

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 14 | Number 1

Article 4

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7-4-1984

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Joseph J. Collins

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### Recommended Citation

Collins, Joseph J.. "THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: THE FIRST FOUR YEARS." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 14, 1 (1984). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol14/iss1/4>

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# THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

by

JOSEPH J. COLLINS

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**T**he Soviet-Afghan war has now lasted longer than World War II did for the Soviet Union. At its initiation in December 1979, the invasion appeared to be yet another dramatic extension of Soviet influence, with the same promise of success already achieved by proxy in Angola and Ethiopia.

Now, four years later, the invasion appears more a blunder than a daring extension of influence. The Soviets, despite the presence of four percent of their Ground Forces, are no closer to securing Afghanistan than they were in 1980. Moreover, although they are learning valuable military lessons, the war has become a persistent, though not a life-threatening, problem for the Soviet military. Having built an army for World War III on the plains of Europe, the Soviets are finding that it is not performing well in a counterinsurgency role in the mountains of South Asia.

The purpose of this article is to update my previous *Parameters* article on the war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, I will address:

- The political situation in Afghanistan.
- Current Soviet military strategy and operations.
- The prospects for a negotiated settlement.
- Conclusions that Western military thinkers might draw from the four years of war to date.

On the domestic scene, the Soviets apparently believed that a decisive show of armed might, coupled with a change in rulers,

would reunite the ruling party, restore order to Afghanistan, and prevent a potential "encirclement" of the Soviet Union. All of this would, at the same time, preserve the neo-socialist "revolution" on their southern border. Delivered in the combat trains of the Soviet invasion force, Babrak Karmal, the Soviet-picked replacement for Hafizullah Amin, was to restore domestic political order, while the Soviet forces were to frighten the guerrillas back to their villages. To put it mildly, the Soviets have not accomplished their objectives. Babrak Karmal has failed in his efforts to reunite the Khalq ("Masses") and Parcham ("Banner") factions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Khalq-Parcham infighting continues and is still a major problem for the Afghan army, traditionally a Khalqi stronghold. In September 1982, the Khalqi general commanding the Central Army Corps was found shot dead in his office under circumstances apparently not connected to the fighting. In May 1983, the Khalqi Deputy Defense Minister physically assaulted the Defense Minister after having been passed over for promotion. Military defections are frequent and even Afghan communists have been reported fighting alongside the *Mujahiddin*. In all, the rate of military accessions barely equals the rate of desertions. The army is still less than a third the size it was in 1978, and it is close to useless as a military force.<sup>2</sup>

Between 20 and 25 percent of the prewar population have become refugees. As a result of Soviet military operations, the population of the cities has swelled, with the population of Kabul now three times its prewar size. In

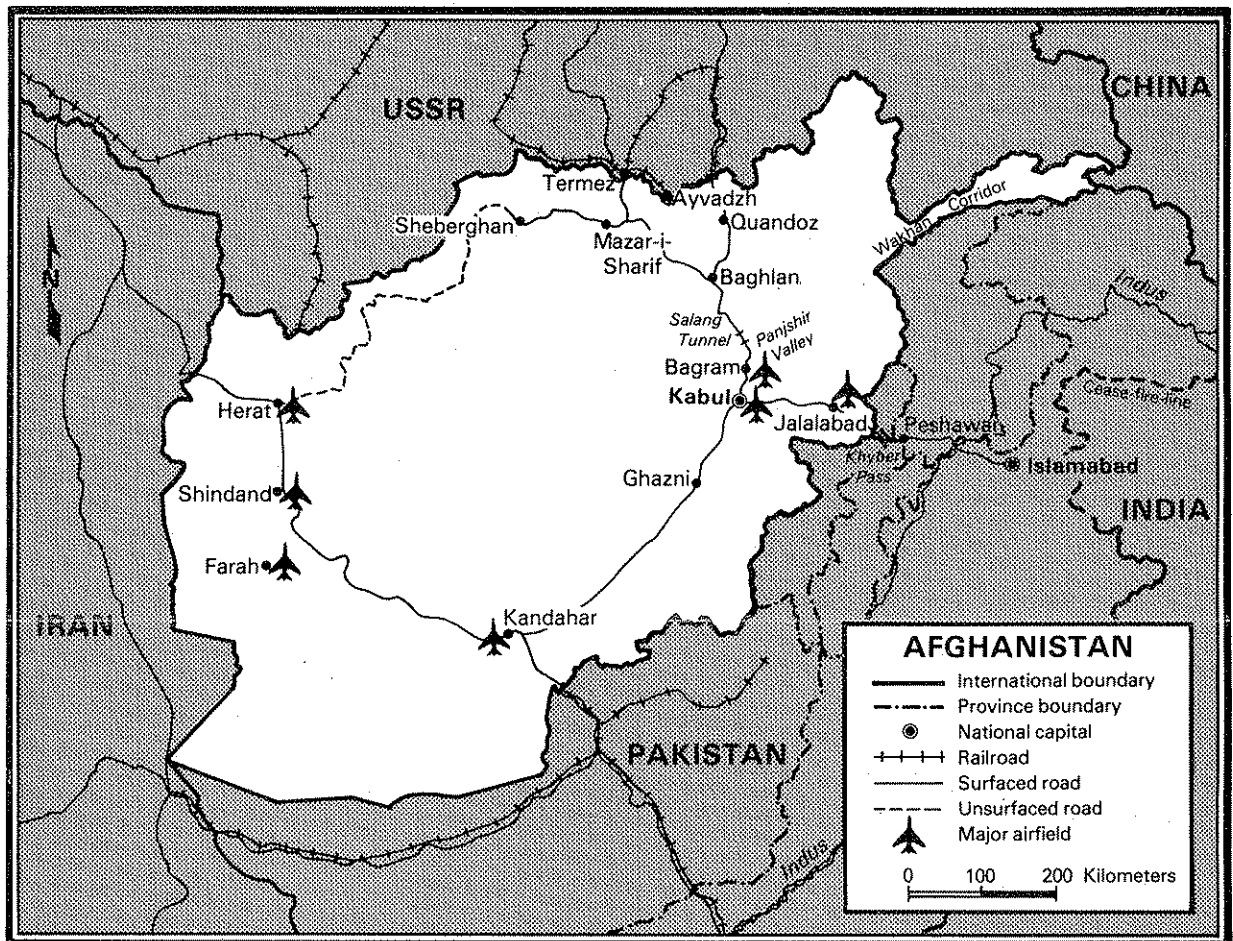
the spring of 1983, Babrak Karmal still claimed that without Soviet support, "It is unknown what the destiny of the Afghan Revolution would be . . . . We are realists and clearly realize that in store for us yet lie trials and deprivations, losses and difficulties."<sup>3</sup> Just two weeks before, Prime Minister Keshtmand had admitted that half of the country's schools and three-quarters of its communication lines had been destroyed since 1979.<sup>4</sup>

### CURRENT MILITARY OPERATIONS

The current situation in Afghanistan pits roughly 105,000 to 120,000 Soviet and 30,000 Afghan troops against 85,000 to 100,000 freedom fighters. Soviet forces (the 40th Army), according to unclassified sources, are composed of seven motorized rifle divisions and five air assault brigades (about 2000 men

each), backed up by an undisclosed number of "airborne/ranger" units, around 240 gunships, 400 other helicopters, several squadrons of MiG-21s and -23s, and at least one squadron of Su-25 attack aircraft. The deployment of this latter aircraft is significant in that the Soviets have chosen Afghanistan as the location for its first operational deployment.<sup>5</sup> Recent reports indicate that MiG-25s configured for reconnaissance may also be in the country. Persistent reports also have an unknown number of Cuban, Vietnamese, and East European advisors and troops in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Soviet forces include more than 80,000 ground forces, 30,000 general support troops, and 10,000 air force personnel. These forces are supported by about 30,000 support and air force personnel in the southern part of the USSR. Divisional deployments are



geographically balanced, with about a third of the ground force total in the Kabul area and other major deployments at Mazar-i-Sharif and Quandoz in the north, Herat and Farah in the west, Kandahar in the south, and Jalalabad in the east. Major airbases are located in Herat, Shindand, Farah, Kandahar, Kabul, Bagram, and Jalalabad.

The freedom fighters come from at least six loosely organized and disunited resistance groups and fight in anywhere from platoon to regimental strength. Armaments vary, with some units having one Kalashnikov (AK) automatic rifle per platoon, while other units have nearly all of their fighters equipped with AKs.<sup>7</sup> Fire support is limited, in the main, to rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, and mortars. Although some analysts put foreign aid to the freedom fighters at the \$100 million level, relatively little materiel has found its way to fighting units.<sup>8</sup> Some recent observers have noted that the open-market price of an AK in Pakistan—about \$2800—had not declined appreciably from 1979 to 1982. The best source of arms is still the Soviet and Afghan forces. One active local commander estimated that 80 percent of his weapons came from the Soviets or Afghan forces.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, since mid-1980 the Soviet position in Afghanistan has deteriorated, though not yet to the point where it might jeopardize the entire operation. While territorially based estimates are necessarily suspect, experts have increased their estimate of rebel-controlled territory from 75 percent of the country (December 1980) to as much as 90 percent (December 1981).<sup>10</sup> It would be more accurate to say that perhaps as much as 90 percent of Afghan territory is controlled by neither the Soviets nor the freedom fighters on a permanent basis. Soviet forces are free to move in strength into almost any area, but neither they nor their Afghan allies possess the numerical strength to occupy and pacify major areas of the country. In most cases, the freedom fighters, of course, depend too much on mobility and concealment for their survival to establish effective control. In any case, the major cities and base areas are only safe for the Soviets during daylight hours. In

the countryside, only the narrow strip joining the PRC to Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor (which has been occupied by the Soviets), and the thinly populated areas in the extreme northwest and southwest of the country are relatively free of rebel activity.

To date, Soviet strategy appears to have been to hold the major centers of communications, limit infiltration, and destroy local strongholds at minimum cost to their own forces. In essence, the Soviet strategy is one wherein high technology and superior tactical mobility are used as force multipliers and as means to hold Soviet casualties to a minimum. In effect, Soviet policy has been a combination of "scorched earth" and, in anthropologist Louis Dupree's words, "migratory genocide."<sup>11</sup> Numerous reports have suggested that Soviet forces, in particular their helicopter gunships, have been deliberately used to burn crops and destroy villages to force the population—the main source of resistance logistical support—to flee to Pakistan or Iran. Other reports imply that the Soviets have used a "free fire zone" approach in areas with strong resistance forces.<sup>12</sup>

Soviet terror tactics have increased in their ferocity since mid-1980. Though few would accuse the Afghans of restrained behavior toward their enemies, the Soviet monopoly on high technology has magnified the destructive aspects of their behavior. One expert testified:

The International Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations are denied access to Afghanistan. Between last October 26 and November 2 [1981], three hospitals, operated by a French humanitarian medical organization, in three separate provinces, were demolished by helicopters that singled them out for bombing and rocketing. Helicopters set the crops aflame just before the harvest; village granaries are emptied and destroyed—all in an effort to starve the people into submission. The planes often bear Afghan markings, but the pilots are Soviet, as they have been since mid-1979—although they reportedly sometimes wear Afghan uniforms.<sup>13</sup>

The use of plastic, caseless mines, usually dropped from helicopters, has greatly affected the resistance's morale and ability to maneuver. One resistance leader noted in 1982:

The Soviets also drop small antipersonnel mines by helicopter. These mines are in the form of watches, ballpoint pens or even books. They have caused enormous damage among the civilian population and livestock, and many women and children have lost feet or hands. The children have now learned not to touch such objects, but to explode them by throwing stones at them.<sup>14</sup>

Total Soviet casualties (killed or wounded) have been estimated at 20,000, and the Soviets may have suffered again as many casualties from sickness and disease. Exact figures on the number of Soviets killed in action are impossible to obtain, but responsible analysts have cited estimates from 5000 to 10,000.<sup>15</sup> To the end of 1982, the freedom fighters may have suffered ten times the number of Soviet casualties, with undoubtedly a higher percentage of deaths as well. In all, despite the costs, the Soviets are preparing for a prolonged stay. Permanent logistical facilities and barracks are being constructed. Airfields are being upgraded, and the construction of a permanent bridge across the Amu Darya has been completed. The tour of duty for Soviet soldiers has been set at two years, with a quarter of the force being rotated semiannually.<sup>16</sup>

Operationally, new or untried Soviet equipment (e.g. the improved BMP, the AK-74 rifle, the Hind helicopter, scatterable mines, the AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher) has been tested, and some technical innovations have been made. For example, the Soviets have experimented with a new main armament on their standard BMP infantry fighting vehicle. Based on their Afghan experience, they have moved to replace the slow-firing 73mm cannon with an automatic 30mm cannon.<sup>17</sup> This change will enable Soviet ground forces to achieve an even larger volume of suppressive fire. The use of helicopters is also an important facet

of operations in Afghanistan. Helicopters are used for resupply, reconnaissance, troop transport, fire support, and command and control. Pilot training in Afghanistan is superb. As one Soviet officer described it,

Flying in the mountains and above the desert, plus the real possibility of coming under fire by anti-aircraft weapons which are making their way from Pakistan to the bandits operating on [Afghan] territory—this is a real training school . . . . No wonder they say that after a month in Afghanistan helicopter pilots can be awarded the top proficiency rating without testing their piloting ability.<sup>18</sup>

This pilot training is also costly, however. The rebels have shot down as many as 300 Soviet helicopters, mostly of the troop-carrying variety, with small arms and anti-tank weapons.

According to two highly detailed US State Department reports, Soviet forces have used chemical weapons in at least 15 provinces of Afghanistan. Witnesses have made a total of 59 separate incident reports, and the State Department noted that at least 36 of the reports were corroborated by additional evidence. Amazingly, the Soviet use of chemical weapons—incapacitants, lethal chemicals, and perhaps even mycotoxin biological weapons—has continued apace even after the first detailed US report appeared in March 1982. The reports conservatively estimate that the attacks have

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Major Joseph J. Collins is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences, US Military Academy. He received a master's degree in Soviet studies from Columbia University in 1980 and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in international relations at that institution. Portions of this article are based on his forthcoming dissertation, *The Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy: The Case of Afghanistan*, and a previous article, "Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan: A Preliminary Assessment," published in the Spring 1983 issue of *Comparative Strategy*.



resulted in 3000 deaths. One other ominous detail did not go unnoticed: detailed survey and monitoring operations following some of the strikes showed that the Soviets were obviously "interested in studying after-effects, lethality, or some other quasi-experimental aspect of a new chemical weapon."<sup>19</sup>

While the question of mycotoxins, artificially manufactured biological weapons, is still the subject of some controversy, the use of other lethal chemicals—blood and nerve agents—in Afghanistan has been proven beyond question. In addition to the statements of hundreds of eyewitnesses, the more significant proofs of lethal agent usage include:

- The film of Dutch journalist Bernd de Bruin, who himself was wounded in an attack in which numerous Afghans perished.

- The fact that chemical battalions were left in place after extraneous military equipment was withdrawn in June 1980.

- The testimony of a Soviet POW who was engaged in post-attack survey and monitoring operations.

- The testimony of another Soviet POW who detailed chemical storage sites in Afghanistan and who had seen Soviet soldiers who were contaminated by agents directed at the guerrillas.

- Positive test results on two Soviet protective masks taken from dead Soviet soldiers in September and December 1981 and on another obtained in February 1982.<sup>20</sup>

Why the Soviet Union would use chemical agents is not difficult to understand. These weapons generate panic. They can also be used to guard exposed flanks and to clear built-up areas or caves of deadly snipers or ambushers. In other words, while inflicting damage and inducing panic among the enemy, they enable the user to conserve troop strength and to minimize his own casualties.

There is very little reliable information on the performance of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. A distillation of the scant information that is available reveals the following:

- The initial invading divisions—except the airborne units—were Category 3

units, manned primarily by Central Asian reservists. These units were poorly trained and unreliable. Collusion with the freedom fighters was commonplace. Ghafoor Yussufzai, a former lawyer and now a resistance leader, gave this eyewitness testimony of collusion between Central Asian soldiers and their co-religionists:

When the Soviets first entered our country in 1979 . . . most of the soldiers were Soviet-Central Asians. This is because they speak a language akin to our own. And the Russians certainly thought that through the use of Soviet-Central Asian troops they could more easily control us. And these Soviet-Central Asian soldiers were told that they [were] coming to defend us in Afghanistan from American, Chinese, and Pakistan military attacks. When these people (Soviet-Central Asians) realized that the only people they were fighting in Afghanistan were Afghans . . . then these Soviet-Central Asians began helping us. They began leaving us packages with ammunition and weapons and caches. They left it in the ground and covered it with earth and just left a little of it emerging. In the beginning we were very suspicious and cautious and poked at this with sticks afraid that they would prove to be mines. And when we finally uncovered these things, we found out that they were parcels of weapons and ammunition that these Soviet-Central Asians were leaving for us. The Soviet (Russians) finally became aware that this was going on and [have] since withdrawn Soviet-Central Asian troops from Afghanistan and now they have just brought their own red-faced troops.<sup>21</sup>

- The initial complement of regular forces was not trained in counterinsurgency or mountain warfare techniques. In December 1981, one Soviet source even reported that "it took a while for [an Afghan] soldier to believe that the majority of Soviet servicemen had first seen mountains here—in Afghanistan." Not finding the Chinese or American "agents" whom they had been told were causing the trouble has also been bad for morale. Recent interviews with Soviet POWs

indicate widespread discontent among Soviet forces.<sup>22</sup>

- The pace of operations ranges from frantic "offensives" or "damage limiting" operations to long periods of boredom. Soviet soldiers are apparently not coping very well with this and reports of the use of hashish have surfaced. Indeed, numerous separate sources have confirmed the widespread use of hashish and the fact that Soviet soldiers have traded truck parts, uniforms, ammunition, and even rifles for hashish or other local drugs.<sup>23</sup>

- Soviet tactics still tend toward an over-reliance on motorized rifle and tank troops employed in sweep or "hammer and anvil" operations. Air assault operations—usually of company or battalion strength—are becoming more important, although they are usually conducted in conjunction with movements by motorized rifle units. Tanks are apparently being used mostly in a fire support role. Much of the Soviets' operational experience apparently has been in road-clearing operations, designed to keep open the ground lines of communication. On the whole, airborne and air assault troops seem to be held in higher esteem by the freedom fighters than troops from the motorized divisions.

An Afghan army colonel who later defected to the resistance observed the Soviet forces as both ally and adversary. He characterized them as "oversupervised," "lacking initiative," and addicted to "cookbook warfare," wherein proven "battle recipes" are mechanically applied to new situations. S. B. Majrooh, another close observer, said that Soviet soldiers were "generally undisciplined, isolated, and not motivated."<sup>24</sup>

Ambushes of various sizes have proved to be very effective. An Afghan army major described guerrilla tactics in a conversation with a Soviet reporter:

Usually they operate in groups of 30-40 men. They used to assemble in larger gangs. They prefer to use ambushes by bridges, or in defiles. They destroy the bridge or block the

road and then open fire from the commanding heights. If a strong army subunit is moving, they allow the reconnaissance and the combat security detachment to go by. All of a sudden, they open up with volleys of well-aimed fire and then rapidly withdraw. They mine the roads, then cover the mined areas with small arms fire. The hand of professional foreign instructors can be felt at work.<sup>25</sup>

A Soviet defector evaluated the freedom fighters as follows:

The *mujahidin* were brave when they began their resistance and they still are. Resistance is still strong. Pilots as well as all soldiers in the Soviet Army respect the courage and tactics of the *mujahidin* and recognize their successes.<sup>26</sup>

The Soviet populace is eager to learn about what is happening in Afghanistan, but censorship within the military and the media is strictly enforced. Accounts of Soviet soldiers in combat are rare, usually anecdotal, and very heavy on propaganda content. In spite of this fact, some truth has emerged in Soviet sources, perhaps because the leadership wants to squelch rumors that may even be worse than the reality. Early in 1983, *Krasnaya zvezda* reported:

Service on Afghanistan's soil makes special demands on all servicemen. It is not easy being far from our motherland . . . . The difficult climate conditions take their toll. The lack of roads presents quite a few difficulties. And how exhausting exercises in the mountains are, when each meter takes a tremendous and intensive effort and it is hard to breathe . . . . There are considerable other ordeals. The *dushmans* are continuing their piratical onslaughts.<sup>27</sup>

Soviet efforts to date have not produced the desired results. Contrary to Soviet propaganda, the bulk of the fighting has been done by Soviet troops, sometimes opposed by mutinous Afghan army forces. A Western

summary of recent major combat actions included the following:

Between April 13 and July 15, 1981, at least 107 high-level Afghan Communist officials and Soviet officers were assassinated in Kabul, on two occasions at the very gate of the Soviet Embassy at midday. In Herat, a no-man's land for two years, Soviet soldiers are killed in their barracks. Unable to wrest Kandahar from the resistance, the Russians bombed much of it into rubble in June; two weeks later, the resistance again controlled Kandahar. On June 19, the main Soviet airbase at Bagram was set ablaze, and fuel, ammunition dumps, and aircraft were destroyed. In July, the resistance won Gulbahar on the north-south supply road. The landscape is littered with ruined Soviet tanks and armor.<sup>28</sup>

A captured Soviet tank officer, a Captain Sidelniko, added that in a series of three raids on Bagram in 1981 and 1982, the rebels had destroyed 38 aircraft. A French doctor, based on an actual count of burned vehicles in seven provinces, estimated Soviet vehicle losses throughout Afghanistan at 3000 to 4000.<sup>29</sup>

The number of major battles involving multiple, battalion-sized units apparently increased from 1981 to 1983. Although there were periodic reports of intra-resistance fighting, three major groups formed the "Islamic Unity of Afghan Mujahidin" coalition early in 1981 and a year later fought a coordinated battle in Paktia Province in which they defeated two Soviet regiments, destroying 25 vehicles and killing 60 Soviet soldiers in the process. Other reports of coordinated operations appeared early in 1983, but they are far more the exception than the rule.<sup>30</sup>

There are few accurate accounts of entire battles by which we can judge the state of Soviet military art in Afghanistan. One month-long operation in 1982 was witnessed by *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Edward Giradet.<sup>31</sup> The battle was apparently designed to eliminate the 3000 fighters of

Ahmed Shah Massoud who had been implicated in numerous raids, including at least one successful penetration of Bagram air base. Four previous Soviet forays into the Panjshir Valley had failed to eliminate this unit of freedom fighters. While the operation was significant because of its size, it was also important because it appeared to represent an archetypical Soviet "battle recipe" that has been used time and again in Afghanistan.

After an entire week of aerial bombardment, Soviet and Afghan forces were inserted by helicopter into the narrow east-west Panjshir Corridor on 17 May 1982. The freedom fighters, having been previously warned of the Soviet battle plan, had escaped down the side valleys or onto the top of the ridge lines. As a *Pravda* military correspondent noted, the first waves of attackers encountered "a multilevel system of fire prepared in advance."<sup>32</sup> Three days later a tank/motorized rifle force entered the valley, bringing the total of Soviet and Afghan forces to between 12,000 and 15,000. A series of sharp engagements followed, and within the first ten days, 50 Soviet and Afghan vehicles and 35 helicopters (at least by resistance reports) were destroyed in the fighting. The freedom fighters may have netted 100 Soviet rifles. The Soviets destroyed up to 80 percent of the dwellings in some areas and killed nearly 200 freedom fighters and close to 1200 civilians, more than one percent of the Panjshir's population, but they were forced to begin withdrawing on 13 June. In early September, Soviet fighter planes again began bombing the Panjshir Valley. The sixth Soviet offensive against Massoud's forces had begun.

As a result of the increased fighting, and following a December 1981 visit by Marshal Sokolov, a First Deputy Defense Minister, the Soviets added 20,000 additional troops to their "limited contingent" in Afghanistan.

## PEACE PROCESS

Throughout the war, the Soviet assessment of the immediate situation in and concerning Afghanistan has been primarily



negative. Numerous officials have expressed concern over the problem. In March 1981, in response to prodding by American members of a panel in Cincinnati, Ohio, Vitaly Kobysh, deputy head of the Central Committee International Information Department, characterized the invasion as "a mistake."<sup>33</sup> A month later, Yuri Velikanov, a Soviet diplomat stationed in the strategically important Seychelle Islands, stated, "For us, Afghanistan is an embarrassment. There were mistakes when we went in, and we are looking for ways to get out."<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the Soviets have incentives to negotiate. Not only is the war a drain of up to \$3 billion per year,<sup>35</sup> but it also distracts the leadership from more important issues and is a stumbling block to improving relations with China and Iran, the latter country being especially significant now that Soviet-Iranian relations are at a very low point. Having perceived a pro-Iraqi tilt on the part of the Soviets, the Ayatollah has severely curtailed the activities of Soviet diplomats in Iran and has arrested more than 1500 members of the Iranian communist Tudeh Party.<sup>36</sup> Soviet patience is also wearing thin. As one Soviet analyst told Karen Dawisha, "There must come a point at which we can no longer support a regime which hurls the people back into the sixteenth century."<sup>37</sup> Although that point has not yet arrived, it seems fast approaching.

Because of the battlefield situation, international pressure, and the desire to improve its image, since February 1980 the Soviets have been seeking a diplomatic way to extricate themselves from the Afghan quagmire. To comprehend these efforts, two cautionary notes must be made. First, Soviet peacemaking attempts have been conducted in the context of continuing to fight in Afghanistan. Moreover, as described above, though the Soviets are not yet committed to a battlefield victory in Afghanistan, they have reinforced their limited contingent by more than one-fourth its original size and they have consistently improved their logistical and basing infrastructure in Afghanistan. In short, they have not evidenced any desire for "peace at any price."

Although there have been changes in nuance and some rather interesting unofficial statements, the formal Soviet position has changed little since February 1980. However, there have been two significant changes in the Soviet position concerning the role of third parties and the pace of the withdrawal.

Up to the summer of 1981, the Soviets rejected peace plans put forward by, inter alia, the United States, France, and the European Community. This last initiative, the "Carrington Plan," was rejected in July 1981 because it did not include the Karmal government in early discussions; it did include rebel representation; and it spoke of neutralization, which the Soviets saw as a much more heinous state than nonalignment and which implied that the Karmal government would cease to exist.<sup>38</sup> This last item violated the Soviet pledge that it would not go behind Karmal's back and their assertion that the gains of the "revolution" were permanent. Brezhnev himself said at the 26th Party Congress:

We do not object to the questions connected with Afghanistan being discussed in conjunction with the questions of security in the Persian Gulf. Naturally here only the international aspects of the Afghan problem can be discussed, not internal Afghan affairs. The sovereignty of Afghanistan must be fully protected, as must its nonaligned status.<sup>39</sup>

The United Nations, in conjunction with Pakistan and Afghanistan and in accordance with a General Assembly resolution in November 1980, began negotiations on the conduct of trilateral indirect talks among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to be held under UN auspices. Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed in principle to the format in January 1981, and the Soviets and Afghans agreed formally to pursue this avenue in August 1981. Iran has refused to participate but is being kept informed of the talks.<sup>40</sup>

The format of the talks is innovative. UN representatives have talked to one side and then the other, obviating the need for the Pakistanis to recognize the Karmal government. Absent that recognition, the Pakistanis

can negotiate without admitting to the Soviet charge that Pakistani support for the resistance is equivalent to "outside interference." The Pakistani position is clear. They want total Soviet withdrawal, restoration of the nonaligned and independent status of Afghanistan, freedom from outside intervention, and the safe return home of the Afghan refugees.

Meetings took place in June 1982 and intermittently thereafter. Although there have been numerous reports of a "light at the end of the tunnel," by the end of 1983 little apparent progress had been made. In October 1982, Karmal characterized the responses of Iran and Pakistan to Afghan peace initiatives in the following manner: "Iran and Pakistan have so far not adopted concrete and constructive positions."<sup>41</sup> In February 1983, after a subsequent round of talks, Karmal stated that these discussions could bear fruit "whenever the other side shows readiness to conduct talks with the necessary realism and goodwill."<sup>42</sup> At about the same time, the usually optimistic UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar characterized as naive the idea "that Mr. Andropov will withdraw Soviet troops tomorrow."<sup>43</sup> In April 1983, after two more rounds of talks, Andropov himself characterized the talks as useful and "having some prospects," but, he added, the Pakistanis were "still being held by their sleeve by their overseas friends."<sup>44</sup>

There has been some slow movement by the Soviets on the question of the pace of troop withdrawals. Although their initial position stated that they would begin to withdraw only after all "interference" had stopped, since 1981 there have been preliminary indications that a Soviet troop withdrawal could be phased into a peace agreement. Brezhnev himself had said:

An agreement on a political settlement would make it possible to establish, with the concurrence of [the] Afghan side, a time schedule and procedures for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan . . . Troops could be withdrawn as accords that have been reached are implemented.<sup>45</sup>

Aside from this glimmer, there have been only rare flashes of hope on a peaceful solution to this problem. When Brezhnev died in November 1982, many thought that Andropov, long rumored to have been against the invasion, would quickly move to end the war. These rumors were supported by some observers, like President Zia ul-Haq, who noted on meeting Andropov that there was a "hint of flexibility" in the Soviet attitude toward Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> Even the chief editor of *Pravda*, Viktor Afanasyev, who is also a full Central Committee member, went beyond the official line when he told a Japanese newspaper:

I do not think military power can settle everything. That is why the Soviet Union intends to withdraw its troops sooner or later. There is no knowing when the conditions for withdrawal will be met, but it is essential that a government which is nonaligned and has good-neighborly relations with the Soviet Union can exist in Afghanistan. It need not be a Soviet-type socialist government.<sup>47</sup>

The Soviet media soon contradicted Afanasyev and retorted that the Soviet position remained unchanged. Six months after Brezhnev died, Andropov indicated how little movement there had been in the Soviet position:

Our plans for a political settlement of the Afghan problem are no secret. We have repeatedly stated them publicly. Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev spoke about that. We consider that as soon as outside interference in the affairs of Afghanistan has been terminated and non-resumption of such interference guaranteed, we shall withdraw our troops. Our troops are staying in that country at the request of the lawful Afghan Government—that government which was then in power—and they continue staying there at the request of the lawful government headed by Babrak Karmal. We are not after anything for ourselves there. We responded to the request for assistance from a friendly

neighboring country. It is, however, far from being a matter of indifference to us what is happening directly on our southern border.<sup>48</sup>

Even the rumors—ably assisted by the comments of many Soviet academics—that the USSR would be willing to sacrifice Karmal and his government for a settlement appear to be without basis in fact. The future of the Karmal government is still a major sticking point in the talks. The Soviets insist on its legitimacy, and Pakistan has continued to reiterate Zia's stand of December 1982: "We have always stated that Pakistan will not talk to this man who came to be the head of the Afghan regime by riding on Soviet tanks. We will not talk to him."<sup>49</sup>

Overall, Soviet efforts to gain a peace in Afghanistan have not progressed very far, and at the end of 1983 both sides were still far apart on a number of issues, including the fate of the Karmal regime, the scope and speed of the Soviet withdrawal, and the nature of international guarantees of the solution. The Soviets have not put all their effort into making peace. The rigidity of their proposals, when coupled with their military measures inside Afghanistan, suggests that even though they are pessimistic about the present situation in Afghanistan, they apparently do not perceive the costs of continued operations in Afghanistan as unacceptable. It is quite possible, as an American diplomat in Moscow has said, that they believe that they have absorbed the worst of the costs (the grain embargo, the Olympic boycott, etc.) and that now it is simply a matter of endurance and fortitude, virtues which their historical experience and highly authoritarian government have given them in great quantities.<sup>50</sup> The Soviets are prepared for peace on their terms or the continuation of warfare at the present level for the foreseeable future.

It is not difficult to understand why there has been such little change in Soviet peace proposals. The potential for disintegration of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan is still present and, in Soviet eyes, the

threat to Soviet security is there as well. Indeed, there is even less likelihood that a new, non-PDPA regime could ever—given cultural constraints—behave in a "good neighbor" fashion toward the Soviet Union. The specter of encirclement is still present, and so is the threat of lost prestige. It is one thing to desert an ally, but it is even more damaging to your prestige if you try very hard to save him and then fail. The Soviets are caught in a trap of their own construction. As a Pakistani diplomat said,

The Soviets can continue to occupy the country, but they cannot win over the people. The longer they stay, the more they alienate the people. The more they alienate the people, the longer they must stay. This Russian dilemma is also the Afghan dilemma, and both seem condemned to suffer its consequences.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan supports a number of conclusions of interest to anyone concerned with Soviet military issues. First, with regard to organizational framework, the Afghanistan experience suggests that armies will do well only those things for which they habitually prepare and practice. Soviet forces performed well in the movement into Afghanistan, but they have done poorly in dealing with the insurgency itself. To date, the Soviets are only beginning to adjust to the conditions present in Afghanistan. Short of genocide, the methods in use at present will continue to be ineffective.

Second, in the area of doctrine, Afghanistan appears as a unique case. The Soviets entered Afghanistan not expecting to fight, but very soon found themselves embroiled in a full-blown counterinsurgency. While the Soviets have in the past shown a strategic appreciation for limited war, they were put in the awkward position of having a force structure and operational and tactical doctrines that did not match the military situation. Moreover, it was a situation that

required an independent, decentralized style of command somewhat alien to the Soviet experience.

In analyzing the Soviet-Afghan war, one finds much data to support the image of the dogged, inflexible Russian who time and again attempts to make circumstance adapt to practiced technique. The observations of German generals at the close of World War II appear to have retained a measure of their validity:

The commanders of Russian combined arms units were often well trained along tactical lines, but to some extent they had not grasped the essence of tactical doctrines and therefore often acted according to set patterns, not according to circumstances. Also, there was the pronounced spirit of blind obedience which had perhaps carried over from their regimented civilian life into the military field . . . .

The inflexibility of Russian methods of warfare was evidenced repeatedly. Only the top Russian command during the last years of the war was an exception. This inflexibility manifested itself as high as army level; in divisions, regiments, and companies it was unquestionably the retarding factor in the way the Russians fought.<sup>52</sup>

Tactical adaptations, as noted above, have taken place and are in evidence even in Soviet accounts of battles in Afghanistan. The Soviet military press is replete with articles discussing mountain training and exhorting leaders to pay more attention to developing the elusive "initiative" and physical fitness among their subordinates. For example, *Voennyi vestnik (Military Herald)* showed a steady increase in articles on mountain warfare from none in 1978, to three in 1979, to 15 in 1981.<sup>53</sup> Time and experience may enable the Soviets to turn this evolving body of information into a working doctrine, but they will probably be inhibited in the near future from getting directly involved in another counterinsurgency.

Third, one ought not believe that the Afghan experience has been totally negative

for the Soviet armed forces. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan has given them valuable experience in mobilization. Unfortunately, from their point of view, many of the lessons learned were painful. The performance of Central Asian troops in the initial invasion was poor, and this could lead to greater emphasis on reserve training and changes in active-duty manning policies. Marshal Ogarkov, the Soviet chief of staff, highlighted the role of the reserves in a 1981 article in *Kommunist*:

If an aggressor unleashes a war, the prepared reserves of personnel and equipment assigned to formations and units must reach them in extremely short periods of time. Hence, the task of constant readiness for immediate mobilization deployment of troops and naval forces is of great state significance.

Later he added that "supplying the troops with prepared reserves of personnel and equipment predetermines the need for efficiently planned measures even in peacetime."<sup>54</sup> All in all, the Soviet reserve forces and mobilization procedures bear further watching. Changes based on their experience in Afghanistan may already be taking place.

In the areas of weapons and personnel, Afghanistan has been a prize (though a very expensive one) for the Soviet military. Training deficiencies will have been detected and combat experience, though it tends to be fleeting, will ensure a more seasoned Soviet army. Particularly significant here has been the performance of Soviet pilots. We can be assured that the Soviets will hone their fire support skills to a fine edge in Afghanistan. If nothing else, Soviet command cadres in future conflicts will be better able to control their air and ground firepower.

As noted above, nearly all analysts give high marks for proficiency to Soviet airborne and air assault troops. NATO planners should take note of this fact. In any NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict, NATO rear areas may be subject to intense pressure from elite, combat-experienced units that do not suffer from the general malaise of their motorized rifle and tank brethren in Afghanistan.<sup>55</sup>

One Soviet "adaptation" which should alarm the West is the use of chemical weapons. The use of these weapons in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia again confirms, not surprisingly, that the Soviets find them put to their best use against unprotected subjects incapable of retaliation. Afghanistan is proof positive that the Soviets do not consider these devices as "special weapons." Considerations of utility and not morality will govern Soviet use of them in future conflicts.

The Soviet use of chemical and biological weapons in Afghanistan also suggests that the validity of future arms control agreements rests heavily on whether the West can retaliate in kind if those agreements are violated. It is clear from the experience in both Southeast Asia and Afghanistan that the various treaties that the Soviets have signed on chemical and biological weapons are of questionable value in curbing either the manufacture or use of such weapons by the Soviet Union.

Finally, one should reflect on the efficacy of learning lessons from recent history. The contest in Afghanistan is far from over. Years from now, the record of events may be far different than it appears today. The Soviets believe that time is on their side and that they do not need a quick victory. The Soviet ability to "hang tough" and "muddle through" far surpasses our own. A French doctor, himself a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war, sadly noted,

The Russians do not need smashing victories to announce to their citizenry, as Soviet public opinion does not influence Soviet policy. Catastrophes, such as that in the Salang tunnel where several hundred Soviet and communist-regime troops (and civilians) were killed, do not incite an outcry in Moscow for Soviet "boys" to come home. The Soviet army can wait it out as long as it did for the Basmachi revolt to end—and it waited for that for 20 years. It can wait even longer if necessary.<sup>36</sup>

## NOTES

1. Joseph J. Collins, "Afghanistan: The Empire Strikes Out," *Parameters*, 12 (March 1982), 32-41.

2. On factional feuding, see US Department of State, "Soviet Dilemmas in Afghanistan," Special Report no. 72, June 1980, pp. 1-3; US Department of State, "Afghanistan: Three Years of Occupation," Special Report no. 106, December 1982, pp. 1, 6-7; K. Wafadar, "Afghanistan in 1981: The Struggle Intensifies," *Asian Survey*, 22 (February 1982), 148-50; and US Department of State, "Afghanistan: Four Years of Occupation," Special Report no. 112, December 1983, pp. 4-6.

3. Tass in English, 28 April 1983, in FBIS-Soviet Union-III-89-4/6/83, p. 2.

4. "U.N. Official Confers on Afghan Fighting," *The New York Times*, 12 April 1983, p. 6.

5. The deployment of the Su-25 was confirmed in an unofficial 1982 State Department document entitled "Glossary of Soviet Military Terms," and in Drew Middleton, "Soviet Said to Be Raising Quality of Air Force," *The New York Times*, 26 September 1982, p. 7. For order of battle information, see David Isby, "Afghanistan 1982: The War Continues," *International Defense Review*, 15 (No. 11, 1982), 1523-26; and Special Report no. 112, pp. 1, 3. Isby uses 152,000 as the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, while the State Department uses 105,000. The range 105-120,000 will be used throughout this article.

6. "Troops of 5 Soviet Allies Reported Fighting Guerrillas in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 20 December 1982, p. 10; and Drew Middleton, "Afghanistan: A Year Later," *The New York Times*, 26 December 1980, p. 3. See also, Agence France Presse dispatch (Spanish), 28 November 1980, in FBIS-South Asia-VII-232-2/1/80, p. C8. See also, *Washington Times*, 16 June 1983, p. 2.

7. Compare Jere Van Dyk, "Afghan Arms: From Missiles to Ramshackle Rifles," *The New York Times*, 12 January 1982, p. 2; and articles in *The Christian Science Monitor* cited in note 31, below.

8. On foreign assistance to the freedom fighters, see Michael Kaufman, "Afghans Said to Get New Guns After Trip to Egypt," *The New York Times*, 22 January 1981, p. 3; and "Afghan Rebels Bristle with New Arms," *The New York Times*, 14 April 1981, p. 3. See also Carl Bernstein, "Arms for Afghanistan," *The New Republic*, 18 July 1981, pp. 8-10; and Anwar Sadat's oblique confirmation of the US role in "Sadat Says U.S. Buys Soviet Arms in Egypt for Afghan Rebels," *The New York Times*, 23 September 1981, p. A15. More recent reports place foreign assistance (US and Saudi) between \$30 and \$50 million per year, 1980-82. See Leslie Gelb, "U.S. Said to Increase Arms Aid for Afghan Rebels," *The New York Times*, 4 May 1983, p. 1; and "The Afghan Connection," *Time*, 16 May 1983, p. 12.

9. Jere Van Dyk, "Afghan Arms: From Missiles to Ramshackle Rifles," and Francis Fukuyama, *The Future of the Soviet Role in Afghanistan*, Rand Research Note N 1579-RC (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, September 1980), p. 12. For the local commander's estimate, see William Branigin, "Mujaheddin Say U.S. Should Provide Training, Weapons," *The Washington Post*, 18 October 1983, pp. A12ff. A French doctor, Lauren Lemonnier, an eyewitness to the fighting in the Panjshir, confirmed the 80-percent figure in her remarks at the Center for the Study of Human Rights Conference on Afghanistan, Columbia University, 2 February 1984.

10. Drew Middleton, "Afghanistan: A Year Later," and US Department of State, "Afghanistan: Two Years of Occupation," Special Report no. 91, December 1981.
11. Nicholas Wade, "Afghanistan: The Politics of Tragicomedy," *Science*, 1 May 1981, pp. 521-23.
12. See Rosanne Klass' statement in US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings on the Situation in Afghanistan*, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 8 March 1982, p. 71-5.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 72-3.
14. *Les Nouvelles Afghanistan*, 10 (July-December 1982), 4-16, in JPRS 81812, 21 September 1982, p. 21.
15. US Government sources now use 10,000 as the high-range estimate of Soviet KIAs. This fact was announced by Ambassador Charles Dunbar, former US charge d'affaires in Kabul, at the Harvard-State Department Conference on Afghanistan, Cambridge, Mass., October 1983.
16. Special Report no. 72, p. 3.
17. Mining operations are described in George Wilson, "Soviets Lay Mines to Slow Afghan Guerrillas, Arms," *The Washington Post*, 8 July 1980, p. 1. Photographs of the new scatterable mines can be found in *Soldier of Fortune* (April 1981), pp. 23-24. Also see DIA, *Review of Soviet Ground Forces* (May 1980, February 1981, June 1981), for details on AK-74 and AGS-17. On the improved BMP (MI981), see DIA, *Review of Soviet Ground Forces* (April 1982 and December 1983), and the photograph in *The New York Times*, 8 November 1982, p. 1.
18. Col. V. Stulovskiy, "Stationed in Afghanistan," *Voyennyye znaniya* (March 1981), as cited in Douglas Hart, "Low Intensity Conflict in Afghanistan: The Soviet View," *Survival*, 24 (March 1982), 66-67. For a description of helicopters in resupply and medevac roles, see *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 4 February 1983, p. 4.
19. US Department of State, "Chemical Warfare in South Asia and Afghanistan," Special Report no. 98, March 1982, and Special Report no. 104, November 1982. The quote is from the former publication, p. 23.
20. *Ibid.* See also, Special Report no. 106, p. 5, and the unpublished US State Department collection of media reports, "Reports of the Use of Chemical Weapons in Afghanistan, Laos, and Kampuchea, Summer 1980," pp. 4-30.
21. "Soviet Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan," the unedited transcript of a presentation by five Afghans on the massacre at Padkahwab-e-Shana, Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., 1 February 1983, pp. 21-22.
22. The quote can be found in *Krasnaya zvezda*, 31 December 1981, p. 2, in FBIS, *Daily Report-Soviet Union*, 6 January 1982, p. D4. An interview with a Soviet officer POW can be found in an Agence France Presse dispatch of 29 April 1982, from Hong Kong. An interview with Soviet enlisted defectors can be found in *Die Welt*, 29 October 1982, p. 8, translated in FBIS, *Daily Report-Soviet Union*, 2 November 1982, pp. D1-D3; and in "Soviets' 'Dirty War' in Afghanistan," *U.S. News and World Report*, 19 December 1983, p. 13. Also see "Soviet Soldier Tells of Deserting to Afghans," *Washington Times*, 23 January 1984, p. 2.
23. *Ibid.*; *Die Welt*, 29 October 1982, p. 8; Alain Fadeux, "Soviet Captives Describe Afghan War Roles," *The Washington Post*, 28 September 1981, p. 15; Jere Van Dyk, "Afghan Arms: From Missiles to Ramshackle Rifles," Stuard Auerbach, "Standoff in Afghanistan Tarnishes Red Army's Image," *The Washington Post*, 27 December 1981, p. 1; and Agence France Presse dispatch of 3 December 1980, in FBIS, *Daily Report-South Asia* 8, no. 235, 4 December 1980, pp. C2-C3.
24. On road clearing, see, for example, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 7 August 1981, p. 2, in FBIS, *Daily Report-Soviet Union*, 13 August 1981, pp. D5-D9; and *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 7 January 1984, p. 3. The quote on performance is from an interview with Colonel A. A. Jalali, Washington, D.C., 6 April 1983. S. B. Majrooh, now director of the Afghan Information Service in Pakistan, made these remarks at the Harvard-State Department Conference, October 1983.
25. *Pravda*, 5 June 1980, in US Air Force, *Soviet Press: Selected Translations* (September 1981), p. 273.
26. *Die Welt*, 29 October 1982, p. 8.
27. *Krasnaya zvezda*, 26 February 1983, p. 1.
28. Rosanne Klass, "Afghans Battle On," *The New York Times*, 30 July 1981, p. 19.
29. On the Soviet captain, see Agence France Presse dispatch of 29 April 1982 from Hong Kong. The figure on destroyed vehicles comes from Dr. Claude Malhuret at the Harvard-State Department Conference on Afghanistan, October 1983.
30. Interview with Colonel A. A. Jalali, former assistant chief of the Military Committee of the Islamic Unity of Afghan *Mujahiddin*, in Washington, D.C., 6 April 1983. See also, "Major Soviet-led Drive is Reported in Afghan War," *The New York Times*, 21 April 1983, p. 11; and William Claiborne, "Afghan Rebels Said to Team Up, Ambush Convoy," *The Washington Post*, 13 April 1983, p. 22.
31. See the series of articles in *The Christian Science Monitor* by Edward Giradet, entitled "With the Resistance in Afghanistan," 22 and 28 June, and 2, 7, and 9 July 1982. Also see the description in Special Report no. 106, pp. 2-4.
32. *Pravda*, 3 August 1982, p. 6. Both the *Pravda* military correspondent, a rear admiral, and Giradet reported that the *Mujahiddin* had at least portions of the Soviet battle plan prior to the start of the battle.
33. This remark was made during the question and answer session following Kobysh's address before the Section on Soviet-American Relations, at the 23d Annual International Studies Association Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, 26 March 1982.
34. Michael T. Kaufman, "Ports and Oil Spur Naval Buildup by U.S. and Soviet," *The New York Times*, 20 April 1981, pp. 1, 12.
35. Remarks by State Department official at the "National Forum on Afghanistan" sponsored by the University of Nebraska and the US Department of State, Washington, D.C., 13 December 1983.
36. See *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin*, RL202/83 (May 1983), p. 3.
37. Karen Dawisha, "The USSR in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, 61 (Winter 1982-83), 448. On Iranian aid to the Afghan resistance, see "Khomeini Helps the Afghans," *Foreign Report*, 22 September 1983, pp. 1-2; and "Khomeini and the Afghans," *Foreign Report*, 20 October 1983, pp. 5-6.
38. *Pravda*, 5 August 1981, p. 4, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (CDSP)-33-31, pp. 5-6.
39. The quote is reprinted in FBIS-Soviet Union-2/24/81, p. 20.
40. The best sources on these negotiations are Selig Harrison, "Dateline Afghanistan: Exit through Finland?" *Foreign Policy* (Winter 1980-81), pp. 163-87; and "A Breakthrough in Afghanistan?" *Foreign Policy* (Summer 1983), pp. 3-26.
41. Press release, cited in FBIS-East Europe-II-196-9/8/82, p. F4.
42. *Patriot* (New Delhi), 10 February 1983, pp. 1, 7, in FBIS-South Asia-VIII-41-3/1/83, p. C3.
43. "U.N. to Press Afghan Efforts," *The New York Times*, 30 March 1983, p. 4.
44. *Pravda*, 25 April 1983, p. 2.
45. *Pravda*, 23 May 1981, pp. 1-2, in CDSP-33-21, pp. 6-8.

46. Richard Bernstein, "Zia Says Soviet May be Flexible on Afghan War," *The New York Times*, 10 December 1982, pp. 1, 8.

47. Cited in *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Tokyo), 17 November 1982, p. 5. For a Soviet "rebuttal" of this "soft" line, see the unsigned editorial in *Pravda*, 16 December 1982, p. 4.

48. *Pravda*, 25 April 1983, pp. 1-2.

49. Richard Bernstein, "Zia Says Soviet May be Flexible on Afghan War."

50. Interview with US Foreign Service Officer Robert Clark in Moscow, 3 January 1983.

51. Quoted in Lord Saint Brides, "Afghanistan: The Empire Plays to Win," *Orbis*, 24 (Fall 1980), 536.

52. On the general subject of military style, see Chris Donnelly, "The Soviet Soldier: Behavior, Performance, Effectiveness," in John Erickson and Eric Feuchtwanger, eds., *Soviet Military Power and Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 114-20. The quotes are from Department of the Army Pamphlet no. 20-230, *Historical Study: Russian Combat Methods in World War II*, November 1950 (rpt. 1983), pp. 12, 25.

53. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Review of Soviet Ground Forces* (July 1982), pp. 13-16.

54. Nikolai Ogarkov, "For Our Soviet Motherland: Guarding Peaceful Labor," *Kommunist* (No. 10, 1981), in JPRS 79074, 25 September 1981, p. 95. Ogarkov repeated the point in a recent pamphlet and added his concern over Russian language proficiency in the armed forces, a fact which could very well be related to the poor performance of Central Asian reservists in the initial invading force. See *Always in Readiness to Defend the Homeland* (January 1982), in US Air Force, *Soviet Press: Selected Translations*, nos. 9 and 10, 11 and 12, 1982; and no. 1, 1983. The appropriate passages are in pp. 19-22 in no. 1, 1983.

55. On air assault units, see Roger E. Bort, "Air Assault Brigades: New Element in the Soviet *Desant* Force Structure," *Military Review*, 63 (October 1983), 21-39. Although their Soviet designation is in question, a former Afghan army colonel related to this author that at least informally, they are referred to as "storm brigades" by the Soviets.

56. Claude Malhuret, "Report from Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, 62 (Winter 1983-84), p. 435.

