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# Soviet Lessons From Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is in turmoil, with tensions rising and people dying every day. Many of them including women, children and the elderly have nothing in common with terrorists or militants.

The government is losing control of its territory: of the 34 provinces, the Taliban controls a dozen. The production and export of narcotics is growing. There is a real danger of destabilization extending to neighboring countries, including the republics of Central Asia as well as Pakistan.

What began after Sept. 11, 2001, as a seemingly appropriate military response aimed at rooting out terrorism could end in a major strategic failure.

We need to understand why this is happening and what can still be done to turn around a nearly disastrous situation. The recent conference in London, attended by representatives from many countries and international organizations, is a first step in a new direction.

After diligent preparations, delegates to the London meeting adopted decisions that could help to turn things around but only if the experience of the past three decades is reassessed and its lessons learned.

In 1979, the Soviet leadership sent troops to Afghanistan, justifying that move not just by the desire to help friendly elements there but also by the need to stabilize a neighboring country. The greatest mistake was failing to understand Afghanistans complexity its patchwork of ethnic groups, clans and tribes, its unique traditions and minimal governance.

The result was the opposite of what we had intended: even greater instability, a war with thousands of victims and dangerous consequences for our own country. On top of it, the West, particularly the United States, kept fueling the fire in the spirit of the Cold War; it remained ready to support just about anyone against the Soviet Union, giving no thought to possible long-term consequences.

As part of perestroika in the mid-1980s, the new Soviet leadership drew conclusions from our troubles in Afghanistan. We made two crucial decisions. First, we set the goal of withdrawing our troops. Second, we intended to work with all parties in the conflict and with the governments involved to achieve national reconciliation in Afghanistan and make it a peaceful and neutral country that threatened no one.

Looking back, I still believe that it was a proper and responsible two-track course. I am sure that if we had fully succeeded, many troubles and disasters could have been avoided. Our new policy was not just a declaration; during my tenure, we worked hard and in good faith to implement it.

To succeed, we needed sincere and responsible cooperation from all sides. The Afghan government was ready to compromise and went more than halfway to achieve reconciliation. In a number of regions, things started to improve.

However, Pakistan, particularly its top brass, and the United States blocked all avenues to progress. They wanted one thing: the withdrawal of Soviet troops, which they thought would leave them in full control. By denying Afghan President Mohammad Najibullahs government even minimal support, Boris Yeltsin played into their hands when he took office.

During the 1990s, the world seemed indifferent to Afghanistan. In that decade the countrys government fell into the hands of the Taliban, who turned Afghanistan into a haven for Islamic fundamentalists and an incubator of terrorism.

Sept. 11 was a rude awakening for Western leaders. Even then, however, the West made a decision that was not carefully thought through and therefore proved flawed.

After ousting the Taliban government, the United States thought that the military victory, achieved at little cost, was final and had basically solved the long-term problem.

The initial success was probably one reason why the Americans expected a cakewalk in Iraq, taking a fatal step in a militaristic strategy there as well. In the meantime, they built a democratic façade in Afghanistan, to be guarded by the International Security Assistance Force i.e., NATO troops. Increasingly, NATO sought to assume the role of a global policeman.

The rest is history. The military path in Afghanistan turned out to be less and less sustainable. That was an open secret; even the U.S. ambassador, in recently disclosed cables, said so.

I have been asked several times in recent months what I would recommend to President Obama, who inherited this mess from his predecessor. My answer has been the same each time: a political solution and troop withdrawal. That requires a strategy of national reconciliation.

Now, at long last, a strategy very similar to the one we offered more than two decades ago and that our partners rebuffed was presented at the London meeting: reconciliation, involving all more or less reasonable elements in reconstruction, and emphasizing a political rather than a military solution.

The United Nations envoy to Afghanistan said in a recent interview that whats needed is demilitarization of the entire strategy in Afghanistan. What a shame this wasnt said, and done, long before!

The chances of success success rather than military victory are at best 50-50. There have been some contacts with certain elements within the Taliban. Still more needs to be done to bring Iran into the process; a lot of hard work remains to be done with the Pakistanis.

Russia could become an important part of the Afghan settlement process. The West should appreciate the position Russias leaders are taking on Afghanistan. Far from gloating and letting the West bite the bullet while we wash our hands of the whole thing, Russia is ready to cooperate with the West because it understands that it is in its own best interests to counter the threats coming from Afghanistan.

Russia is right in asking why, during the years of U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan, little or nothing has been done to stem the production of narcotics, large amounts of which flow to Russia through its neighbors porous borders. Russia is also right to demand access to economic opportunities in Afghanistan, including the reconstruction of dozens of projects built with our help and then destroyed during the 1990s.

Russia is Afghanistans neighbor, and its interests must be taken into account. The logic seems self-evident, but sometimes a reminder is in order.

I would like to hope that a new day is dawning for long-suffering Afghanistan, a ray of hope for its millions of people. The opportunity is there, but much is needed to seize it: realism, persistence and, last but not least, honesty in learning from the mistakes made in the past and the ability to act on that knowledge.