

Is the International Intervention in Afghanistan Doomed by History? Exploring the Similarities, Differences and Lessons of Past Conflicts

“[L]ike the astrologers and magicians whom they have succeeded [they] cast up their eyes to the clouds, and speak in immense, unsubstantiated images and similes, in deeply misleading metaphors and allegories, and make use of hypnotic formulae with little regard for experience... Thereby they throw dust in their own eyes as well as ours, obstruct our vision of the real world, and further confuse an already sufficiently bewildered public about the relations of value to fact...”¹

- Isaiah Berlin, on *Historical Inevitability*

Introduction

The international intervention in Afghanistan, now in its ninth year, is doomed by historical fate. History repeats itself and Afghanistan—where foreign invasions have failed since the time of Alexander the Great—will once more bear out this historical inevitability. This matter-of-fact assertion, often tacit but at times explicit, has become a widely-accepted diagnosis of the ongoing war in Afghanistan. I will argue that this blanket critique of the international mission in Afghanistan, based on the premise that it is doomed to fail, is inherently misleading. I will offer three counter-arguments to this critique. Firstly, I will seek to demonstrate that historical inevitability is a myth, albeit a politically-useful one. Secondly, I will concede, where necessary, on some of the tactical and political similarities which such conflicts as the Vietnam War and the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War shared with the current Afghan War. But I will equally highlight the major qualitative differences in terms of political and international contexts. Finally, I will attempt to draw some conclusions regarding the ongoing war in Afghanistan, and put forward my own interpretation of why the current intervention is different and arguably necessary.

The current mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is mandated by the United Nations (UN), and is a well-and-truly international mission.² By most accounts, Afghanistan’s insecurity is not only an

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 78-79.

² Over 40 democracies contribute to the NATO-ISAF coalition, totalling some 68,000 international troops. Slightly under half of this number is drawn from the United States. NATO HQ Media

American foreign policy issue, but a global problem.³ Despite the complex historical and geopolitical setting of the current Afghan War, many contemporary pundits simplify the matter thus: the war was caused and, thus, revolves around the USA. Some push the point even further, arguing that Afghanistan has become the personal ownership of the US president. “It’s up to Barack Obama,” seems to be the fashionable reading of the war in Afghanistan.⁴ The problem is that by giving an exaggerated emphasis to the United States in the intervention, one invites a host of unpalatable, and often unjustified, historical analogies into the debate. Furthermore, by focussing on the chief US decision-maker—commander-in-chief Obama—at the expense of the international allied effort, analysts are reinforcing the misleading assumption that this is a US war, serving only US interests, in a US-dominated world order. This means that the complicated international context of the current war for Afghanistan is unwittingly traded for a more straightforward, but over-simplified US-centric narrative.

Vietnam, Jimmy Carter and All That: The Danger of False Analogies

As of late 2009, a frenzied media battle was raging in daily newspaper articles and other opinion pieces. The moment was critical for the war effort. General McChrystal—having pressured the US administration to send in reinforcements to the mission—had not yet received his additional 10,000 boots on the ground. A two-month long deliberation process within the Obama administration was being lambasted by many commentators as sheer indecisiveness, or ‘dithering’. It was clear that an historical ghost was haunting the coalition’s efforts in Afghanistan—that of the Vietnam War.⁵ Obama was certainly confronted with a very similar dilemma as his presidential counterparts throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Public support for the US war effort, then as now, was waning dramatically, correlated

Operations Centre-Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan National Army Strength & Laydown, 2009.

³ Regional great powers are by and large facilitating the mission in Afghanistan, including the Russian Federation and, to a lesser extent, the People’s Republic of China. Furthermore, India, Iran, Turkey, the Central Asia ‘Stans’ and, arguably, Pakistan all share a common interest in blocking a fundamentalist Taliban regime from returning to power in Kabul. Adam Roberts, ‘Doctrine and Reality in Afghanistan’, in *Survival* 51(1), 2009: 50.

⁴ William Kristol, ‘A Whiskey Tango Foxtrot Presidency?’, in *The Weekly Standard*, September 21 2009: 7.

⁵ Paul Kelly, ‘Obama to confront spectre of Vietnam’, in *The Australian*, October 3-4 2009: 11.

with the increasing number of soldiers returning home in body bags.⁶ As a result, the future of the entire mission was cast in deep uncertainty.

It is important to note that historical analogy *can* be quite useful in making well-informed policy decisions. The ability to learn from our past mistakes—or those of others—is what makes us intelligent and (ideally) rational creatures.⁷ President Obama’s White House acknowledged the lessons of the US military venture in Vietnam before committing to its own ‘surge’ in early 2010. Indeed, an unofficial book club initiated during Obama’s extensive deliberations focussed on such retrospective accounts of Vietnam as Gordon Goldstein’s *Lessons in Disaster*.⁸ That was good news, in that American leaders demonstrated their aptitude to learning from their predecessors’ mistakes. But this only seemed to have encouraged Vietnam-era comparisons in the popular media. “The President,” one author wrote, “reminded of the fate of another domestically ambitious president, LBJ, has hesitated before going all-out to rescue the mission in Kabul.”⁹ However, as Ian Martin argued, by being overly concerned with emulating Lyndon Baynes Johnson, Barack Obama was actually mimicking Jimmy Carter—another Democratic president whose foreign policy was widely derided as weak and ineffective.¹⁰

So why is the current war in Afghanistan constantly imagined to conform with the failed US intervention in Vietnam?¹¹ Why can’t Obama just be himself, in the modern era, facing novel security problems, rather than the reincarnation of historical actors fighting lost wars? Three ideas spring to mind. Firstly, the cynical answer would be that such simplification is necessary for attention-grabbing news spots. But cynicism is not necessarily intelligent. A second reason could be that analysts take too literally Santayana’s dictum about learning from history, lest one

⁶ For example, see *The Economist*, ‘American opinions on Afghanistan: A war of necessity?’, 22 August 2009: 22.

⁷ Friedrich von Hayek sharply criticised the “fatalistic belief” of historical inevitability, which seems to depict human agency as entirely impotent, if at all existent. Cited in Antony Flew, ‘Human Choice and Historical Inevitability’, in *The Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. V, No. 4 (Fall 1981): 356.

⁸ Gordon M. Goldstein, ‘Lessons in Disaster’, in *Foreign Policy*, October 6 2009, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/06/lessons_in_disaster (accessed 3 December 2009).

⁹ John C. Hulsman, ‘The Dice are loaded against Obama with Afghanistan mission destined to fail’, in *The Weekend Australian*, November 14-15 2009: 23.

¹⁰ Ian Martin, ‘Same dilemma, different president’, in *The Australian*, November 17 2009: 8.

¹¹ For a particularly blunt comparison, see Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, ‘Obama’s Indecent Interval’, in *Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2009, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/10/sorry_obama_afghanistans_your_vietnam (accessed 12 December 2009).

be doomed to repeat it.¹² This gives rise to a linear and cyclical view of the past, which is one of the tautological falsehoods—otherwise known as Whig or presentist history—which historians worthy of the name avoid at all costs.¹³ But history is not such a simplistic process. Thirdly, and most convincingly, directly comparing Afghanistan to Vietnam seems to be a convenient way to express general opposition to the Afghan mission, be it for political or moral reasons.

Of course there are similarities between both wars, some rather striking. Specifically, both the Viet Cong and Taliban used similar guerrilla tactics—evading the world’s most advanced military forces by day, but controlling villages by night for example. Moreover, some US military and political patterns from the Vietnam War *are* being replicated in this new war. So much so, that Thomas Johnson and Chris Mason lament the fact that “we have apparently learned nothing from Vietnam.”¹⁴ But it is possible to over-state their similarities. During a landmark speech, President Obama directly addressed the concerns of the critics “who suggest that Afghanistan is another Vietnam”, and “argue that it cannot be stabilised, and we are better off cutting our losses and rapidly withdrawing.” To Obama, “this argument depends upon a *false reading of history*.” He continued:

Unlike Vietnam, we are joined by a broad coalition of 43 nations that recognises the legitimacy of our action. Unlike Vietnam, we are not facing a broad-based popular insurgency. And most importantly, unlike Vietnam, the American people were viciously attacked from Afghanistan, and remain a target for those same extremists who are plotting along its border.¹⁵

Indeed, Vietnam analogies, as a January 2009 *Newsweek* article made clear, “can be tiresome”. John Barry, the author, cut a finer line than most contemporary

¹² As one of the most quoted—as well as most commonly misquoted—historical observations, I am not suggesting that we abandon George Santayana’s dictum. But what he actually said was that those who could not “remember the past” were condemned to repeat it. There is an obvious distinction between remembering a past event, and learning a set of objectively-defined ‘lessons’ from it. The point is that history does not offer ready-made lessons for all to see. Different lessons become visible to different historians. Hence, what carries more weight in historical inquiries is less the ‘objective truth’, than the empirical evidence and sophistication behind the (subjective) arguments of notable historians. Hence Kierkegaard’s own dictum: “Truth is subjectivity.”

¹³ Cameron G. Thies, ‘A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations’, in *International Studies Perspectives* 3, 2002: 360.

¹⁴ Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, ‘Saigon 2009: Afghanistan is today’s Vietnam. No question mark needed’, in *Foreign Policy*, August 20 2009, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/20/saigon_2009 (accessed 5 December 2009).

¹⁵ Emphasis added. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Barack Obama’s new Afghanistan strategy speech in full*, December 2 2009, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8389936.stm> (accessed 5 December 2009).

analyses between the “disturbing parallels” and “important differences” between the campaigns. Like in Vietnam:

The nation that we are supposedly rescuing is no nation at all but rather a deeply divided, semi-failed state with an incompetent, corrupt government held to be illegitimate by a large portion of its population. The enemy is well accustomed to resisting foreign invaders and can escape into convenient refuges across the border ... [But] there are important differences between Afghanistan and Vietnam. The Taliban is not as powerful or unified a foe as the Viet Cong. On the other hand, Vietnam did not pose a direct national-security threat; even believers in the “domino theory” did not expect to see the Viet Cong fighting in San Francisco.¹⁶

Hence, whatever their points in common, two-dimensional comparisons of Vietnam and Afghanistan often downplay the major political and contextual differences between them. Furthermore, the US has arguably learned important lessons from Vietnam—such as not to assassinate its own corrupt autocratic clients, as happened to South Vietnamese Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. As Professor Alfred W. McCoy has argued, however, this has had the ironic effect of reinforcing Washington’s conundrum and that of its allies in Afghanistan. As in Diem’s case, Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s strongest weapon and bargaining chip is his very weakness, in that he could and often has used “the threat that his government...might simply collapse if pushed too hard.”¹⁷ This leads to the point that, rather than possessing directionality and moving in an inexorable march, history, “or at least our awareness of its lessons, does change things, albeit in complex, unpredictable ways.”¹⁸ That is why an essentially ahistorical argument—that Afghanistan is a second Vietnam—cannot serve as a balanced and reasonable platform for making important policy decisions.

Historical analogies are a beneficial, and necessary, component of human learning. A great mistake is only made when history is imagined to be inevitable in its trajectory—panning out just as neatly and predictably every time. By far the most instructive analogous event to the current intervention in Afghanistan is not that of the Vietnam War. Evidently, it is the historical experience of Afghanistan

¹⁶ “To critics, especially those on the left, all American interventions after Vietnam have been potential ‘quagmires’. But sometimes clichés come true, and, especially lately [in early 2009], it seems that the war in Afghanistan is shaping up in all-too-familiar ways.” John Barry, ‘Obama’s Vietnam’, *Newsweek*, January 31 2009, available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/2009/01/30/obama-s-vietnam.html> (accessed 6 June 2010).

¹⁷ Prof. Alfred W. McCoy, ‘From Vietnam to Afghanistan: America and the Dictators’, *Global Research*, available at: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18714> (accessed 6 June 2010).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

itself which provides the most important ‘lessons’ for the current intervention. In particular, the 1979 to 1989 Soviet-Afghan War represents the scenario which NATO-ISAF military commanders are most worried about repeating, due to the very disturbing historical parallels.

How Afghan Islamists Brought Down the Soviet Union

The Red Army invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, responding to the pleas of Kabul's besieged socialist government for military support. The Soviet mission was meant to be quick—perhaps lasting up to two years—to prop up the friendly regime in the name of ‘good neighbourly’ relations. After that initial period, a “permanent advisory and security presence was envisioned.”¹⁹ After all, a Cold War was on. One more Soviet-aligned state meant one less for the US imperialists to court. That is essentially how the entire Fourtieth Army wound up on the Hindu Kush. Rather than a *blitzkrieg*, however, what Soviet generals got was an unsuccessful ten-year long war.²⁰ Finally, this guerrilla conflict was economically draining—putting additional strains on the stagnating Soviet economy. These human, material, and even moral pressures contributed to the ‘restructuring’ (*perestroika*) of the 1980s and, ultimately, the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Today, analysts commonly ring alarm bells, warning that history is repeating itself. Some of their claims are convincing. Five principal observations, or ‘lessons’, are variously presented. The number one similarity between the Soviet and present war is the technological advantage of the invader. Massive firepower and air superiority were employed by the Soviets—as during the initial US-led invasion—to bombard enemy strongholds into submission. But this only emboldened the ‘soldiers of God’ (*Mujahideen*), who capitalised on popular grievances from innocent civilians dying in such indiscriminate barrages. Moscow’s ‘lessons learned’ during this frustrating campaign, mostly negative, have served as tactical

¹⁹ Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London and Washington: Brassey’s, 1991), 10.

²⁰ The costs in blood and treasure were considerable, amounting to the (official) loss of some 14,000 young Soviet soldiers. Realistically, the death toll was probably double that figure. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (translated and edited by Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress) (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 310.

lessons for the current international soldiers.²¹ One lesson which General Rhodes drew from the botched Soviet war was that, although US “equipment, technology, training, and support are the best in the world...technological superiority is not in and of itself a guarantee of success.”²²

In one notorious incident of the current intervention, in early 2009, a German commander ordered bombs to be dropped on fuel tankers which had been stolen by insurgents. The explosions killed countless civilians, as well as Taliban fighters, and caused a crisis of guilt and uncertainty back in the Federal Republic of Germany.²³ Hence David Loyn’s warning for coalition forces to beware of “the deceptive lure of tactical superiority.”²⁴ It will neither result in strategic victories, nor in buying Afghan acquiescence; and it will drain domestic support. Secondly, failing to understand the complex local grievances which animate the various insurgent groups is a common mistake.²⁵ The Afghan resistance fighters were variously labelled as bandits (*dushman*), ‘ghosts’ (*dukhi*), insurgents and, finally, ‘the armed resistance.’²⁶ What this suggests is that the Soviet military failed to understand its enemy. The dominant Marxist-Leninist discourse left little room to comprehend native Afghan customs, religious traditions, and community values. For the Soviets, anyone opposing the forces of socialist progress could only be mad, backward, or a bandit. Today, there seems to be uncertainty in NATO-ISAF headquarters regarding whether the current conflict should be seen as an Afghan civil war, an inter-Pashtun ethnic conflict, or an Islamist upheaval.²⁷ Failing to

²¹ See for example: The Frunze Military Academy, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (edited by Lester W. Grau) (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996).

²² Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Virginia: The United States Marine Corps Studies and Analysis Division, 1995), vii.

²³ An article in the popular German magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote that these two bombs “shook the self-image of the Federal Republic,” as a pacific and Kantian force in the world. ‘Das Ende der Unschuld’, *Der Spiegel*, 14 September 2009: 75.

²⁴ David Loyn, ‘5 Afghan History Lessons for Obama’s New General’, in *Foreign Policy*, June 24 2009, available at:

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/24/5_afghan_history_lessons_for_obamas_new_general?page=0.0 (accessed 7 December 2009).

²⁵ See for example David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Artyom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist’s Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 2-3.

²⁷ David Kilcullen, ‘Conference of Defence Associations Institute 26th Annual Seminar’, CPAC, March 3 2010, available at: <http://www.cpac.ca/forms/index.asp?dsp=template&act=view3&pagetype=vod&lang=e&clipID=3730> (accessed 6 June 2010).

agree on the common problem certainly poses the risk of Western powers repeating a Soviet mistake in Afghanistan.

Third, the Soviet mission was plagued by the unreliability of their Afghan partners. Inter-factional fighting, low morale, and mass desertions characterised the performance of the Afghan Army during the 1980s.²⁸ The Soviet attempt to ‘Afghanise’ the war prefaced Moscow’s exit strategy. This is exactly what the contemporary coalition is attempting to do, by dramatically boosting the Afghan National Army (ANA), and handing over responsibility to Kabul.²⁹ But some of the ANA’s deficiencies remain comparable to their notorious level some thirty years ago. Fourthly, and directly relating to the previous point, Moscow’s war effort was hampered by the weakness of the central government to control areas outside of urban centres. The invader could never bring order to the countryside. As a result, the foreign troops effectively abandoned Afghan villages (*kishlaks*) and mountains in favour of highly-defended cities; the circular highway which connects Afghanistan’s major population centres was controlled by the Soviets in most places, but not all of the time.³⁰ Against this historical background, General McChrystal’s proposed strategy of focussing on Afghan cities and civilian centres, at the expense of rural patrols, sounds eerily familiar.

Finally, the US surge in Afghanistan which the Obama administration recently approved—and explicitly modelled on the Iraqi surge—has been framed by various analysts in the light of Soviet troop commitments to that same land. Zbigniew Brzezinski is one such public figure, who has claimed that NATO-ISAF was on the cusp of committing all of the Soviets’ prior mistakes in Afghanistan.³¹ One such mistake, which history seemingly warned against, was committing too many troops to the inextricable Afghan quagmire. At the height of the Soviet intervention, the foreign troop strength in Afghanistan hovered around 100,000 at any one time—

²⁸ Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear*, 46-47. In some cases, entire Afghan regiments—Russian equipment and all—would simply switch allegiance and begin fighting for the guerrillas. For this reason, the Soviets hesitated to rely on their erstwhile native allies. Anna Heinämaa, Maija Leppänen and Yuir Yurchenko, *The Soldiers’ Story: Soviet Veterans Remember the Afghan War* (translated by A. D. Haun) (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 4.

²⁹ Steve Coll, ‘Legitimacy and the Afghan Army’, in *The New Yorker*, 24 September 2009, available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/stevecoll/afghanistan/> (accessed 14 December 2009).

³⁰ ‘Ink Spots’, 28 September 2009. *Ibid.*

³¹ Jonathan Marcus, ‘US “risks Afghan Soviet failure”’, *BBC*, 11 September 2009, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8251944.stm (accessed 8 December 2009).

roughly where it stands today.³² If the Pentagon and international ISAF commanders do not pay due attention to the mistakes of the previous army in Afghanistan, then history may (very roughly) repeat itself.

Why This Time Is Different

All of the tactical similarities which the current war shares with the Soviet experience should not blind us to their major differences. The most important is the international political setting. During the late Cold War, Moscow acted under its self-proclaimed ‘Brezhnev Doctrine’, whereby any attempts to reverse the gains of revolutionary socialism—anywhere in the world—would be met with Soviet counter-force. It could perhaps be argued that similar ideas underpinned the so-called Bush Doctrine, after 9/11, stating the United States’ right at undertaking unilateral régime change.³³ But the fact remains that the Soviet invasion was qualitatively different to that of international forces today. Back then, a major coalition of states—from America to China, and from Saudi Arabia to Israel—unofficially sponsored the insurgents through direct economic and military aid.³⁴ Today, the Taliban enjoys no such extensive international support. To the December 1979 Soviet invasion, most Afghans reacted “the same way that they had reacted in the past to every foreign invader...with outrage, resentment and characteristic Afghan implacability.”³⁵ In contrast, an Australian Lieutenant explained, the predictions of the “doomsayers” that a similar popular uprising would greet American soldiers in October 2001 fell flat.³⁶ In fact, the seemingly benign security situation initially misled the occupying American and allied forces.

³² The Soviet-Afghan War has often been compared to the experience of the US in Vietnam. Whilst similar in political contexts (Cold War struggle, external support for insurgents, etc.) there are notable differences. The Soviet presence paled in comparison to the American effort in Vietnam, which consisted of more than 500,000 soldiers in a country five times smaller than Afghanistan. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan war*, xix.

³³ Indeed, George Bush’s National Security Council (NSC) had already agreed, one day *before* the September 11 attacks, to a program of covertly overthrowing the Taliban if necessary. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), 205-206, available at: <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2009).

³⁴ George Crile, *My Enemy’s Enemy: The Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History: The Arming of the Mujahideen by the CIA* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 142.

³⁵ Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear*, 10.

³⁶ Lieutenant Andrew Wegener, *A Complex and Changing Dynamic: Afghan Responses to Foreign Intervention, 1878-2006* (Canberra: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2007), 1-2.

The Taliban insurgency only began gaining momentum between 2005 and 2006,³⁷ by which time a diversion of American resources to Iraq had stifled the possibility of intervening early to re-establish order in Afghanistan.

For practical and ideological reasons, international NATO-ISAF troops cannot be directly compared to Red Army soldiers. At the operational level, Russians treated Afghans very differently than Americans and their allies do in the current war. During the 1980s, entire villages were flattened by Soviet artillery barrages, peaceful civilians and all. Furthermore, soldiers' accounts reveal the horrific unofficial practice of taking no Afghan prisoners, and summarily executing them instead, especially towards the end of the war.³⁸ One notorious commander, named Antonenko, even punished his troops if they did not sufficiently lay waste to Afghan villages. Shortly before the Soviet withdrawal, he took it upon himself to personally mow down Afghan women and children with an AK47.³⁹ Some scholars have even spoken of a virtual "genocide" of the local population under Soviet occupation—which caused the death of approximately one million Afghans, not to mention the indirect result of millions of Afghan refugees.⁴⁰ Without corroborating evidence to suggest that the NATO-ISAF intervention is responsible for such mass atrocities in Afghanistan, conflating the current campaign to that of the Soviet Union in its dying days is indeed an act of historical acrobatics.

All of the previous empirical evidence makes it slightly unrealistic to directly compare the operations of the Soviet Union with those of NATO-ISAF in Afghanistan. Robert Gates, the US Defence Secretary, has raised an important point. The size of the coalition's military footprint, although similar to the Soviet precedent, is less important than "the nature of the footprint and the behaviour of those troops...and their interactions with the Afghans."⁴¹ Another major difference with the past experiment at creating a functional Afghan state, underwritten by Moscow, has to do with the contentious question of ideology. Whilst the Soviets effectively "imposed a government with alien ideology," as Afghanistan's Defence

³⁷ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), *GAO-10-178R Afghanistan's Security Environment*, November 5 2009: 2.

³⁸ Many such events are related in Heinämaa, Leppänen and Yurchenko, *The Soldiers' Story*.

³⁹ Borovik, *The Hidden War*, 258-259.

⁴⁰ M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995).

<http://www.escholarship.org/editions/view?docId=ft7b69p12h;brand=ucpress>

⁴¹ Cited in Yaroslav Trofimov, 'Surge plan dogged by Soviet war debacle', in *The Weekend Australian*, November 28-29 2009: 20.

Minister stated, the US and its allies “enabled us to write a democratic constitution and choose our own government.”⁴² Regardless of how ineffective and corrupt the post-Taliban Kabul government has been, the fact that Afghans were given a choice was indeed a major departure from historical precedents. Finally, a major qualitative difference of the contemporary NATO-led intervention in Afghanistan relates to the opinion of ordinary Afghans.

As Professor Maley, one of Australia’s pre-eminent experts on Afghanistan, explained during a recent public lecture, when Afghans are asked whether they liked the presence of foreign troops on their soil, and if they like the US-led commando missions taking place in their villages—often killing innocent non-combatants—their responses are inevitably negative. However, when these same Afghan villagers and city merchants were asked if they wanted the international forces to leave their country, the answer was once more ‘no’.⁴³ How to explain this apparent contradiction? This anecdotal evidence suggests that Afghans see the NATO-ISAF mission as necessary for the country’s security to normalise. Opinion polls confirm this Afghan perception. In 2006, public polls suggested that Afghans were on the whole (44%) positive about the direction in which their country was heading. To most Afghans, their major concerns were not security-related but were instead bread-and-butter issues of unemployment, poverty and corruption.⁴⁴ After the degradation of the following three years, Afghans were less optimistic about their country’s future, but the vast majority were still resolutely opposed to a return of the Taliban, even if support for coalition forces was wavering somewhat.⁴⁵

As of early 2010, however, most Afghans were increasingly optimistic about the future of Afghanistan and public perceptions of NATO and US troops were even improving. The Taliban, not Western soldiers, are still seen as the major threat to Afghanistan’s stability—and only some 6 percent of respondents wanted, or

⁴² The said minister in Hamid Karzai’s government is Abdul Rahim Wardak. Cited in *Ibid.*

⁴³ Professor William Maley, ‘Recent Developments in Afghanistan’, *Australian Institute of International Affairs, Queensland Branch*, Harris Terrance, May 11 2010.

⁴⁴ 21% were more sceptical, believing that Afghanistan’s situation was not improving, whilst 29% had mixed feelings. The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2006: A Survey of the Afghan People*, Kabul, 2006: 3.

⁴⁵ For the sake of methodological accountability, it should be noted that this particular poll was only conducted in Kabul, meaning that the views of villagers in Taliban-held areas further into the provinces could not be accurately portrayed. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Afghanistan: national opinion poll for BBC, ABC News and ARD*, 9 February 2009, available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2009/02_february/09/afghanistan.shtml (accessed 6 June 2010).

admitted to wanting the return of Taliban rule. Moreover, Afghans themselves are divided over when NATO-ISAF should leave their country, with the largest proportion (29%) believing that this should depend on the overall security situation.⁴⁶ A major Afghanistan-wide report by *Oxfam*, released in late 2009, revealed how trenchant ordinary Afghan views of the insurgents were, with one particular interviewee decrying the fact that the “Taliban destroyed our country in the name of Islam.”⁴⁷ Indeed, in terms of popular perceptions of three decades of war in Afghanistan, most Afghans see the Communist government era (from 1978-1992) as the worst, closely followed by the Taliban period (1996-2001), and the Civil War of the 1990s as the most “harmful” periods of their recent history respectively.⁴⁸ Finally, poverty and unemployment was seen as the major driving factor of the conflict, followed by endemic government corruption, and the Taliban in third place. Only 18 percent of respondents saw the presence of international forces in Afghanistan as contributing to the vicious cycle of violence in that country.⁴⁹

What all of this evidence suggests is that Afghans themselves are well aware of the risks that a precipitous NATO-ISAF pullout would entail, as advocated by proponents of the argument that Afghanistan is doomed to fail, and that the West should therefore pack up and leave as quietly and as quickly as possible. Evidently, ordinary Afghans would have the most to lose from such a policy, since the last time a foreign army abandoned an inconclusive war there, the whole country was engulfed by an incredibly brutal, inter-ethnic civil war. The point is not to scare hesitant voters and domestic opposition groups into a zero-sum choice between a neo-Domino Theory paradigm, in which we either win by stopping the Islamist hordes at the gates of Kabul, or watch the entire Afghan neighbourhood succumb to a subversive, trans-border insurgency, as critics have argued.⁵⁰ In my humble

⁴⁶ BBC, ‘Afghans more optimistic for future, survey shows’, 11 January 2010, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8448930.stm> (accessed 6 June 2010).

⁴⁷ Oxfam International, *The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978-2009*, November 2009: 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 46.

⁵⁰ See for example, ‘Kissinger, Iraq and India’s Muslims-a new domino theory?’, *FaithWorld* (*Reuters*), May 27 2008, available at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2008/05/27/kissinger-iraq-and-indias-muslims-a-new-domino-theory/> (accessed March 24 2010). For an arguably more representative sample of Mr. Kissinger’s views on the current Afghan conflict, and the regional and international stakes, see Henry Kissinger, ‘Deployments and Diplomacy’, in *Newsweek*, 12 October 2009: 35.

understanding, an important but often neglected point is that ordinary Afghans would likely suffer incredibly more from a unilateral American or NATO-ISAF pullout than from a continued, albeit temporally-limited foreign presence in Afghanistan.⁵¹ I accept that the current mission is based on a logically debatable doctrine of “enlightened self-interest”, which seeks to reconcile the Western principle of (armed) humanitarianism with pragmatic self-interest.⁵² But if a call to morality were used to argue that Western military forces ought to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible—no matter the situation on the ground—I would question the moral underpinnings of such a policy, which would in all likelihood perpetuate the chronic internal crises and more than thirty years of war which the Afghan people have endured.

Conclusion: War, Democracy and the Power of Myths

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that wholesale comparisons between past military interventions and the ongoing one in Afghanistan neither reflect the reality of NATO-ISAF’s mission, nor of Afghan hopes and fears, but rather represent often dubious analogies which distort history for the sake of short-term political goals. To be fair, some criticisms of the conduct of international forces in Afghanistan are well deserved. The fact that the United States initially opted for “a quick, cheap war, followed by a quick, cheap peace,” as the International Crisis Group put it, was a grave mistake.⁵³ The failure to strengthen the Afghan state, society and economy as soon as possible after the fall of the Taliban is being felt to this day—namely through a reinvigorated insurgency and booming opium poppy trade, both feeding off each other.⁵⁴ Today, Afghanistan’s nascent democracy is

⁵¹ This view is shared by many experts, including Professor Maley, who suggested that the most likely scenario would be a return to the Afghan civil war, when foreign powers (including the US, Russia, India, Iran and Pakistan) armed and trained competing factions of Afghan warlords and fighters to kill each other. *Recent Developments in Afghanistan*, May 11 2010.

⁵² For a synthesis of the contemporary rationale for intervening in Afghanistan, see ‘Full text of Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize speech’, *MSNBC*, 10 December 2009, available at: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34360743/ns/politics-white_house/page/2/ (accessed 14 December 2009).

⁵³ Cited in Atiq Sarwari and Robert D. Crews, ‘Epilogue: Afghanistan and the Pax Americana’, in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (edited by Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi) (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2008), 312.

⁵⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational threat of Afghan opium* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009), 101.

dysfunctional at best, riddled with corruption at worst. It is highly probable that the current US-style centralised, presidential system of governance is very badly suited to Afghanistan. It encourages nepotism and corruption in Hamid Karzai's government.⁵⁵ And the system clearly lacks popular legitimacy, unfortunately demonstrated during the 2009 Afghan elections. Despite all of these major setbacks, however, Afghanistan is less threatened by History than by its own reputation.

Back on the collective home fronts of an international effort to—once and for all—stabilise Afghanistan, we should beware of the discursive power of myths. “Few countries are as obscured by historical myth as Afghanistan,” as one historian aptly wrote.⁵⁶ We often hear that democracy is alien to Afghanistan; yet the country went through a ten-year long “experiment with democracy” and social modernisation from the 1960s, no matter how tenuous and ultimately unsuccessful.⁵⁷ Similarly, it is often assumed that no outsider has ever defeated rebellious Afghans, despite the fact that the Mongols and their (Timurid and Mogul) descendents occupied Afghanistan for hundreds of years. Clearly, political myths have political power so long as they impact upon the perceptions of a political majority. The Taliban clearly relish Afghanistan's reputation as a stubbornly independent land, capitalising on the propaganda value which the ‘graveyard of empires’ cliché provides.⁵⁸ Hence the discursive battle of ideas, rather than any tactical gains on the battlefield, may yet decide the fate of Afghanistan.

In conclusion, failure in the contemporary Afghan War is not preordained by “vast impersonal forces” driving the historical process.⁵⁹ Of course, the NATO-ISAF mission may well fail. Afghanistan may defeat one more superpower and, in doing so, would likely shatter the future prospects of internationally-sanctioned state building. But the main point I have argued is that this is not inevitable; no one can truthfully claim to know for sure how the intervention will pan out. The idea that there is “some determinism in history that says things always go wrong in

⁵⁵ See Saikal's convincing critique for example. Amin Saikal, ‘The roots of the Afghanistan conflict’, *What Are We Doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War* (edited by Kevin Foster) (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2009), 15-17.

⁵⁶ B. D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 35.

⁵⁷ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (with assistance from Ravan Farhadi and Kirill Nourzhanov) (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 133.

⁵⁸ Matthew Green, ‘Taliban says US faces “graveyard of empires”’, in *Financial Times*, 21 September 2009: 7.

⁵⁹ This term is attributed to T. S. Eliot. Cited in Berlin, *Historical Inevitability*, 3.

Afghanistan,” or that the Taliban cannot be defeated, as one British counter-insurgency expert put it, “is nonsense”.⁶⁰ Historical inevitability is an illusion. This concept, which seeks to explain everything in one short catch-phrase—i.e. “Afghanistan always beats its invaders”⁶¹—explains nothing at all. With the skills of subtle persuasion, or unabashed ignorance, anyone can craft the malleable record of history to resemble the present. In the current Afghan campaign, some important lessons can and arguably have been learned from history, as I have attempted to demonstrate. But from an even-handed perspective it is clear that the “foremost lesson of history is that history does not repeat itself in the exact same manner at every junction.”⁶² Like the great historian Isaiah Berlin suggested, we should beware of the soothsayers and astrologists who would convince us otherwise.

⁶⁰ Barry Neild, ‘Is Afghanistan really a “graveyard of empires?”’, *CNN*, 7 December 2009, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/12/07/afghanistan.graveyard/> (accessed 11 December 2009).

⁶¹ Robert Fisk, ‘The lesson of history: Afghanistan always beats its invaders’, in *The Independent*, 14 September 2001, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/the-lesson-of-history--afghanistan-always-beats-its-invaders-669267.html> (accessed 8 December 2009).

⁶² Ray Takeyh, ‘Vietnam’s lessons for Afghanistan’, in *The Boston Globe*, November 12 2009,