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## Afghanistan: A Russian diplomat's fears

Bernard Smith

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Blackened by smoke and pockmarked by shrapnel, rockets and bullets, the shell of the Soviet trade mission building sits in a corner of what is now the compound of the Russian embassy in the Afghan capital Kabul.

It is soon to be rebuilt to accommodate the increasing numbers of staff at the embassy. For now it serves as a handy reminder of what happened the last time a major world power withdrew its forces from Afghanistan.

The current ambassador, Andrey Avetisyan, was a junior diplomat here when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev announced that USSR soldiers would withdraw from Afghanistan. By February 1989 the last soldier had left crossing the bridge into Uzbekistan.

Three years later Afghanistan was engulfed in civil war.

"Everything was burnt and semi-destroyed ... rockets were flying above us from both directions," the ambassador says as we survey the trade mission on a freezing snowy winter's morning.

The Soviet embassy wasn't specifically targeted. It just happened to be stuck in the middle of the fighting between Afghanistan's warring factions.

Now Ambassador Avetisyan fears this country risks being abandoned again.

## **Mandate not fulfilled**

"I think we must try to learn from the past," he tells me. "Whatever circumstances or whatever reasons the Soviet Union or NATO now had or have to withdraw from Afghanistan, [there will be] more problems for the international community in the future, like it happened in the 90s and Afghanistan became a hotbed for terrorists unfortunately."

By the end of 2014 all foreign combat troops will have been withdrawn from Afghanistan. According to the latest rumours from Washington DC, President Barack Obama may decide to leave behind just 6,000 soldiers to continue training the Afghan security services.

Russia's ambassador thinks NATO is pulling out its troops too soon, before they've fulfilled the mandate given to them by the United Nations. "I think it is premature", he says, "because when NATO and ISAF asked for the mandate from the security council 11 years ago the goal was to fight here against terrorism and to eliminate the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan. But unfortunately we see today that it hasn't yet been achieved ..."

There are now 352,000 members of the Afghan security forces – police and military. But, according to the US Department of Defense only one of 23 Afghan army brigades can operate without coalition help. For Russia's ambassador this highlights what he sees as the missed opportunities of the last 10 years.

"Unfortunately maybe for the past two maybe three years more attention has been paid to training Afghan army and police. If that job had started 10 years ago I think today we would have had a very able Afghan army and police but unfortunately many years were wasted and only recently the efforts have been made to help Afghanistan to strengthen its army and police. This is the right thing to do. Russia supports it and also helps in strengthening Afghan security forces and we will be doing so in the future."

## **Impending job losses**

Another missed opportunity has been the need to develop Afghanistan's economy away from almost total reliance on military spending and aid money.

Over the next 24 months thousands of drivers, cooks, cleaners, administration staff and so on will be laid off as the NATO operation winds down. There are no jobs for these people to go to. "If we take economic development," says Ambassador Avetisyan, "I can't think of a single serious big infrastructure project or factory or agricultural project. Unfortunately until recently it was almost all about fighting and war and only now more attention is paid to the civil part of it, to [the] development part of it."

The ambassador wants the UN to play a lead role in co-ordinating the future development of Afghanistan. But the UN is already struggling to come up with enough money to meet current needs. It's raised barely half the money it asked for to fund a series of projects across the country. The UN's Humanitarian co-ordinator here spoke recently of "donor fatigue" when it comes to Afghanistan.

Ambassador Avetisyan knows that the governments of the US and other NATO countries have had enough of the war in Afghanistan.

There is no appetite to prolong the foreign presence here. But that attitude brings a warning from the ambassador. "Look, if we decide not to learn of the mistakes of the past made by the international community here then we will find ourselves and Afghanistan in big trouble."