

THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: THREE KEY DECISIONS THAT SHAPED THE 40TH ARMY'S OPERATIONAL WITHDRAWAL PLAN

A Monograph

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ABSTRACT

THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: THREE KEY DECISIONS THAT SHAPED THE 40TH ARMY'S OPERATIONAL WITHDRAWAL PLAN, by MAJ Edward L. Arntson III, 57 pages.

The accounts of why the Soviet Union struggled in Afghanistan are too numerous to count. This monograph examines the key decisions made by Mikhail Gorbachev and his political leaders, namely Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, leading up to and during the withdrawal from Afghanistan—and the subsequent impact those decisions had on the 40th Army's operational withdrawal plan. This study also analyzes the motives underlying Gorbachev's and Shevardnadze's decisions and offers an analysis of the strategic and political contexts surrounding each decision—factors not well known or understood within the U.S. Army. This study focuses on Gorbachev and his struggle to extricate the Soviet Union from a conflict that he reluctantly inherited, while still trying to maintain Soviet prestige and honor. The decisions Gorbachev made from 1986-1989, several of which conflicted with his military leadership, had a significant impact on the course of the 40th Army's withdrawal plan.

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INTRODUCTION

“First, therefore, it is clear that war should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy.”¹ The preceding quote by Carl Von Clausewitz instructs the military professional to never consider war in a vacuum—or simply war for its own sake. The strategic context of war shapes the environment for the operational artist. Strategic choices influence operational decisions for commanders and their staffs. It is with this backdrop that the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from Afghanistan must be analyzed. How did strategic decisions by Mikhail Gorbachev, heavily influenced by his “new political thinking,” impact the 40th Army’s operational withdrawal plan from Afghanistan? Additionally, how did political debates between the civilian and military leadership over reform influence the withdrawal?

What follows is the story of Mikhail Gorbachev and his struggle to disengage the Soviet Union from a conflict that he reluctantly inherited from the previous Soviet leadership. This story contains violence, intrigue, meetings between world leaders, pride, and frustration. It is also a story not well known within the United States Army. The narrative that the introduction of the Stinger missile into Afghanistan forced the withdrawal of the Soviet Union is wholly false. This is the story of a leader trying to extricate his country from a situation that had grown untenable—while still trying to maintain Soviet prestige and honor. Strategic decisions made by Gorbachev and his advisers between 1986-1989 made a significant impact on the course of the Soviet operational withdrawal plan from Afghanistan.

¹Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 88.

When Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in March 1985, the Soviet Union had been at war in Afghanistan for five years. Gorbachev reframed the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan, and openly wondered if Soviet efforts were worth the considerable cost in both human lives and international prestige. Initially, however, Gorbachev allowed the military plans that were already in motion to continue. Publicly, he did not want to abruptly change course in Afghanistan, but privately, Gorbachev was already seeking a way out. In April of 1985, after only one month in power, he ordered a review of the Soviet Union's policy on Afghanistan.²

By October 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev knew that he wanted the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. Soviet objectives, set in 1979, to install a new leader, stabilize the government and enable Afghanistan's Army to fight a low-level insurgency had failed. Therefore, Gorbachev and the Politburo made a decision in principle to withdraw from Afghanistan. In a speech before the politburo in February 1986, Gorbachev called the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan a "bleeding wound," acknowledging the mounting difficulties there.³ Three years later, in February 1989, the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan was complete.

The withdrawal was delayed because Mikhail Gorbachev made three decisions. First, following Mohammed Najibullah's appointment as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in May 1986, Gorbachev encouraged

²Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 187.

³Mikhail Gorbachev, "Gorbachev Opens 27th Party Congress," eds. Robert S. Ehlers and Frederick C. Schulze, trans. Bruce Collins, Deborah Hunter, and Erik Carlson, *Current Digest of Soviet Press* 38, no. 8 (26 March 1986): 29.

him to embrace a policy of national reconciliation in order to broaden his political base. This policy was not successful and deepened the Soviet Union's involvement just as they were trying to withdraw. Second, Gorbachev made a unilateral announcement in February 1988 that the withdrawal would begin in May of the same year. This announcement caused the 40th Army, the lead Soviet Army headquarters in Afghanistan, to accelerate its withdrawal plans.

The third reason that the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan was delayed was because Gorbachev placed too much trust in his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, and allowed him to dominate the Soviet Union's Afghanistan policy. President Najibullah manipulated his relationship with Shevardnadze in an effort to ensure Soviet forces stayed as long as possible in Afghanistan. For his part, Shevardnadze allowed his personal relationship with Najibullah to skew his views on Afghanistan and ultimately gain primacy in his decision-making process during the withdrawal. Shevardnadze pressed Gorbachev for a slower pace of withdrawal and recommended that the Soviet Union leave a stay-behind force to assist Najibullah—both of which were critical factors for Soviet Army planners until the final weeks of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan.

Each of these strategic decisions had an impact on the operational withdrawal plan from Afghanistan. Operational level planners at the 40th Army headquarters in Kabul were forced to adapt the plan after each of these decisions. Despite the semi-fluid political environment surrounding the withdrawal, the 40th Army executed a disciplined, well-organized withdrawal

from Afghanistan.⁴ Their plan, however, was not without flaws and warrants further examination. The elements of operational art provide a sound baseline to analyze their withdrawal plan.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

In September 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan. Elements of the CIA entered the country days after the attacks on 11 September, and were followed shortly thereafter by Special Operations Forces. The United States did not have any military or government presence in Afghanistan prior to September 2001; it had to be established by force. The circumstances under which the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan in December 1979 were quite different. The Soviet Union did not “invade” Afghanistan in December 1979; rather, its military entered the country on a standing request from a friendly government to help stabilize a political situation that had grown untenable to the Soviet Union’s political leadership. When the “limited contingent” of Soviet forces entered Afghanistan that December, the Soviet Union already had hundreds of political and military advisers serving in Afghanistan.⁵

The decision to deploy a limited contingent of Soviet forces inside Afghanistan was rooted in events that began twenty months earlier. In April 1978, the Communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) executed a military coup, led by Hafizullah Amin, against the government of President Mohammed Daud. President Daud was killed during the coup, and a revolutionary council installed Nur Mohamed Taraki as the new prime minister and

⁴Lester W. Grau, “Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 2 (13 June 2007): 235-261.

⁵Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 19.

president of Afghanistan.⁶ Even though the Communist Party engineered the coup in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union was stunned.⁷ The Soviet Union had enjoyed a cordial relationship with President Daud's government for the last five years, and now the situation had dramatically changed. The Soviet Union struggled to adjust to the new reality in Afghanistan—a reality where the Soviet Union exerted no influence over Afghan affairs.⁸

Soviet hurt feelings aside, Taraki began a brutal reign as President of Afghanistan. Generals, clerical leaders, and others loyal to former President Daud were executed almost immediately after Taraki claimed power. In spite of the bloodshed, Taraki and his newly-formed government advocated for women's liberation and reforms in education for young girls.⁹ Attempted reforms, however, were muffled by the shrieks of a terrified population that began to come unglued. As civil unrest grew, the Soviet Union's commitment to Afghanistan was tested.¹⁰

On 15 March 1979, the population in Herat, led by mid-level Afghan Army officers, revolted. Mob violence swept through the city, and Afghan officials, Soviet advisers, and their families were murdered.¹¹ Soviet leaders in Moscow immediately considered military

⁶Ibid., 17. Many believed that the PDPA received support and backing from the Soviet KGB.

⁷Recent evidence indicates that the Soviet Union was just as surprised as the United States about the coup. For many years, key leaders in the Carter and Reagan administrations believed that the Soviet Union engineered the coup, when in fact they did not.

⁸Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47-48.

⁹Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 18.

¹⁰Braithwaite, 43-44.

¹¹Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 19.

intervention. Military intervention, however, was not the best strategic option for the Soviet Union at the time. Despite doubts about their own capabilities, the Afghan Army pacified Herat within a week of the uprising. Order had been restored, but the signs of a country on the verge of fracture were clearly present.¹²

While direct military intervention at the time was ruled out by the Politburo, the Soviet Union decided to increase its military and political adviser presence in Afghanistan. Five hundred advisers from the Ministry of Defense and the KGB reinforced the five hundred and fifty already present. The USSR also provided economic and financial assistance to the Afghan government, and mobilized two Soviet divisions for deployment to the border of Afghanistan.¹³ Soviet interest climbed to new levels following the uprising in Herat, but the political leaders were not ready to push the panic button just yet.

Following the deployment of more advisers, the Soviet Ministry of Defense began to increase its military capability inside of Afghanistan. Very quietly, the Soviet Union stood up the “Muslim Battalion,” deployed two small Spetsnaz detachments into Afghanistan, and sent an airborne battalion to protect Soviet transport aircraft and their crews based in Bagram.¹⁴ With two divisions mobilized for deployment to the border, and the increase in military capabilities in and

¹²Ibid.

¹³Braithwaite, 49.

¹⁴Braithwaite, 56. The “Muslim Battalion” was a unit comprised of Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen Soldiers who looked like many of the Afghans across the border, and spoke the same languages. This battalion was based in Tashkent, Turkmenistan. Spetsnaz is the umbrella term for Soviet special operations troops that conduct raids, deal with hostage situations and other sensitive operations. The United States was aware of the Soviet battalion’s deployment to Bagram in June 1979, but determined that there was no hostile intent behind the move, and therefore took no action against the Soviets.

around Afghanistan, the Soviet Union slowly prepared for what they viewed as inevitable – a military solution to their problems in Afghanistan.¹⁵

Mohamed Taraki visited Moscow in September 1979. He had been in power for 15 months, and despite the support of Leonid Brezhnev, there were concerns for Taraki's safety. Both Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB, warned Taraki that Hafizullah Amin, his partner in last April's revolution, planned to kill him.¹⁶ Taraki returned to Afghanistan and immediately acted on the information provided by Brezhnev and Andropov. His attempted arrest of Amin, however, failed. Not only did it fail, forces loyal to Amin subsequently arrested Taraki. After holding Taraki prisoner for several weeks, Amin ordered the death of his revolutionary partner.¹⁷

The death of Taraki was the “crucial turning point in the Soviet decision making process.” Brezhnev, in particular, took the death of Taraki very hard.¹⁸ Despite the presence of their military and political advisers, the Soviet Union had been incapable of stopping Amin from seizing power in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union was embarrassed, and Amin added more fuel to

¹⁵Ibid., 57. It is important to note that Taraki's government requested, on multiple occasions, an increase in Soviet military capability inside of Afghanistan. The Afghan government wanted armored helicopters, Soviet infantry divisions, as well as supplies to support the increased fighting with the population. The Soviets rebuffed these requests multiple times, but started to slowly increase their presence in Afghanistan during the summer of 1979. Braithwaite is critical of the Soviets on the point of military intervention. He says that they could not think of a better alternative.

¹⁶Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 20. Brezhnev was the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union from 1964 until he died in 1982.

¹⁷Braithwaite, 73.

¹⁸Braithwaite, 73.

the fire. He expelled the Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan and refused to adhere to Soviet requests on the repression of PDPA members. Amin not only continued the brutal tactics employed by his predecessor, he ramped them up. Amin placed a picture of Joseph Stalin in his office and planned to build socialism in a backward country by brute force.¹⁹

The stage was now set for Soviet military intervention. The Soviet Union had lost control of the situation in Afghanistan, and they wanted to get it back. Amin became a non-pliable head of state, and the situation deteriorated rapidly inside of Afghanistan. Military units revolted, and there were reports that Amin secretly met with the CIA.²⁰ Yuri Andropov, as the head of the KGB, played up the angle that Amin was an agent of the United States during discussions amongst the senior political leaders. Potential US interests in Afghanistan aside, Brezhnev and his key leaders made the decision to intervene with military force on 8 December 1979. On 12 December, the Politburo met and approved the decision.²¹

On 27 December 1979, the Soviet Army executed *Operation Storm-333*. Elements of the Muslim Battalion and Spetsnaz troops stormed the Presidential Palace and killed Hafizullah Amin. The operation took forty-three minutes and the Soviets suffered light casualties.²² The

¹⁹Ibid., 76.

²⁰Ibid., 78. Braithwaite argues that Soviet fears about Amin being recruited by the CIA are likely overblown, but during the Cold War, it was not unreasonable for the Soviets to think this. Additionally, in November 1979, Americans were taken hostage at the Iranian embassy in Tehran. Braithwaite argues that the US may have had plans to use Afghanistan as a new basing point for US military assets.

²¹Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 23. After initial advocating for no military intervention, once Andropov learned of U.S. aid to the mujahedeen, he strongly advocated for intervention. He did not want a demonstration of U.S. aggression to go unchecked on their southern border.

²²Braithwaite, 96-98.

initial Soviet plan called for a change in Afghan leadership, to garrison the cities, protect key bases, and enable the Afghan Army to fight a low-level insurgency. The Soviets installed Babrak Karmal as the new leader, and planned to be out of Afghanistan in a few months.²³

The decision to use military force in Afghanistan, however, was not unanimous—especially amongst the Soviet military’s senior leadership. General Nikolai Ogarkov, speaking on behalf of the General Staff, advocated against the use of military force arguing that the Afghans should handle their own internal affairs and that Soviet troops did not understand Afghanistan very well, which would present problems during operations. He also noted that the global community—especially the United States—would not understand Soviet intentions. Ogarkov made this final appeal on 10 December, and was ignored by the Politburo.²⁴ General Ogarkov’s informed dissent on the use of military force in Afghanistan foreshadowed the tension between military and political leaders throughout the Soviet Union’s involvement in Afghanistan.

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION—A YEAR LOST

Our strategic goal is to complete this war and pull forces out in one or, at most, two years.

—Mikhail Gorbachev, 13 November 1986 Politburo Session

²³Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 24. Babrak Karmal was one of the original revolutionaries when Taraki and Amin came to power. He was initially installed as Taraki’s deputy, but later went into diplomatic exile and served as the Afghan ambassador to Czechoslovakia during Taraki and Amin’s reign.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 22.

Of all the key decisions that Mikhail Gorbachev made between 1986-1989, the decision to embrace National Reconciliation was the most important, because in doing so, he wasted a full year in Afghanistan with little to show for his efforts.

In May 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Barbak Karmal with Mohammed Najibullah as the head of the PDPA, effectively consolidating power with “his guy” as the leader of Afghanistan. The Soviet political leadership viewed Karmal as ineffective and lazy. Najibullah, on the other hand, was disciplined, conscientious, and driven. Najibullah was younger than Karmal and had recently served as the head of the secret police.²⁵ The political leadership of the Soviet Union viewed the installation of Najibullah as a step forward. While no political leader in Afghanistan was without faults, Gorbachev in particular thought that Najibullah’s energy and demonstrated leadership skills would make a difference in a country Gorbachev desperately wanted to depart.²⁶

Prior to Najibullah taking over as the head of the PDPA, a project called National Reconciliation began to take shape. The aim of National Reconciliation was to broaden the political base of the PDPA and form a coalition government with representatives from outside the Communist Party. Gorbachev viewed this process as essential to leaving a stable, functioning government in Afghanistan following the Soviet Union’s departure. Gorbachev thought that as

²⁵Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 96. One of the primary reasons that Najibullah had been selected to lead the PDPA was his demonstrated ability to establish links with Pashtun tribal leaders as head of the secret police.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 99.

long as the government in Afghanistan was not developed along Marxist lines, but rather reinforced through legitimate Afghan institutions with broad representation, it would survive.²⁷

National Reconciliation began in earnest in January 1987 with an official release from Najibullah's government that announced a cease-fire and invited his opponents to negotiate.²⁸ Not surprisingly, mujahedeen leaders did not immediately come down from the mountains to participate in roundtable discussions. In fact, the early period of National Reconciliation was marked by little activity despite the push from Najibullah's regime in Kabul. Cosmetic changes, such as removing the word "democratic" from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, did little to sway Najibullah's critics.²⁹

Despite the slow going at the start of National Reconciliation, Najibullah continued to try to win over mujahedeen commanders and build a small coalition. One of the mujahedeen commanders that Najibullah and the Soviets tried to win over was Ahmad Shah Massoud; the famous Tajik nicknamed the "Lion of the Panjshir Valley." Since Massoud was a Tajik and Najibullah a Pashtun, this would be a difficult task, but Massoud had negotiated previous cease-fire agreements with the Soviets. Massoud's cooperation in a new government was an important issue for Najibullah's regime given Massoud's reputation as a warrior and a politician. General Varennikov, the senior Soviet Ministry of Defense representative in Kabul, was able to open a

²⁷Ibid., 96.

²⁸Tom Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Analysis and Chronology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 71.

²⁹Jonathan Steele, *Ghosts of Afghanistan: The Haunted Battleground* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2011), 119.

line of communication between Massoud and Kabul in October 1987, but this soon broke down once the talks became public.³⁰

In addition to his efforts to reconcile with mujahedeen commanders, Najibullah also outlined several ministerial and governmental positions that would be opened to non-PDPA members. While Najibullah was not comfortable giving up control of any power, at the urging of Gorbachev he slowly gave up control of small portions of his government. Progress within the PDPA, however, proved even more difficult. Najibullah was forced to deal with divisions within his own party, particularly the faction of the PDPA that still supported recently ousted Barbak Karmal. Self-preservation became the primary motivation in Najibullah's new government as those with government posts became increasingly concerned with simply holding on to them, or passing them to family or tribal members.³¹

Gorbachev became increasingly frustrated with Najibullah's inability to move reforms forward within his government. He maintained that his goal was a friendly or neutral government in Afghanistan following the Soviet Union's departure, but even that seemed difficult to fathom in the middle of 1987. The Soviets wanted Najibullah's government to develop into an independent entity with less influence from the Soviet advisers. However, at each moment where

³⁰Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 104. Yulii Vorontsov, Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan from 1988-89, was heavily engaged in diplomatic talks with Massoud as well. If it weren't for a last minute, unplanned bombing of the Panjshir Valley, Vorontsov or Varennikov would have met with Massoud. The bombing was Najibullah's not-so-subtle way of undermining the negotiations with Massoud.

³¹Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 106.

the Soviet advisers felt that they should step back, the Afghans did not step up to firmly take the reins of their own government. Years of work by the Soviet advisers proved virtually fruitless.³²

In addition to disagreements within the Afghan PDPA, Gorbachev was forced to deal with disagreements within his own party over the way ahead in Afghanistan. Three opinions formed about the proper formation of the Afghan government. One position advocated a coalition led by the mujahedeen in which the PDPA was a junior partner, allowing the Soviet Union to still have a voice in Afghan affairs. Another position affirmed that the best way forward was to have a PDPA-dominated government to maintain maximum Soviet influence. The final position, supported by Shevardnadze, advocated for a coalition led by the PDPA but with sizeable influence from outside parties, including the mujahedeen commanders. Gorbachev thought the final option gave Afghanistan the best chance to succeed once the Soviets departed.³³

Despite his support for a coalition-led government by Najibullah and members of the PDPA, Gorbachev found that implementation on the ground in Afghanistan was even more difficult than he imagined for several reasons. First, Soviet military officers did not completely support the policy of National Reconciliation.³⁴ This should not have come as a surprise to Gorbachev and other Soviet political leaders. The Soviet Army had been fighting in Afghanistan for almost seven years by the time National Reconciliation became official. Many Soviet officers did not view participating in a political process as part of their role in Afghanistan. General

³²Braithwaite, 279.

³³Artemy Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy: The Geneva Accords and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Cold War History* 8, no. 3 (August 2008): 381-404.

³⁴Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 103.

Varennikov acknowledged that meetings between Soviet lower level commanders and local leaders stopped towards the middle of 1987, just when Gorbachev hoped National Reconciliation would be taking root.³⁵

The second reason that National Reconciliation started poorly was that the lower level cadre within the PDPA did not fully support the policy. Self-preservation dominated the thought process of these lower level leaders and they did not allocate the resources provided by the Soviets towards the proper objectives aimed at National Reconciliation.³⁶ Lastly, other than secret talks with Ahmad Shah Massoud, the mujahedeen commanders were not even remotely involved in the process. They rejected the offer for a cease-fire. In the view of the leading mujahedeen parties, known as the Peshawar Seven, their war against the Soviets would have been in vain if they conceded to a PDPA-led government.³⁷

In November 1987, Najibullah's government convened a grand council (Loya Jirga) to approve the country's new constitution. Parliamentary elections were scheduled for April 1988, and on the surface it appeared that Najibullah had made some progress in the face of significant obstacles. Najibullah's small gains, however, were not deeply rooted in his government and he did not have buy-in from any of the mujahedeen commanders in Peshawar.³⁸

³⁵Ibid., 103-104. In an email to the author, Rodric Braithwaite described Varrenikov as an "able and determined officer," as well as "intelligent and friendly, but vain." According to Braithwaite, vanity was perhaps the central criticism leveled against Varrenikov by journalists and others who interacted with him.

³⁶Ibid., 106-107.

³⁷Steele, 122. For a full discussion of the Peshawar Seven, see *Afghantsy*, 344-345.

³⁸Cordovez and Harrison, 252; Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos," 244-246; Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 105. In an effort to jump-start a stalled process, Najibullah's

Gorbachev wanted to leave Afghanistan almost as soon as he took office. He understood that the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan reduced its legitimacy within the international community and garnered him very little domestic political capital. It was also not cheap. In February 1987 alone, on the heels of National Reconciliation, the Soviet Union provided 950 million rubles in aid to Najibullah's government—the largest aid package the Soviet Union had ever provided to a single country.³⁹

The war in Afghanistan provided the Soviet Union with no benefits. Yet, at the end of 1986, a year after he said he wanted to leave Afghanistan, Gorbachev embarked on the policy of National Reconciliation. It sounded like a panacea to Gorbachev, but did his staff conduct a feasibility analysis prior to embracing this policy? The results of National Reconciliation suggest that Gorbachev and his political advisers did not, thereby wasting a full calendar year in Afghanistan.

An analysis of early Soviet involvement in Afghanistan suggested that the Afghan population did not appreciate - nor desire - a country under Communist rule. While Gorbachev and his advisers attempted to shade the language of how the coalition government would look, it did not resonate beyond diplomatic meetings in Kabul. The general unrest that existed when the

government passed a new law in the middle of 1987 that granted legal status to political parties that did not show hostile intentions towards Najibullah's government. This law, however, did little to entice the development of new political parties because of the sub text within the newly created law. Newly formed political parties did not have to share the same views as the PDPA, but they did have to swear allegiance to "strengthening the historical friendship with the USSR." The subtle message underlying this "reform" passed by the Najibullah government soured many from joining the political process.

³⁹Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 101.

Soviet Union entered the country in 1979 was still there. Additionally, a thorough analysis of the tribal differences that existed among the major mujahedeen leaders would have at least shown Gorbachev the steep, uphill climb his government faced when they undertook the policy of National Reconciliation.

In the summer of 1986, Gorbachev announced to the Politburo that the Soviet Union would begin its withdrawal later that summer. In June and July, six regiments withdrew from Afghanistan as an act of good faith to the international community. He wanted to demonstrate cooperation on the issue of Afghanistan.⁴⁰ However, just as he wanted to decrease the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan—he increased it by embracing the policy of National Reconciliation.

The bizarre part of this story is that in January 1987, Gorbachev admitted to the Politburo that the prospects of withdrawing from Afghanistan with honor were dwindling. Gorbachev said, “We could leave quickly, without worrying about the consequences, and blame everything on our predecessors. But that we cannot do. A million of our soldiers have passed through Afghanistan.

⁴⁰B. V. Gromov, 305. *Ogranichennyi Kontingent* (Moscow, Progress, 1994). According to General Gromov, this is when the withdrawal truly began. Additionally, notes transcribed from a June 26, 1986 Politburo session by Anatoly S. Chernyaev, one of Gorbachev's principal foreign policy advisors, indicate that this is when Gorbachev believed the withdrawal, in his mind, began. See also: Mikhail Gorbachev, “Gorbachev Accents Soviet Role in Asia,” eds. Robert S. Ehlers and Frederick C. Schulze, trans. Bruce Collins, Deborah Hunter, and Erik Carlson, *Current Digest of Soviet Press* 38, no. 30 (27 August 1986): 8, 32.

And it looks as if they did so in vain.”⁴¹ Despite his grim outlook, Gorbachev still pressed for the policy of National Reconciliation—even in the face of a gloomy report from his foreign minister.

In the same Politburo meeting, Shevardnadze reported on his recent trip to Kabul. He did not see encouraging signs of progress during his visit. “We went in without knowing anything at all about the psychology of the people, and that’s a fact. And everything we have done and are doing in Afghanistan is incompatible with the moral basis of our country.”⁴² Shevardnadze understood that the military situation, both for the Soviet Army and the Afghan Army, was not improving, and that the Soviet Union could not control the border with Pakistan, which further frustrated Soviet military efforts.⁴³

Inside Soviet Decision Making

With these factors staring Gorbachev and Shevardnadze in the face as the Soviet Union attempted to close out their involvement in Afghanistan, what else went into their thinking that led them to extend Soviet involvement? Two additional factors influenced Gorbachev and other Soviet policymakers’ thinking.

The first was that Soviet prestige and power were closely tied to the concept of Soviet loyalty to friends. Gorbachev’s subjective view of Soviet prestige not only influenced National Reconciliation, but was also a theme that undergirded the entire withdrawal. Gorbachev thought

⁴¹Braithwaite, 278. In a 13 November 1986 Politburo session, Gorbachev clearly stated that he wanted to be completely out of Afghanistan in two years. Embracing the policy of National Reconciliation did not support a Soviet withdrawal in two years from this meeting.

⁴²Braithwaite, 278.

⁴³Ibid., 278.

that a country that abandoned its allies during difficult times could not maintain its global influence. He also thought this sent a poor message to other Soviet allies such as Angola and South Africa. Gorbachev believed that individuals such as Amin and Karmal were expendable, but that entire governments were not. Gorbachev, despite the damage the Soviets had done there, still thought Afghanistan could be a long-term ally of the Soviet Union.⁴⁴

The other factor was that despite negative views expressed by members of the military, junior Soviet officials serving in Afghanistan had a tendency to over-accentuate positive developments in Afghanistan. There was an illusion of progress in Afghanistan, and for every negative report produced, there was a positive one to balance it out. Soviet political advisers in Afghanistan were happy to write reports about the progress that they were generating in various postings throughout the Afghan government. The general line of thought was that although significant problems still existed in Afghanistan, progress was being made, and that extending Soviet presence could eventually turn the tide.⁴⁵

In addition to Gorbachev's subjective view of Soviet honor and prestige, he also wanted to please the international community, specifically Pakistan, with a coalition-led government in

⁴⁴Artemy Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 46-73.

⁴⁵Kalinovsky, 71. "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan." Colonel Tsagolov, in a letter to the Politburo in August 1987, called the state of reporting on events in Afghanistan "dangerous." He said that it was important to remain objective and report what occurred, not what party officials desired to occur. He also said in the same letter that the PDPA was slowly moving towards its political death, which was not reversible. Colonel Tsagolov was a Soviet Army officer who held a Ph.D. He served in Afghanistan, and was later promoted to Major General. He called the idea of the mujahedeen commanders accepting the proposal of National Reconciliation a "groundless illusion."

Afghanistan. Pakistan had long supported the mujahedeen and its installation as some form of government in Afghanistan. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze thought they could convince Pakistan to accept the newly established government, even though it was dominated by the PDPA. Gorbachev, however, did not fully account for the fact that Pakistan was linked at the hip, policy-wise, with the United States. Any form of government that was PDPA-heavy was unacceptable to the United States, despite Pakistan's desires to see a more pluralistic government in Kabul.⁴⁶

Lastly, Gorbachev did not allow sufficient time for National Reconciliation to work. While the process may have been doomed from the start given the cultural and political context in Afghanistan, it certainly was not going to work in ten to twelve months. In a politburo meeting in May 1987, Gorbachev met with senior officials from Kabul, including General Varennikov. In this meeting, all members acknowledged that the Afghan Army was falling apart and that Najibullah was failing to get a grip on the National Reconciliation process.⁴⁷ It had only been five months. Najibullah had only been in power for one year. How realistic were the expectations of Gorbachev and his staff? If the prospects for success, and even just withdrawing honorably, were small in January, were they going to be that much greater in May? In October?

In the summer of 1987, reality set in for Gorbachev and his political leaders. No amount of hope, wishful thinking or smooth political rhetoric was going to allow a graceful exit from Afghanistan. Gorbachev met with Najibullah in July 1987 and emerged disappointed from their session of talks. Gorbachev knew that a pluralistic, pro-Moscow regime would not emerge in

⁴⁶ Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 110-113.

⁴⁷ Braithwaite, 279.

Afghanistan no matter what set of policies was put in place.⁴⁸ Therefore, an operational withdrawal plan that began in May 1988 could have just as easily begun in May 1987. Had Gorbachev's political leaders and their staffs conducted a more in-depth analysis on the feasibility of a process like National Reconciliation in the fall of 1986, they may have well avoided the frustration, wasted effort, and lost lives suffered throughout 1987.⁴⁹

UNILATERAL WITHDRAWAL ANNOUNCEMENT

As summer turned to fall in 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev—having come face-to-face with the reality that National Reconciliation was not going to work—began to pursue negotiations with the United States with renewed vigor. He wanted out now more than ever and understood that negotiations with the United States were the last critical piece of the withdrawal process. Gorbachev was tired of the diplomatic setbacks, intra-party bickering, and Najibullah's ineffectiveness as the leader of Afghanistan. Gorbachev, much like his February 1986 speech where he announced that Afghanistan was a “bleeding wound,” opted for a unilateral

⁴⁸Kalinovksy, *A Long Goodbye*, 118.

⁴⁹Approximately 2,300 Soldiers died serving in Afghanistan in 1987. Also, while Gorbachev's “new political thinking” fully emerged in 1987, its base was generally established in late 1986. Evidence of this comes in the form of a speech Gorbachev delivered in November 1986 in India where he discusses a “new mode of political thought,” and a “new concept of the world.” Therefore, the argument that Gorbachev's political thinking was not fully developed when he embraced National Reconciliation in late 1986/early 1987 is not entirely true. For further information on Gorbachev's visit to India, see for instance - Mikhail Gorbachev, “Gorbachev visits India, talk with Gandhi,” eds. Robert S. Ehlers and Frederick C. Schulze, trans. Bruce Collins, Deborah Hunter, and Erik Carlson, *Current Digest of Soviet Press* 38, no. 48 (31 December 1986): 11-14.

announcement on 8 February 1988 that the Soviet Union would withdraw from Afghanistan beginning on 15 May of the same year.⁵⁰

It is important to examine some of the key factors behind why Gorbachev made this unilateral announcement, and ultimately how his strategic decision impacted the operational withdrawal plan. The first reason that Gorbachev announced the withdrawal date to the world was to appease the United States. The second reason he made the announcement was because of the political infighting between the military and the KGB. Third, the military advised Gorbachev that their operations were becoming increasingly less and less effective in the eighth year of the war. In light of all the other compounding issues, Gorbachev was willing to accept losses in the withdrawal negotiations in order to implement his changes to Soviet foreign policy, which was rooted in his “new political thinking.”⁵¹

His new thinking, which began to solidify in 1987, was based on four concepts, which formed a general framework for Soviet policy-making. First, human interests took precedence over the interests of any one social class. Second, the world was becoming increasingly interdependent, which linked directly to the idea that nuclear war would not produce a victor. Third, security had to be based on political, not military instruments. Arms control and the settlement of regional conflicts were central to this concept. And lastly, especially in the context

⁵⁰ Mikhail Gorbachev, “Gorbachev: Afghan Exit Could Start May 15,” eds. Robert S. Ehlers and Frederick C. Schulze, trans. Bruce Collins, Deborah Hunter, and Erik Carlson, *Current Digest of Soviet Press* 40, no. 6 (9 March 1988): 1-5.

⁵¹Kalinovsky, “Old Politics, New Diplomacy,” 392.

of U.S.-Soviet relations, security must be mutual. Gorbachev believed that if only one side thought they were secure—the other would believe they were insecure.⁵²

Thus, the primary reason that Mikhail Gorbachev unilaterally announced that the Soviet Union would begin its withdrawal in May 1988 was to appease the United States, and demonstrate cooperation as part of his “new political thinking.” The United States provided money, ammunition and arms to the mujahedeen resistance based out of Pakistan, and served as a thorn in the Soviets’ side during their involvement in Afghanistan. The Reagan administration proved no less thorny in the months leading up to Gorbachev’s announcement, especially following two high level meetings in the fall of 1987.⁵³

The first meeting took place in September 1987 between Eduard Shevardnadze, and President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State, George Shultz. In this meeting, Shevardnadze tipped the Soviets’ collective hand and indicated formally to Shultz that the Soviet Union would withdraw from Afghanistan. Shevardnadze also indicated that the Soviet political leadership agreed on this decision, and that the Soviets could withdraw in five to twelve months once a formal agreement was reached. If Shultz and the Reagan administration were surprised or encouraged by Shevardnadze’s statements, they did not show it. The United States remained firm

⁵²David Holloway, “Gorbachev’s New Thinking,” *Foreign Affairs* (America and the World Edition 1988) 68, no.1 (Winter 1989): 66, 80. See also, Mikhail Gorbachev’s book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, 139-44.

⁵³Kalinovsky, “Old Politics, New Diplomacy,” 387. Gorbachev’s aim for these two meetings was to be direct and open with the United States about ending the Soviet Union’s involvement in Afghanistan. Gorbachev hoped that improved US-Soviet relations would enable US acceptance of the Najibullah regime during the ongoing treaty negotiations brokered by the UN.

that they wanted the Communist influence reduced in Kabul and for the Soviets to cease support to Najibullah and his government.⁵⁴

The second set of meetings was the Washington Summit, which took place from 8-10 December 1988, in Washington, D.C. During the summit, Gorbachev wanted to set US-Soviet relations on a new path.⁵⁵ In discussions with President Reagan, Vice President George H.W. Bush, and Secretary of State Shultz, Gorbachev emphasized the Soviet position that the US halt arms supplies to the mujahedeen. Issues such as the withdrawal timeline remained flexible, but the Soviets were confident that they could complete the troop withdrawal in less than twelve months. The Soviets departed Washington with what they viewed as a clear understanding between the two nations about arms supplies to the opposition. Unfortunately for the Soviet Union, the United States did not share the same understanding.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid. Gorbachev also mentioned in news reports as far back as July 1987 that the Soviet Union intended to withdraw from Afghanistan very soon; Cordovez and Harrison, 261-262.

⁵⁵Cooperation with the United States was a critical component of Gorbachev's "new political thinking." In his book, *Perestroika*, Gorbachev openly stated, "We have no ill intent towards the American people.... We have no universal solutions, but we are prepared to cooperate sincerely and honestly with the United States and other countries in seeking answers to all problems, even the most difficult ones."

⁵⁶Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy," 389-390; Cordovez and Harrison, 262. Soviet planning and negotiations with Najibullah's regime were based firmly on the assumption that the US would not interfere with the planned Soviet withdrawal. Shevardnadze travelled to Kabul on 4 January 1988 to speak with Najibullah about the progress of the withdrawal and the negotiations. Shevardnadze made it clear to Najibullah that an agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union would contain an agreement about ending support to the mujahedeen in Pakistan. Despite having nothing in writing, Shevardnadze was eager to please Najibullah with this news. President Reagan never formally agreed to anything that halted arms supplies to the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was now in a serious bind. His administration had made promises to Najibullah about US non-interference during the withdrawal process, but those promises were

The second reason that Gorbachev made the unilateral announcement to withdraw was the infighting between the KGB and the military over the best course of action for Afghanistan. Throughout the war, tension developed between the military and the KGB because the military thought the KGB had dragged the Soviet Union into an unwinnable war.⁵⁷ While this tension undergirded general interactions between the military and the KGB, a more poignant debate developed over the issue of Najibullah's leadership. Members of the Afghan military wanted to see Najibullah out in favor of a coalition-style government that included Ahmad Shah-Massoud and other opposition members. The KGB was firmly entrenched in its support of Najibullah and resented overtures from the military to interject in the political sphere.⁵⁸

In addition to the infighting between the KGB and the military, previous military assessments of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan influenced Gorbachev's decision making. As early as November 1986, Marshall Akhromeev, Chief of the Soviet General Staff, indicated that the problem in Afghanistan could not be solved militarily. General Valentin Varennikov delivered a similar assessment in May 1987 when he noted that the opposition had become increasingly effective, making Soviet Army operations difficult. Ultimately, the Army had grown tired of fighting a war it viewed as unwinnable, no matter how many tactical engagements they won against the mujahedeen.⁵⁹

now hollow. Both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze misjudged their position with the United States and overplayed their hand with the Najibullah regime.

⁵⁷Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 66.

⁵⁸Ibid., 66-67.

⁵⁹Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy," 385.

Gorbachev acknowledged that his announcement weakened the Soviet Union's stance at the negotiating table, but that was far less important than starting the withdrawal. Gorbachev needed his Army to conduct the withdrawal to prove he was serious about setting the Soviet Union on a new course in foreign policy. While a weakened stance in negotiations was a negative from the announcement, there were two key positives. The first was that the announcement served to jump-start the final round of negotiations in Geneva.⁶⁰ There was no turning back now—the Soviet Union was set to withdraw. Second, the announcement nullified a standing claim by the Pakistanis that a coalition government be formed in Afghanistan prior to the withdrawal. The announcement helped to de-link future political arrangements from the operational withdrawal plan.⁶¹

Gorbachev's unilateral announcement and the political constraints included in the withdrawal agreement impacted operational planners from the 40th Army staff. The announcement came as a surprise to members of Gorbachev's own political party so it must have come as nothing short of a shock to operational level planners in Kabul. Previous discussions about the withdrawal centered on a one-year time frame, but following a meeting between Shevardnadze and Shultz in March 1988, the time frame was reduced to nine months with the caveat that half the Soviet troops would withdraw in the first three months. Shevardnadze also

⁶⁰Diego Cordovez led the Geneva peace accords process. Mr. Cordovez served as the undersecretary-general for special political affairs of the United Nations from 1981 to 1988. He was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the negotiations that brought about the end of the Soviet-Afghan war.

⁶¹Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy," 393-394. Gorbachev later agreed to form a coalition government in Afghanistan, but his unilateral announcement allowed UN negotiators to move forward without that specific language in the treaty negotiations.

indicated that the withdrawal could be even shorter.⁶² The first required an adjustment to current plans, and the second no doubt generated contingency plans to speed up the withdrawal if political considerations warranted a change.

Gorbachev's strategic decisions set the stage for his operational level commanders to execute, and on 7 April 1988, the Soviet Ministry of Defense issued the Afghanistan operational withdrawal plan. The plan was developed in just over a month with input from four separate staffs, with the primary inputs likely coming from the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense stationed forward in Kabul, and the 40th Army staff. The order identified the specific measures that were required for route security during the withdrawal and broke the withdrawal plan down into two phases.⁶³

As the Soviet military began its preparations for withdrawal, an undercurrent of tension began to swell in Eduard Shevardnadze. Reality was setting in. The Soviet Union would have to leave Afghanistan, and Shevardnadze was not comfortable, as he did not want to leave Afghanistan in its current state. His sense of personal loyalty to Afghanistan's leader began to override his duty as the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs. In short order, Shevardnadze became the Soviet minister of Najibullah's affairs, which caused a host of problems during the final months of the Soviet withdrawal.

⁶²Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy," 394.

⁶³Grau, "Breaking Contact," 247. The other groups who offered inputs to the withdrawal plan were the General Staff, who likely provided the political and broader constraints required for the plan, and the Turkmenistan Military District, who likely provided coordinating input for the withdrawal of forces in western Afghanistan.

NAJIBULLAH, SHEVARDNADZE AND CIVIL-MILITARY FRICTION

The Soviet Union began an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan on 15 May 1988, in accordance with the timetable laid out in the Geneva Accords. Mikhail Gorbachev finally saw concrete steps being taken inside Afghanistan that would lead to the withdrawal of all Soviet forces by February 1989. In his mind, Gorbachev had been seeking this moment since he rose to power in March 1985. At this point, with the Geneva accords signed and Soviet forces withdrawing, Gorbachev should have been able to breathe a sigh of relief. However, Najibullah's political squabbling, coupled with tensions between Soviet military and political leadership, not only continued but also intensified during the withdrawal.

The primary catalyst for increased tension during the withdrawal was Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduard Shevardnadze.⁶⁴ While Gorbachev viewed the withdrawal from Afghanistan as part of larger foreign policy reforms in line with his "new political thinking," Shevardnadze took a very myopic approach to Soviet policy in Afghanistan. Despite his role as Minister of Foreign Affairs, he allowed his personal relationship with Najibullah to skew his views on Afghanistan, which drove multiple actions that both complicated and delayed the withdrawal operation. Gorbachev placed far too much trust in Shevardnadze, allowing him to dominate Afghanistan policy until the withdrawal was complete on 15 February 1989.

The first sign that Shevardnadze was out of synch with Gorbachev on Afghanistan was during the signing of the Geneva Accords on 14 April 1988. Despite public comments that

⁶⁴Sarah Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). The author notes that Shevardnadze, upon appointment to his post in July 1985, "[did] not have a stitch of foreign policy experience, [and] had never worked in Moscow."

demonstrated his support, Shevardnadze's support for the accords was luke-warm at best. Shevardnadze could not rid himself of the personal guilt he felt towards Najibullah and the rest of his regime in Kabul. Shevardnadze sought the perfect solution in Afghanistan, and he certainly felt the Soviet Union had not achieved it with the signing of the accords. In spite of Gorbachev's desire to leave Afghanistan and the military's firm stance that the Soviet Union withdraw, Shevardnadze was unhappy with the results of the accords.⁶⁵

Following the first phase of the withdrawal from 15 May 1988 to 15 July 1988, when half of the Soviet troops withdrew to the Soviet Union, tensions between Shevardnadze and top military leaders began to surface. The prime issue was Najibullah. Several military leaders wanted Najibullah out. His unwillingness to make peace with Ahmad Shah Massoud in the north, coupled with his lack of a plan for Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal led top military leaders to recommend his removal. Shevardnadze's position remained that Najibullah was a strong leader who could survive with enough Soviet support following their withdrawal.⁶⁶

Najibullah's unwillingness to make peace with Massoud in the Panjshir Valley, combined with a worsening security situation in Kabul, led to Gorbachev's decision to officially suspend

⁶⁵Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy," 397.

⁶⁶Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 67. Another important factor to note in the civil-military tensions was the split between the Khalq/Parcham factions of the Afghan PDPA, which began during the early stages of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. The Afghan army was composed of primarily of Khalqis, while the secret police and many in the ministerial leadership were composed mainly of Parchamis. The Soviet Army backed the Khalqis while the KGB supported the Parchami faction. In fact, the secret police (KhAD) was created while Babrak Karmal was still in office to off set the potential security risk of having Karmal, a Parchami, in office while his Army was composed of mainly Khalqis. Najibullah, also a Parchami, was the first head of the secret police force.

the withdrawal on 5 November 1988.⁶⁷ During the build up to this critical point in the summer and fall of 1988, Shevardnadze remained steadfast in his support of Najibullah and his demands, which only complicated matters further. Shevardnadze's loyalty to Najibullah shaped his decision making to the point that he began making decisions solely based on preserving his relationship with Najibullah, not the long-term interests of the Soviet Union. This was especially true when it came to Massoud. General Varennikov thought Najibullah's hatred of Massoud bordered on pathological.⁶⁸

As the Soviet command in Kabul pressed for peace with Massoud, Najibullah pressured Shevardnadze for a major operation against Massoud and his forces. Najibullah felt that Massoud was the biggest threat to his consolidation of power after the Soviets departed, and he wanted to degrade his combat capabilities while the Soviets were still in Afghanistan. Najibullah preferred to form an alliance with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was an ethnic Pashtun like himself. He viewed Hekmatyar as less likely to cause trouble in Afghanistan after the Soviets left. This of course was patently absurd. Many in the Afghan government considered Massoud a political moderate with strong support from the Tajiks in the north. Hekmatyar was considered by many to

⁶⁷Rogers, 47. In October 1988, the security situation around Kabul became very poor. The mujahedeen increased its attacks on the Kabul airport and the Khariton-Kabul highway, a primary north-south road critical to the withdrawal of Soviet troops and materiel.

⁶⁸Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 159. Further insight into discussions surrounding Massoud can be found in the excerpt from Alexander Lyakhovsky's book *Citizen, Politician, Fighter: In Memory of Shah Massoud*, 202-205.

be an extremist who often carried out brutal, unnecessary killings of civilians—even ethnic Pashtuns.⁶⁹

Despite Najibullah’s questionable political judgment, Shevardnadze never wavered in his support of the Pashtun leader. Gorbachev also stood firmly behind the man he had selected to take over for Babrak Karmal two years earlier. It was in their firm support of Najibullah, however, that both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze lost sight of the Soviet strategic objective—to maintain a neutral and friendly Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal. On the contrary, Soviet military leaders such as General Varennikov were engaged in more long-term strategic thinking. Soviet military leaders maintained the appropriate perspective and kept the best interests of the Soviet Union—not Najibullah—at the forefront of their minds.

Clear evidence of this was a list of political propositions that General Lyakhovsky developed in December 1988. The proposition called for the creation of an autonomous Tajik region in northern Afghanistan, Massoud’s own armed forces operating under the general auspices of the central Afghan military, as well as an economic development plan, and representation in the new Afghan central government. It also had provisions for direct trade, as

⁶⁹Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 169. Gorbachev’s advisors warned him that Hekmatyar was an extremist, and that Najibullah’s interest in forming an alliance with him was cause for concern. Hekmatyar was generally considered one of the most brutal mujahedeen commanders, often fighting with his fellow commanders as much as the Soviet forces. Hekmatyar received a large portion of the aid funneled through Pakistan from the United States, with estimates ranging as high as \$600 million for a period of approximately 10 years. In fact, Hekmatyar supported an attempted coup in March 1990 to oust Najibullah.

well as economic and cultural links to Soviet Tajikistan. General Varennikov, Ambassador Vorontsov, and several members of the Afghan leadership approved this plan.⁷⁰

At this point, it would be inappropriate to engage in a historical counter-factual argument and analyze what would have happened if this plan had been implemented. This plan, along with General Varennikov's direct communication with Massoud, aligned actions on the ground with the Soviet Union's strategic objectives. Even if only the northern portion of Afghanistan was on friendly terms with the Soviet Union, it was better than having no ties at all. Massoud was a far better ally to the Soviet Union than he was an enemy.

Najibullah and his team of supporters in the Kremlin, led by Shevardnadze and KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov, overwhelmingly rejected this plan. They also resented Varennikov and others in Kabul for their attempt at meddling in political decisions.⁷¹ With Varennikov and the Soviet military sidelined, Shevardnadze continued to press for a major military operation against Massoud during the final weeks of Soviet presence in Afghanistan. On 28 December 1988, Gorbachev ordered that the withdrawal officially resume and that the military carry out an operation against Massoud.⁷²

Military leaders named the operation they were ordered to carry out *Operation Typhoon*, after the German operation of the same name that failed to seize Moscow during World War II. The operation planned to strike targets around the Salang Tunnel and into Massoud-held territory in the Panjshir Valley. If the name chosen for the operation was an indicator of the military's

⁷⁰Braithwaite, 287.

⁷¹Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 67.

⁷² Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 167-168.

stark cynicism, they did not let it stop there. General Varennikov and military members in Kabul sent several memoranda to Moscow detailing the likely negative second and third order effects from *Operation Typhoon*, but Shevardnadze and Gorbachev ignored them. The military saw the operation for what it was—a political appeasement to Najibullah.⁷³

Here again, the military - not the political leadership of the Soviet Union—was engaged in strategic, long-term thinking. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze cast aside the potential repercussions from *Operation Typhoon* such as: injured civilians, a more difficult withdrawal for the Soviet Army, and ruining any chance at future reconciliation with Massoud. Gorbachev somehow thought that a three-day operation in late January 1989 would buy Najibullah some political operating space and help his regime in the long run. After almost ten years of fighting in Afghanistan, a three-day artillery barrage along the Salang Highway in northern Afghanistan was somehow going to solve the Soviet Union's problems and secure the long-term viability of Najibullah.

The operational level effectiveness of *Operation Typhoon* was almost nothing. From 23-25 January 1989, the Soviet Air Force conducted strikes in and around the Panjshir Valley and the Army conducted heavy rocket artillery strikes. General Sotskov, a member of General Varennikov's staff in Kabul, summed up the operation: "Almost ten years of the war were reflected, as if in a mirror, in three days and three nights: political cynicism and military cruelty, the absolute defenselessness of some, and the pathological need to kill and destroy on the part of

⁷³Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 168; Braithwaite, 288-289.

others.”⁷⁴ In a single operation, Gorbachev de-linked any notion of Soviet honor and prestige to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The strategic objective of maintaining a friendly and neutral Afghanistan following the withdrawal slipped further from reality after the actions Gorbachev ordered the military to execute.

Gorbachev’s trust in Shevardnadze, who pushed for the operation against Massoud for months, guided Gorbachev down a path where he thought this operation became absolutely necessary, despite advice to the contrary from his military leaders. Additionally, during *Operation Typhoon*, Shevardnadze led a debate in the Politburo over an option to leave Soviet troops in Afghanistan beyond the mandated 15 February withdrawal date. Shevardnadze felt it was necessary to leave behind 10-15,000 Soviet troops to ensure the security of Najibullah’s regime.⁷⁵ Again, Shevardnadze’s loyalty to Najibullah, and not the long-term strategic interests of the Soviet Union, dominated his decision making during the withdrawal.

Shevardnadze was alone in his recommendation to leave Soviet troops behind, and Gorbachev rejected this idea. For the first time during the withdrawal, Gorbachev sided with his military advisers. The Soviet Union had to withdraw. It had to keep its commitment outlined in the Geneva Accords. So, on 30 January 1989, the Soviet Air Force began to fly home. By 3 February, all Soviet aircraft were out of Afghanistan, and by 4 February, the last Soviet unit left Kabul. In western Afghanistan, the last Soviet units departed Shindad on 4 February and Herat on 12 February. From 11-14 February, Soviet units conducted a phased withdrawal back into the

⁷⁴Ibid., 168.

⁷⁵Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 171-172.

Soviet Union, and on 15 February, General Gromov crossed the Friendship Bridge, a clear signal that the troop withdrawal was complete.⁷⁶

ANALYSIS OF THE SOVIET OPERATIONAL WITHDRAWAL PLAN

How did the 40th Army, the primary Soviet Army unit in Afghanistan, perform during the withdrawal? A forthcoming analysis of their withdrawal plan against the elements of operational art will provide the appropriate framework to evaluate their plan.

The 40th Army's operational withdrawal plan was broken down into two phases designed to withdraw the first half of the 40th Army's forces from 15 May to 15 August 1988, and the latter half from November 1988 through January 1989. (See Figure 1.) Prior to the start of the official withdrawal, as a component of the National Reconciliation program, Soviet forces conducted limited offensive operations and primarily supported Afghan Army combat operations against the mujahedeen throughout 1987.⁷⁷ The 40th Army, as a part of the broader disengagement strategy on Afghanistan, began to prepare its Afghan Army partners for their eventual departure.

⁷⁶Grau, 258; Gromov, 325.

⁷⁷Grau, 246.

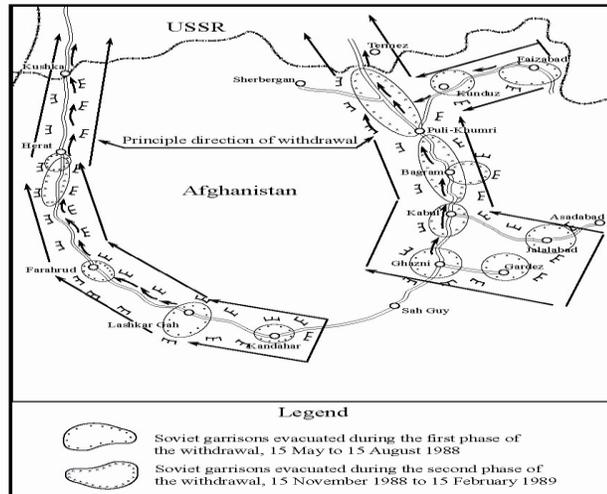


Figure 1. General Concept and Scheme of Soviet Withdrawal

Source: Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 2 (13 June 2007), 248.

After the Ministry of Defense issued the withdrawal order on 7 April 1988, the 40th Army began to collapse its smaller garrisons into their larger bases. Garrisons at Asadabad, Gul'bakhar, Bamian, Baraki, Chahcharan, and Shadzhoi were closed, and the units that occupied those bases moved back underneath the control of their parent units.⁷⁸ Closing the smaller garrisons allowed the 40th Army to consolidate combat power and units in preparation for the withdrawal. It also allowed them to turn these smaller outposts over to the Afghan forces, which facilitated an incremental territorial transition.

⁷⁸Grau, 247.

The first phase of the withdrawal plan, was well organized and well executed. The latter half of the withdrawal plan, however, was hastily conducted due to the political constraints outlined in the previous chapter. Military planners could not control the political environment thrust upon them during the second half of the withdrawal. However, the second phase should have been scrutinized further during initial planning, specifically the time analysis for the remaining forces to withdraw.

Grau has argued that the 40th Army executed a well-organized, disciplined withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that the environment that the Soviet Union left behind was relatively stable. While the 40th Army did execute a generally well-organized withdrawal, the Soviet Union did not leave behind a tenable post-conflict environment for Najibullah's regime in Kabul. For further analysis, the elements of operational art will serve as the framework to evaluate the withdrawal plan itself, and the conclusion will analyze the effects of nine plus years of Soviet occupation in Afghanistan—and what the Soviets truly left behind.⁷⁹

⁷⁹Dr. Lester Grau provided his analysis of the 40th Army's withdrawal plan, and more broadly, the Soviet disengagement strategy from Afghanistan. Dr. Grau's 2007 article from *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* provided the baseline for analysis of the withdrawal plan. Dr. Grau's personal friendship with Dr. Alexander Lyachovsky allowed him access to maps and documents that previously were not accessible in the United States, making his article a critical source for research on this topic.

Elements of Operational Art

1. End state and conditions.⁸⁰ The strategic end state set forth by Gorbachev was that Afghanistan remain a friendly, neutral state upon the Soviet Union's departure. For their part, the military did everything in its power to achieve this objective for Gorbachev.

- Friendly: The Soviet Union was required to have all of its forces out of Afghanistan by 15 February 1989. The 40th Army plan gave special attention to the security of its forces during the withdrawal in an attempt to lose as few soldiers as possible. After nine years of involvement, the 40th Army did not want to assume any unnecessary risk.⁸¹ As part of the withdrawal, the 40th Army also turned over a large number of garrisons and equipment to the Afghan Army.

- Enemy: Contrary to the narrative that has been built in books such as *Charlie Wilson's War*, the Soviet Union was not handed an overwhelming tactical defeat in Afghanistan. The 40th Army and other Soviet forces that served in Afghanistan fought to a tactical stalemate with the mujahedeen. There are multiple cases of successful operations on both sides during this war, with neither being able to bring about a decisive end to the war. Two Soviet operations in particular, Operation 333 and Operation Magistral in the winter of 1987-88, were brilliantly executed.⁸²

Upon withdrawal, the Soviets understood that the primary mujahedeen elements were intact and still dangerous. Commanders such as Massoud in the north, and Hekmatyr and

⁸⁰Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 defines End State as "a set of desired future conditions the commander wants to exist when an operation ends."

⁸¹Gromov, 258.

⁸²Grau, 235-236. For further reading on Operation Magistral see *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* and *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, both edited by Dr. Lester Grau.

Jalaladdin Haqqani in the East retained powerful guerrilla forces. While some, such as Massoud, took a primarily passive stance during the Soviet withdrawal, other mujahedeen commanders fought bitterly until the last Soviet element left Afghanistan. The Soviets accounted for the likelihood of continued tactical engagements along the primary main supply routes (MSRs) and near their major garrisons in cities like Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad.

- Terrain: Soviet forces were primarily arrayed along the main lines of communication and in the larger population centers in the eastern and western halves of Afghanistan at the start of the withdrawal. At end state, the Soviets turned over all of their major and minor garrisons to the Afghan forces in these locations and intended to keep the MSR from Kabul to the Soviet Union open in order to continue to provide logistical support to Najibullah's government following the Soviet Union's departure.⁸³

- Civilian population: The 40th Army attempted to limit civilian casualties during the withdrawal. The Soviets understood that little could be done during the withdrawal to repair nine years of bitter frustration and anger towards them from the Afghan population. However, Soviet officers were not indiscriminate robots who did not care about civilian casualties—they were serious professionals who ensured concrete steps were taken to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties. During the conduct of *Operation Typhoon*, for example, 40th Army subordinate commanders directed fires into unpopulated areas to avoid civilian casualties.⁸⁴

⁸³The route that was critical to remain open was from Kabul to Khariton. Khariton is located next to Termez, just across the Afghanistan border inside Uzbekistan.

⁸⁴Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 168.

2. Center of Gravity.⁸⁵ Task organization and mission allocation indicate that the 40th Army may have thought their center of gravity to be the forces assigned to conduct route security along the MSRs and in the vicinity of the Salang Pass north of Kabul.⁸⁶ The 40th Army knew that a critical vulnerability for their withdrawing forces was security along the primary routes used for north-south traffic in the eastern and western corridors. If convoys of withdrawing units were harassed along the withdrawal routes, the pace of the withdrawal may have been slowed dramatically—and the Soviets may have missed their 15 February deadline set in the Geneva Accords.

For the most part, the 40th Army did an excellent job protecting their critical vulnerability—route security—by appropriately task organizing their forces and placing them along critical areas during the withdrawal. Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of security in the western corridor during the withdrawal, and the reader can assume security was similar, if not much better, in the eastern corridor. A few reasons for this were: the eastern corridor contained more Soviet forces, was closer to Pakistan and therefore had an elevated threat level, and contained the Salang Pass—which was key terrain for the 40th Army during the withdrawal.

⁸⁵Defined in ADRP 3-0 as “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act. The center of gravity is a vital analytical tool for planning operations.”

⁸⁶The Salang Pass is a major mountain pass that connects the northern portion of Afghanistan with the Parwan and Kabul provinces. Bagram Airbase is located in Parwan province. The Salang Pass runs through the Hindu Kush mountains. The Salang Tunnel, a major feature of the pass, was built in the 1960s by the Soviet Union. The tunnel cuts directly through the mountains and cuts travel time from 72 to 10 hours moving north. The tunnel sits at approximately 11,300 feet elevation.

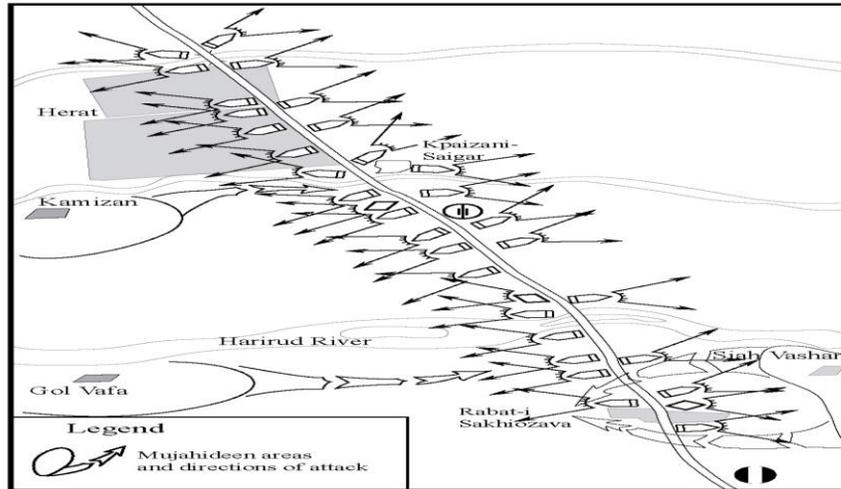


Figure 2. Mujahideen Areas and Directions of Attack

Source: Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 2 (13 June 2007), 259.

3. Decisive Points.⁸⁷ Not only was the Salang Tunnel key terrain for the 40th Army during the withdrawal, it was decisive terrain. The security of the Salang Tunnel was a decisive point for the 40th Army, and perhaps the only decisive point within the 40th Army's withdrawal plan. The security of the Salang Tunnel was decisive because its closure or partial destruction would have caused serious issues for the logistical flow of men and materiel out of Afghanistan in the eastern corridor. In the second phase of the withdrawal alone, 30,000 troops and their equipment stationed in the eastern corridor had to travel through the Salang Tunnel.

⁸⁷Department of the Army, ADRP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012) defines a decisive point as a "geographic place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to achieving success."

The second and third order effects of losing access to the Salang Tunnel are important to note. First, the loss of the Salang Tunnel would have required a complete reroute of forces and equipment in the eastern corridor, taking days and perhaps even weeks longer to withdraw forces out of Afghanistan. In the summer months, this would have been less of a problem with warmer weather and better road conditions, but in the winter months, rerouting battalion and brigade size elements leaving Afghanistan would have been no small task. Some units or equipment may have been forced to move by air, which would have required a major reshuffle in the Soviet air transportation plan since the entirety of the Soviet air force flew home by 4 February.⁸⁸

Second, if access to the Salang Tunnel were lost, the 40th Army would have had to reorganize their route security plan for the withdrawal, which may have caused them to miss their 15 February withdrawal deadline established in the Geneva Accords. The Soviets placed such a heavy emphasis on route security prior to unit departures from Afghanistan that the loss of the Salang Tunnel would have meant a shift in security to a southern route or an improvised northern route. Along the eastern corridor alone, 14,500 troops manned 199 outposts to secure the route. Shifting almost 15,000 troops as part of a lock step, zero-risk withdrawal plan certainly would have taken several days, which at the end of the withdrawal the Soviets did not have based on their compressed timeline.

The resources and manpower dedicated to protect the tunnel demonstrate its decisiveness to the 40th Army's overall withdrawal plan, and the Soviet Union's long-term plan to continue to

⁸⁸Grau, 257. It is reasonable to conclude that multiple contingency plans were in place in the event that the 40th Army lost access to the Salang Tunnel. Operational planners would have had to refine and issue those plans if access to Salang Tunnel was lost.

assist Najibullah's regime. Following the Soviet withdrawal, the Afghan government conducted a weekly 600-truck convoy, through the tunnel, to the Soviet Union to receive logistical resupply.⁸⁹ Damage to the tunnel certainly would have hampered this weekly effort, damaging the chances of survival for Najibullah's already weak regime.

4. Lines of Effort.⁹⁰ The 40th Army had two distinct lines of effort during the withdrawal. The first was security, which has already been discussed, and the second line of effort was transition. The 40th Army did an excellent job of first handing over smaller garrisons to the Afghan Army, and then transitioning the larger garrisons closer to the targeted withdrawal date of 15 February. (Figures 3 and 4 show the disposition of Afghan forces prior to, and then after the first phase of the withdrawal, respectively.)

⁸⁹Grau, 258.

⁹⁰ADRP 3-0 defines a line of effort as a "line that links multiple tasks using the logic of purpose rather than geographical reference to focus efforts toward establishing operational and strategic conditions."

While the 40th Army performed well in developing a gradual basing transition plan, their handover of operational areas went far less smoothly. Some of this was due in part to the fact that the 40th Army secured cease-fire agreements with several mujahedeen factions that did not include the Afghan Army, which allowed almost immediate attacks on the newly acquired Afghan Army outposts and bases.⁹¹ The mujahedeen conducted coordinated attacks in an attempt to seize bases at Jalalabad, Konduz, and Faizabad from the Afghan Army following the transition from the 40th Army.⁹² While the mujahedeen were not able to seize their intended objectives, the attacks foreshadowed their future intentions following the full withdrawal of the 40th Army.

Why did the Soviets obtain cease-fire agreements only for themselves, and not for their Afghan Army partners, at least for the withdrawal period? This action not only demonstrated selfishness on the part of the 40th Army, but also a lack of foresight. Soviet forces trained the Afghan Army for several years bringing their total strength to approximately 52,000 soldiers organized across 14 divisions. They also transferred 990 armored vehicles, 3,000 trucks, and hundreds of artillery and multiple rocket launch systems to the Afghans.⁹³

If the Soviet Union was committed long term to Najibullah and his government, why would they sacrifice those trained forces and some of those critical capabilities so early on after departing? By making separate cease-fire agreements with certain mujahedeen factions, the Soviets did not enable the Afghan Army to have early success following their departure from

⁹¹Grau, 257.

⁹²Ibid., 251.

⁹³Grau, 241. Dr. Grau notes that while the paper strength of the Afghan Army was 132,000, the actual strength was approximately 52,000 due to regular desertions.

several areas. Cease-fires brokered for both parties fighting in Afghanistan would have been symbolically important to the Afghan Army, and would have displayed more long-term thinking about sustaining the Afghan Army's fighting capabilities beyond the initial withdrawal.

5. Basing and Tempo.⁹⁴ Basing and tempo are included together here because the operational tempo that the 40th Army established in the first phase of the withdrawal hinged largely on their plan for basing during the withdrawal. The Soviets collapsed their smaller garrisons into their larger garrisons before the official withdrawal began on 15 May 1988. This allowed the 40th Army to do two things. First, it facilitated a more gradual transition of the smaller garrisons and their associated areas of operation to the Afghan Army. Second, it allowed the 40th Army to begin the withdrawal in earnest on 15 May. The 40th Army did not have to wait to consolidate its forces and organize for the withdrawal; this was largely accomplished between mid-April and mid-May. (See Figure 5.)

⁹⁴ADRP 3-0 defines tempo as “the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy. It reflects the rate of military action. ADRP 3-0 defines a “base” as a locality from which operations are projected or supported.

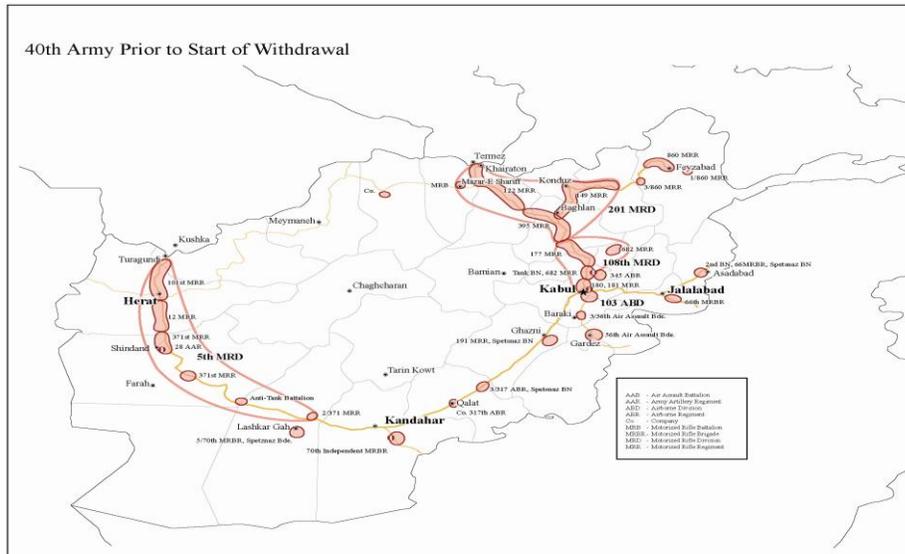


Figure 5. 40th Army Prior to Start of Withdrawal

Source: Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 2 (13 June 2007), 249.

Uninterrupted by political constraints during the first phase of the withdrawal, the 40th Army established a sound operational tempo that allowed them to withdraw approximately 50,000 Soviet troops, as mandated in the Geneva Accords. In the east, large garrisons at Faizabad, Kunduz, Ghazni, Gardez, and Jalalabad withdrew north to Termez with little complication. In the western portion of the country, garrisons at Lashkargah and Kandahar withdrew through Kushka back into the Soviet Union. The 40th Army had to be pleased with how the first phase of the withdrawal plan unfolded as they suffered minimal casualties and transferred multiple garrisons to the Afghan Army.

The second phase of the withdrawal was anti-climatic. (See Figure 6.) Following the political drama that played out between key Soviet military and political leaders, the 40th Army closed out of Afghanistan in short order. After *Operation Typhoon*, the withdrawal resumed and the remaining 40th Army units began to depart Kabul. By 8 February 1989, the 40th Army units

In fairness to General Gromov and his staff, there were political constraints that did not allow elements of the 40th Army to depart Kabul until the beginning of February. Najibullah was paranoid, and rightly so, about his own personal safety and the security of the Afghan capital city and therefore would not allow Soviet troops to depart earlier.⁹⁷ This political constraint, however, does not excuse the initial plan put forward by 40th Army and Ministry of Defense planners.

Why begin the second phase of the withdrawal as the Afghan winter sets in? Why not begin the second phase of the withdrawal in September or October?⁹⁸ 40th Army planners knew they would likely deal with extreme weather conditions during the winter months that may delay the withdrawal plan. Even after receiving permission to resume the withdrawal in early January 1989, General Gromov could not move any of his forces north from Kabul through the Salang Tunnel because of permanent fog, sub-zero temperatures, frost, and icy roads at 12,000 feet above sea level.⁹⁹ Even if a complete withdrawal was not possible prior to the winter of 1988-89 because of Najibullah's security concerns, a partial withdrawal of 20-25,000 troops in the eastern corridor was certainly possible in September or October, alleviating potential congestion moving through the Salang Tunnel during the harsh winter months that lay ahead.

In the end, the 40th Army's operational withdrawal plan worked and they suffered low casualties during the withdrawal. However, successful execution of the plan does not alleviate the

⁹⁷Gromov, 325.

⁹⁸Answers to these questions and others may have been available from Dr. Alexander Lyachovsky, who maintained a personal friendship with Dr. Lester Grau. Following Dr. Lyachovsky's death in 2009, access to insightful historical documents and older versions of the Soviet withdrawal plan was lost.

⁹⁹Gromov, 329.

40th Army and MoD staff from responsibility for developing a plan that could have been timed far better at its outset, thereby avoiding a semi-hasty withdrawal of 30,000 troops over a three-week period in January and February 1989.

7. Risk.¹⁰⁰ General Gromov accepted little to no risk during the withdrawal. This was evident by the amount of forces dedicated to both route and airfield security during the withdrawal. Along the eastern corridor, for example, 26 battalions comprised of 14,500 soldiers were arrayed along 199 outposts from Kabul to Khariton. Three battalions performed the same task along the more sparsely populated western corridor. Additionally, 25 battalions comprised of 7,000 soldiers were tasked to secure airfields vital to personnel and equipment movement during the withdrawal.¹⁰¹ The 40th Army staff conducted rigorous analysis of the security requirements for the withdrawal, which set the conditions for a secure withdrawal of Soviet troops.

In addition to sound staff analysis, General Gromov ordered his subordinate commanders to take all necessary measures to avoid casualties during the withdrawal. General Gromov thought that the Soviet soldiers and their families had suffered enough during the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, and was unwilling to accept even a single casualty during the withdrawal. Gromov explicitly stated that, “for everyone who died in battle, firing at the airfield, the garrison outpost or some other object, its commander must bear the strictest punishment.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ADRP 3-0 discusses risk. “Risk, uncertainty, and chance are inherent in all military operations. When commanders accept risk, they create opportunities to seize, retain and exploit the initiative and achieve decisive results.” Also, with respect to planning it says, “inadequate planning and preparation recklessly risks forces.”

¹⁰¹Gromov, 258.

¹⁰²Ibid., 258.

The force protection measures established, along with General Gromov's exhortations to his commanders, led to minimal casualties during the withdrawal.¹⁰³

8. Conclusion. What did the Soviets really leave behind? Grau contended that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan provided an "excellent model for disengagement from direct military involvement in support of an allied government in a counter-insurgency campaign."¹⁰⁴ Since Grau's 2007 analysis, several key sources have been published to provide further insight into Soviet thinking during the withdrawal. Given the shortcomings identified here, how is this an excellent model for disengagement from a counter-insurgency campaign? While the 40th Army executed a fairly well-planned withdrawal, the Soviet government did not have a clear, long-term policy for Afghanistan. In its departure, the Soviet Union left behind a dependent state, a weakened Afghan military, a dangerous enemy, and a slew of placated disaffected mujahedeen fighters.

Afghanistan was wholly dependent on the Soviet Union for its economic and military survival. The 600-truck convoy that traveled weekly from Kabul to Khariton not only provided the military with the necessary fuel and ammunition it needed to survive, it also provided food to feed the Afghan Army and other security forces. In addition to the weekly ground convoy, the Soviets maintained an active air bridge to friendly territory that supplied everything from SCUD

¹⁰³Braithwaite, 290. Other than three dead lost during *Operation Typhoon*, the 40th Army suffered light casualties during the withdrawal. Only 39 soldiers were killed between 1 and 15 February 1989.

¹⁰⁴Grau, 260.

missiles to flour for baking bread.¹⁰⁵ Najibullah's government did not have to develop self-sufficient organizations or attempt to develop the country's economic potential because Soviet aid was the primary vehicle that sustained the Afghan economy and its military.

Despite having a multitude of high-tech capabilities and a functioning air force, the Afghan security forces were a paper tiger. The Afghan Army was racked by desertions to the tune of 32,000 annual departures from active service, and the entire security force apparatus was mildly dysfunctional. The Afghan security forces—comprised of the Army, the secret police, and the armed forces of the Ministry of the Interior—did not have unity of command.¹⁰⁶ Each element reported separately to Najibullah by design. A lack of unity of command did not allow the separate security elements to coordinate a coup, but it also made them weak and less able to ward off external threats to the government.

As long as Soviet money, ammunition, fuel and supplies continued, Najibullah's regime remained viable. One of the other key items that Soviet money bought was loyalty from the disaffected mujahedeen, who returned to their homes once the Soviets withdrew. Najibullah's government co-opted a large number of these former fighters to guard the Kabul-Khariton highway to prevent active mujahedeen from disrupting the weekly Soviet convoys.¹⁰⁷ This plan was short-sighted though. How long were the Soviets going to be able to pay 100,000 militiamen to prevent attacks along an essential ground line of communication, and generally not attack the Afghan security forces? The militia's loyalty was sincere as long as Soviet payments continued.

¹⁰⁵Grau, 258.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 241-43.

¹⁰⁷Ibid, 254.

While Soviet cash kept a large portion of former mujahedeen on the sidelines during the initial period following the withdrawal, other mujahedeen elements were still active and very dangerous after the Soviets' departure. The mujahedeen continued to receive supplies, money and ammunition through the CIA and Pakistan, which bolstered their confidence following the Soviets' departure.¹⁰⁸ A coordinated attack on the major city of Jalalabad shortly after the Soviets withdrew was illustrative of the mujahedeen's renewed confidence. New recruits, trained and equipped by the CIA, and in coordination with the highest levels of the Pakistani government, launched an attack on Jalalabad in early March 1989. While Najibullah's government survived the attack on Jalalabad, the attack foreshadowed the continued pressure that the mujahedeen would place on Najibullah over the next two years.¹⁰⁹

The most critical issue that the attack on Jalalabad raised was not the CIA-equipped mujahedeen or the surprisingly respectable performance of the Afghan Army - it was the Soviet response to the attack. After the attack began, Gorbachev called a meeting of Politburo members to discuss potential Soviet responses. Should the Soviets intervene with air strikes? Remain on the sidelines? Not surprisingly, Shevardnadze and Kryuchkov—the “Najib lobby”—advocated for Soviet military intervention to prevent Jalalabad from being overrun. Gorbachev, however, was firmly against active military support to Najibullah's regime. He remained consistent on his

¹⁰⁸Braithwaite, 296.

¹⁰⁹Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 180. Benazir Bhutto, the newly appointed Prime Minister of Pakistan, approved the attack on Jalalabad. During the attack, Najibullah's military performed far better than expected. Soviet aircraft, flown by Afghan pilots, bombed mujahedeen positions and overpowered their more lightly armed opponents.

position from the fall of 1988 that he would support Afghanistan with money and supplies, but not direct military intervention.¹¹⁰

The Soviet response begs the question: Did Gorbachev and other members of the Politburo not discuss this type of scenario before the withdrawal was complete? It is clear they did not, highlighting a serious fault with Soviet-Afghan policy following the withdrawal—namely, that there was no clear policy. Despite still having military and political advisers inside Afghanistan, Gorbachev’s government did not develop a long-term policy, or even a short-term policy, for their involvement in Afghanistan. This was evident when General Gareev, appointed to take over as the senior military representative in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal, was told by the minister of defense to report to Kabul for “two to three months, and then we’ll see.”¹¹¹

After nine years of involvement in Afghanistan, thousands of soldiers wounded and killed, and billions of rubles spent, Gorbachev and his political leadership were willing to adopt a “we’ll see what happens” approach. For the military professional, this means, in no uncertain terms—“we don’t have a plan, and we’re banking on Najibullah’s regime to crumble.” After Gorbachev’s rhetoric about loyalty to Soviet friends and Shevardnadze’s constant pandering to Najibullah, it appeared that all of the talk was disingenuous at best. Gorbachev wanted the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, and once all of his forces were withdrawn, Afghanistan fell off his day-to-day radar.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Ibid., 181-182.

¹¹¹Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 183.

¹¹²Ibid. At the beginning of 1989, the political situation in Eastern Europe and the economic situation in the Soviet Union dominated Gorbachev’s agenda. Following the

CONCLUSION

We must at least announce that the introduction of our troops was a gross error.

—Edward Shevardnadze, April 1988¹¹³

The accounts of why the Soviets failed in Afghanistan are too numerous to count. The purpose of this monograph has been to examine the key decisions made by Mikhail Gorbachev and his political leaders, namely Eduard Shevardnadze, leading up to and during the withdrawal—and the subsequent impact those decisions had on the 40th Army’s operational withdrawal plan. This study has also analyzed the motives underlying Gorbachev’s and Shevardnadze’s decisions and attempted to understand the strategic and political contexts surrounding each decision. In summary, three key decisions made between late 1986 and early 1989 altered the course of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The first decision, to encourage Najibullah to embrace the policy of National Reconciliation, was the most costly in terms of time to the Soviet Union. Without conducting a feasibility assessment, and clinging squarely to the coattails of hope, Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze supported National Reconciliation as a panacea that would bring stability to a country he desperately wanted to depart. Ultimately, National Reconciliation failed because the key mujahedeen factions were not involved in the process and because the Soviet Army and

implementation of Gorbachev’s “new political thinking,” Soviet power began to erode in East Germany, Hungary and Poland.

¹¹³Braithwaite, 282. It should be noted that in his auto-biography *The Future Belongs to Freedom*, Shevardnadze, who served as Soviet minister of foreign affairs for five years, four of which revolved around Afghanistan, discusses Afghanistan for 4 out of 200 pages.

the PDPA did not fully support the policy. This policy cost the Soviet Union one full calendar year in Afghanistan, and the lost lives of 2,300 soldiers.¹¹⁴

The second key decision—Gorbachev’s unilateral announcement on 8 February 1988 that the Soviet Union would withdraw from Afghanistan beginning in May 1988—was made primarily to please the United States. As the lead aid supplier to the mujahedeen, the U.S. had been calling for the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from Afghanistan since it entered the country nine years earlier. Gorbachev’s new policy of *glasnost*, which encouraged transparency in political dealings, heavily influenced the announcement. Two supplementary reasons he made the solo announcement were infighting between the military and KGB leadership and the Army’s warnings that its operations were no longer effective. This surprise announcement almost certainly caught his military leadership off guard, which was forced to adapt their current withdrawal plans to meet the timeline Gorbachev established.

The final decision Gorbachev made that impacted the withdrawal of his forces was that he placed too much trust in his foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze and the chairman of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, dominated the Soviet Union’s Afghan policy. Shevardnadze in particular developed a close personal relationship with Najibullah and began to advocate Soviet policies that were primarily helpful to Najibullah, not the Soviet Union’s long-term strategic interests. The best example of this was *Operation Typhoon*, for which Shevardnadze persistently advocated on behalf of Najibullah. In three days of artillery and rocket strikes in the Salang Pass, the Soviet political leadership delinked the notion of honor and prestige

¹¹⁴Grau, *Soviet-Afghan War*, 44.

from the withdrawal process.¹¹⁵ Shevardnadze's meddling and constant pandering to Najibullah's concerns disrupted the final months of the withdrawal, ultimately causing 30,000 troops to withdraw in just a few weeks' time.

The operational headquarters in charge of the withdrawal, the Soviet 40th Army led by General Boris Gromov, performed well. General Gromov's staff, with assistance from Ministry of Defense officials in Kabul, developed a sound plan that gradually transitioned Soviet garrisons to the Afghans and incrementally decreased Soviet presence throughout Afghanistan while maintaining a strong security presence along the main MSR. The plan, however, allowed too much time to elapse before the second phase of the withdrawal began. The 40th Army staff did not build in time to accommodate for political friction that was bound to occur at the end of this conflict. Lastly, the Soviet-orchestrated cease-fires that did not include the Afghan Army were simply poor form. The 40th Army did not enable success for the Afghan Army as they were routinely attacked immediately following the Soviet's departure from an area.

While the 40th Army executed an organized withdrawal from Afghanistan, Mikhail Gorbachev and his leaders did not establish a clear policy for Afghanistan upon their departure. Other than the pre-determined logistical support to sustain Najibullah's regime, important discussions about Soviet contingency plans to deal with specific situations inside Afghanistan did not occur until it was too late. Once the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, Gorbachev had attained his perceived political victory and Afghanistan's importance quickly diminished as events in Eastern Europe and throughout the USSR itself began to heat up.

¹¹⁵In his article for the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* Dr. Grau called Operation Typhoon a "violation of national decency."

Gorbachev's concept of Soviet honor and prestige, within the framework of his "new political thinking," undergirded almost every decision he made during the withdrawal. The military withdrawal was not based on any concrete metrics, but rather Gorbachev's personal view of when the Soviets could "honorably" withdraw with minimal political damage.

This study is yet another example of how strategic-level decisions create operational-level constraints that affect commanders and their staffs. The operational artist must always consider the strategic situation, as it will inform his decisions. In the case of the Soviet Union's military leadership, it can be argued that they understood the strategic environment perhaps better than their civilian masters. However, with Gorbachev's subjective views and political motivations driving the Soviet Union's departure from Afghanistan, he left a more complex situation than he inherited in 1985. Afghanistan had become a dependent nation led by a weak central government still facing a well-funded, dangerous enemy—clear consequences of decisions made by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze.

APPENDIX: DOCTRINAL CROWD REFERENCES

Key Actors (listed in alphabetical order by last name)

Rodric Braithwaite—British Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1988-1992. Mr. Braithwaite is listed here because the author maintained personal email contact with him throughout this project. He provided insight and further clarification to points he made in his book, *Afghantsy*.

Diego Cordovez—Undersecretary-General for Special Political Affairs of the United Nations from 1981-1988; Primary UN negotiator at the Geneva Accords in April, 1988.

Mikhail Gorbachev—General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985-1991; President of the Soviet Union from 1990-91.

General Boris Gromov—Commander, 40th Army, 1987-89. General Gromov was the last Soviet soldier to leave Afghanistan, crossing the Friendship Bridge on 15 February 1989. Following his military service, Gromov was a successful politician in Russia.

Babrak Karmal—General Secretary of the Central Committee of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan from 1979-1986.

Ahmad Shah Massoud—famous Tajik political and military leader; lived primarily in the Panjshir Valley in northern Afghanistan; nickname was “Lion of the Panjshir.”

Major General Alexander Lyakhovsky—rose to the rank of Major General in the Soviet army, and in retirement became an eminent military historian and the leading Russian authority on the Soviet war in Afghanistan. During the war, he worked in the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces, and in 1987-1989 he served as personal aide to General of the Army Valentin Varennikov, the head of the USSR Defense Ministry Operations Group in Afghanistan and President Najibullah’s top military adviser.

Mohammed Najibullah—General Secretary of the Central Committee of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan from 1986-1992; President of the Republic of Afghanistan from 1987-1992.

Eduard Shevardnadze—Soviet Union minister of foreign affairs from July 1985 - December 1990.

General Valentin Varennikov—personal representative of the Soviet Defense Minister in Kabul from 1986-1989; later named commander-in-chief, Soviet ground forces and Deputy Minister of Defense.

Yuli Vorontsov—Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan from 1988-89.

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