

U.S. Stay in Afghanistan Is as Long as Soviet Slog

November 28, 2010

The  Moscow Times

KABUL ☒ The Soviet Union couldn't win in Afghanistan, and now the United States is about to have something in common with that futile campaign: nine years, 50 days.

As of Friday, the U.S.-led coalition has been fighting in this South Asian country for as long as the Soviets did in their humbling attempt to build up a socialist state. The two invasions had different goals ☒ and dramatically different body counts ☒ but whether they have significantly different outcomes remains to be seen.

What started out as a quick war on Oct. 7, 2001, by the U.S. and its allies to wipe out al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden and the Taliban has instead turned into a long and slogging campaign. Now, about 100,000 NATO troops are fighting a burgeoning insurgency while trying to support and cultivate a nascent democracy.

A Pentagon-led assessment released earlier this week described the progress made since the United States injected 30,000 more troops into Afghanistan earlier this year as fragile.

The top U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, has said NATO's core objective is to ensure that Afghanistan "is never again a sanctuary to al-Qaida or other transnational extremists that it was prior to 9/11."

He said the only way to achieve that goal is "to help Afghanistan develop the ability to secure and govern itself. Now not to the levels of Switzerland in 10 years or less, but to a level that is good enough for Afghanistan."

To reach that, there is an ongoing effort to get the Taliban to the negotiating table. President Hamid Karzai has set up a committee to try to make peace, and the military hopes its campaign will help force the insurgents to seek a deal.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Dec. 27, 1979, its stated goal was to transform Afghanistan into a modern socialist state. The Soviets sought to prop up a communist regime that was facing a popular uprising, but left largely defeated on Feb. 15, 1989.

In 1992, the pro-Moscow government of Mohammad Najibullah collapsed and U.S.-backed rebels took power. The Taliban eventually seized Kabul after a violent civil war that killed thousands more. It ruled with a strict interpretation of Islamic law until it was ousted by the U.S.-led invasion.

Nader Nadery, an Afghan analyst who has studied the Soviet and U.S. invasions, said "the time may be the same" for the two conflicts, "but conditions are not similar."

More than 1 million civilians died as Soviet forces propping up the government of Babrak Karmal waged a massive war against anti-communist mujahedeen forces.

"There was indiscriminate mass bombardment of villages for the eviction of mujahedeen," Nadery said. "Civilian casualties are not at all comparable."

Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank and Afghanistan expert, said NATO forces have killed fewer than 10,000 civilians and a comparable number of insurgents.

The allied military presence has also been far smaller and more targeted. Even now, nearly all operations are restricted to the south and east of the country where the insurgency is most active. O'Hanlon points out that at the height of the resistance, there were 250,000 mujahedeen representing all Afghan ethnic groups fighting the Soviets, while "the current insurgency is perhaps one-eighth as large and is only Pashtun."

"We do have big problems. But there is no comparison between this war and what the Soviets wrought," he said.

"The Soviet war set Afghanistan back dramatically from what had been a weak but functioning state. NATO has, by contrast, helped Afghanistan to a 10 percent annual economic growth rate, 7 million kids are now in school, and most people have access to basic health care within a two-hour walk," O'Hanlon said.

The United States and its allies, however, have made strategic mistakes, including taking their eyes off Afghanistan and shifting their attention to the war in Iraq. In those crucial years, the

Taliban and their allies surged back and took control of many parts of the Afghan countryside and some regions in the south, especially parts of Kandahar and Helmand.

Wadir Safi, a professor at Kabul University who served as civil aviation minister under the Najibullah government, said risks surround the U.S. effort because "the Americans never reached the goal for which they came."

"If they don't change their policy, if they don't reach their goals, if they don't reach agreement with the armed opposition and with the government, then it is not a far time that the Afghan people will be fed up with the presence of these foreign forces," Safi said.

The United States has pledged that its commitment to Afghanistan will run past the 2014 date when NATO forces are supposed to transition to a noncombat role.

A Russian analyst said the Soviet Union tried to do something similar when it left Afghanistan. It backed Najibullah with money and weapons, and left behind a trained and heavily armed Afghan military. But it all crumbled and the mujahedeen took over Kabul in 1992. Najibullah stayed in the city's U.N. compound until Kabul fell to the Taliban in 1996, and he was hanged from the main square.

"The Soviet Union tried to leave its protege alone to run the country, but that ended in the Taliban victory," said Alexander Konovalov, the head of the Moscow-based Institute of Strategic Assessment, an independent think-tank.

"The U.S. now wants to create a self-sufficient structure backed by some support forces," he said. "It remains to be seen how successful it could be in Afghanistan."

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