

Obama Repeats Soviet Missteps in Afghanistan: Celestine Bohlen

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Commentary by Celestine Bohlen



Feb. 25 (Bloomberg) -- Here's a scary thought. The U.S. could be walking in the Soviet Union's shoes.

Twenty years to the month after the Soviet Army pulled out of Afghanistan, the U.S. is ramping up troop commitments in a country famously known as "the graveyard of empires."

This is the country that President [Barack Obama](#) called the "right battlefield," where we are fighting the real enemy for the correct reasons. We went in there in 2001 to crush al-Qaeda and push the Taliban from power so Afghanistan would never again be used as a staging area for terrorist attacks.

The problem is that we are now in danger of falling short of that limited goal, and even losing the war. Sending more U.S. soldiers is not the answer.

The security situation in Afghanistan has been worsening in the last 12 months. One statistic speaks volumes: civilian casualties rose a staggering 40 percent last year to 2,118, of which 552 were killed by allied or Afghan government air strikes, according to a UN report.

That's just one reason why Obama rushed a decision to send another 17,000 U.S. troops -- on top of the 38,000 U.S. soldiers now on the ground -- ahead of a comprehensive policy review due in April. That is expected to call for even more troops.

Yet history tells us that increasing troop levels to fight an insurgency is not a winning formula. The Soviets learned this after 10 years in Afghanistan; the French learned it in Algeria, and we had our lesson in Vietnam.

Troop Escalation Fails

The larger the foreign troop presence in wars of counterinsurgency, “the worse the outcome tends to be.” That was the sweeping conclusion drawn by a [2008 study](#) by the Rand Corp.

Yes, the one-time infusion of 30,000 U.S. combat troops into Iraq in January 2007 succeeded in improving security in Baghdad and other cities. A key component, known as the Anbar Awakening, was a political effort to reach out to local Sunni leaders who, after three years of violence, were ready to back the U.S. against the insurgents.

“You cannot kill your way out of insurgency,” General [David H. Petraeus](#), architect of the surge and now Commander of the U.S. General Command, said in an interview with [Time](#) magazine last month. “You’re not going to defeat everybody out there. You have to turn them.”

In Afghanistan, the war is taking place not in the cities, which are relatively secure, but in the country’s southern half, now more or less under Taliban control, where allies are as elusive as the enemy.

Soviet Lessons

This is where the Soviets met their match 20 years ago, and not surprisingly, they have some advice on that score, as painful as it may be to hear.

“Afghanistan taught us an invaluable lesson,” ex-Soviet General [Boris Gromov](#) said on the anniversary of the Feb. 15, 1989, withdrawal. “It has been and always will be impossible to solve political problems using force.”

In Europe last week, U.S. Defense Secretary [Robert Gates](#) offered U.S. allies a choice. For those unwilling to send more troops to Afghanistan, he proposed a contribution on “the stability side,” which he defined as governance and development.

Maybe “the stability side” is where the U.S. should be putting more of its money and manpower, rather than spend the extra \$7.3 billion the Pentagon has requested for troop reinforcements.

Emphasis on Dialogue

If there is a solution to Afghanistan’s failure as a state -- and there may not be one -- it lies in what Gates calls governance and development. That means broadening the political dialogue with moderate members of the Taliban, speeding up the training of the local police and army, weeding out corruption and getting neighbors like Pakistan to join the fight against extremism.

None of this is easy. The Taliban insurgency has spread into Pakistan, where the government, over U.S. objections, recently tried to make a separate peace by giving fundamentalists the right to impose Islamic law in the volatile Swat valley.

The Obama administration has stepped up diplomatic and military efforts to help the Pakistanis contain the Taliban. The promised policy review is sure to also focus on a broad range of economic assistance, including finding alternatives to the poppy crops that help fund the Taliban, and increased development aid.

Still, in announcing the new deployments last week, Obama invoked the need “to stabilize a deteriorating situation.” That is one slippery slope.

100,000 Troops

The Soviets never had more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan at one time. Depending on the outcome of the administration’s policy review, the U.S. may have as many as 68,000 there, along with 32,000 troops provided by NATO allies, putting the total near Soviet levels.

The Soviets’ goals were also limited, but their methods were not. One million Afghans and 15,000 Soviet soldiers died during the 10-year [occupation](#), which began as an attempt to prop up a puppet regime.

It’s a safe bet that if the Soviets, with their disregard for “collateral damage,” couldn’t control the country by military force, neither can the U.S. and its NATO allies. In fact, the trend in the past year has been in the other direction, as the Taliban has extended its reach deeper into Pakistan and across wider swathes of Afghanistan.

Unlike the Soviet Union, which collapsed 10 months after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. will not meet its end there.

Still, Afghanistan’s history of burying big ambitions -- those of Alexander the Great as well as of [Leonid Brezhnev](#) -- was clearly on General Petraeus’s mind when he spoke at a security conference in Munich this month.

“We cannot take that history lightly,” [said Petraeus](#), and he is right.

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