

# From Invasion to Insurgency: Assessing the Legacy of Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** *Due to the unsuccessful invasions by numerous foreign nations, Afghanistan is referred to as the “graveyard of empires.” Afghanistan’s numerous ethnic and tribal disputes make it a place of insurgency as well. The significant effects of the Soviet operation in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 are examined in this research article. The research paper examines the complex impacts of the intervention on Afghan society, economy, politics, and geopolitics through examination of historical occurrences, academic viewpoints, and empirical data. This study attempts to give a thorough grasp of how the intervention changed Afghanistan’s course and affected regional and international dynamics by looking at both the short-term and long-term effects. Examining the significant and wide-ranging consequences of the Soviet incursion in Afghanistan is the aim of this research work. We shall examine the strategic goals and ideological underpinnings of the USSR’s 1979 invasion choice. The terrible human cost of the conflict will thereafter be the focus of our analysis. We’ll look at the effects on Afghan society, such as the massive death toll, the millions of people who have been displaced, and the infrastructure damage.*

**Keywords:** Soviet intervention, Afghanistan Crisis, Invasion, Insurgency, Cold War

## INTRODUCTION

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 is one of the most important events which changed the geopolitics of that time. Mohammed Yousaf (1992) argued that the Soviet war was not just a war between Afghan and Soviet soldiers, but it was a proxy war between the superpowers. There was not a single or defined motivation behind the Soviet intervention, but the motivation can be defined in terms of impact on Soviet society. The most significant motivation to intervene in Afghanistan was to support the communist government and prevent the spread of Islamic insurgency. Dr. Amin Saikal (2004), a scholar of Afghan relations, highlighted that the war turned Afghanistan into a battleground for the superpowers. Soviet intervention destabilized the region, as argued by Lester Grau (2002). According to him, the war laid the groundwork for the rise of the Taliban. Soviet intervention was not just a regional or bilateral event; it had a global impact. Sceptics highlighted the role of the United States in supporting the Afghan resistance fighters known as mujahideen. The war was brutal, and it had long-lasting consequences which can be witnessed now in Afghan society.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Afghanistan was facing problems of instability, factionalism, and weak central governance before Soviet intervention. Afghan society was divided into tribes, and regional rivalries were common there because that state institution was weak. Barnett Rubin (2002) argued that before the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the political landscape of the country was characterized by instability, factionalism, and weak central governance. Scholars have described Afghanistan as a nation plagued by tribal divisions, regional rivalries, and a history of weak state institutions. According to political scientist Barnett Rubin, Afghanistan’s political structure before the intervention was defined by a lack of effective central authority, with power often decentralized among several tribal leaders and provincial strongmen. Rubin observes that the country’s traditional social structure, centered on tribe and kinship networks, played a crucial role in establishing political allegiances. The growing dissatisfaction with the monarchy is noted by historian Mohammed Yousaf (1992), who writes, “By the 1970s, Afghanistan was ready for change. The monarchy had grown more remote and insensitive to the demands of its subjects.” According to Afghan historian Louis Dupree (1980), the lack of a unified governmental system and a strong sense of national identity caused power struggles and internal strife. The Afghan monarchy found it difficult to preserve peace in the face of tribal disputes and to maintain authority over remote areas, even with modernization attempts. Afghanistan’s political vulnerabilities were further increased by its advantageous position as a buffer state between empires

and regional powers. The geography of Afghanistan was one of the reasons for attracting foreign powers to intervene. Afghanistan shares a strategic location with Central Asia, and the USSR was dominant there. King Zahir Shah ruled Afghanistan for four decades (1933-1973), and he tried to modernize Afghan society. Modernization impacted the religious beliefs of conservative Afghans; he faced criticism from the traditional power structure. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which was a communist party, came into being in the 1960s. Some societal groups found the PDPA's socialist policies and land redistribution desirable, but others expressed alarm about its extreme goals. King Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1978 by a communist coup headed by the PDPA. Internal disputes within the PDPA, however, quickly broke out. After Hafizullah Amin's extreme Khalq faction took power, they imposed severe and unpopular measures that made many Afghans angry. Before Soviet intervention, Afghanistan's social condition was characterized by tribal affiliations and traditional Islamic values. Afghanistan was a rural society where the majority of the population was governed by tribal structure and was more dependent on agriculture. Social hierarchies were the common feature of Afghan society, where power was in the hands of local tribal chiefs and elders. Tribal elders possessed authority and power regarding various decisions. Although this social structure promoted a strong sense of community loyalty and solidarity, it also upheld patriarchal norms and inequalities, especially regarding gender relations. In addition to having limited access to education and career options, women were typically restricted to conventional responsibilities within the home. In terms of religion, the majority of people in Afghanistan were Muslims, and Islam was a fundamental component of both personal and social identity. Numerous facets of social interactions, governance, and legal systems have been impacted by Islamic cultural traditions and ideals. Islamic teachings had a significant influence on the nation's social structure, influencing standards for marriage, family life, and communal harmony. Political power was decentralized in pre-Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, where tribal leaders, regional warlords, and religious figures shared power and had high influence in local decision-making. Helmand and Kabul River basins help Afghanistan in providing irrigation, and because many Afghan regions were dependent on cultivation. Foreign aid was significant in the Afghan budget. Foreign aid helps in the development of projects in sectors like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. This aid dependency also made Afghanistan vulnerable to geopolitical influences and fluctuations in donor priorities. Afghanistan's landlocked location further limited its economic opportunities because trade routes were frequently disrupted and vulnerable to geopolitical disputes. A feudal land tenure system, which concentrated huge landholdings in the hands of a small number of wealthy families, was another feature of Afghanistan's economy. Rubin (2002) pointed out that social inequality and rural poverty were exacerbated by differences in land ownership and the widespread practice of tenant farming. This agrarian system hampered efforts at rural development and stagnated agricultural output, especially when combined with limited access to technology and capital.

### SOVIET INTERVENTION

The objectives behind Soviet intervention were ideological, geopolitical, and strategic. Regional stability and

ideological imperatives are most common. One of the reasons for Soviet intervention was the rise in American involvement in the area. According to Diego Gibbs (2006), the Soviets saw Afghanistan as a buffer state, and its loss to Islamic or Western forces would have left an unconscionable void on the southern border of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union wanted to strengthen its position in Central Asia and stop anti-communist sentiments. The Cold War was a battle of ideology, and in this battle, the USSR wanted to dominate the world by spreading the ideology of communism. The Soviet Union saw the intervention in Afghanistan as advancing socialism and modernism by focusing on Marxist and Leninist ideals. Eva Jenne and Marko Popovic (2013) highlighted that in addition to being geopolitical, the Soviet Union's decision to engage was motivated by a deep-seated ideological commitment and a conviction in the internationalist obligation to defend socialism in Afghanistan. It was the responsibility of the USSR to defend socialism across the globe, which motivated the Soviet Union to intervene in the region. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 also created a fear in the Soviet regime for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Abdullah Mohib (2024) held that Soviet concerns that Islamic radicalism would infiltrate its Muslim-majority southern republics were intensified by the Iranian Revolution. Soviet intervention was also driven by internal political considerations. Christopher Andrew (2005) highlighted those following failures like détente and the growing aggressiveness of China and the United States. The leadership was resolved to regain Soviet supremacy within the socialist bloc and to show its power to the West. By intervening in Afghanistan, Leonid Brezhnev aimed to establish the USSR's supremacy inside the communist bloc and solidify its position as a global force. Afghanistan is a resource-rich country, and foreign powers are always attracted towards it to gain economic prosperity from the Afghan region. Panagiotis Dimitrakis (2012) argued that Soviet access to Afghan minerals and vital transit routes was a tacit motive, though it wasn't usually highlighted. The Soviets prioritised the conquest of important cities and vital infrastructure in their quick and decisive operation plan. The Afghan Mujahideen, who benefited from rugged terrain and guerrilla warfare techniques, were underestimated for their determination. Miscalculations happened by Soviet leaders in the Afghan intervention. Michael Fenzel (2013) highlighted that the troops received ambiguous orders, and the Soviet leadership lacked a clear political goal for the action. Their approach suffered throughout the battle because of this initial ambiguity. The Soviets mostly depended on air power, using bombers and helicopter gunships to cause deaths and impede Mujahideen movements. But these strategies frequently led to innocent casualties. These air strikes united the Afghan people, and hatred increased against communist leaders in the heart of common Afghans. Soviet ground forces found it difficult to fight in the steep terrain of Afghanistan because they were used to large-scale conventional combat. They were exposed to ambushes and Mujahideen hit-and-run tactics because they relied on armored columns. Ulugbek Khasanov (2024) argued that Soviet strategists had long desired indirect access to the Indian Ocean, which would be possible with control of Afghanistan. Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1986. Gorbachev started a reform (Glasnost) and withdrawal-openness program after realising the war's mounting costs and

dwindling benefits. Archie Brown (1996) argued that Gorbachev's reformist beliefs and personal initiative were essential to the Soviet Union's withdrawal from war zones like Afghanistan. The 1988 Geneva Accords provided a framework for the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops and install a transitional government in Afghanistan. The final Soviet troops left Afghanistan in February 1989, bringing an end to a ten-year military operation.

### IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan impacted the balance of power equation around the globe. Due to the Cold War, the world was divided into blocs. The intervention of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan changed the perspective of Muslim nations regarding the Soviet Union. Fred Halliday (1980) argued that by upsetting regional balances and escalating the U.S.-Soviet conflict in the Third World, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan signaled the final militarization of the Cold War. Militant Islam was spread across the globe, which is one of the major impacts of Soviet intervention. Ahmed Rasid (2001) highlighted that a transnational jihadist mindset was fostered by the Soviet Union's strategic error of invading Afghanistan, which inspired Islamic resistance movements throughout the Muslim world. Heavy damage and destruction were faced by Afghan society, and many tribal leaders lost their lives due to insurgency. Due to destruction and damage of infrastructure, including roads, bridges, communication networks, and irrigation, common Afghan people face significant problems in balancing lifestyle. Brain drains of Afghanistan was also a major cause of soviet intervention, due to war and conflicts skilled and professional Afghans left their country for better livelihood. Young Afghans also lost their lives. A leadership gap in Afghan society was also witnessed due to Soviet intervention. William Maley (2002) highlighted that one of the biggest refugee crises of the 20th century was brought on by the Soviet occupation, which forced more than five million Afghans to flee their homes. Soviet intervention weaponized the tribal identity as highlighted by David. B Edwards (2002), Traditional tribal rivalries were turned into strongly armed, ideologically motivated insurgencies by foreign assistance and the Soviet threat. Soviet intervention degraded human resources as it crippled the Afghan economy; also, production declined due to displacement, use of landmines, and conversion of farmers into soldiers. Malnutrition and food shortages became common problems. War and Public Health: The Human Cost of Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan, a report published by Health and Human Rights Journal in 1996, highlighted that over a million civilians are thought to have died, with children and expectant mothers suffering the hardest from widespread hunger. Cultural and mental trauma was also faced by Afghan citizens, which can be seen in their behavior till now, and the politics of Afghanistan is also influenced by this mental trauma and insecurity given by Soviet intervention. Odd Arne Westad (2005) highlighted that because of the intervention, Soviet military doctrine changed from aiding allies to direct occupation, which ironically made insurgent networks stronger rather than weaker. The impact of Soviet intervention is so large that its spots can be traced in current Afghan politics. Thomas Barfield (2010) held that civil war and the emergence of the Taliban were directly influenced by the power vacuum created by the Soviet withdrawal.

### INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

A wave of condemnation was seen in the global community. The United States and its allies criticized the USSR for its expansionist and interventionist attitude. Under the guise of Operation Cyclone, the United States provided the Mujahideen with billions of dollars in training and weaponry. The intervention increased superpower rivalry even more, confirmed the Cold War split, and generated worries about Soviet expansionism. Fawaz A. Gerges (2005) noticed that the war sowed the seeds for transnational Islamist militancy and turned Afghanistan into a testing ground for global jihad. The intervention was condemned by many nations, especially those in the Non-Aligned Movement. They asked for a peaceful settlement of the war and a Soviet troop pullout. Countries like Iran, with complaints against the Soviet-backed administration in Afghanistan, backed the Mujahideen. Some Arab countries, wary of Soviet influence but also worried about the growth of Islamic extremism, kept a measured attitude. Drawing in foreign players and aggravating local unrest, the war turned into a proxy battleground for the Cold War superpowers. Support for rival factions in the Afghan war deepened Cold War splits and created long-term effects for the area.

### LEGACY OF SOVIET INTERVENTION

USSR intervention destabilized the region for a long period because of conflict and wars. Foreign investment was not attracted towards Afghanistan. Amin Saikal (2004) noticed that a protracted period of regional instability, radicalization, and internal conflict that still affects South and Central Asia today was triggered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Soviet intervention provided a threat of insecurity to traditional Islamic identity. As Islam is a religion beyond borders, the intervention spread the jihad beyond the Afghanistan border, due to which the rise of militant Islam was witnessed across the globe. The US support to mujahideen shows the vulnerability of self-interest-based politics, as noticed by Steve Coll (2004). He highlighted that the United States unintentionally helped to create militant networks that eventually directly threatened international security by aiding the mujahideen. It was the Soviet intervention of Afghanistan which showed how effectively a proxy war can damage the opponent without full participation. Barnett R. Rubin argued that future international reactions to military occupations were influenced by the Soviet invasion, which also gave rise to indirect engagement and proxy warfare theories. The event also highlights the role of Pakistan as a frontline strategic state which helped the USA in proxy techniques. Husain Haqqani (2005) examines critically how Zia-ul-Haq's government combined religious rhetoric with official policy, using Islam as a tool to justify jihad against the Soviet Union. The USSR disintegrated more quickly due to the military and moral failure in Afghanistan, which seriously undermined Soviet internal confidence. The role of the United Nations was heavily criticized as the USSR, a permanent member, breached the sovereignty of Afghanistan. The legacy of Soviet intervention is continued as Afghanistan became a more fragmented society after intervention, as noticed by Thomas Barfield (2010). Warlords and militias controlled the fragmented post-Soviet state of Afghanistan, which had little chance of establishing a single national identity. The effects of the Soviet intervention on Afghanistan were brought to light by the 9/11 attacks. The 9/11 attacks and the emergence of al-Qaeda showed how Afghanistan's

instability can endanger international security. Afghanistan and its neighbours continue to face challenges due to the war's legacy of instability, state weakness, extremism, and regional security threats. During the Soviet Afghan War, Afghanistan emerged as a major producer of opium, which is now a global drug proliferation threat.

## CONCLUSION

Legacy of Soviet Afghan war remains a guiding principle for contemporary discussions and debates on foreign intervention, insurgency, and geopolitical contest between major global powers. As Afghanistan remains a theater of clash of strategic ambitions, especially in the context of resurgent global multipolarity, the learnings from this phase remain profoundly relevant and resonantly impactful. Power vacuum left by the Soviet withdrawal resulted in conflict among various tribes in Afghan society. Understanding this history is essential to get a hold of the persistent trends of conflict and the fragility of coercive administrative engineering. Training camps established by the USA to train mujahideen became breeding ground for international terrorism, which led to 9/11 terrorism attack on the USA. The withdrawal of Soviet forces did not constitute the end of conflict, but rather the beginning of new phases of instability, civil war and global intervention trends that would repeat. Soviet Afghan conflict legacy can be witnessed in the form of Destabilized Afghanistan. The vacuum left behind added to the rise of extremist ideologies and militant networks, whose repercussions have been experienced globally. In today's changing geopolitical landscape, where global powers once again get involved in proxy conflicts and firm & assertive foreign policies, the Afghan story stands as a cautionary remainder. It validates the need for long-term strategic outlook, culturally attuned diplomacy and discretion in exercising military or hard power. Ultimately, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan presents not only historical perspective but also a reflection of the present and future obstacles in global governance, regional stability and foreign relations. One of the biggest obstacles to Afghanistan's long-term stability is the fight to install a legitimate and functional government.

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