ECHOES OF THE PAST:

COMPARING SOVIET AND US COUNTERINSURGENCY DOCTRINE & STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

For more than nine years the Soviet Union engaged a determined opponent in a counterinsurgency (COIN) conflict in Afghanistan. The United States is presently facing what appears to be an equally determined foe in that same country, and has now been waging a counterinsurgency campaign for nearly as long as the USSR’s.

This paper seeks to compare current US counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine in Afghanistan with Soviet counterinsurgency strategy and doctrine, examining whether the US is repeating errors made by the Soviet Union made in prosecuting its war. This paper also attempts to discern lessons learned from the Soviet conflict that may be applicable to the current US counterinsurgency effort.

In comparing Soviet and US doctrine and strategy, this paper employs primary source material from both countries. These materials are supplemented by several case studies comparing the leaders of the Afghan government under the DRA and the present US-backed Karzai Administration.

This paper concludes that there are no major similarities between Soviet doctrine and US COIN doctrine. It does identify some similarities between US and Soviet strategy, particularly with regard to the protection of urban areas. These similarities, however, do not necessarily portend the failure of the US effort. The paper further suggests that the strongest similarity between the two conflicts is the lack of participation by the Afghan government in COIN efforts—both militarily and politically.

The paper concludes by offering a series of lessons learned and associated policy recommendations.
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INTRODUCTION

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the subsequent US-led invasion which toppled the Taliban regime from power, the United States and the international community have struggled to stabilize Afghanistan. Successes, when they have occurred, have often come at a high cost. As of the publication date of this paper, the US death toll from the conflict in Afghanistan has reached 1,000.¹

This paper examines the last counterinsurgency effort which occurred prior to the US invasion — the Soviet-Afghan War. Specifically, this paper seeks to determine whether the US counterinsurgency (“COIN”) efforts (both military and political in nature) in Afghanistan have significant similarities to the Soviet COIN effort in that country. By doing so, it attempts to establish whether US-led efforts are repeating past Soviet-era errors, and also notes significant similarities between the two situations. This paper concludes with a summary of potential lessons to be learned by Coalition forces operating in Afghanistan based on an evaluation of Soviet COIN operations.

Hypothesis & Methodology

This paper has two stated hypotheses, which are placed in the context of Afghanistan’s history, experience with insurgencies, and governance structures. Hypothesis #1 is that there are significant similarities between the current US COIN doctrine in Afghanistan

² Note: Coalition, US, and ISAF are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to US and allied actions to combat the insurgency. US and ISAF forces typically follow similar concepts of operations and strategy, and are led by General Stanley McChrystal, who is both Commander of US Forces—Afghanistan and the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force.
and the Soviet COIN doctrine in Afghanistan. Hypothesis #2 is that there are significant similarities between the current US strategy in Afghanistan and the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

Hypothesis #1: There are significant similarities between the US COIN doctrine followed in Afghanistan, and the Soviet COIN doctrine followed in Afghanistan. The term “doctrine” is defined by the Department of Defense as, “Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application.” This hypothesis will be tested through a direct comparison of the basic concepts recommended by Soviet doctrine, and the practices US COIN doctrine has explicitly deemed “successful” and “unsuccessful.”

Hypothesis #2: There are significant similarities between the current US COIN strategy being implemented in Afghanistan and the Soviet COIN strategy in Afghanistan. The term “strategy” here is defined as the plan of action by which objectives will be met. Given a shared set of common objectives—gaining the support of the population; creating effective local control while integrating former insurgents into society; creating effective security forces; creating an effective government; and the overall focus of the COIN military effort. These objectives are common to most counterinsurgency efforts, and are more importantly common to both the Soviet-Afghan War and the current US-led war.

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Judgments: The following terms will be applied to indicate the degree to which the hypothesis is supported by the evidence: Valid, Partially Supported, or Not Supported. “Valid” indicates the hypothesis is supported by the evidence; “Partially Supported” means a significant portion of the hypothesis is supported by the evidence; “Not Supported” indicates the hypothesis not supported by the evidence.
PART I—COMPARING SOVIET AND US SITUATIONS

Chapter 1: Country Background

Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, Afghanistan is, in the words of one longtime observer of the country, “Easy to pass through...impossible to conquer. Several of the world’s largest mountain ranges and deserts make life difficult for the resident population and invaders alike.” Afghanistan’s topography is dominated by mountains, rugged terrain, and deserts. However, these mountains have also created many valleys, where most of the arable soil in the country can be found and from which farmers can produce enough food to permit subsistence farming – or pastoralism in those regions where even subsistence farming cannot be sustained. A number of rivers also wind through the deserts of the west and the south, creating what are known as “green zones,” lush areas that are agriculturally productive.

Both arable land and water are highly prized resources throughout the country, with much of the population unable to gain more than a subsistence living from either farming or pastoralism. These activities were and continue to be the major economic activities in Afghanistan. Even though only 12% of the land is arable, in 1978 (the date of the last census), the rural economy employed approximately 85% of the population. Today, it is estimated to employ 80%. The terrain works to segment society into small groups, known as qawms, which are scattered throughout the country. Each qawm has its own

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separate identity and long history. The result has been a population with both a strong sense of local identity and a high resistance to governance by a centralized authority.

At the same time, the existence of a weak state for most of the Afghan state’s 225 years of existence (maintained primarily by tribal chieftains respecting the legitimacy of the Monarch of the country) has prevented many from gaining an education. By the time of the Soviet invasion, only 20% of the population was literate by some estimates and most of the literate were concentrated in the cities.\(^6\) Thirty years later, the literacy rate figure is now estimated at 28%.\(^7\)

Finally, ethnic and tribal divides have remained pronounced throughout the country, both during the 1980s and the present time. During the Soviet-Afghan war, all ethnic groups were fully engaged in the war against the Soviets. Today, however, the insurgency is centered on the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Pashtuns are believed to comprise 42% of the total population, and are dominant in the south and east of Afghanistan (See Figure #1). The next largest group is the Tajiks, which comprise 27% of the population, or an estimated 7.5 million people, and largely reside in the northern and north-east areas of Afghanistan. This area is divided from the rest of the country by the massive Hindu Kush mountain chain. However, in both the Soviet era and the present, the Tajiks were well represented in business and the government. The third largest group is the Hazara, with 9% of the population, and who reside in the mountain core of central Afghanistan. While the other ethnic groups are Sunni, the Hazara are

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\(^6\) Interview with Anton Minkov and Gregory Smolynec, Fort Leavenworth, October 2009.
Shi’ite, and thus are often persecuted. Finally, the Uzbeks make up 9% of the population of the country, and are mingled with the Tajiks throughout northern Afghanistan. These percentages have stayed roughly consistent through both Soviet times and today.

Figure 1: Ethno-linguistic Groups of Afghanistan

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Altogether, the above form the basis of today’s operating environment for the US, one which has changed very little from the time of the invasion of the USSR.

**Background to Soviet Invasion**

In 1978, the resident Communist Party of Afghanistan, the PDPA, took power in a coup against the government of the Prime Minister Daoud, who had in turn taken power from the long reigning King Zahir regime in 1973. The PDPA, however, was far from united. It was founded in 1965 by two men, Nur Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal. Just two years after its founding, it split into two factions, the *Khalq* and *Parcham*, resulting in the dissolution of the PDPA. *Khalq*, led by Taraki, drew its membership primarily from educated rural Pashtuns. *Khalq* was in favor of implementing radical reforms throughout the countryside that it contended would elevate Afghanistan into a socialist country. *Parcham* was led by Karmal, and in contrast drew most of its members from urban areas and non-Pashtun ethnic groups. *Parcham*, in turn, favored a slower socialization process, calling for integration with the current social elite.\(^{10}\)

In 1977, the Soviet Union managed to convince the two parties to reconcile their differences, and reconstitute the PDPA. The decade of separation, however, had resulted in deep-seated hatreds and suspicions of each party toward the other. Following the coup in April 1978, Mohammad Taraki, the leader of *Khalq*, became leader of the country, and began to purge *Parcham* members as well as other dissidents. The *Khalq*-led regime began to implement a series of ambitious and radical reforms in the countryside, aimed at “leaping” the country forward into true socialism. These reforms arrived in the form of

\(^{10}\) Rubin (2002), p. 86.
decrees that attempted to redistribute land to the peasants, provide greater freedom for women, and to those in rural areas, and appeared to minimize the importance of Islam. These reforms, however, were often opposed by large segments of Afghan society.\footnote{Henry Bradsher, \textit{Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 43- 45.} This resulted in significant desertions in Army units throughout the country, as well as rebellions in the major cities of Heart and Kandahar.

The PDPA had instituted these changes while possessing only a very small base of support in the cities and almost none in the countryside. The Soviet Union, which had several hundred advisors stationed in Afghanistan and had made considerable investments in both the country and the communist party, began to be concerned that it was in jeopardy of losing both.\footnote{Ibid, p. 49.} These concerns increased when Hafizullah Amin– the \textit{Khalqi} who had led the communist coup against the Afghan government – imprisoned Taraki and assumed leadership of the country. In the words of one historian, “The brief period of Amin’s ascendancy is widely recognized by Afghans to have been one of the worst in Afghanistan’s modern history.”\footnote{William Maley, \textit{The Afghanistan Wars} (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2002), p. 32.} Amin proceeded to systematically imprison, torture, and execute real and perceived political opponents in Afghanistan. The official Afghan government figure for those killed in this period was reported at 11,000. The Afghan government also estimated later that the number of PDPA members killed ranged from 1,000-4,500.\footnote{Rubin (2002), p. 62.} Amin also began pursuing more independent course from Moscow. In turn, the USSR Politburo became concerned that either the US might try and take advantage of the situation and place an unfriendly regime in power, or that the regime...
might collapse due to spreading mutinies in the army and cities. Thus, to preserve their communist allies, as well as ensure a secure southern border, it approved and launched an invasion of the country on December 24, 1979.\textsuperscript{15}

In a rapid campaign, Soviet forces took control of the major cities of Afghanistan—Heart in the west, Kandahar in the south, the capital of Kabul in the east, and Mazar-e-Sharif in the north (see Figure #2). The Soviets also proceeded to assassinate Hafizullah Amin, and replaced him with Babrak Karmal. While the Soviets quickly crushed the resistance of the ruling regime’s conventional military, the Soviet invasion provoked a massive rebellion from the populace, turning what had been a few localized uprisings into a nationwide revolt. By March of 1980, the Soviet effort was confronted by a nationwide insurgency, and as can be seen from the map shown in Figure 2, proved unable to expand very far beyond the established roads.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 75.
Background to US Invasion

On September 11, 2001, members of the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization hijacked and flew two planes into the World Trade Center, and flew a third into the Pentagon, with a 4th hijacked plane crashing into the Pennsylvania countryside due to a loss of control during a struggle with passengers.

Al-Qaeda, headed by Osama bin Laden who was part of a Saudi billionaire family, maintained its primary base in Afghanistan, where it was protected by the ruling regime, the Taliban. Having identified Al-Qaeda as the perpetrators of the attack, then-President George W. Bush demanded the Taliban hand over Al-Qaeda and bin Laden. The Taliban

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refused, and the US launched Operation: Enduring Freedom in response. In a quick campaign, the US drove the Taliban from the cities, and the Taliban leadership fled across the border into Pakistan.

By early December of 2001, the Taliban regime had fallen. The US, together with other nations throughout the international community, began work to create a new government. However, the US attention began in 2002 to turn toward Iraq. The Taliban, from their safe havens in Pakistan, gradually rebuilt their capabilities, and in 2003 began their insurgency against the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) comprised by US and NATO forces and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). By 2009, the insurgency had increased dramatically in both size and strength.

By the beginning of 2010, the US found itself deploying 34,000 more troops to the country, bringing the total deployed ISAF force to 100,000 – approximately as many troops as the Soviet Union had deployed at the peak of their presence in the country.

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17 Rashid, p. 142-154.
Chapter 2: Comparing Operating Environments

In evaluating differences between the Soviet and ISAF approaches to COIN, it is important to discern the distinctions between the two situations confronted by these forces. Foremost among these are the structure and capability of the insurgent forces and the national government.

Comparison of Insurgent Forces

There are significant differences between the mujahedeen that fought the Soviets and the insurgent groups currently engaging the ISAF/GIRoA. These differences include the composition of their forces, unity of command, scope and scale of activity, and equipment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>US Period</th>
<th>Soviet Period</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Three main groups, one with good command and control</td>
<td>Seven parties with poor command and control over loosely linked field forces (number several thousand separate bands)</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Dispersion</td>
<td>Mainly in Pashtun southern/eastern areas</td>
<td>Nationwide insurgency</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighters under arms</td>
<td>Estimated less than 30,000</td>
<td>Estimates range from 50,000—100,000</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>$140-200mm per year</td>
<td>$630mm at peak</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offensive Capability</td>
<td>October 2008-October 2009: 11,103 (small arms and indirect fires only)</td>
<td>January—December 1986: 13,038.</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Composition. Based on US military reports, the Taliban insurgency is comprised of three principal groups, which are, in order of threat: the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), operating primarily in southern Afghanistan; the Haqqani Network (HQN), operating primarily in southeast/east Afghanistan; and Hezbe-e Islami Gulbuddin, based in eastern Afghanistan. According to the leader of Coalition forces in Afghanistan, General McChrystal, “These groups coordinate activities loosely, often achieving significant unity of purpose and even some unity of effort, but they do not share a formal command-and-control structure.\(^{18}\) QST, the largest of the three groups, has developed a relatively sophisticated structure command structure, whereby it appoints “shadow governors” to establish Taliban administrations in Afghan provinces, as well as command local forces.\(^{19}\)

The close coordination between three groups, as well as the solid command structure of the QST has little equivalent among the *mujahideen* that comprised the insurgency in the Soviet-Afghan War. The *mujahideen* had weak command structures at both the local and country-level. As a group, they were split into seven different factions based in Peshawar, most of which rarely cooperated with each other in planning and carrying out operations.\(^{20}\) These parties exerted only weak control over the field commanders associated with them by providing weapons shipments and recruits from Pakistan.\(^{21}\) While several commanders, such as Ahmad Mahsud, attempted to establish governance institutions within their base area of operations, these structures did not extend beyond a


\(^{19}\) Ibid, p. 2-7.


small number of provinces and were regional in nature—very different from the scale and
scope of the QST shadow governments.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Geographic dispersion.} The Taliban movement is centered on the Pashtun ethnic group,
which while comprising 40\% of the country’s total population, is primarily located in
southern and eastern Afghanistan. This enables ISAF forces to concentrate on a specific
area, rather than devote significant forces to all parts of the country. In contrast, the
Soviet Union encountered an insurgency that raged throughout the country, with all
ethnic groups taking up arms against the Soviets in their area. The result was that much
of the Soviet force was devoted to guarding Soviet lines of communication, garrisons,
and government buildings and facilities.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Fighters under arms.} The \textit{mujahideen} are credited with having recruited and retained
more men under arms than the Taliban do today. It was estimated by Soviet military
intelligence that there were between 30,000-35,000 fighters active at any given time at
the beginning of 1982\textsuperscript{24}, and 80,000 by 1986.\textsuperscript{25} In contrast, according to news reports

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Rubin (2002), p. 234-237.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Antonio Giustozzi, \textit{War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan} (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2000), p. 279.
\end{itemize}
citing intelligence officials, the US Intelligence Community now estimates there are
25,000 active Taliban fighters.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Financing.} The Taliban’s revenue streams do not approach the scale of the \textit{mujahideen},
which received $625 million in high-quality military equipment from the US between
1979—1985, and $630 million for fiscal year 1986 alone.\textsuperscript{27} In contrast, the Taliban are
believed to have no principal foreign sponsor, though are reported by the US intelligence
community to receive between $140 million and $200 million from taxing the narcotics
trade in Afghanistan and from individual donors in the Persian Gulf.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Offensive capability.} Key indicators suggest that the Taliban may be approaching the
capabilities of the \textit{mujahideen} insurgency at its height. Insurgent-initiated attacks are one
of the primary metrics by which the US military measures the capabilities of an
insurgency. These attacks are defined as attacks conducted at the initiative of the
insurgents, rather than return fire to Coalition attacks. Insurgent initiated attacks include
direct attacks, indirect attacks, IEDs, and surface to air fire.

According to figures obtained by the late KGB defector Vasili Mitrokin, during the first
nine months of 1982 the \textit{mujahideen} conducted 7,689 insurgent initiated attacks, or

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} William H. Gray, “U.S. Covert Assistance to the Mujahidin,” Letter, February 25, 1987; Accessed at Digital National Security Archive, \url{http://0-nsarchive.chadwyck.com}.
\end{itemize}
approximately 10,000 on an annualized basis.\textsuperscript{29} Four years later, attacks for all of 1986 totaled 13,038 for the year.\textsuperscript{30} In contrast, between October 2008 and October 2009, there were approximately 11,130 insurgent-initiated attacks using small arms fire and indirect attacks alone.\textsuperscript{31}

There are several possible explanations for why the Taliban are able to sustain a tempo of operations comparable to the \textit{mujahideen}, despite their comparatively weaker manpower. One possibility is that the US has underestimated the total numbers of the Taliban’s active force. Estimating the strength of an insurgency is a difficult task, given that many part-time insurgents regularly rotate in and out of the insurgency, as their commitments to their home demand.

A second explanation is that the Taliban has been able to maintain this level of attacks because they have a more efficient and structured organization than the \textit{mujahideen} possessed.\textsuperscript{32} The \textit{mujahideen} broadly failed to succeed in developing unity of command:

\textsuperscript{29} Mitrokin, “The KGB in Afghanistan—Geographical Volume 1”; based on notes taken while reviewing KGB documents. The categories of attacks Mitrokin provides actually add up to 8,231 insurgent-initiated attacks, which casts some doubt on whether the figures are correct. However, it is possible that some of the categories of attacks were not mutually exclusive, which would explain this discrepancy. For example, a mujahedeen operation which targeted a “transport convoy” could have been escorted by military vehicles, and thus have also been categorized as an attack on “military units.” The number of attacks given by Mitrokin fit the data I have compiled concerning insurgent initiated attacks in 1986, derived from Soviet official battle reports and figures provided in a post-war study done by the Russian General Staff.

\textsuperscript{30} Grau and Gress, p. 55-60; and “1987 analysis by Soviet military experts,” quoted in Lyakhovskiy (1995), p. 327-331. Where the latter document gives numbers that differ from of Grau’s, the “1987 analysis” is used. The major difference is in the number of shelling attacks—whereas Grau’s figures are 22,000 for the period of December 1985—April 1987, given by a Soviet colonel who fought in the conflict, and who also presumably had access to Soviet records while writing his chapter in Grau’s book, the 1987 analysis gives 1810 in the first half of 1986. These figures were multiplied by 3 to take into account the increased fighting in the summer, where attack levels often double from winter norms.


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the insurgency was composed of seven different factions based in the Pakistani city of Peshawar (near the eastern border of Afghanistan) and nearly all were antagonistic, if not hostile, toward each other.\textsuperscript{33} This discord was amply demonstrated after the Soviet Union completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, when \textit{mujahideen} from a number of major parties failed in a major attack on a main city because they did not coordinate their assault.\textsuperscript{34}

One caution is that while the data appears persuasive, it may on its own be a false indicator. Specifically, raids conducted by the \textit{mujahideen} may have been significantly larger than raids conducted by the Taliban; thus, a 20 man raid could be input as a small arms attack, while a 120 man raid could be considered as the same. It is also possible that the insurgent-initiated attack is not a valid metric for measuring insurgent strength. In order to compensate for the ease of planting IEDs, for example, in neither case have mine attacks been included in the data set.

\textbf{Comparison of Afghan Governments}

The single greatest point of similarity between the Soviet-Afghan War and the current War in Afghanistan is likely the two Afghan governments. Both the Soviet-backed Communist government of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (“PDPA”), and the US-backed Karzai administration, suffered from very high levels of corruption and low levels of administrative capability.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, p. 226-231.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>US Period</th>
<th>Soviet Period</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralization</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Capability</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Effectiveness</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Level of Corruption.** Transparency International, a German based company which measures perceptions of corruption, placed Afghanistan in its 2009 study at 179th of 180 countries, effectively tying for last place with Somalia. 35 That is to say, countries such as Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Chad, Zimbabwe, and Myanmar are all perceived to have less corruption than Afghanistan.

The possibilities for corruption within the government were apparent from the beginning of the US-led invasion—many, if not most government officials were not paid enough to provide for their families, nor were they paid on time. 36 Moreover, given the weak oversight capability and power of the central government, as well as the presence of powerful warlords within the government, opportunities for corruption abound. Despite, or more likely because of, the billions of dollars of Western aid that has flowed into the country, corruption seems to have become progressively more prevalent: the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime issued a report in January 2010 which found that in 2009 Afghans had paid $2.49 billion in bribes, equivalent to 23% of the country’s GDP. 37

It found that citizens routinely have to pay bribes for government services, with 52% of

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the 7,000+ Afghans surveyed stating they had to pay at least one bribe to public officials in 2009, with the average cost of a bribe was $158.\textsuperscript{38} In a country where many people earn less than $2 per day, these sums can be devastating.\textsuperscript{39}

While there are few comparable aggregate measures by which to evaluate corruption in the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (“DRA”), there are two subjective indicators of note. First, throughout the 1980s, the top officials of the PDPA continually railed against corruption to little effect. The leader of the DRA, Babrak Karmal, stated in April 1980 that it was necessary to eliminate, “lawlessness, disobedience, embezzlement, bureaucracy, pilferage of public property, chauvinism, etc.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet this lawlessness persisted; a foreign correspondent in late 1984 reported that “a new class of careerists and profiteers has emerged…and an evil spirit of totalitarian temptation haunts [Kabul].\textsuperscript{41}” In his last speech as General Secretary of the PDPA, in April of 1986, Karmal asserted that little progress had been made in this area, stating that “an impenetrable barrier has not been established against corruption, giving or taking bribes, embezzlement… misuse of government property or public wealth. Work discipline is at a low level.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{40} FBIS Daily Report. SOUTH ASIA, FBIS-SAS-80-084 on 29 April 1980, p. C3.
\textsuperscript{42} FBIS Daily Report. South Asia, FBIS-SAS-86-066 on 07 April 1986, Page C5.
bribe-takers, and there were plenty of abuses’, but the party still lacked ‘the
determination to deal with’ them.43"

A second indicator of corruption in the DRA is the numerous reports on the subject. In
1988, the Soviet newspaper Pravda reported that after the Soviet withdrawal, “one third
of all goods supplied by the USSR had been stolen.44” Soviet documents also reveal that
the Soviets encountered numerous challenges involving Afghan corruption amongst
Afghan armed forces during their withdrawal from the country. For example, in 1988 the
personal representative of the Soviet Minister of Defense in Afghanistan and the
commander of the Southern Theater (the theater encompassing Afghanistan), General
Varennikov, noted the turnover of Soviet arms and material to Afghan forces in
preparation for the withdrawal was being hampered by corruption and poor discipline
amongst the Afghan forces.

…Because of poor organization and the desire of a number of people on the
Afghan side to use this moment for personal gain….theft, pillaging, and crippling
of combat equipment and material are being committed….Beginning on the
morning of 14 May the servicemen of our brigade completely vacated their
garrison and handed it over to the Afghan side….However during the second half
of the 14th and particularly on the 15th and 16 of May the brigade garrison was
completely plundered and valuable property was sold through city shops. In a
majority of buildings doors and window frames were torn out…The desire was
expressed that similar incidents would not be permitted in the future [to General
Secretary Najibullah]. Najibullah gave the necessary instructions. However in
another brigade on the second day after handing over the garrison two barracks
were destroyed by fire. 45 (Emphasis added)

44 Antonio Giustozzi, War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan (Washington, DC: Georgetown
There are several possible explanations as to why corruption remained so prevalent among the Afghan governments of both time periods. One element may be the Afghan culture itself. As Bradsher puts it, “…in Afghan society a person’s first duty is to his relatives and clansmen, not to some abstract party or government. Nepotism is traditional, even honorable.” Combined with the large amounts of external aid that flooded the country during both periods, this cultural view could have influenced government officials to divert aid for their own benefit. A low literacy rate throughout the country (likely 20% at most during the DRA and 28% at present) may have precluded public oversight of the spending habits of government officials.

**Degree of Centralization.** A second point of similarity between the DRA and GIRoA governments is that both governments formally sought to create a centralized state which would govern the country. At the same time, the leadership at both periods sought to centralize power around themselves through patronage networks, at the cost of the power of government institutions.

The DRA ruled by a Communist government, and it was envisioned from the outset of the Soviet invasion that the communist party, the PDPA, would control all state institutions through a centralized structure. Thus, the PDPA was intended to establish a parallel governance structure to the national government. For example, the party

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46 Bradsher, p. 131; see also Rubin (2002), p. 128.
secretary of a province was often also provincial governor of the same province.\textsuperscript{48} Within this structure, PDPA officials would travel to population centers and, by recruiting new members into the Party, would expand the social base of the government.

In the latter half of the 1980s, this approach changed somewhat, as the PDPA no longer insisted on being the “sole” power in government, and instead called for other parties to join the national government—with the caveat that the PDPA would be the “leading” party in the state.\textsuperscript{49} Elections were held at the district level, and candidates were elected to the Parliament in 1987, although this body never exerted significant influence.

Throughout the existence of the DRA government, the concept of governance continued to be a strong centralized state administration.

GIRoA’s structure is very similar to that of the DRA in that it also calls for the concept of a strong centralized state administration. The GIRoA is structured somewhat differently in that it relies on democratic elections to appoint a Parliament and the President. The country is governed by a President elected by popular vote; the President appoints all ministers, deputy ministers, governors, and provincial security chiefs.\textsuperscript{50} There is a bicameral legislative branch: the lower house, the \textit{Wolesi Jirga} (House of the People), has 249 seats which are filled in district-level elections, with candidates elected by a single non-transferable vote.\textsuperscript{51} The \textit{Meshrano Jirga} (House of Elders), has 102 seats: 1/3

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{49} Rubin (2002), p. 148-149.
\textsuperscript{50} Barnett Rubin, “Afghanistan’s Uncertain Transition From Turmoil to Normalcy,” \textit{Council on Foreign Relations} (CRS No. 12, March 2006), p. 27.
\end{flushright}
are elected from provincial councils (4 year terms), 1/3 from local district councils (3 year terms), and 1/3 are appointed by the President (5 year terms).\textsuperscript{52} The Wolesi Jirga passes laws, approves budgets and treaties, and can veto Cabinet appointments, as well as also having the ability to force Cabinet appointees to resign through a vote of no-confidence. The Meshrano Jirga has the ability to veto the lower house’s votes. Of some note however, is that neither the provincial governors, nor the district governors, their deputies, or the provincial and district-level department personnel who represent the Cabinet-level ministries, are elected by the people. Instead, they are appointed by the President, the provincial governor, and the ministries, respectively.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{Administrative Capability.} Both state apparatuses found the effective administrative of their territories to be challenging. Neither the DRA nor the GIRoA governments significantly expanded their bases outside of Kabul. As well, neither meaningfully expanded their governance capacity and each suffered from a lack of trained civil servants – a challenge that again may have been compounded by the country’s low literacy rate.

Each government often focused on securing additional political power for itself, rather than establishing governance through institution building, strengthening governance

capacity, or providing for its citizens. These issues were cited by Soviet and U.S.
surveyors of the respective situations:\(^54\)

“The leadership nucleus of the PDPA does not have sufficient energy and
decisiveness to carry out the tasks of economic and social development of the
DRA and organize a military defeat of the counterrevolution…”—KGB Report,
January 1983

“…Factional warfare continues in the PDPA. It is reflected to the greatest degree
in personnel policy…The intra-Party conflict remains the main hindrance in the
process of stabilizing the situation in the country. The main efforts of the
leadership level of the Party as before are expended on intra-party warfare, and
not for the cause…”—Deputy Minister of Defense, Marshal Sokolov, June
1983.

“President Karzai is not an adequate strategic partner…Karzai continues to shun
responsibility for any sovereign burden, whether defense, governance, or
development…Besides Karzai himself, there is no political ruling class that
provides an overarching national identity that transcends local affiliations and
provides reliable partnership. Even if we could eradicate pervasive corruption, the
country has few indigenous sources of revenue, few means to distribute its
services to its citizens, and most important, little to no political will to carry out
basic tasks of governance.”—US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry,
November 3, 2009.\(^56\) (Emphasis added)

Of note, in both cases, neither government expected the foreign power to leave,
decreasing the urgency of capacity building as they expected the foreign power to
administer key services:

“I was at the Politburo today. There was a historical statement about Afghanistan.
Gorbachev has finally made up his mind to put an end to it. [Gorbachev] outlined
his talk with [leader of the DRA Babrak] Karmal. [Karmal], Gorbachev said, was
dumbfounded, in no way expected such a turn, was sure that we need Afghanistan
more that he does, and was clearly expecting that we will be there for a long time,
if not forever.”(Emphasis added)— Anatoly S. Chernyaev, October 17, 1985,
Gorbachev advisor\(^57\)

\(^{54}\) Regarding DRA inability to govern, see: Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, trans. Khalid Hasan


\(^{56}\) “Ambassador Eikenberry’s Cables on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, p. 3;

\(^{57}\) Diary of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, October 17, 1985, p. 142.
“The leadership of the country has finally understood the importance of carrying out measures to consolidate its power in Kabul and in the provinces….Elections to local councils and the National Assembly have been held, but everything is being done slowly. It is obvious that the Afghan leadership hoped until recently that the Soviet troops would still not leave. It is hard to find another explanation for the passivity of the leadership at all levels…”—Report of the USSR Afghanistan Operations Group leadership, October 1988 (Note that the USSR had informed DRA leadership of its intentions in October 1985, and had in fact withdrawn half of its troops on May 15, 1988). 58

“[Karzai] and much of his circle do not want the U.S. to leave and are only too happy to see us invest further. They assume we covet their territory for a never-ending war on terror and for military bases to use against surrounding powers.”—US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, November 3, 2009. 59

One possible explanation for this persistent centralization across Afghan regimes is that officials in high-level positions in government in Afghanistan have tended to centralize power around themselves as individuals, rather than centralize power in an institution. This is likely motivated by the desire of officials to ensure their ongoing political viability through the establishment of a power base, rather than any view toward the effective performance of their official duties. While this is known to occur in many countries, the experience in Afghanistan appears substantially more pronounced. Appendix A provides a series of case studies of powerful Afghan leaders during both the Soviet and current period that further details this effect.

PART II: COMPARING SOVIET AND US FORMAL DOCTRINE
AND EVIDENCED STRATEGIES

Chapter 3: Comparing Soviet and US COIN Formal Doctrine

Result of Hypothesis #1: Not Supported – No Major Similarities in Military Doctrine

Military doctrine forms the framework for planning and carrying out actions, providing a common ground with which commanders throughout the theater can base their actions. Where doctrine is found to be inappropriate or must be informally improvised—as was the case with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan—commanders may not disseminate lessons learned to other units in a timely manner, nor fight the war in a unified, coherent fashion.

Prior to the codification of the US COIN doctrine, for example, a report in late 2005 on how well US commanders in Iraq were absorbing counterinsurgency lessons found that, “20% of them got it, 60% were struggling, and 20% were trying to fight a conventional war.” The lack of COIN doctrine, it should be noted, was of particular importance for Soviet forces. Given that Soviet press did not even begin to critique the war until Gorbachev’s era of perestroika in the late 1980s, there was no institution other than the military that had the ability to identify lessons learned in the war.

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**US COIN Doctrine**

The US COIN doctrine, as put forward in Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24), serves as an example of a doctrine created for a specific situation. Prior to its publication, the Army had not published a field manual devoted exclusively to COIN operations in 20 years and the Marine Corps for over 25. FM 3-24 codified and provided an intellectually rigorous study of the basis for insurgency and those strategies which are more likely to succeed in counterinsurgency.\(^{61}\)

FM 3-24 detailed that the main mission in COIN is not to attack the insurgents directly, but to undercut their base of support in the population by establishing the legitimacy of the government. The doctrine emphasizes a focus on the security of the populace as the primary objective. It calls for US and host nation security forces to provide security for the populace, gain their support, and thus separate them from the insurgency. The underlying thesis is that given a lack of popular support, the insurgency will weaken and become increasingly vulnerable.\(^{62}\)

**Soviet COIN Doctrine**

In contrast, there is no evidence the Soviet Union developed a formal counterinsurgency doctrine.\(^{63}\) Instead, Soviet forces utilized throughout the war their conventional warfare doctrine, as detailed in volume six of the *Soviet Military Encyclopedia* (1978). Elements of this approach include:

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1. “The simultaneous destruction of the enemy to the entire depth of his deployment, the timely accumulation of forces, the clever maneuver of forces and means for the development of military action at a rapid tempo, and the destruction of the enemy in a short period.\textsuperscript{64}

2. “\textbf{Surprise}, decisiveness, aggressiveness of military activity, continuous striving to achieve and retain the \textit{initiative}.\textsuperscript{65}

3. “Decisive concentration of the essential force at the needed moment and in the most important directions and for the decision of the main mission.”

4. “Strict and uninterrupted leadership\textsuperscript{66}.”

5. “\textit{Comprehensive security in combat.}\textsuperscript{67} (emphasis from original)

In short, Soviet doctrine called for an offensively and operationally-focused employment of forces. The Soviet doctrine prioritized speed, surprise, centralized control, and the employment of massed forces to attack the enemy simultaneously along the entire depth of their deployment, with the objective being the annihilation of the enemy force.\textsuperscript{68} In practice, these goals were often achieved at the expense of the security of the populace.

\textit{Comparison of US and Soviet COIN Doctrines}

In comparing US and Soviet COIN doctrines, there appears to be little similarity between the two, as outlined in the table below. US COIN doctrine articulates a specific approach

\textsuperscript{65} Baxter, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Baxter, p. 23.
for dealing with the problem of insurgencies; the Soviets, in turn, never developed a formal doctrine to do the same. Thus, the Soviet Army improvised tactically in a piecemeal manner. As one researcher noted as late as 1991, “Overall, it appears that there is not yet an unclassified Soviet publication that analyzes or summarizes the entire set of lessons learned. The literature is partial, elliptical, and often reticent…”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Soviet COIN Doctrine</th>
<th>US COIN Doctrine</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus of Doctrine</strong></td>
<td>Designed for conventional war</td>
<td>Designed specifically for COIN</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Center of Gravity</strong></td>
<td>The enemy, i.e. the insurgents</td>
<td>Doctrine designed exclusively for counterinsurgency</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Command Structure</strong></td>
<td>Calls for centralized command structure, structured decision-making</td>
<td>Devolves command to the lowest levels</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scale of operations</strong></td>
<td>Emphasis on the operational level: large-scale conventional operations</td>
<td>Emphasis on tactical level: small scale</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civil-military unity of effort</strong></td>
<td>Little to no guidance</td>
<td>Civil-military effort is integrated into COIN effort</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Focus of Doctrine.** Soviet doctrine did not take into account the possibility that the USSR would have to fight a counterinsurgency war. Rather, it was focused on conventional warfare, and was specifically designed to guide Soviet forces fighting on the European plains against an opponent with similar capabilities. As a result, it was poorly suited for fighting an insurgent force.

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69 Blank, p. 2.
As Stephen Blank has noted, “The fundamental misapprehension was that European style forces and tactics could be applied to a TV [military theater] where guerrilla war predominated…The USSR blundered into an unconventional war with perhaps the most conventionalized and standardized tactical-operational mindset of any major army in the world.\textsuperscript{70b} In contrast, FM 3-24 was specifically designed for COIN, and thus could offer guidance to commander and soldiers at all levels concerning the specific situations and circumstances associated with COIN.

\textbf{Center of Gravity}. Soviet doctrine viewed the enemy’s forces as the decisive point of the war; their doctrine called for the direct and rapid destruction of enemy forces throughout the battlefield. The result was a military which was heavily in favor of offensive maneuver. Indeed, this preference was at times carried to the point where “defensive” operations were viewed as only a temporary measure enacted so that offensive operations would be able to commence.\textsuperscript{71}

Thus, in Afghanistan, Soviet doctrine called for the primary focus of Soviet forces to be on finding and destroying insurgent forces.\textsuperscript{72} Such an approach has been noted by many to be highly inefficient, as it reduces the war to one of attrition.\textsuperscript{73} This critique appears to be particularly valid in the case of Afghanistan, as guerilla units were typically more mobile than Soviet motorized units, and the mountainous terrain discouraged the successful encirclement and destruction of guerilla forces.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 37, 38.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Baxter, p. 122-123.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Blank, p. 71.
\end{itemize}
By contrast, FM 3-24 views the population as the center of gravity. It calls for destroying insurgent forces by separating them from their base of support within the population. By providing security for the populace, and gaining their support through the provision of benefits, the population thus becomes separated from the insurgency. Given a lack of popular support, the insurgency is unable to seek aid or refuge from the populace, and thus becomes vulnerable to Coalition efforts.\footnote{Grau and Gress, p. 174-181.}

**Command Structure.** FM 3-24 states that “Successful COIN operations require competence and judgment by Soldiers and Marines at all levels. Indeed, young leaders…often make decisions at the tactical level that have strategic consequences. Senior leaders set the proper direction and climate with thorough training and clear guidance; then they trust their subordinates to do the right thing.\footnote{FM 3-24, p. 50-51.}” In contrast, Soviet doctrine called for the centralization of authority around senior commanders.\footnote{Grau and Gress, p. 45-46.} Given that conflict in COIN usually occurs at the small-unit level (squads, platoons, and companies) these doctrinal views have had a significant impact. To this point, FM 3-24 calls for the US to rely on its majors, captains, lieutenants, and non-commissioned officers to take the initiative at the tactical level.

In contrast, Soviet doctrine contributed to tactical inflexibility. As Blank notes, Soviet forces suffered from glaring deficiencies in the competence of non-commissioned
officers and a lack of initiative. He contends these issues can be traced back to, “Soviet tactical doctrine which stated that the lower the level of training of staffs and commanders, the more success of offensives depend upon the greatest possible centralization of control.”

**Scale of military effort.** Soviet doctrine called principally for the conduct of large-scale operations which would annihilate the enemy through the conduct of strikes along the entire front of the enemy. The emphasis was on large-scale consecutive operations which would continually attack the enemy. This operationally-focused doctrine was a significant factor in the failure of Soviet counterinsurgency, as the Soviet forces continually prioritized search-and-destroy missions over clear, hold, and build missions. As Lester Grau and Michael Gress note in their commentary on the Soviet General Staff study of the Soviet-Afghan War,

> The Soviets were masters of large-scale successive operations with which they kept their enemy off balance and his reserve committed to the wrong sector…Naturally, the Soviets tried to defeat the Mujahideen with large, sweeping operations. Instead of victory, the operations used a lot of fuel, covered a lot of territory, and accomplished little…Operations were within the comfort level of the Soviet commanders in Afghanistan and so they continued them—despite their lack of success.

The result was a doctrine which emphasized the use of massive firepower directed against an area, followed by sweeping the terrain with division-sized units, under the strict control of the division commander. This approach typically resulted in few insurgents being killed, as the large units would tend to give more warning of their

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77 Blank, p. 72-73.
79 Grau and Gress, p. 91-92.
deployment than small units, increasing the ability of the insurgents to flee ahead of an attack. It also yielded massive civilian casualties, which would frequently recruit more people to the side of the insurgency than the operation itself killed.

One soldier in the early 1980s recounted how ten guerillas were found in a village by a Soviet battalion. In response, the Soviet battalion commander gave the order to, “shoot the whole village level with the ground…The guerillas generally shot for some time and then went back to the mountains. Our men, on the other hand, bombed the village flat to the ground, even though they knew that there was also a civilian population there, women and children.” More to the point, these operations only produced transitory effects; by not maintaining a force in the area after sweeping it, insurgents could easily infiltrate back into the country.

In contrast, FM 3-24 emphasized using appropriate levels of force so as not to alienate the population, as well as taking action at the tactical level to secure the population and encourage alignment with host nation and coalition forces. The result has been the development of such practices as Key Leader’s Engagement patrols—routine patrols which engage key leaders in an area, allowing better intelligence to be developed as trust grows between the key leader and Coalition forces. Patrols which interacted with the populace in this manner were rarely, if ever practiced by Soviet forces. In this area as well, US and Soviet doctrines share little similarity.

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Civil-Military Unity of Effort. Soviet doctrine makes no mention of integrating civilian operations with military operations. In the normal conduct of a conventional war, this would not be necessary; civilian advisors were controlled by the International Department of the CC CPSU, and had never been called on to coordinate with military personnel in a wartime situation.\textsuperscript{82} Combat operations like those noted by General Varennikov, the personal representative of the USSR Minister of Defense in Afghanistan, were typical as a result. In one report, for example, he noted that while a multi-division level sweep conducted in Kunar province of eastern Afghanistan in May and June of 1985 had resulted in 4500 insurgent casualties but had produced little in the way of sustained progress:

“At the same time the actions of the Party and government bodies of the DRA seem passive in using the results of the successful combat operations….In the province of Kunar...No organizational nuclei are being established in liberated areas. Free material aid for Kunar province coming through government channels has not been delivered in a timely manner. Therefore the results of the combat operations which have been carried out to stabilize the situation in the country can only be of a temporary nature…”\textsuperscript{83}

In contrast, FM 3-24 explicitly makes clear that civilian efforts must accompany military efforts, noting that, “The integration of civilian and military efforts is crucial to successful COIN operations.” The effects of this doctrine can be seen in the US Government’s Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Afghanistan, which details the integration of civilian and military efforts between 2009 and 2012; it

specifically calls for the deployment of civilian teams forward to military units. This is further seen by Ambassador Eikenberry’s message to the US Embassy in Afghanistan (which has control over all civilian efforts in the country), in which he noted that civilians are not only an integral part of the US COIN strategy, but that they will be deploying to military unit’s forward locations in support of the campaign.

Summary of Comparison

In comparing US and Soviet COIN doctrines, it appears that there is little similarity between the two. US COIN doctrine advocates an approach that minimizes civilian casualties, while the Soviet approach does not seem to take these into consideration. The US approach relies on the initiative of soldiers at the tactical level; the Soviets rely on the ability of their commanders to direct most activities. US COIN doctrine outlines a specific approach for dealing with the problem of insurgencies; a Soviet doctrine was never formally developed to do the same. Thus, even after Soviet commanders came to understand that mass killings of civilians was unhelpful to their cause, this realization did not filter down to the troops or result in a wide-scale change in behavior.

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Chapter 4: Comparison of US and Soviet COIN Evidenced Strategy

Result of Hypothesis #2: Partially Supported – Some Similarities in Military Strategy, Particularly Following 1986 Soviet Strategy Shift

Military strategy is the plan of action by which objectives are achieved. Doctrine informs the framework for this planning, and offers best practices. While strategies may be explicit or implicit, they are assessed for this purpose by the way in which they were evidenced through actions in the field.

US COIN Strategy

On August 31, 2009 the General McChrystal, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, submitted his initial assessment of the situation in Afghanistan. In it, he called for the development of a new COIN strategy based on four pillars: 1) improve effectiveness through greater partnering with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF); 2) prioritize rapid and responsible government; 3) regain the initiative from the insurgents; 4) focus resources on those areas with great population density that insurgents threaten most.  

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The Campaign Plan shows the immediate influence of FM 3-24, and is divided into three phases that are analogous to the phases FM 3-24 uses to describe COIN operations.

There are five primary elements to the first stage of this strategy: protecting the population, supporting the expansion of the national government, expanding the national army, neutralizing opponents, and promoting socio-economic development.

**Soviet COIN Strategy**

In contrast to this plan, the Soviet Union failed to develop a detailed plan which unified civil-military effort. Indeed, the conventional warfare doctrine of the Soviet Union likely hindered the recognition that such an approach was required. The Soviet experience was divided into two phases: the first between 1980-1986 in which the Soviets attempted to acquire control of the country, and the second between 1986-1989 in which the Soviets sought to withdraw their forces.

**Soviet Strategy: 1980-1986**

By May 1981, the Soviet generals in command of the 40th Army realized that the expansion of the PDPA into rural areas would be critical to winning the fight against the insurgency. They were in control of the cities and the roads, yet with 80% of the population living in rural areas, control of the cities did not provide the PDPA with power over the greater population.

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*In stage 1, “the goal is to protect the population, break the insurgents’ initiative and momentum, and set the conditions for further engagement.” Stage 2 focuses on helping the area achieve stability; creating a functioning civil government, providing essential services, and stimulating economic development. Stage 3 is characterized by the transition for COIN operations to host nation forces. (FM 3-24, p. 153-154).*  

Given the *mujahideen* control of the countryside, the Soviet army needed to secure remote villages before the government could re-establish its presence in these regions. However, maintaining control of the cities and roads consumed a significant portion of the Soviet’s combat power. According to Grau, in the winter of 1980-1981, with 73 maneuver battalions in country, only 8 were available for combat. Even at the height of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan in 1988, there were only 30 of 93 battalions not devoted to some kind of security duty.\(^8^9\)

Because of the modest combat power available for offensive operations, the Soviets made the decision in this period to focus on three military lines of operation: the destruction of insurgent forces and bases; an interdiction campaign against insurgent supply lines along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border; and the rebuilding of the DRA Army.\(^9^0\) Through this strategy, it was hoped that several effects would be achieved: first, the insurgency would be destroyed—or at least suppressed—in areas near the cities. This would allow DRA institutions grow in conditions of security; once strong enough, they would be able to expand into the countryside.\(^9^1\) In conjunction with the strengthening of government institutions, the DRA army would also grown in strength and capability, allowing it to assume an ever-greater role in combat, eventually permitting the Soviet military to leave. The result of this policy was vastly different—and a classic case of tactics interfering with strategy, making the merits of the strategy itself difficult to evaluate. Soviet forces adopted a policy at the tactical level of responding to insurgent attacks with massive,

\(^9^0\) Giustozzi (2000) p, 96-103.  
\(^9^1\) Ibid, p. 170.
punitive strikes against suspected guerilla locations. Given the difficulty of distinguishing
between insurgents and civilians, Soviet forces often killed both. In the words of one
Soviet soldier serving in the early 1980s, “Human life cost nothing here, neither your
own nor a stranger’s…Our men slaughtered a lot of Afghans.” Far from discouraging
attacks, these merely created more insurgents.

These indiscriminate bombings, which by the early 1980s had created over 5 million
Afghan refugees outside Afghanistan, need not have doomed the Soviet COIN effort. An
army which actively coerces a population can force them to choose the occupying army
as the lesser of evils, as occurred in Eastern Europe during the Soviet occupation. What
undermined the Soviets was that this policy of indiscriminate attacks was not integrated
into Soviet strategy; indeed, there is some evidence to indicate that Soviet generals were
not aware in the early years of the damage they were inflicting on the Afghan population:
a researcher of declassified Soviet documents, Svetlana Savranskaya, has noted that she
has never found any reference to a policy of deliberate civilian killings in Soviet
documents. This is further demonstrated by a trip undertaken by General Varennikov,
the newly appointed theater commander of the Southern Military District (encompassing
Afghanistan), to an Afghan village in the summer of 1985. There, he was reportedly
surprised by a proposal of the Afghan village elders to refrain from supporting insurgent
forces, if Varennikov called off the Soviet bombing of their villages. The anecdote is
noteworthy because it reveals that Soviet commanders rarely sought to integrate the

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93 Conversation with Svetlana Savranskaya, George Washington University Campus, March 5, 2010.
coercive aspects of their tactics with their overall strategy. Time and again, the Soviet war effort would suffer from this failure to integrate tactics and strategy.

**Soviet Strategy: 1986-1989**

The ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev as the new leader of the Soviet Union brought a new strategy for the war. By late 1986, the strategy changed to focus on control of the cities, with the addition of a policy of national reconciliation. The first sign of this new strategy was the replacement of Babarak Karmal, leader of the DRA, was replaced by his intelligence chief Najibullah, who was perceived to be better aligned with the Soviet’s new strategy, and a chief advocate of the national reconciliation program.

National reconciliation was a significant program launched by Najibullah under Soviet pressure that attempted to accomplish three objectives: expand the DRA presence in villages, expand the DRA’s armed forces, and lessen the number of enemies the regime possessed. This program called for insurgents to lay down their arms and join the PDPA government in a ruling coalition, promising them positions of power within the government. It also attempted to convince the leaders of individual units of *mujahideen* to join the regime by promising them full autonomy in the areas in which they operated, as well as supplies of advanced weapons and munitions. These former *mujahideen* would essentially become militias. By the time the Soviet withdrawal had commenced, an

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95 Giustozzi, p. 171.
estimated 15,000 insurgents had joined the government, while 11,533 were “in negotiations.”

It was hoped that these militia forces would secure their territories, so that the government could conduct “build” missions without needing to deploy forces to the area. Such build missions were to be undertaken by units called agitprop—short for “agitation and propaganda” detachments. By 1986, one of these detachments was present in every DRA division, brigade, and even regiment.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>ISAF COIN</th>
<th>Soviet COIN (1981-1986)</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COIN Approach</td>
<td>Secure major population centers</td>
<td>Destroy insurgent forces, bases of support, and supply lines</td>
<td><em>Low</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of Host Government</td>
<td>Build up government support at local and national levels</td>
<td>Build up government support at national level</td>
<td><em>Medium</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of Host Nation Security Forces</td>
<td>Expand National Army through incentives and training</td>
<td>Expand National Army through conscription</td>
<td><em>Medium</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Support</td>
<td>Long-term investment in infrastructure and education</td>
<td>Minimal development effort</td>
<td><em>Low</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Control &amp; Influence</td>
<td>Provide jobs to former insurgents and establish local defense forces</td>
<td>No major reconciliation efforts</td>
<td><em>Low</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Correlation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Low</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

96 Lyakhovskiy, “The number of rebel groups which have come over to the side of the government and entered into negotiations,” p. 419.
97 Giustozzi, p. 42.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>ISAF COIN</th>
<th>Soviet COIN (1986-1989)</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COIN Approach</strong></td>
<td>Secure major population centers</td>
<td>Secure major urban areas</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support of Host Government</strong></td>
<td>Build up government support at local and national levels</td>
<td>Build up government support at national level</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expansion of Host Nation Security Forces</strong></td>
<td>Expand National Army through incentives and training</td>
<td>Expand National Army through conscription</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population Support</strong></td>
<td>Long-term investment in infrastructure and education</td>
<td>Short-term effort focused on political indoctrination and medical/materiel aid</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local Control &amp; Influence</strong></td>
<td>Provide jobs to former insurgents and establish local defense forces with existing equipment</td>
<td>Establish local defense forces with new equipment</td>
<td>Medium/High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Correlation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COIN Approach.** ISAF doctrine emphasizes securing the major population centers of the country, allocating forces to the most densely populated areas; for example, Kandahar City (the capital of Kandahar Province) and the surrounding area, and the Helmand River Valley, which runs through most of Helmand province. The securing of territory is intended to deprive insurgents of the use of that area to mount attacks – and allowing for reconstruction and stabilization efforts.\(^98\) This effort implies that once a population center is cleared of insurgent influence, forces remain in place to ensure that insurgents cannot return to the area.

In contrast, early Soviet strategy focused on destroying enemy bases and supply lines irrespective of location. In 1980-1986, the Soviet Union undertook what amounted to a

“scorched earth” campaign, contrary to the principles of FM 3-24. In this period, the Soviets relied on airpower to bombard villages throughout the Afghan countryside, with the aim of depopulating an area, and thus destroying an insurgent’s supply base. 99

To interdict supply lines, the Soviet Union substantially increased its force presence along the border of Pakistan. By 1985 there were over 50,000 Soviet forces deployed in the border areas. 100 However, despite conducting 53 interceptions of mujahideen arms convoys per month in 1983, and 120 per month in conjunction with DRA forces in 1984, by 1986 the Soviets recognized that such measures were broadly ineffective, and withdrew their forces purposed for the task in 1987 and 1988. 101

These policies resulted in much of the population turning against the Soviet war effort, and furthermore resulted in the creation of an estimated 5 million refugees outside the country. 102 Villages from which rockets were launched in the vicinity against Soviet/DRA forces were bombed. One eyewitness passing through the once fertile area of Kandahar in 1988 stated that agriculture had been totally eliminated. 103 At the same time, a number of operations were launched every year in order to clear areas of insurgents. However, villages that were garrisoned were subsequently handed off to DRA forces. Vulnerable in their isolated garrisons and prone to desertion, the DRA forces

100 “CPSU CC Politburo meeting minutes, 13 November 1986,” from Cold War International History Project, Afghanistan Collection.
often initiated a quick withdrawal, allowing for the return of insurgents. As a result, even though at least 1,000 villages were “freed” each year between 1982 and 1987, on average only 292 of those villages remained under government control the following year.\textsuperscript{104}

\textit{Support of Host Government.} The US/ISAF approach advocates that forces work to support the establishment of legitimate local community, sub-district, and district government, and thus, “gain the active support of the population by empowering legitimate sub-national leaders with effective population security measures.”\textsuperscript{105} Along with establishment of the government, COIN forces are also assigned to help ensure the provision of essential services.

The early Soviet strategy took a different approach, assuming that by simply by maintaining control of the cities, they could increase the institutional capacity of the DRA government. In this model, the national “center” would grow strong enough to expand slowly expand into the countryside. However, the Soviets failed to maintain an adequate level of control and the PDPA did not expand its capabilities. Rather, the PDPA’s two factions, the \textit{Parcham} and the \textit{Khalq}, found themselves embroiled in factional fighting. Accordingly, the DRA government failed to grow stronger over time.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, p. 82.
Following the Soviet decision toward withdrawal in 1986, it was seen as necessary to expand the popular base of the regime into the rural areas, where the vast majority of the population was concentrated. As the leaders of the DRA noted in October 1986, “of the 31,000-35,000 villages in Afghanistan the government has only 8,000 formally under control, and they managed to hold elections to local bodies in a still smaller number of villages near cities, in only 2,000.”

**Expansion of Host Nation Security Forces.** The ISAF attempts to mentor the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police and work to, “accelerate and expand indigenous force capability, partnering at any echelon.” The objective to have successfully expanded the Afghan National Army to 134,000 trained soldiers by Fall 2010.

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet invasion, the DRA Army suffered a tremendous number of desertions, reducing it from a force of 80,000 members in 1979 to an estimated 20,000 at the beginning of 1981. Due in part to the unpopularity of the ruling regime, the DRA was forced to conscript men into the military, resulting in a very high desertion rate. Desertion sapped the morale of most DRA units and discouraged strong

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108 Isby, 21.
unit cohesion and unit leadership. By 1988, only 50\% of the regular military forces and 60\% of the police force were present for duty.\(^{109}\)

The Soviet’s strategic shift in 1986 was prompted by the recognition that the creation of a viable national military force would support a Soviet Union withdrawal. Impeding the Soviet attempts to rebuild the DRA Army, however, was the tendency of most Soviet commanders to use Afghan units in the most casualty-intensive roles of battles. For example, in conducting a basic operation against insurgents, a cordon-and-search, Soviet units were used to maintain blocking positions around suspected insurgent positions, while the DRA forces would have to perform the sweep itself.\(^{110}\)

Consequently, following the withdrawal of all Soviet forces in 1989, the total number of villages under government control dropped to an estimated 6,100—less than 1/5 the total villages in the country, and the lowest number controlled since 1982. The result was that the DRA essentially ceded control of the countryside to insurgents. The DRA had never maintained continuous control of the countryside during the war. However, until 1986, Soviet and Afghan forces would consistently seek to retake sections of the countryside, if only briefly – a practice that ended following the Soviet withdrawal.

**Population Support.** ISAF strategy establishes that Coalition forces and agencies must work with GIRoA to improve transportation infrastructure, establish educational

\(^{110}\) Grau, p. 111.
programs, and increase employment opportunities.\textsuperscript{111} These efforts are led by Provincial Reconstruction Teams and focus on those territories cleared of insurgent activity. These teams consist of 100-300 personnel deployed to a province to directly aid in reconstruction. They are charged with building roads, bridges, and improving economic infrastructure.

The Soviet strategy of “agitprop” detachments was similar in many ways to the ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Agitprop units, however, performed a much more limited role. Generally, 15-20 members of the PDPA would visit a village, escorted by a military unit. Upon arriving, they would show propaganda films and convene a meeting of village elders to explain DRA policies. The central part of the agitprop program was the free distribution of Soviet products and commodities to the villagers. Additionally, they would provide free medical aid to the villagers. In all, 400,000 Afghans were given medical aid and 1,000,000 materiel aid between 1981 and 1989.\textsuperscript{112}

Nevertheless, the agitprop units were inherently limited in that they did not perform larger-scale economic activities, such as the construction of roads. Nor did they persist in development and reconstruction activities in one area over a span of time, as can be seen by the fact that agitprop missions were termed “raids.”\textsuperscript{113} Thus, agitprop units often failed to compensate for the lack of a persistent government presence that would provide security and governance.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
**Local Control & Influence.** ISAF has not established a formal policy on local defense forces. News reporting indicates the Community Defense Force Initiative calls for local community defense forces (CDF) to be formed, which will be paid for by the Afghan government.¹¹⁴ These would operate within the area of their village and provide it basic protection against Taliban incursions; they will also establish a mechanism for locals to report information on the Taliban to CDF members, who will then pass it on to US forces.¹¹⁵

Such a model is similar to the national reconciliation policy pursued by Najibullah after 1986. This policy advocated that DRA should offer a position in the government to any groups, neutral or mujahideen, that wished to join. As part of this policy, Najibullah created organized a large number of militias from tribes and mujahideen willing to join with the government. By offering a salary some six times that of a regular army soldier, the promise of complete autonomy within the area militias operated in, and an exemption from conscription in the Army, the militias quickly expanded in size, reaching a total of 150,000 members by 1988.¹¹⁶ This structure effectively created a group of government subsidized warlords throughout the country.

While the policy of national reconciliation succeeded for a period, this success came at what proved to be an unsustainable cost. Najibullah relied on billions of dollars in Soviet

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goods and weapons in order to keep the militias loyal to him, raising their salary to over six times that of the regular DRA forces.\textsuperscript{117} This resulted in the development of militias that were increasingly heavily armed, and which continually demanded more money and weapons from the regime. The increased power of these militias resulted in their increased control of the countryside. In turn, this control tended to create in a form of anarchy as militias sought to supplement their income by taxing trade through the areas under their control, and levied taxes against villagers. Such circumstances would not permit the expansion of state authority outside cities for a very long time.

However an important distinction from the militias created under National Reconciliation is that CDF forces will not acquire arms from the Afghan government; instead, they will supply their own weapons. This means the ability of CDF leaders to directly challenge the authority of the Afghan government may be no different than before the CDF unit was created.

The policy of national reconciliation allowed the DRA government to succeed in the territory it controlled despite the Soviet withdrawal of Afghanistan—albeit with massive infusion of Soviet military and economic aid. Once the government proved it would not fall after the Soviet withdrawal by holding the city of Jalalabad against determined \textit{mujahideen} assault, many members of the resistance accepted Najibullah’s offer of weapons and his promise of autonomy. Indeed, by 1989, 125,000 mujahideen switched

\footnote{117 Interview with Anton Minkov and Gergory Smolyne, October 2009.}
sides to the government, and the regime of Najibullah did not fall until the Soviet government itself fell in January 1992. Though this policy cost the regime control of the countryside, it also allowed the regime—so long as it could maintain the patronage of the militias—to maintain control of the cities.

**Summary of Comparison**

While the Soviet strategy in the period 1981—1986 varied substantially from that of ISAF, an analysis of the period of 1986—1989 indicates that Hypothesis #2 is partially supported over that duration. Specifically, the Soviet policy of focusing on holding the major population centers is consistent with the US policy of focusing on clearing and holding major population centers. This can be seen simply by comparing Figure #3 and Figure #4. Figure #3 indicates that the current ISAF strategy intends primarily to secure the major population centers which lie along the “ring road”—the primary highway in Afghanistan, which runs in a ring from Kabul, to Kandahar, to Heart, to Mazar-e-Sharif, and back to Kabul. This strategy is similar to that followed by the Soviets; the principal difference between ISAF and Soviet strategy in this regard appears to be that ISAF forces have, through the construction of Forward Operating Bases, and long-range patrols, sought to establish a constant presence in the Afghan countryside. In contrast, the Soviet Union attempted to control the countryside through a few battles involving large division-sized units, which it believed would be decisive in nature.

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While the ISAF approach emphasized building governance capability at both the local and national levels, the Soviet strategy remained centered on the national government. In

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120 ISAF, Tackling Security Challenges: An Overview on ISAF’s Mission, p. 86. Blue areas indicate secured areas; brown lines represent major roads.
addition, ISAF prioritizes long-term infrastructure development to help support the population, while the Soviet approach sought potentially quicker-impact but shorter-lived benefits such as medical aid and free products. With respect to local control and influence, there also remain important similarities between the National Reconciliation program, which aimed at creating local militias, and the ISAF Community Defense Force Initiative.
Chapter 5: Lessons Learned & Recommendations

1. Given conditions of security, the Afghan government might not increase its capabilities faster than the insurgency grows. Despite both the US and the Soviet Union maintaining control of the major cities of Afghanistan throughout the course of the war, the institutions of government do not seem to have strengthened at a rate comparable to the COIN efforts being mounted to grant conditions of security. At present, the Afghan government has grown more, not less, corrupt over the past several years. Similarly, the institutions of governance of neither Najibullah nor Karmal’s government strengthened appreciably during the Soviet period. This evidence supports the concerns voiced by Ambassador Eikenberry regarding the US troop surge into Afghanistan.121

2. The Soviet approach to counterinsurgency suggests that focusing on the insurgents, rather than the population, is an ineffective strategy for Afghanistan. By focusing on insurgent forces, rather than on gaining the support of the population, the Soviets only provided the insurgents with a broader base of support. As the civilian casualties caused by their attacks grew, civilians were pushed into the arms of the insurgency.

3. National Reconciliation was a successful policy in terms of protecting the Afghan regime. Through the provision of autonomy to local commanders of the mujahideen, the regime of the DRA was able to remain in power after the Soviets left. Furthermore, the

fact that the program was conducted in large part by the intelligence agency of the regime, KhAD, deserves note— due to the ability of KhAD officials to move through hostile territory, they were able to successfully negotiate reconciliation agreements.122 Moreover, with each militant who accepted the regime’s authority, the intelligence resources of the regime expanded. At the same time, it should be recognized that this policy may have succeeded because the mujahideen were highly factionalized— something which does not seem to be the case at present. Therefore, care should be exercised when pursuing a program of this nature.

Policy Recommendation #1: The US should anticipate that a growth in Afghan governance capabilities following COIN operations will proceed slower than anticipated. The Afghan government’s institutions may not grow more powerful, as COIN theory would imply. Rather, key elites in the Afghan government may simply remained focused on amassing as much power as possible. Unless the US can convince Afghan leaders to invest their power in institutions, rather than derive power from their positions, gains made during counterinsurgency operations may only prove transitory.

Policy Recommendation #2: A policy of national reconciliation, without making use of heavily armed militias, could prove useful in improving the stability of Afghanistan. Given that intelligence capabilities seemed to increase through the successful defection of militants to the government, an expanded policy may result not only in a lessening of mujahideen strength, but an expansion of intelligence capabilities.

122 Giustozzi, p. 127-128.
Appendix A – Case Studies of Influential Afghan Leaders

The following section presents case studies describing the ways in which key Afghan leaders amassed and centralized power during their rule. These include Babrak Karmal and Mohammad Najibullah, leaders of the Afghan government during the Soviet period, and Hamid Karzai, the leader of the Afghan government during the US period.

Babrak Karmal—General Secretary of the PDPA, leader of Afghanistan, 1980—1986

Karmal was a longtime leader of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, having been one of its founders in the 1960s. After Taraki took power in 1978, Karmal was effectively sent into exile. The Soviets subsequently placed him in power during their invasion, with the hope that he would be able to united Parcham and Khalq. In this position, he served as the General Secretary of the PDPA and the Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. He was forced to rely extensively on the Soviet Army to support his regime, however, for several reasons. First, he was perceived to be a Tajik while Afghanistan had traditionally been ruled by Pashtun leaders. Though Karmal repeatedly claimed that his family was Pashtun, it was never popularly believed (his father was a Tajik and his mother a Pashtun, but in Afghan society one’s bloodline is traced through the father’s side). Second, the population viewed his government as illegitimate, believing him to merely be a Soviet puppet that had illegitimately been brought to power. Third, his base of support was very small: thousands of Parcham members had been killed by Taraki and Amin during their 20 months in power, leaving the Khalq party not only

123 Bradsher, p. 119.
124 Kakar, p. 65-66.
125 Kakar, p. 68-69.
numerically larger, but also forming the majority in PDPA membership in the Army and police (sarandoy). Finally, the Soviet invasion had spurred what had been localized civil unrest into a nationwide jihad, or holy struggle, against both the Soviet invaders and Karmal’s own government. In order to win the fight against the insurgency, it was necessary for Karmal to either build up the government bureaucracy and institutions in the cities (where the PDPA was strongest) and/or decentralize the government into the towns and villages of the countryside, where the majority of the population resided while expanding the PDPA’s social base.

Instead, Karmal took little action to counter the insurgency or strengthen the government. Karmal spoke at length about strengthening the government in both the cities and rural areas, in particular, calling repeatedly for party cadres to go to rural areas to recruit amongst the locals. However, it is noted both in Soviet documents and by Western sources that Karmal did very little. A month after he came to power, according to Anthony Giustozzi, “[Soviet advisors] wrote a letter to their own head complaining that Karmal was doing nothing to meet the expectations of the population; they feared a real civil war could begin in two or three months if nothing was done.

Karmal promised a new constitution, issuing a temporary constitution in the interim called, “The Basic Principles of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.” In fact, a constitution was not actually drafted until 1987, after he had been forced out of office by

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the Soviets. Atremy Kalinovsky, a scholar studying the role of Soviet advisors during the war, similarly reports: “The Afghanistan [Politburo] Commission presented a plan of action to the Politburo at the end of January 1980…With time, and prodding from Soviet advisors, these measures were introduced by Karmal’s government, although with limited success. These efforts were generally half-hearted…”

To this point, Soviet advisors often complained of having to do the work of administering the country. According to Giustozzi, “Resolutions, decrees, and directives numbered 17,251 by 22 August 1985. It was estimated that 50-80% of the time of officials at various levels in the capital and in the provinces was wasted in examining paperwork. This would later expose Karmal to the Soviet accusation of having substituted political work at the centre and in the provinces with paper production.”

Rather than focusing on governance, Karmal instead sought to strengthen his power base. The Soviets, upon installing him as President of the DRA, had forced him to form a government that included Khalqis. Once he was in power, “Karmal began to edge out Khalqis, even executing some of Amin’s associates.” As early as 1981, the military leadership recognized this problem, with the senior commanders of Soviet forces in Afghanistan stating that the DRA leadership was not making a “coordinated effort” to bring broad segments of the population to the side of the government.

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131 Giustozzi, p. 55.
The political and government leadership of the DRA is not involved in solving this pressing problem in real earnest in full measure; it mainly operates at the highest levels and the rebels [operate] among the populace. As before, in all the political life of the country and also in the resolution of military and other problems a policy is being followed of achieving narrow factional goals (removal of Khalqis)...[Victory] is only possible if the Party is united and has [close] ties with the people, which is not borne out in practice.\textsuperscript{133}

The report goes on to note that Parcham members, led by Karmal, have been actively seeking to increase the strength of their own faction, as well as remove Khalq officials from power:

Moreover, in recent months the actions of the CC PDPA leadership from the former “Parcham” wing are characterized as a blatant attempt to increase the numbers of its supporters by any means... The attempt to change the balance of power in the Party in favor of “Parcham” is leading to unscrupulous acceptance in Party provincial and district. Party organizations which...permits [people] personally devoted to individual Parchamists to be enrolled on a mass basis as members and candidate members... Representatives of the former Parcham wing are, as a rule, appointed to leading Party and administrative positions in place of workers from the former “Khalqi” wing. Thus the governors of the provinces of Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Parwan have been replaced by Parchamists... The Afghan political leadership is completely satisfied with such a state of affairs and it is trying to prolong it as much as possible, meanwhile solving its narrow factional problems of defeating political opponents, creating a Parchamist Party, but shifting the fight against the counterrevolution in the country completely onto the 40th Army, and not the DRA VS, SGI, and MVD.\textsuperscript{134} (Emphasis added)

Indeed, between 1980-1985, the chief activity of Karmal would be to build up his political power, with the Soviet Deputy Defense Minister noting in 1983 that,

…factional warfare continues in the PDPA....All the main leadership posts in the CC PDPA are held at the present time by former Parchamists. The leadership in the provinces, districts, and rural districts has also been given mainly to [Parcham]….One can say that the attitudes regarding the problems of the further

\textsuperscript{133} M. Mayorov, V. Cheremnykh, V. Rodin, V. Samoylenko, and Yu. Maksimov, May 1981 Report of Military Leaders To D.F. Ustinov, Cold War International History Project: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan Collection,
http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034D1E4-96B6-175C-91DAD2D6121A1441&sort=Collection&item=Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
Parchamization in the Party issue from Cde. Babrak Karmal…The intra-Party conflict remains the main hindrance in the process of stabilizing the situation in the country. The main efforts of the leadership level of the Party as before are expended on intra-Party warfare, and not for the cause.135

The only reason a complete purge of Khalq did not take place was the Soviets expressly forbid Karmal from doing so.136 It also helped that the Khalqs still retained a majority membership in the PDPA, with the majority of senior Army officers belonging to Khalq, and the vast majority of police were as well.137 Nevertheless, Karmal continued to attempt to purge Khalq, telling Soviet advisors in 1984, “As long as you keep my hands bound and do not let me deal with the Khalq faction, there will be no unity in the PDPA and the government cannot become strong…They tortured us and killed us. They still hate us! They are the enemies of the party!”138

A final indicator of Karmal’s method of governing is provided by Gilles Dorronsoro who notes that Karmal governed with the help of a small group of people connected to him through familial ties. These included his mistress, Anahita Ratezbad, and a member of the Politburo; Nur Ahmad Nur, a Politburo member also married to a daughter of Anahita; Shah Muhammad Dost, whose daughter, the foreign minister of the DRA, whose daughter had married one of Karmal’s brothers; and General Sadiqi and General Wakil, who were his cousins.139 In short, he followed a policy of appointing to positions of

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137 Giustozzi (2000), p. 82.
139 Dorronsoro, p. 174.
power those who were already connected to him through family ties, thus further centralizing power around himself.

A further example can be found in his appointments to head the Ministry of Defense. Upon taking office, he appointed General Rafi, a Parchami Pashtun, as Minister of Defense. Rafi was forced from his position due to his lack of control over the Khalq officers who populated the Army. Karmal then replaced him in 1982 with General Qadir, a Parchami with his own following amongst military personnel. However, since Qadir was a Tajik, and the majority of the Army officer corps (as well as Khalq members) were Pashtun, this left him in a weak position, dependent on Karmal for support.140

Based on these reports, it seems likely that Karmal gave greater attention to centralizing power around himself at the expense of fighting the mujahideen insurgency—specifically through the expansion of his faction’s base and the use of patronage to draw others to him. Throughout the period of his rule, Parcham membership in the PDPA steadily increased— but only in the cities, where the government had control, often because of the efforts of Soviet forces. The degree to which Karmal managed to centralize this power, however, was exceeded by his successor, Mohammad Najibullah.

Mohammad Najibullah—President of Afghanistan, 1986—1992

Mohammad Najibullah originally came to prominence through his appointment by the Soviet Union to head the DRA’s intelligence service, KhAD. KhAD was originally

established by Karmal as a counter-balance to the overwhelming presence of Khalq members in the Ministry of Interior, which was headed by the Khalq leader Sayed Gulabzoi and commanded the national police. KhAD was composed almost entirely of Parcham members, which accounted for 90% of PDPA members in that organization.\footnote{Giustozzi, p. 82.} KhAD assumed from the Ministry of Interior the dual jobs of infiltrating the mujahideen and ensuring loyalty to the Party within areas of PDPA control. KhAD, due in part to heavy investment by the KGB, quickly became, “the most important and successful institution of the new regime.”\footnote{Rubin (2002), p. 133.} As a result of Najibullah’s role as leadership of KhAD, he had strong ties to the KGB. In addition, his support for the policies the Gorbachev government in Moscow was pursuing in Afghanistan also inclined the Soviet leadership toward him. As a result, when the Soviet Politburo finally decided to force Karmal to step down as President of the DRA - as a result of the lack of progress made by Karmal - Najibullah was chosen to succeed him.\footnote{Giustozzi, p. 154.} A Pashtun born in the border province of Paktya and married into the traditional ruling tribe of Afghanistan, the Muhammadzai, Najibullah was seen as more legitimate than Karmal, and was also more acceptable to Pashtuns.\footnote{Dorronsoro, p. 193.}

Najibullah came to power, however, without a strong political base. His support primarily derived from KhAD, which was elevated to a cabinet-level ministry in 1986,
and from certain eastern Pashtun tribes. Most of the Parcham faction did not support his ascent to power, and instead supported Karmal.145

This lack of support can be observed from a Soviet report on the PDPA Party conference in Kabul in October 1987. At this conference, the report describes that a number of Karmal supporters in several cases caused a “serious complication of the work of the conferences.”146 Moreover, Karmal and his mistress Anahita Ratebzad, a key supporter whom Najibullah had also forced from power, were both elected near-unanimously by conference delegates to represent them. The Soviets had to step in and force the delegates to change their views and annulled the voting results.147 Notably, this event took place after Karmal had been exiled to Moscow, and was no longer even in the country.148

To consolidate his power, Najibullah steadily centralized power both around himself and through the office of the President. Faced with a small political base, and opposed by the majority of his own party, the Parchamists, he sought to both play on the antagonisms between Parcham and Khalq members.

First, he split the PDPA into nine identifiably separate factions, reducing the influence of any single faction.149

147 Ibid.
Second, he appointed key members of his personal circle, including family and those he had established a professional relationship with at KhAD, to positions of power. Specifically, he appointed his deputy, Gholam Yaqubi, to the Central Committee, and his ally Suleiman Laeq, as an alternate member of the Central Committee. This is a policy Najibullah pursued throughout his tenure; indeed the GRU file (Soviet Military Intelligence) notes, “He is inclined to select colleagues not for their professional qualities but for their personal devotion to him, predominantly relatives and fellow-villagers.” He also further increased his support by packing the key administrative body of the PDPA, the Central Committee, with his supporters, doubling the committee’s size.

Third, Najibullah purged those members of Parcham that he could. In the words of two historians, “Najibullah’s tenure was, indeed, marked by the systematic removal of all other people of influence within the PDPA.” He purged four major Karmal supporters from the politburo between August and November 1986 alone. He further reduced the opposition by convincing the Soviet Politburo to force Karmal to leave the country for Russia.

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150 Dorronsoro, p. 194.
152 Bradsher, p. 162.
153 Halliday and Tanin, p. 1368.
Fourth, Najibullah attempted to bypass and balance the power of Khalq by creating a private army of militiamen, under the control of KhAD.\textsuperscript{154} This action dovetailed with the policy of National Reconciliation that the USSR encouraged him to pursue.

Fifth, complementing these efforts at centralization, Najibullah developed a “Special President’s Guard,” consisting of several divisions, composed of loyal members of KhAD, among others, effectively providing him with a personal military force.

Additionally, through a new constitution which he had written in 1988, Najibullah concentrated more powers into the Office of the President: “He was supreme commander of the armed forces, approved all laws, convened ‘when so required’ a cabinet that was responsible to him, approved appointments and pensions for judges, senior officials, and military officers, declared emergencies and mobilizations…and generally dominated everything.”\textsuperscript{155} Indeed, Donnesoro notes that he was in fact forced to take this action because he was increasingly politically isolated, due to the fact that Khalq and Parcham members continued to persist in undermining and resisting his rule.\textsuperscript{156}

Finally, Najibullah was able to tell the Soviet leadership what they wished to hear. Gorbachev and the Politburo had arrived at the conclusion by November 1986 that no matter what, the USSR needed to withdraw its troops over the next two years.\textsuperscript{157} Najibullah, knowing that the Soviets had pressured Karmal for over a year to initiate a program of National Reconciliation, proposed taking that step, thereby gaining their

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{156} Dorronsoro, p. 194.
support. This support gave him authority, at least for his first year in office, to make personnel changes (i.e. remove Khalq and Parcham members and appoint his own supporters) as he saw fit.

As stated before, National Reconciliation would call for offering the mujahideen the ability to “reconcile” with the government, offering them positions of power within the DRA. No longer would the PDPA be the only Party in government; instead there would be a multiparty system. National Reconciliation also called for holding elections at the village and district levels, which would then elect representatives to a parliament. By holding these elections, it was thought, the DRA would gain a broader base among the populace.

In some ways, the resulting situation presented a return to the fifteen years prior, when a King ruled Afghanistan, there was little government presence outside the cities, and the King dealt with the various tribes/warlords through patronage, and grants of autonomy. Importantly, the creation of these militia gave Najibullah a means by which to counter the Khalq-dominated army; given that control over the militia (such as it was) was exercised by KhAD, control effectively ran through the President’s office.

However, like Karmal, Najibullah was unwilling to relinquish a substantial amount of power. The only positions offered to the mujahideen were non-defense related posts. The Ministry of Defense, the Office of the President, the intelligence services, and the Ministry of Interior, would all either be kept under direct PDPA control, or would have

158 Ibid, p. 238-239.
the preponderance of the bureaucracy controlled by the PDPA. The result was that the mujahideen rejected the policy of National Reconciliation, and Najibullah, seeing how it upset the entirety of the PDPA - both Khalq and Parcham factions opposed it - did not pursue it further. Thus, Gorbachev remarked in a May 1987 Politburo meeting, “But we have already told Najib to do everything himself and not run to us for advice. He sees that a national reconciliation will not be reached, yet he does nothing. This is typical Karmalism."

Thus, Najibullah never pursued a real coalition government, despite constant Soviet urging. Instead, he continued to centralize power around himself; when he rejected a plan for the defense of Kabul proposed by Khalq leader Gulabzoi, General Varennikov reported, “This incident at the Supreme High Command meeting again is evidence of the mistrust displayed by the President toward one of the leaders of the Khalqi wing of the PDPA and an attempt to limit his influence and power.”

Finally, this tendency to centralize power in an individual, rather than in an institution, can be seen by Najibullah’s management of KhAD. Here again, Najibullah appointed to key positions people with whom he had personal ties. According to Gilles Dorronsoro, “On the evidence of known cases, his family and professional networks…seem to have been crucial.”

162 Dorronsoro, p. 178.
It therefore appears that Najibullah sought to centralize power around himself. He attempted to do so through the creation of a personal patronage network, whereby he would appoint people close to him to positions of power. In this calculus, he would be able to rely on them when they in turn began to acquire power. He also made use of what Barnett Rubin refers to as a brokerage system, whereby the state paid leaders to supply troops from their supporters.\textsuperscript{163} Again however, this centralization of power did not strengthen bureaucratic institutions, with the exception of KhAD, which became more powerful. Both the Ministry of Interior and the DRA Army continued to suffer from high desertion rates, as well as poor leadership. At the same time, government services did not seem to improve during his time in office. By 1988, 84% of government expenditure was spent on routine programs, while only 16% was allotted to development; moreover, only 30% of tax revenue was derived from domestic taxes—the rest derived from Soviet aid or the government borrowing from its central bank.\textsuperscript{164}

**US-Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Case Study: Hamid Karzai**

*Hamid Karzai—President of Afghanistan, 2001—Present*

Hamid Karzai originally came to prominence as the sole Pashtun leader in southern Afghanistan willing to take on the Taliban. Born in 1957, he was the son of the leader of the powerful Popalzai tribe in Kandahar. After attending primary school in Kandahar, he attended high school in Kabul, and just before the invasion of the Soviet Union, gained

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, p. 113.
admission to a college in northern India.\textsuperscript{165} Finishing his degree in 1983, he then sought to contribute to the \textit{jihad} through political dealings in Pakistan. Except for a period of two years (1992-1993) between 1983—2001, he lived in Pakistan. When his father was killed in 1999, the Popalzai tribe chose him as the new tribal chief. When the US invasion commenced in the fall of 2001, he appeared to be a natural choice to be leader of Afghanistan: a Pashtun tribal leader, with a secular Western education.\textsuperscript{166}

Similar to Karmal and Najibullah, Karzai came to power with a weak political base. In the first years of Coalition operations he was often termed the “mayor of Kabul,” because it was said his decisions did not reach beyond that city. Karzai was the political leader the US backed in Afghanistan. The warlords, however, who had been supported by the US during the drive to topple the Taliban regime (and afterward, to hunt for Al-Qaeda) commanded thousands of militiamen, giving them control over large areas of territory. Karzai deftly maneuvered to bring several of the largest warlords into the government, and through a United Nations initiative known as the Disarmament, Demilitarization, and Rehabilitation (DDR) Program, that sought to either disarm the militias of a number of powerful warlords or split the warlords from their militias.\textsuperscript{167} The result was that warlords were increasingly disarmed, co-opted, or removed from positions of power.

Giustozzi offers an example of this through his study of one of the key warlords, Marshal Fahim. Fahim, the leader of the Northern Alliance, the group of anti-Taliban warlords the

\textsuperscript{165} Rashid, \textit{Descent into Chaos}, p. 6.


\textsuperscript{167} Ibid, p. 6-8.
US supported in “Operation: Enduring Freedom,” was given the position of Minister of Defense. Other Northern Alliance warlords were given various positions in the ministries of Interior, Defense, the National Directorate of Security (the Afghan Intelligence Service). By making Fahim responsible for the institution of MoD, Fahim was seen as responsible when he failed to stop DDR from being implemented, thus cutting him off from the militias based outside Kabul.\footnote{Antonio Giustozzi, \textit{Empires of Mud}, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 191}

However, as Giustozzi goes on to note, “Karzai and his tribal allies were not so much interested in institution-building as in the centralization of patronage…This did not translate in a new wave of appointments favorable to warlords, but increasingly in the direct cooptation of members of the military class by the central government, i.e. Karzai’s circle, thereby bypassing the warlords.\footnote{Ibid, p. 96}.”

Describing Karzai as centralizing power around himself may be misleading, as “centralize” could suggest permanence. In this instance, it may be more accurate to describe Karzai’s actions as centralizing patronage networks through him. Indeed, Karzai and his family have demonstrated this tendency repeatedly over the past eight years, which can be seen in part by how he rotates people among provincial governor posts.

As an example, Gul Agha Sherzai, the provincial governor of Kandahar, was long seen as one of the most corrupt governors in Afghanistan. Sherzai’s militia manned tolls throughout Kandahar City, and reportedly gained $1 million per week from illegal taxes

\footnote{Antonio Giustozzi, \textit{Empires of Mud}, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 191}
and the opium trade. In 2003 he was removed from governorship of Kandhar City, yet much of his influence still remained—his replacement was a fellow tribesmen and confidant, Yusuf Pashtun. Sherzai, meanwhile, became Ministry of Urban Development. In 2004, he became governor of Nangahar province, where he has remained to the present. Despite continued rumors of corruption, and a continued lack of development of institutionalized governance in Nangarhar, Sherzai remained in power largely because he is the leader of the Barakzai tribe, the other powerful tribe in Kandahar.

Other governors have also been rotated through positions. Asadullah Wafa, was first governor of Paktika province in southeastern Afghanistan from 2004—2005. In 2005 he became governor of Kunar province. A year later, in 2006, he became governor of Helmand province in the south, until he was forced out in 2008 amid rumors of corruption. Afterward he became a special assistant to Karzai.

Today, it is reported that Karzai relies on a network of warlords and other notables to maintain power. Nor has this centralization of patronage been confined to Karzai himself. In Kandahar City, Karzai’s half-brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, has become effectively the local strongman of the province. He was head of the Kandahar shura, a parallel governance structure to the provincial governance structure between 2002—

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172 Doug Sanders, “Corruption Eats Away at Afghan Government.”
2005. In 2005, he was elected to the Provincial Council of Kandahar as head of the provincial council, and reportedly controls the province. Of the 16 other members of the council, seven are reported to be close allies.\textsuperscript{175}

In summary, leaders in both the Soviet era and today have clearly demonstrated a preference for centralizing power around themselves as individuals, and not in their position. This tendency has not strictly been limited to the top leadership level; it extends to the level of governors, as can be seen in the case of Gul Agha Sherzai.

Hamid Karzai himself articulates one rationale for this tendency. Writing in 1988, Karzai stated that,

“The introduction of democracy in the absence of legal political parties, without which a healthy growth of parliamentary democracy is hard to achieve, smoothed the way for tribal leaders to enter into national politics. The fact that they could influence government decision-making through the \textit{Wolesi Jirga} increased their tribal and central power to the detriment of the endeavors for a strong central government.”\textsuperscript{176}

One could infer from this that without political parties, in a democracy where political figures run as independents, they have no means except patronage networks to achieve some permanence of power. Once a political figure arrives in the capital, irrespective of whether they are from a powerful tribe, the power of that single tribe may prove insignificant in comparison with other politicians who have tribal backing.

\textsuperscript{175} Canadian Defense Intelligence Liaison Office, “District Assessment, Kandahar City, Kandahar Province,” (Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, November 2009), p. 35-36.
Therefore, for an official to expand his power meaningfully, he must either dispense patronage, placing tribesmen in positions by which they can themselves centralize power, thereby providing the him a source of power on which to rely, or alternatively, or form alliances with people outside his own tribe by granting some positions and power, to increase their dependence.

Karzai, in his writing, outlines a practice similar to the latter, stating that educated elites of tribes lost their influence over their tribes because they, “rarely preserved any social or political values from them...As a result, they lost their tribal leverage with the masses.” Furthermore, “Since their power did not originate from the masses, their dependence on the central authority for promotion or appointment to high civil, diplomatic, and military posts became absolute.” (Emphasis added)

Because institutions in Afghanistan have little to no power invested in their structures, the result is often that institutions are not used not to provide services, but to provide individuals with a revenue stream.

Researchers Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah provide an example of this process. During the Soviet war in Afghanistan, a man named Allah Noor living in Helmand became involved in government militias through a relative. One of his brothers had been a close associate of President Taraki, and was appointed chief administrator of Helmand province. Using his brother’s connections, Allah Noor soon became first chief driver in

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177 Ibid, p. 34-35.
the transport department, which granted him the opportunity to embezzle money. Using this, he was then able to organize a tribal militia and expand his power base.¹⁷捌

An important lesson to be drawn from these case studies is that, in the presence of nearly-unlimited external resources – as noted, a commonality in both situations is that neither Karzai nor the PDPA believed their foreign supporters would leave – the principal motivation of Afghan leaders is to expand one’s own power, most commonly through patronage networks—and not through the strengthening of government institutions.

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