

THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN:
SOVIET STRATEGY AND THE STATE OF THE RESISTANCE

Alex Alexiev

November 1984

The Rand Paper Series

Papers are issued by The Rand Corporation as a service to its professional staff. Their purpose is to facilitate the exchange of ideas among those who share the author's research interests; Papers are not reports prepared in fulfillment of Rand's contracts or grants. Views expressed in a Paper are the author's own and are not necessarily shared by Rand or its research sponsors.

The Rand Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90406-2138

THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: SOVIET STRATEGY AND THE STATE OF THE RESISTANCE

Statement to Hearing on Afghanistan by the Senate Select
Committee on Intelligence, September 26, Washington, D.C.

Mr. Chairman,

This statement is based on a research project on the war in Afghanistan directed by me for The Rand Corporation. The views expressed in it, however, are my own and not necessarily those of The Rand Corporation or its research sponsors.

As it nears the fifth anniversary of its invasion of Afghanistan the Soviet Union has continued to pursue its objective of defeating the resistance and consolidating its rule through an assertive and comprehensive strategy in the military, political and economic realms. In each of these separate dimensions the Soviet strategy has exhibited some novel and at times increasingly sophisticated approaches that present a growing challenge to the Afghan freedom fighters. These are addressed briefly below as a background to the discussion of the problems and prospects facing the resistance.

THE MILITARY DIMENSION

The most striking and, at first glance, paradoxical feature of the Soviet military effort at present is the increasing evidence that it may not be designed to secure a purely military solution through a decisive defeat of the resistance forces. This is very likely due to the realization that such a military solution is not obtainable short of a dramatic intensification of the Soviet effort entailing massive and perhaps intolerable personnel loss and economic and political costs. Instead, militarily the Soviets have pursued a strategy of consolidating their control of the urban areas and the major transportation and logistics networks of the country, while denying any significant or lasting gains to the mujahideen. They have been largely successful in this objective without a marked increase in either military assets or

losses and at a relatively low manpower commitment that does not exceed 2 1/2 percent of overall Soviet force strength and one to two percent of their defense expenditures. The second major objective of Soviet military operations, such as the much publicized spring and summer offensives, has essentially been political in nature.

These operations have aimed not so much to defeat mujahideen forces as to intimidate and terrorize the population into withdrawing support for the mujahideen or abandoning areas of intense resistance. Both the tactics and weapons used in such operations, i.e, high altitude carpet bombing, deliberate destruction of villages, napalm, fragmentation bombs, anti-personnel mines, etc., testify to such intent. In this campaign the Soviets have not shied away from using some of the most odious Nazi terror tactics as, for instance, the use of booby-trapped toys and the execution of civilian hostages. It is not clear to what extent these tactics are effective in the long term but they appear to be successful in the short run. Thus the Panshir, Shomali and Loghar valleys which until recently harbored large resistance concentrations have reportedly been abandoned by most of the civilian population following recent brutal assaults. Given such tactics it is not surprising that Soviet operations exact a heavy toll from among the non-combatant population. According to French doctors operating small clinics in resistance-controlled areas, over 80% of the casualties inflicted by the Soviets are civilian.

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION

A concerted effort at economic warfare as part of the Soviet strategy has acquired critical importance in the past two years and may well be the greatest threat to the continuing viability of the resistance in the near future. Essentially, the Soviet approach has consisted of a large-scale attempt to curtail food production and destroy the economic base of support in general for the mujahideen in areas known to be resistance strongholds. In order to achieve this goal the Soviets have used a stick-and-carrot approach involving four specific tactics:

- Outright destruction of crops by napalm and discouraging agricultural activities by planting anti-personnel mines in the fields;
- Destruction of the irrigation system;
- Buying off surplus food from peasants at prices much higher than market prices;
- Supplying peasants living in government-controlled areas with seed, fertilizers and implements on extremely favorable terms in order to encourage the migration of others.

These Soviet tactics combined with the practice of establishing scorched-earth, heavily mined perimeters around most towns and along key highways has resulted in the destruction of a large part of the most productive land. Agricultural production has fallen to 20-25% of pre-1979 levels, prices of most commodities have risen six- to tenfold and severe food shortages with near famine conditions are prevalent in many areas.¹

The unavailability of food at the local level is likely to have serious consequences for resistance operations since the alternative is to bring supplies from Pakistan at much greater risk and cost. In addition, in order to forestall further exodus of the local population, the mujahideen may even have to feed them, which evidently is already happening in some areas.²

¹ For a recent scholarly report documenting these conditions see Frances D'Souza, *The Threat of Famine in Afghanistan*, London 1984.

² It should be noted that economic warfare and famine are a time-tested weapon in the Soviet arsenal. For instance, the universal opposition to collectivization in the Ukraine was finally subdued through a man-made famine which claimed some 6 million victims. In another example, the large-scale anti-Soviet resistance in the Baltics following World War II was successfully suppressed by the Soviets after five years of bitter fighting through the destruction of the freedom fighters' economic base (collectivization and the deportation of some 600,000 Balts to Siberia). The same strategy was used successfully to subdue the West Ukrainian resistance movement (1944-1952).

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

The Soviet political warfare effort has both an internal and an external dimension. Internally the strategy has aimed at winning over some elements of the diverse Afghan society, exacerbating the traditional ethnic and tribal tensions, promoting separatism and preventing the emergence of an Afghan nationalism. This objective has been sought through a sustained effort to create a new loyal technological and administrative elite educated and indoctrinated in the Soviet Union and the activities of a newly formed Ministry of Tribes and Nationalities and the Afghan secret service (KHAD). The ministry, which has been set up on the model of the Soviet Ministry of Nationalities under Stalin in the 1920s, has pursued a dual approach. In the north of the country which is populated primarily by Afghan nationalities (Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen) that have co-nationals across the border in the Soviet Union, it has stressed their separate identity and close historical and cultural links with their Soviet brethren. Since the latter generally enjoy a higher level of modernization and standard of living, the message conveyed is that the Afghans' own future will be brighter under socialism and Soviet rule. It is also not inconceivable that this may be the beginning of a campaign preparing these ethnic areas north of the Hindukush for eventual annexation to the Soviet Union. A different approach has been pursued in the southern, predominantly Pashtun areas where the emphasis has been on bribing and coopting tribal and religious elites into withholding support from the resistance. Thus tribal chieftains, Moslem dignitaries and military officers have recently been exempted from limits on land ownership imposed by land reforms, while defecting mujahideen are paid salaries several times higher than they would expect to command based on their skills. Here again the purpose is to create a stratum of people in the countryside that have a vested political and economic stake in the system and are likely to defend it.

The external political effort has pursued the removal to the extent possible of the Afghanistan issue from the international political agenda and more importantly an intensified effort to intimidate Pakistan into curtailing support for the resistance and eventually denying it the sanctuaries on Pakistani territory that are vital for its operations.

The increasingly brutal pressure exerted by the Soviets has been accompanied by frequent air incursions and bombings of border areas and acts of internal subversion. There is some evidence that Pakistan may not be totally immune to such pressure. For instance, Islamabad, has recently ordered the resistance organizations to terminate their activities in Peshawar and relocate their headquarters outside of the city.

THE STATE OF THE RESISTANCE

Faced with this formidable Soviet strategy the Afghan resistance is showing increasing signs of strain and exhibiting weaknesses in several areas.

Weapons and Supplies

The most glaring deficiency continues to be the lack of any effective means to combat Soviet jets and helicopters such as portable heat-seeking missiles. The best weapon presently used against Soviet air, the ZPU 14.5 mm anti-aircraft gun in its single or double barrel configuration, is only conditionally portable and is generally available only in the border regions. The standard weapon used, the 12.7 mm DShK heavy machine gun, has a range of only 1000 meters and is not very effective. As a result the Soviets are able to operate with virtual impunity in the air, which, given the fact that perhaps 80% of all Soviet combat and logistics operations depend on air, virtually precludes any significant and lasting mujahideen military gains. Apart from anti-air weapons the most serious shortage is ammunition. While there appears to be a reasonable supply of some weapons (indeed there may be too many light arms) ammunition for heavy weapons (mortars, rocket propelled grenades, heavy machine guns) is in very short supply.

Further there is a whole category of items essential for the conduct of a successful guerrilla war that evidently have not been adequately supplied. These include:

- communications equipment
- remote control mines and explosives
- mine detectors
- range finders
- binoculars
- maps.

There is also a critical shortage of warm clothing, boots and sleeping bags, which severely detracts from mujahideen ability to operate in the winter.

These weaknesses in equipment and supplies are compounded by serious training shortcomings which have limited mujahideen effectiveness and resulted in growing casualty rates.

Overall the resistance appears to be on the defensive throughout the country and, more significantly, for the long run, the pool of resistance fighters seems to have shrunk considerably in the past two years.

Political and Economic Problems

The biggest problems facing the mujahideen in the political realm is the lack of any unity among their political representatives in Pakistan. Many of the political parties seem to be expending most of their energy bickering and fighting each other and are riven with corruption and nepotism. In the opinion of many mujahideen field commanders the political factions at present represent more of an obstacle to effective resistance than an asset. They also contribute to divisiveness inside Afghanistan by virtue of the fact that they continue to be the main recipients and distributors of weapons and ammunition which gives them a powerful political leverage over the men in the field.

Economically the most serious problem, as already mentioned, is the severe shortage of food resulting from agricultural decline and depopulation. There are two possible solutions to the problem --

supplying food from Pakistan or revitalizing agricultural activity inside Afghanistan. Of these the second is much to be preferred. Next to the Soviet efforts to destroy it, rural agriculture has suffered from lack of markets for surplus production, i.e., inability or unwillingness to sell to the government, coupled with mujahideen inability to pay for food obtained in the countryside. Thus, if the resistance is provided with the resources that would enable it to pay for its supplies and make agriculture once again a reasonably profitable pursuit, it could be expected that despite the difficulties many peasants will resume their traditional activities to the tremendous benefit of the resistance.

RESISTANCE EFFECTIVENESS AND THE QUESTION OF AID

Based on the foregoing analysis it would appear that there are a number of ways in which the effectiveness of the resistance could be improved considerably through streamlining of the international aid effort. The key to this is a better understanding of the needs of the men fighting in the field, which should lead to the correction of the above mentioned shortages hampering the resistance at present. Secondly, there is a need to supply at least some of the aid directly to the mujahideen, which will help decrease the opportunities for corruption of the present system and alleviate politicization. Direct supplies to the resistance are increasingly feasible since there have emerged on the inside of the country a number of strong and respected military commanders who possess political authority and respect exceeding those of most Peshawar political leaders and who could be trusted with a much more equitable and effective distribution of aid.

A number of objections could be raised to such a course of action. It would be said that direct aid will mean more visible U.S. involvement than heretofore, which may exacerbate relations with the Soviets and make "plausible deniability" impossible. Secondly it may also be argued that Pakistan would be unwilling to go along, fearing that a more effective resistance will bring Soviet retaliation. On the first objection it should be noted that the Soviets are well aware of the aid effort and have been attempting to present it publicly as much larger and threatening than it is. For instance they have accused the United States of operating some 100 training camps for the mujahideen, directly

participating in operations, and supplying chemical and bacteriological weapons, among other things. The second potential problem could be dealt with by stressing U.S. security guarantees to Pakistan while making it clear, as the Pakistanis are well aware, that the defeat of the resistance will place Pakistan in an untenable security position. Overall, it needs to be realized that a Soviet victory in Afghanistan is not a foregone conclusion and that a dramatic increase in the costs involved to them may induce them to reach an accommodation short of outright domination as they have on previous occasions when faced with determined resistance.

RAND/P-7038

THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: SOVIET STRATEGY AND THE STATE OF THE RESISTANCE

Alex Alexiev