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Echoes of Afghanistan in Syria

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The Russian military intervention to shore up the Assad regime in Syria, coupled with the previously begun U.S.-led military intervention in the same country—amid uncertainty about U.S. war aims and a reluctance to part with the objective of ousting Assad—presents the specter of a proxy war between Russia and the United States. Before the specter gets any closer to becoming a reality, we should gain what insights we can from a country that hosted previous proxy warfare, that was the scene of military interventions by both Moscow and Washington, and that continues to be a problem for U.S. policy: Afghanistan. We should learn what lessons we can regarding both risks and opportunities in such places, while understanding the differences as well as the similarities between the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria.

Whatever other motives Russian president Vladimir Putin has in doing what he is doing today in Syria, shoring up a beleaguered regime that has been a friend and client of Russia is clearly one of the immediate objectives. In that respect the action is very similar to what the Soviet Union did when it threw its forces into Afghanistan in 1979, in an effort to shore up a similarly beleaguered client regime in Kabul. Another similarity in the two conflicts is that the opposition to each regime comprised a variety of armed groups in a predominantly Sunni Muslim country, with the groups ranging from mostly secular to militant Islamist. And in each case opposition groups received material support from Arab states and, later, from the United States.

So far the Russian military operation in Syria is much smaller than the Soviet expedition in Afghanistan, which at its peak involved 115,000 troops. No Russian ground troops have yet been committed to combat in Syria, although hints from Moscow and the facts on the ground will make it unsurprising if Russian "volunteers" start participating directly in the fight. Regardless of the discrepancy in size of the two operations, the prospects for quagmire that have faced the Soviets and Russians in each place are comparable. Bashar Assad is no more secure today than Afghan president Babrak Karmal was in 1979. The insecurity in each case has been due not to any direct countervailing military intervention by outside powers—the United States and the USSR/Russia have not used their forces in Afghanistan at the same time as the other did—but to the deep unpopularity of each incumbent regime and the unlikelihood that it ever could form the basis of lasting stability in its country, in the face of persistent and in large part religiously inspired opposition.

How far Vladimir Putin wades into this quagmire before devoting more attention to finding a way out remains to be seen. But we can already say that the situation he faces in Syria is more like Afghanistan in the 1980s than like, say, Ukraine. In Ukraine he has had the limited objective of keeping Ukraine out of the Western orbit of the European Union and NATO. A relatively low-cost commitment along his own country's border to maintain a frozen conflict, with the use of a few little green men in unmarked uniforms, may serve that purpose. The conflict in Syria will not freeze, and it does not serve Russian purposes well to be propping up endlessly a besieged client regime in control of only a fraction of its country's territory.

The Afghan mujahedin's war against the Soviets is the subject of fond Cold War memories of many people on the U.S. side of the Cold War divide. The effort, begun under Jimmy Carter and continued under Ronald Reagan, to supply the mujahedin is widely perceived as having been instrumental in defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan, a defeat that in turn is often seen as contributing significantly to the downfall of the Soviet Union itself. The supply of man-portable air defense systems—the famous Stinger—to the rebels was the centerpiece of this aid. But it would be dangerous to attempt something comparable in Syria, where U.S. and allied aircraft and not just Russians operate. Distributing such systems to anyone in the fractured Syria opposition would result in a significant chance they would be used against American planes.

One of the principal lessons from Afghanistan is that defeat of a despised regime does not usher in peace, let alone anything resembling democracy. When the Afghan regime of Najibullah—whom the Soviets installed after Karmal demonstrated his inability to get control of the situation—fell three years after the last Soviet troops left, civil war continued unabated, with different militias that had received U.S. aid battling among themselves. This led to the Taliban sweeping to power over most (but not all) of the country, to the Taliban playing host to the Arabs of al-Qaeda, and the rest is history. And in a later phase of Afghan history, U.S. ouster of the Taliban again failed to bring anything resembling peace to Afghanistan.

The role of extremists and of terrorists who have struck against the United States and the West ought to be of high concern to Americans reflecting on history of the Afghan conflict, and on how earlier American policymakers may have focused too narrowly and shortsightedly on defeating the Soviets. The comparison with Syria ought to be too obvious to need much

reflection, given the current reality of the radical group ISIS, as well as an al-Qaeda affiliate, forming a major part of the alternative to the Assad regime.

The Afghan experience as well as the Syrian conflict itself show why the oft-voiced counterfactual about how a bigger and earlier U.S. involvement in the Syrian war would somehow have produced a more viable and effective "moderate" opposition is invalid. The post-Najibullah phase of Afghan history demonstrated the pattern seen elsewhere as well, and being seen today in Syria, of radicals crowding out moderates in a situation of prolonged warfare and instability. It is in the nature of such situations for such a pattern to prevail, civil war being an inherently immoderate thing to wage. The Stingers and other U.S. aid bought the United States little or nothing in the way of subsequent influence.

One of the biggest, and most relevant for current policy questions, differences between the Soviet phase of the Afghan war and the current war in Syria is that there isn't a Cold War any more. There is no reason today to gauge the advance and retreat of U.S. interests worldwide in terms of the retreat and advance of the country whose capital is Moscow, as was habitually done during the Cold War. If Russia were to maintain all of the position and influence it hopes to maintain in whatever part of Syria the Assad regime controls, it would be small potatoes compared to how successfully the Soviet Union competed for influence throughout the Middle East during most of the Cold War. Countering Russia wasn't even part of the original reason for the United States to get involved in the Syrian conflict. It would be one of the worst examples of mission creep if this comes to be seen as a reason, and doubly unfortunate if the potential proxy war were allowed to become a real one.

Probably the biggest single lesson from the Afghan example concerns the quagmire potential, as demonstrated by the Soviets' experience as their military efforts dragged on through the 1980s, and as demonstrated by the U.S. experience after the mission of retaliation for 9/11 and ousting the Taliban and al-Qaeda from their comfortable places creeped into being a nation-building operation. In applying the quagmire dimension to Syria, think about how U.S. forces now have been in Afghanistan for 14 years (which doesn't even count, of course, the time during which the United States was giving significant material aid to Afghan insurgents, a process that began more than three decades ago). Then think about the possibility of debate in Washington in 2029, 14 years from now, about how many troops the United States ought to be keeping in Syria.

Vladimir Putin's gambit in Syria has poured fuel on a fire and has made a complicated and dangerous situation on the ground (and in the air) even more complicated and dangerous. But for now we ought to be glad to the extent that the costs of proto-quagmire fall on Russia and not on the United States. These include not only the material costs of fighting a war but also the extremist-fueling hatred that comes from stuff that happens, even inadvertently, in the course of fighting a war—such as, say, bombing a hospital. Here another lesson from Afghanistan is how the United States has for some time now been wearing out its welcome, as reflected in opinion polls that show much previous friendship and admiration for the United States among Afghans having dissipated.

We also ought to look to other silver linings in the gambit—which admittedly assume that Putin is as smart as he often is cracked up to be: that the Russian leader knows the only way to step out

of a costly quagmire is to work diligently with other outside powers to negotiate some sort of resolution of the Syrian conflict; and that through Russia's intervention he has acquired more of the sort of leverage over the Assad regime that will be necessary to effect any such resolution.