

Obama Tests Soviet's Afghan Endgame

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The last Soviet troops boarding a plane to leave Kabul on Feb. 13, 1989.

Laurent Rebours / AP

The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan bears ominous similarities to the disastrous Soviet war there 20 years ago, when a modern army was humbled by small guerrilla bands and the invaders struggled to prop up an unpopular government in Kabul. But comparisons like these, often cited by critics of President Barack Obama's planned surge, have emphasized similarities while ignoring key differences in the position of the Soviet Union then and the United States and NATO today. A close reading of history suggests that there is still a chance that the allies can succeed where the Soviet Union failed.

While more than 850 members of the U.S. military have died as a result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, those losses still represent a fraction of 14,500 Soviet deaths in Moscow's Afghan adventure.

During the 10 years that the Soviet Union fought in Afghanistan, the country was a Cold War battleground, pitting a Kremlin-backed atheist government against Muslim fighters clandestinely supported by the United States, Pakistan, Iran, China and Saudi Arabia. By the late 1980s, the United States and the others were supplying the rebels with everything from transport mules to advanced weaponry, including the Stinger anti-aircraft missiles that played a crucial role in neutralizing Soviet air power.

Today, the Western allies face an insurgency in Afghanistan that is largely homegrown and self-financed, in part through opium production. No government in the world publicly supports the Taliban. Dark assessments of the West's chances in Afghanistan typically dwell on Moscow's setbacks while ignoring its successes,

including the creation of a relatively stable Afghan government and a 300,000-member army. Afghanistan's Communist regime defied all predictions and outlasted the Soviet Union, collapsing only after post-Soviet Russia halted massive economic aid.

In the current conflict, militants have turned parts of Pakistan into sanctuaries, as they did during the Soviet war. But unlike the Soviets, the United States has been able to extend its air power into these ungoverned regions.

The United States has alienated many Afghans through its bombing raids, which have caused numerous civilian casualties. But U.S. and Western troops have trod far more lightly than Soviet military forces, some of whom robbed farmers, looted markets and used air power indiscriminately, sometimes wiping out villages. Russian veterans of the Soviet Afghan war have long predicted that the U.S.-led battle against the Taliban was doomed, based on their own experience fighting among the arid peaks of the Hindu Kush. But these judgments perhaps are colored by bitterness over the Soviet defeat.

While mindful of Soviet failures, Western forces have been slow to learn from Moscow's successes. Kabul's Kremlin-backed Communist regime was generally brutal, corrupt and represented a small minority of the population. But the Afghan Communist leaders arguably had far more control of their country than the government of President Hamid Karzai. After the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union implemented a strategy of securing cities and the roads between them, strengthening the central government's grip. And to some extent this approach worked, creating islands of stability where the government could run schools and hospitals, organize police and train soldiers. Older residents of Kabul recall that the city was safer during the era of the Soviet occupation.

Obama's plan for ending the U.S.-led war against the Taliban bears a striking resemblance to former Soviet leader [Mikhail Gorbachev](#)'s scheme for ending his country's Afghan war 20 years ago. After Gorbachev took power in 1985, he authorized a surge in military forces. But he gave his generals a year to win the war. After that, he warned, they would have to withdraw. Obama on Tuesday proposed a similar strategy, calling for 30,000 additional American troops, bringing the U.S. total to nearly 100,000. But he also said troop withdrawals would begin in the summer of 2011. Gorbachev's exit from what he called "our bleeding wound" took four years instead of one and cost the lives of an additional 7,000 Russian soldiers. But the government that they left behind hung on for another 1 1/2 years, and might have survived far longer with international support. So if the parallels between the U.S.-led Afghan war and the Soviet defeat there aren't as simple as they seem, why isn't the United States winning in Afghanistan? Some blame the lack of a clear strategy or commitment on Washington. "I think that we spent eight years under the Bush administration just wasting time and making things worse," said Gregory Feifer, author of "The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan." Feifer said he is concerned that it could be too late to reverse eight years of failed U.S. military policies. But, he added, "I do believe we've taken a big step in the right direction." Pavel Felgenhauer, an independent military analyst, said the West's military advantage over the guerrillas should not be underestimated. "It's a much better situation for the U.S. than it was for the Russians," he said. "And that makes it at least theoretically winnable."