Identifying lessons of withdrawal and capacity building in Afghanistan: From the Soviet enterprise to NATO’s Resolute Support Mission

TRANSITION IN AFGHANISTAN

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“... Such men, for the reasons given can open the way into the state and render the victory easy; but if you wish to hold it afterward, you meet with infinite difficulties, both from those who have assisted you and from those you have crushed. Nor is it enough for you to have exterminated the family of the prince, because the lords that remain make themselves the heads of fresh movements against you, and as you were unable either to satisfy or exterminate them, that state is lost whenever time brings the opportunity.”

**Introduction**

When Soviet special forces launched an operation in Kabul during the early hours of December 27th in 1979, the main objective was to change the political leadership of Afghanistan prior to a deployment of a temporary Soviet military force that was tasked with supporting the political transition and ensure that stability in Afghanistan would improve under this new leadership. There existed no anticipation of staying engaged with the deployed forces longer than absolutely necessary and initially, Moscow estimated that its forces would be deployed in Afghanistan for a period of 3-6 months. Almost ten years later, Soviet forces withdrew without having fulfilled the objective of stabilization. In the last half of the almost ten years of intervention Soviet forces had a core focus on capacity building of the Afghan security forces in order to pave the road for a successful security transition and a complete military withdrawal while still maintaining Soviet political influence in Kabul.

Transition of security is also a key objective in NATO’s Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, which is now in effect as the successor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Once again Afghanistan faces changing times in its security environment, and despite Machiavelli’s quotation from above having been written more than half a millennium ago, it captures the very essence of the security transition's complexity in the wake of a military victory in Afghanistan.

1) (Machiavelli, 2014, p. 21)
A complete security transition was planned to have taken place by the end of 2016, but in the wake of the initial withdrawal of NATO forces in the first half of 2015, insurgency operations increased. Large areas in the province of Helmand have been left outside government control, and even a large population center as the city of Kunduz, temporarily fell to the insurgency. Overall, these challenges put in question the general state of security in Afghanistan, which caused Barrack Obama to postpone the planned complete withdrawal of US troops from the country, and furthermore it became evident that Afghan reliance on external economic support, even after billions of dollars have been invested, will continue in many years to come.

Whether the deployment of international forces in Afghanistan has been a successful venture or an unsuccessful one is of course a matter of perception. This brief sets out to present a comparative overview of Soviet experiences from the intervention in 1979-1989 and the following stabilization efforts in order to highlight coinciding elements, pitfalls, opportunities, and lessons that the present RSM operation could learn from and implement in order to improve the current situation.

Stability through Military Intervention and Capacity Building

Challenges for the External State

Since the increased numbers of US forces in Afghanistan – often referred to as the “surge” - in 2009 the ISAF mission’s main objective has been building the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The previous nation-building strategy, also called the comprehensive approach, had proven too ambitious, and as US president Barrack Obama had an aspiration for withdrawing all deployed US personnel during his presidency, the strategy was changed, and an actual exit date for this withdrawal was decided. It is important to stress that this approach indeed had been tested in recent history.

During the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Moscow also focused on capacity building of national security forces in the last phase of the intervention. The initial plan was to facilitate an end to internal feuds and the harsh reformative policies in the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), as well as supporting the Afghan Army, and make it capable of leading the fight against the Mujahedeen insurgencies on its own. The Soviet government also followed the strategy of a surge in 1985, as some members of the Soviet politburo still thought the war could be won outright with the use of increased force or could be concluded through negotiations leading to a favorable outcome. The surge consisted of an increased quality of troops and expanded missions, but not in numbers of troops. In “Locals Rule” it is described as being only the introduction for withdrawal of troops from the country. Already in 1986

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2) (Roberts, 2015)
3) (Barakat & Smith-Windsor, 2015)
4) (Nordland, 2012)
5) (Braithwaite, 2011, p. 123)
6) (Kuperman, 1999; Long, Pezard, Leidolt, & Helmus, 2012, pp. 135–149)
the Politburo changed the objective from maintaining a friendly communist government to ending the war on neutral terms in two years.\(^7\)

The objective of transferring security responsibility in terms of combat operations to the Afghan national security forces through an initial surge was not a pioneer strategy in Afghanistan, when it was launched by the US and ISAF in 2009. The implementation of this strategy culminated as the British operation Herrick 16 (April to October 2012) limited NATO forces, primarily in Helmand, to performing a purely supportive role for the ANSF. This was indeed the first big test of whether the ANSF would in fact be capable of providing security in Afghanistan after the future withdrawal of international forces from the country. The transition was of course gradual, and initially, a success as the increasing focus on capacity building resulted in operational victories, especially for the Afghan National Army (ANA).\(^8\)

From 1987-1989, in the latter period of the USSR’s intervention in Afghanistan, this strategy was also pursued in a similar security setup with a centralized government in Kabul directing the armed forces against different insurgency groups at the time, known as the mujahedin.\(^9\)

However, one huge difference in terms of conditions has to be mentioned. The ISAF faced the task of building the national security forces from scratch, while the USSR could rely on an existing security structure and develop the already existing ten Afghan divisions with Soviet weapons and equipment,\(^10\) indicating that the challenge for ISAF was more complicated than the case was for the USSR.

**Internal Challenges – the Case of Kunduz**

However, as the development of ANSF has been a focal point since 2009, the present RSM can arguably be compared to the challenges of the USSR in relation to capacity building. In this manner the surrender of the city of Kunduz to the Taliban forces, on 28 September 2015, is a useful common denominator illuminating how challenging capacity building in Afghanistan is. Even though the subsequent fight by ANSF forces with the support of American Special Forces resulted in a retake of the city, it was inevitably a blow to the confidence in the ANSF. This resulted in a questioning of the ANSF in general and if they indeed were (or ever would be) able to provide security for the Afghan population without the support of international forces.\(^11\)

The temporary takeover of the city was seen as a big morale boost to the Taliban, even though their forces were not able to hold the city. At the same time, the effect of the limited takeover still caused a setback in morale among the government forces. It was a big blow to the ANSF as well as to NATO. The ANSF was unable to defend the sixth largest city in the

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7) (Long et al., 2012, p. 140.)
8) (Johnson, 2015, p. 396)
9) (Feifer, 2009, p. 218)
10) (Braithwaite, 2011, p. 136)
11) (Craig & Salahuddin, 2015)
Transition in Afghanistan

country despite the fact that more than a thousand troops,\textsuperscript{12} including helicopter gunships, were stationed in the city.\textsuperscript{13} Reinforced by some of the 9,800 US forces still present in the country, the city was retaken but at the cost of most things of value in the city, along with the circumstance that many people had fled the city,\textsuperscript{14} proving even the perception of a somewhat safe Northern Afghanistan to be a delusion.

A glance in the history archives shows that a similar event occurred in August 1988 during the Soviet intervention. What on paper seemed to be superior Afghan garrison forces surrendered the city to insurgents without putting up a fight. Kunduz was afterwards retaken, but only because the then-Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah’s request for assistance resulted in General Varennikov’s arrival at the city to coordinate its recapture with the Afghan Army and support from Soviet forces.\textsuperscript{15} In the Soviet report by General Varennikov, he focuses on the Afghan government’s attention to the bravery shown by the defending troops, which was evidently false as they, as mentioned above, gave up the city without a fight and some even joined the insurgents.\textsuperscript{16}

The American as well as the Soviet experience shows a very quick loss of morale and ability to fight among the in these cases deployed Afghan security forces in Kunduz, and in the Soviet case there seems to have been no fight at all, and though some fighting took place in the initial Taliban takeover of Kunduz in September 2015, some units seems to have had an agreement with the insurgents, which simple mathematics indicates.\textsuperscript{17}

In terms of building a stable Afghan army the country’s geographical and ethnical conditions have been a huge negative factor as defections, desertions, and corruption have resulted in a general level of unreliability from the view of the civilian population.\textsuperscript{18} As expressed in “Locals Rule”, the problem of increasing the national defense forces in large numbers is the lack of control over badly trained units, which ended up being the case of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{19} Therefore the quantitative approach to the attritional problems of the Afghan Army might have undermined the quality of the National Security forces. The capacity building of national Afghan security forces was of limited success during the Soviet intervention, and so far in the ISAF/US case, the present ANSF faces many of the same challenges as was the case during the Soviet interference.

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  \item \textsuperscript{12} (Goldstein & Sukhanyar, 2015)
  \item \textsuperscript{13} (Craig & Salahuddin, 2015)
  \item \textsuperscript{14} (Raghavan, 2015)
  \item \textsuperscript{15} (Feifer, 2009, p. 250)
  \item \textsuperscript{16} (Varennikov, 1988)
  \item \textsuperscript{17} (Craig & Salahuddin, 2015)
  \item \textsuperscript{18} (Braithwaite, 2011, pp. 137–138)
  \item \textsuperscript{19} (Long et al., 2012, p. 170.)
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Decentralization of Security Forces – the Najibullah Approach

Some success was achieved by the Najibullah at the local level, as the Soviet backed Najibullah-regime succeeded in buying, or more correctly renting, the loyalty of local militias, and if this was impossible, paying for their neutrality. In many areas this created stability, but the problem with employing militia forces is of course that their loyalty relies on payment and is thereby entirely conditioned by it. The latter became evident when the progress made by Najibullah vaporized immediately after Soviet financial support for the Afghan government ceased in 1992.\textsuperscript{20}

The limited loyalty of local security forces was only one of the downsides to relying on militias. The Najibullah government paid a lot more for each militiaman than for each national army soldier. The militias were seen as effective, and the payment to militias denied recruiting grounds to the insurgents, as the neutral militias were not as likely to join them. The cost of this tool was that a militiaman received double the pay of an enlisted soldier in 1987. When the present Afghan Local Police (ALP) was established in 2010 it was determined as a temporary solution in order to gain a better foothold at the village level. There was reluctance towards the establishment of ALP due to lack of national control with these forces as they were organized as local para-military forces more than actual police forces.\textsuperscript{21} As the strength of ALP is its knowledge of the local security environment along with the ability to react to insurgency attacks rather quickly, this is also poses as a weakness seen through the lenses the central government in Kabul as ALP’s local organization also implies local agendas. The latter leads to that the government in Kabul could be viewed as only one possible partner of cooperation. If another partner eg. a warlord or even an insurgency group proves more capable of promoting these local agendas the loyalty of the units can change.

The salary in ALP is much lower than comparable to the local militias that Najibullah cooperated with. It was initially set to 60 percent of an average employee in the Afghan National Police (ANP), with the argument that the enlisted forces in the ALP should not be full time security personnel and should have an additional job to make up for the difference.\textsuperscript{22} In order for the ALP to be capable of supplying local security, and thereby denying the insurgents the opportunity to recruit in their area of influence, this of course requires that there in fact is an additional job available, which by no means is given based on the growing Afghan unemployment rate in general.\textsuperscript{23}

The problems of loyalty to the Najibullah government were visible immediately after the cessation of Soviet financial support, and identical problems have also occurred with the present ALP. Attacks near the city of Pul-i-Kumri resulted in the loss of three ALP units and their

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  \item 20) (Long et al., 2012, pp. 141–147)
  \item 21) (International Crisis Group, 2015, pp. 6–7)
  \item 22) (Long et al., 2012, p. 138 & 181.)
  \item 23) (Warren & Hopkins (eds.), 2015, pp. 54–62)
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
bases. One base was overrun, while at the two others the local police joined the insurgents.\footnote{Goldstein & Sukhanyar, 2015} In conclusion, decentralizing security by centralized funding requires a very stable financial pipeline, recruitment from personnel that already has or are able to have a civilian job beside the enrollment in a local security force, and it requires constant oversight as the loyalty towards the government in Kabul is far from given.

**Security Transition: The Post-Withdrawal Phase**

In the wake the drawdown of the ISAF mission in December 2014, the political landscape of Afghanistan has been inconstant. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s initial positive attitude towards US and international forces in Afghanistan in the early days of his presidency changed to a somewhat more negative one. Karzai was far from impressed with the American Counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in Afghanistan, and probably more importantly, the exit-date of the ISAF mission along with the prospect of a total international withdrawal was a game changer for the Afghan Government.\footnote{Alexander, 2014} Far more focus had to be directed against obtaining support from the population as they, and not US soldiers, would pose as his primary future powerbase.\footnote{Petrou, 2014} Furthermore, Karzai later emphasized the necessity to include the major powers of China, India and Russia at the negotiating table in order to get the peace process on a progressive track,\footnote{Shevardnadze, 2015} which evidently shows that the former president was very aware of the vital security role external support plays in keeping Afghanistan from falling apart. If the US would not play that role, other states were required to take on this responsibility.

The election of Ashraf Ghani as new Afghan President in 2014 brought a change of attitude with his positive (or arguably realistic) view of keeping NATO forces in the country. The election process in itself was far from smooth as a political stalemate between Ghani and the runner-up Abdullah Abdullah paralyzed any decision-making for almost sixth months, underlining the fragility of the country in this post-withdrawal phase. The stalemate was in the end solved following interference by the US, and a unity government was created. One of Ghani’s first acts as president was the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States, which secured the continued presence of American troops in Afghanistan.\footnote{“New leader, new chapter for U.S. in Afghanistan,” 2014}

In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, President Najibullah also tried to keep external forces in Afghanistan. The Najibullah government tried to engage the Soviet forces as much as possible after it had become clear that the Soviet troops were leaving.\footnote{Varennikov, 1988}

The Najibullah government continued to request Soviet supplies, support, and money after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. The demand for supplies ranged from military provisions,
especially for high-tech equipment, that could give the Afghan Army an edge over the insurgents, the R-17 missiles are highlighted as such. Najibullah also requested that the USSR let their air force conduct airstrikes in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{30} In total the USSR is estimated to have sent over $300 million every month in direct support to the Najibullah government.\textsuperscript{31} These large sums were spent entirely in relation to security in the country. The chief part of these sums was directed to support intelligence and national security services, such as the army, the police and the intelligence agency, while the rest was used as payment to the local militias.\textsuperscript{32}

The Najibullah government’s primary focus and stories of success were in relation to diplomacy and somewhat to local security forces, as described above. The pragmatic nature of Najibullah’s policies, with the reconciliation process, extended the government’s survival more effectively than the armed forces were able to do alone.\textsuperscript{33}

In the withdrawal phase after 2014, Afghan forces initially performed above expectations when supported by ISAF forces, but in the fight of Kunduz as stressed above, the deployed ANSF forces almost broke, which underlines that international support, in terms of money as well as troops, is required and probably will remain necessary in the near future if the present political structure with a centralized government in Kabul is to survive. The support in finances and equipment to the ANSF, as well as to society at large, is vital as both the territorial, economic, and social gains in Afghanistan will simply not endure without international support. A brief look at what happened when the Soviet financial pipeline to Najibullah was cut is a good indicator of what is likely to happen. The national forces defected in large numbers, and in less than two weeks the government collapsed, and Afghanistan was thrown into a civil war.

\textbf{The Vital Role of Intelligence}

One explanation in relation to why the first six months after the drawdown of ISAF proved successful to the ANSF is the role of intelligence and the ability to maintain the initiative in a COIN campaign. In the immediate period after the ISAF mission terminated the intelligence gathered prior to the drawdown was still useful and provided the ANSF with a sufficient image of enemy strongholds and movements. However, as time passed this image could not be maintained as the level of gathered intelligence was strongly reduced. It seems that the ANA after this period was forced into a more defensive strategy in the last half of 2015 causing units, especially in the rural areas, to concentrate at checkpoints instead of conducting offensive operations. Of course, if you do not have an awareness of where the enemy is, it is logically not possible to conduct these operations. The result has been units stationed at checkpoints waiting to be attacked.

\textsuperscript{30}) (Kryuchkov, E., D., & V., 1989)
\textsuperscript{31}) (Long et al., 2012, p. 143)
\textsuperscript{32}) (Kryuchkov et al., 1989)
\textsuperscript{33}) (Braithwaite, 2011, p. 147)
Najibullah was very aware of the importance of intelligence. The then Afghan intelligence service *Khadamat-e Aetla‘at-e Dawlati* (KhAD), was a major priority for the Najibullah government, and in 1986 the service was even elevated to a full ministry *Wizarat-e Amaniyya-e Dawlati* (WAD), which translates into Ministry for State Security. The intelligence work was an important tool in fighting the insurgents, which can be seen in the role that the KGB, KhAD, and later WAD fulfilled.

So far the US and ISAF forces have been able to defeat Taliban forces in conventional fights using superior firepower, but the irregular fighting methods used by insurgents allows them to avoid heavy casualties and keep up the fight. Intelligence is the key to countering this strategy, as knowledge of enemy positions will make security forces able to target insurgents in small groups or on their own. Of course, intelligence is not only a weapon that can be used against insurgency forces. It can also be misused against the civilian population, and this is often a general downside for all intelligence services. While this downside has to be addressed, it is very important to stress that an effective COIN campaign cannot take place without an efficient intelligence service, and the present level of intelligence collected by the Afghan intelligence service is probably not sufficient. This leads to loss of controlled territories, which then limits the physical and visual presence of the security forces. Hereby a vicious circle is created, which is one explanation to why the ANSF has been forced into a more defensive role leaving the initiative to the insurgency. The conclusion must be that in order to be able to control and influence an area and gain the operational initiative in a war, you need awareness and physical presence, or as Machiavelli very simply put it: A ruler needs to be in a conquered country in order to control it.

**Conclusion**

The coinciding elements between the two interventions in Afghanistan by the USSR and ISAF, respectively, are plentiful. Looking at USSR’s experiences during and after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, we can conclude that the main reason the Najibullah government broke down was the sudden termination of financial support. As such the important lesson that NATO and its Resolute Support Mission (RSM) should note is the fact that the Afghan government will need its support for an untold number of years to come. As long as the Afghan economy cannot financially sustain the necessary security forces needed to ensure the present stability in the country (which arguably is not even sufficient when looking at the increasing civilian casualties in recent years), NATO-countries cannot expect to decrease the financial support to Afghanistan without a high risk of the present government structure collapsing. This support

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34) (Long et al., 2012, p. 135)  
35) (Long et al., 2012, p. 147)  
36) (Long et al., 2012, p. 172)  
37) (Machiavelli, 2014, p. 23)  
38) (UNAMA & United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016, p. 1)
should be kept in place until the Afghan government is capable of shouldering the security challenges it faces on its own.

Of course, these key points do not necessarily result in the eradication of the insurgencies in Afghanistan as the mindset behind them needs to be eradicated as well, but that will only be possible once the security situation in Afghanistan is stable.

Looking at the key findings in “Locals Rule”, it is emphasized that in order to have a Kabul-based centralized government in control local awareness is necessary.39 One option in this manner is semi national local security forces as seen in the examples of Najibullah's militias and the present ALP. These forces might have a better understanding of the local history and culture and will have an easier task of avoiding pitfalls, e.g. the ALP will in most cases be from the local village,40 and naturally possess awareness of local customs and the area without any special training. As a downside, the local security forces might have local agendas that do not coincide with the national objectives of Afghanistan, and some that might even go against the interests of the national government. The local security forces can be tremendously effective but will always have the disadvantage of being under “non-national” leadership, which can result in greater difficulties for the national government, and thereby also the national security forces, as was the case with the Uzbek General Dostum’s militia forces, who were loyal only to him, even after they officially became the 53rd Army Division.41 A very important point about the local security forces is that continued financial support to them will be required in order to assure their continued assistance and loyalty. A problem that the Najibullah Government faced at the end of Soviet support.42

The gains achieved through use of local security forces should not be at the expense of intelligence. With the withdrawal of ISAF forces, the intelligence infrastructure has also suffered a setback making it harder for the national and local security forces to find and destroy insurgency forces. The best example of the troubles faced by ANSF is that of the Helmand province, where the 215th Army Corps has been depleted and demoralized along with the police as the operational initiative has been handed over to the insurgents.43

The drawdown of ISAF has implied that the ANSF needs to be able to fight alone against insurgents in the country. The sudden disappearance of the military dimension of ISAF has been a big challenge for the national security forces, but even more so has the just as sudden drawdown of military intelligence in Afghanistan, which has resulted in a weaker position for the ANSF. The ANSF has been left “blind” against insurgent forces where even if they have the required manpower and materiel to fight the insurgents, they lack the ability to do so properly.

39) (Long et al., 2012, p. 173)
40) (Long et al., 2012, p. 181)
41) (Long et al., 2012, pp. 137–138)
42) (Long et al., 2012, pp. 145 & 184)
43) (Jolly, 2016)
because of lacking intelligence, with Helmand as a prime example of the problems faced by the ANSF.\footnote{Majidi, 2015} Therefore, coalition forces should focus on strengthening and supporting Afghan intelligence or increasing exterior intelligence personnel in Afghanistan.

If the present political structure in Afghanistan is to survive, continued dedication in terms of financial support is needed. This is evident when looking at the experiences from the Soviet-supported Najibullah government as well as the security development during the last years in a post-ISAF Afghanistan.

**Aftermath**

In July 2015 it was announced that the new peace talks were being initiated with the Taliban. An Afghan delegation was sent to Islamabad in order to begin talks with Taliban representatives.\footnote{Boone, 2015} The peace talks were initiated alongside the initiative by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is apparent in the symbolic location in Islamabad for the peace talks.

However, the peace talks have faced, and continue to face, great challenges. First and foremost, the Taliban is not fully committed to the peace talks, as some of its factions will not necessarily follow the political leadership if an agreement is reached. On the government side, the disagreements with Pakistan have created problems for the talks, and in addition the changing leadership within the Taliban over the past years has also complicated future peace talks. Nonetheless, if a peace agreement is to be made, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has to improve, and if this implies a total withdrawal of international forces, this has to be taken into consideration. Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan in relation to politics, economy, and culture are certain to make any peace deal without their engagement and commitment a very short-lived one.
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