousness of its cause, underlining its progressive roots and even playing with the Western pacifist movement during the missile crisis and the deployment of the SS 20 intermediate range missiles, countered by the Pershing II ballistic missiles and the Cruise missiles (GLCM) in 1984, as Moscow's archives clearly prove. The ageing Soviet leadership deemed the invasion of Afghanistan, and the resulting establishment of a well-functioning Afghan communist state, as useful to regain the lost leadership within the Cominform.

In fact within the Communist Information Bureau, coordinating all similar parties in the world under Soviet guidance, some important Communist parties of Western Europe (Finland, Italy, Spain and then France) were progressively loosening themselves from Moscow's ideological and political allegiance.

As a Communist and viable state could not be established in Afghanistan, the propaganda effect utterly failed in Western Europe. The Italian Communist Party for instance became increasingly critical about the Soviet system, while the Social Democratic Party of Western Germany, already a left-wing non-Marxist/Leninist party, accentuated its distance from Soviet positions. West Germany, despite the growing tensions between the West and the USSR due to the invasion of Afghanistan, continued to manage mutually beneficial economic relations with the USSR and the import of Soviet oil also in the Eighties, notwithstanding US dissatisfaction with it. From the West German side such

a stance was taken not only on the basis of national interests, based on a rational economic calculation (the same that brought important European countries in accepting Soviet gas pipelines, 1982-1984), but also due to the aspiration of not jeopardising a future re-unification with East Germany vis-à-vis a threatening Soviet Union at the apex of the Cold War.

The propaganda effects the Soviet leadership wanted to reap in the Western European left leaning public opinion soon turned into a defeat, giving rise to a growing acceptance of the idea that the Soviet Union was an aggressive force – and not a peace-loving and progressive Socialist state – that had to be contained even militarily. This is an example of the very damaging consequences that a military aggression and a long drawn conflict without any military solution can inflict to a country's image and reputation.

A similar problem emerged within the national public opinion because both people within and outside the elite began to express their doubts and dissatisfaction. Precisely due to this Soviet leaders urged restraint on the military, as they understood that an escalation in war methods and number of soldiers deployed would most probably lead to victory but would also determine heavy repercussions. An escalation implied a substantial rise in the death toll of Soviet soldiers that would inevitably bring internal repercussions and raise strong popular discontent. Public opinion cannot be utterly ignored by the leadership, even in non-democratic countries.

It is interesting to see how, changing the ideological and political template of interventions, errors are similar, recurrent and persistent.



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