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As the tanks roll in, shades of a Soviet failure

Analysis: Does the arrival of American tanks herald the start of an urban war?

By C.M. Sennott

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As winter settles across Afghanistan, American M-1 Abrams tanks are just about to roll in.

Arrival is expected in the next few weeks of the Marine Corps Tankers with a detachment of 14 Abrams with their 120mm main guns and their devastating, long-distance accuracy.

Soon these 70-ton tanks will be rolling right past the bombed-out hulks of Soviet tanks scattered across the rugged landscape as rusted symbols of the failures of the last empire that tried and failed to occupy Afghanistan.

Analysts say bringing an armored presence to the asymmetrical fight suggests that the U.S. military strategy is shifting, at least for the winter, to a focus by ground forces on targeting concentrations of insurgents at a greater distance.

Analysts say that means intense urban warfare is on the horizon particularly in the southern city of Kandahar, the Taliban's hometown that has been the strategic prize of the U.S. troop surge since it began amassing there in the summer.

In other words, the counter-insurgency strategy of hearts and minds and steering clear of urban settings because of the risk of mass civilian casualties might be over.

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The former Afghan ambassador to Washington, Said Jawad, said in a recent interview with GlobalPost, “A lot of pressure has been put around the Taliban that has forced them into the city. And we will likely see a fight this winter in Kandahar city, an urban fight.”

“The worry will be its impact on civilians,” said Jawad, who is now a Fisher Family Fellow at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The arrival of tanks intensifies that concern for Afghans and for human rights activists, who say fighting has already intensified in recent weeks in the streets of the city of Kandahar.

But to U.S. Army Lt. Rajiv Srinivasan, who served as a Stryker platoon leader in Kandahar, the arrival of the heavy armor is not such a bad idea.

“If there is a vehicle on the ground in Afghanistan, the enemy will find a way to blow it up. But tanks are weapons systems capable of taking the hit and continuing the fight,” he recently wrote for the New York Times’ “At War” blog.

The struggle between the effectiveness of armor and the threat it poses to civilian populations is as old as mechanized war, but it is a moral dilemma that the United States is likely to face head on in the coming months.

On a surprise visit to Afghanistan this week, U.S. President Barack Obama pointed to what he said were notable successes in Afghanistan since he ordered a 30,000-troop surge, which arrived over the summer.

Amid the attempt to bolster troops in what is widely seen as a faltering war that has dragged on for more than nine years, Obama’s advisers have been meeting to finalize a comprehensive assessment of whether the expanded U.S. presence is working.

And there is a growing sense that any gains against the Taliban are fragile at best.

Michael O’Hanlon, an expert on Afghanistan who served last year as a member of the secretary of state’s International Security Advisory Board, said it is simply “too soon to know” if the surge has worked.

O’Hanlon, who is now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said there were definitely positive signs of success in killing insurgents and targeting Taliban commanders, but that “the ranks from which these fighters are being drawn is huge.”

“There’s just no evidence that killing our way out of this problem is going to work,” he added.

The Soviets tried that approach, as Bruce Riedel, who led the Obama administration’s strategic review in Afghanistan, pointed out in a recent interview.

“They chose an urban war in Kandahar and carpet bombed the place. The population went from 200,000 to 25,000 in a few days in the early 1980s,” he said. “We don’t fight like that and rightly so.”

Riedel said that there are lessons of history to be learned from the way the Soviet approach in urban warfare in Afghanistan backfired and fueled the insurgency that ultimately defeated them.

And so as the American Abrams roll in past the remains of the old Soviet tanks, they tread on history.

And they do so just as the American military rolls past another Soviet landmark in Afghanistan. That is the timeframe of nine years and 50 days, the precise length of time the Soviets spent in Afghanistan before they humbly withdrew.