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## Learning from the Soviets: How to Withdraw From Afghanistan

By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

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The New York Times *bungles history in predicting the upcoming departure of U.S. troops.*

One unique feature of Afghanistan's history, in addition to the ubiquity of foreign invasions that stretch back for 2600 years, is the manner in which one would-be conqueror after another found its position compromised due to its failure to understand this history. "The British would repeat the blunders of the Romans," writes Peter Tomsen in *The Wars of Afghanistan*, arguing that their nineteenth century invasions overlooked lessons that could be gleaned from the defeat the Romans suffered at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C. And, he added, "the Soviets would make the same mistakes a century later."

The lessons of history extend not only to those looking to use military force to enter Afghanistan, but also to foreign armies on their way out. On January 1, *The New York Times* published an interesting article comparing the U.S.'s coming 2014 withdrawal to the Soviet exit in 1989. This is a worthwhile period to familiarize ourselves with, one that is understudied compared to the Afghan-Soviet war that preceded it. However, the analysis in the *Times* demonstrates not only what can be gleaned through historical comparisons, but also some of the pitfalls of undertaking them.

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Afghanistan's communist president at the time the Soviets withdrew, Mohammad Najibullah (sometimes known as Najib), is remembered primarily for his life's gruesome ending. After the Taliban lured him and his brother out of the U.N. compound where they had found shelter, they tortured and castrated Najibullah, then dragged him from the back of a vehicle. Tomsen writes that the following morning, both men's "bloodied bodies hung from a traffic pylon outside the palace walls, their cadavers mutilated." Symbolizing his corruption, decadence, and allegiance to a foreign power, "a wad of Soviet currency and cigarettes were stuffed into Najib's mouth and nostrils."

This brutal man encountered his brutal end in 1996, seven years after the Soviets left. Because his death is so well known, we tend to overlook what the *Times* emphasizes: Although most outside observers expected Najibullah's regime to collapse immediately when the Soviets withdrew, it in fact appeared surprisingly strong for about three years. The *Times* outlines the basic contours: The Soviets "continued large-scale military assistance" after leaving Afghanistan, and "the combat effectiveness of Kabul's security forces increased after the Soviet withdrawal, when the fight for survival became wholly their own."

There are two further wrinkles to add to this analysis. First, Najibullah's government wasn't shored up solely by the increasing vigor of its forces -- a line that in some ways smacks of Western analysts using history to try to reassure themselves that the U.S.'s withdrawal won't go so badly. Rather, Najibullah was also bolstered on the battlefield by a major mujahedin blunder that occurred in March 1989, as 15,000 of their fighters -- egged on by Pakistani military intelligence chief Hamid Gul -- massed and attacked the city of Jalalabad.

The mujahedin were decisively crushed in this battle by the Afghan army, who in turn were strengthened by over four hundred Scud missiles fired by Soviet advisers. The scope of mujahedin losses -- around 3,000 dead -- without a single piece of territory to show for it swung momentum toward Najibullah, who had previously been viewed as a dead man walking.

The second wrinkle is the "soft" side of Najibullah's strategy, in which he rebranded himself and used a traditional tool of influence in Afghanistan -- patronage networks -- to neutralize foes. In *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Thomas Barfield writes that Najibullah understood that the Soviet presence had served as a primary catalyst for insurgency. Though he had been involved in the communist movement since the 1960s, Najibullah refashioned himself an Afghan nationalist, and bought off foes who threatened his regime.

The combination of the Soviets leaving and Najibullah's patronage networks worked well. As Barfield writes, "20 percent of former mujahedin groups defected and joined Najibullah's militia system, while another 40 percent agreed to ceasefires." He deems only 12 percent of the mujahedin to have been what he calls "irreconcilables."

It is worth regarding these figures with some skepticism. After all, as Barfield himself writes when analyzing the strength of Afghanistan's various ethnic groups, "statistics in Afghanistan are validated more through repetition than by any data." Yet the point remains: Najibullah, after the Soviets withdrew, was able to utilize patronage -- a tool that has been employed since the time of Afghanistan's pre-modern conquerors -- to negate a number of the threats his regime faced.

There is no guarantee that a Kabul-based regime can replicate Najibullah's successes, since fighters attempting to overthrow that government may not blunder into their own Battle of Jalalabad. Further, even if the government *can* duplicate his success, that may not address Western concerns. One of the preeminent fears that the U.S. and other Western countries have is the possible return of an al Qaeda safe haven, and a Kabul-based government that is busy buying off its foes in various regions won't be able to extend its writ throughout the country to prevent such a safe haven from reemerging.

At any rate, the reason this was not a winning strategy for Najibullah for more than three years is obvious with some historical hindsight. His strategy depended on continuing Russian support -- and after the Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991, that support dried up.

Thereafter, Najibullah's regime collapsed quickly. As competing factions -- including those of Ahmad Shah Masud, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Abdul Haq -- descended on Kabul, Najibullah's generals and even defense minister conspired with his enemies. Najibullah remained holed up in the U.N. compound for years, looking for safe passage out of the country. He missed out on his final opportunity to save himself: In September 1996, Masud offered him *nanawati* (sanctuary), and travel by helicopter to Panjshir Valley while the Taliban stood on the brink of entering Kabul. Najibullah refused, and before the end of the month he had been tortured and killed.

But historical analyses should not simply be a process of drawing parallels; we should also understand continuities. And one of Afghanistan's most significant players from the 1980s until today receives only two brief mentions in the *Times* article, and is too often marginalized in similar analyses: Pakistan.

In the 1980s, Pakistan insisted that U.S. aid to the anti-Soviet mujahedin be channeled through its military intelligence, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). Pakistani officers strongly preferred to sponsor Islamic extremists, and convinced their CIA partners that such factions performed best on the battlefield, even though there was significant evidence to the contrary. Pakistan's ISI supported the Taliban in the 1990s. And since 9/11, Pakistan's continued support for insurgents in Afghanistan has cost many lives, and has made the allied mission incalculably more difficult.

Pakistan has had its own reasons for supporting religious extremists. Some of its strategic calculus is rooted in concerns about its arch-rival India, and other parts are attached to fears that Afghanistan might reignite the "Pashtunistan" issue at the heart of their border dispute. Nor can discussion of Pakistan's motivations ignore the continuing influence of Muhammad Zia ul Haq, the fundamentalist general who deposed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a 1977 coup and guided Pakistan until his death in a mysterious 1988 plane crash. Zia spearheaded an "Islamization" campaign that extended to Pakistani society as a whole, but was particularly focused on its military. The changes in military culture that Zia wrought was part of the combustible mix that drove Pakistani policies toward Afghanistan in the 1980s and beyond.

Peter Tomsen suggests that anything resembling success in Afghanistan will, at this point, "require great finesse and political will to succeed, especially in convincing Islamabad to change course." On this point, he is doubtless correct. Yet analyses like those offered by the *Times* --

that end at the military parallels, and ignore Pakistan's policy continuities -- will only push us further toward ignoring its vital role.