

Avoiding Bear Traps and Similar Military Pitfalls

A criticism might be made that America's political leadership and their supporting cast of civilian and uniformed bureaucrats spend far too much time trying to make history without reading it first. In an effort to understand the complexity of international conflict, it is necessary to begin an intensified reading of past warfare. An important article by George Kennan was a midterm evaluation of the Soviet Union's historic error that occurred when they invaded [Afghanistan in late 1979](#). This extended deployment of Russian troops was essentially the first – and last - armed intervention by Moscow outside its region of control developed shortly after the end of [World War II](#).

The Soviets' decision-making is eerily familiar: The gradual evolution of a hostile regime in a country viewed as critical to national interests due to its geopolitical position; growing fears that opposing interests would coalesce around this regime to challenge regional stability; decision-making by a small, select group in the absence of detailed information needed to make accurate recommendations; presence of a key leader determined to press his selected solution to the front; a warning by a key commander that the armed intervention was being planned around too few ground troops; and a ground commander ignored.

Obviously, this isn't an assessment of the [Bush](#) administration's decision-making process prior to [invading Iraq](#); it is an historical outline of the Soviet leadership's decisions to invade Afghanistan. The declassified transcripts of the Politburo's deliberations now are available for all to read and evaluate and a comparative analysis illustrates what can happen when major policy decisions are made out of fear and implemented based on experiences elsewhere which have little pertinence to the current problem. In the case of the Soviet Union's decision-making process regarding their Afghanistan problem, Party Chairman [Brezhnev](#) was swayed by arguments based on [Yuri Andropov's](#) successful experience in Hungary and [Czechoslovakia](#).

Instead of reading history and learning from the military solutions attempted by others under similar circumstances, the unprepared often reach back to repeat solutions with which they experienced previous success. In the case of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, Yuri Andropov was the key player who fell into this particular trap because of his previous successful operations under circumstances that were being experienced in Afghanistan in 1979.

As the Soviet ambassador to Hungary during the 1956 revolution, Andropov played a key role in convincing a reluctant Nikita Khrushchev that military intervention was required to stabilize the situation. Again in 1968, he was instrumental in ensuring that the Czechoslovakian reform movement was brutally suppressed with military force.

Given his experiences in two previous threats to Soviet dominance within their sphere of influence, it isn't surprising to discover that Andropov was a leading advocate for the use of military force to resolve the growing crisis in Afghanistan.

But these experiences were entirely dissimilar to the problem of confronting nationalistic Muslim fundamentalists inside a Central Asian country with supportive neighbors, primarily Pakistan.

A 1984 paper revealed some basic misunderstanding and erroneous assumptions made during the Cold War. Then, as now, the military industrial complex was a large player in ensuring that the worst-case scenario would be the basis for national security decision-making. During the Cold War, this resulted in our view that the Russians were an aggressive power needed to be feared. A far more rational and less alarmist view was presented in this paper by [George F. Kennan](#), a man who carefully read history before attempting to make it.

Kennan carefully explained that the Soviets were far less likely to intervene militarily in the contested Third World than was the United States. Since their violent [1917 Revolution](#) brought them to power in Russia, the Soviets were far more aggressive with their propaganda than they ever were with their military power. They were clearly opportunistic and took advantage of every opportunity to use subversion and their deniable surrogate forces, but sending the huge Red Army across international borders was not their *modus operandi*. Armed reactions occurred, obviously, in East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia when Soviet garrisons were used to quell secessionist movements that would result in gaps in the buffer Soviet leaders wanted to maintain around their borders. Borders were a sensitive issue for the Soviets with the memories of [Hitler's](#) highly mobile [Wehrmacht's](#) divisions streaming across the border toward Moscow still fresh in their minds.

Buffer states were retained along borders with Eastern Europe and early relationships with the People's Republic of China left the Soviet's leaders relatively comfortable. Only to the south did potential threats arise in the form of Iran and Afghanistan, but both nations were far too weak militarily and remained generally unaligned. But world events failed to continue to break the way the Soviets desired.

Egypt's [Anwar Sadat](#) was the first to view a close relationship with U.S.S.R. as a liability, and within a few years, Somalia's [Siad Barre](#) also rejected the Soviets. Meanwhile, the United States stepped in with large aid programs for both countries that the Soviets could not match, and the strategic allegiance in both Egypt and Somalia shifted towards the West.

While Iran had been a quiet neighbor for decades, the last year of the 1970 decade would have a profound impact on the Soviet leadership's views of their southern border that had been stable for so many years. The inept blundering of President Carter removed the gradually modernizing [Shah](#) and allowed [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) and his radical followers to create the world's first Islamic fundamentalist state out of previously pro-western Iran. For the first time in decades, there was a potentially hostile nation on the Soviet Union's border.

The Soviet Union's leaders took some comfort in the [Afghanistan's 1978 communist revolution](#), but the repression of the rural peasantry and their tribal and religious leaders by the new leadership in Kabul spawned an Islamic fundamentalist insurrection in rural Afghanistan. Within a year, the new communist government was responding to the rural rebellion with considerable savagery, creating anger and hatreds that led to the insurgency spreading even further. The new communist leader of Afghanistan, poet-revolutionary [Muhammad Taraki](#) who had been imprisoned by the government, was soon requesting Soviet help in putting down the rebellion he had managed to create.

George Kennan argued that the Soviet Union was reluctant to use military force to solve political problems and this is well-documented in declassified Politburo transcripts related to their decision to intervene in Afghanistan's developing civil war. But the Soviets did intervene after nearly two years of agonizing over the decision and in the end, essentially four individuals convinced Brezhnev to invade. This begs the question: Why did the Soviets invade if this was not a part of some Grand Strategy?

Great powers are generally slow to move militarily because of problems related to "unintended consequences." And once a military option is in motion, bureaucratic politics and internal competition among contending elites make it next to impossible to reverse a decision to use force without facing a loss of personal prestige that could result in the loss of personal power. The Soviets were facing multiple challenges during this period and they moved into Afghanistan out of fear, not out of strength. Fear is the one factor that will get a great power to utilize the military instrument of power.

Soviet fears were difficult to assess from the United States perspective, but these were real to the old men running the Kremlin at this period in Russian history. Their presence on the world stage was relatively new and they were generally inexperienced in dealing with events such as the one that was under consideration. For example, the last democratic leader of Russia in the chaos of 1917, [Alexander Kerensky](#), was still alive and living in New York City in 1970, not long before they were making the difficult decision to invade the first country in their history. And like most leaders about to make history, they failed to read any of it before committing troops to the Afghanistan intervention. Even a cursory reading of Afghanistan's history would have been illuminating and they may have listened to the advice of Chief of General Staff [N. V. Ogarkov](#) who wanted to deploy more troops:

“On December 10, 1979, the Defense Minister of the USSR D. F. Ustinov summoned Chief of General Staff N. V. Ogarkov, and informed him that the Politburo had reached a preliminary decision of a temporary introduction of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and ordered him to prepare approximately 75 to 80 thousand people. N. V. Ogarkov was surprised and outraged by such a decision, and said that 75 thousand would not be able to stabilize the situation, and that he was against the introduction of troops, calling it “reckless.” The Minister of Defense cut him off harshly: “Are you going to teach the Politburo? Your only duty is to carry out the orders....”

Preparations for the intervention were soon underway: On the same day, Ogarkov was promptly summoned to L. Brezhnev's office, where the so-called “small Politburo” (Yu. Andropov, [A. Gromyko](#) and D. Ustinov) was in session.

“The Chief of General Staff once again tried to convince those who were present, that the Afghan problem should be decided by the political means, instead of relying on using force. He cited the traditions of the Afghan people, who never tolerated foreigners on their soil, warned them about the possible involvement of our troops in military operations, -- but everything was in vain. However, in the end of the conversation they tentatively determined that for the time being they would not make the final decision on the immediate military assistance, but, in any case, the troops should start preparing.

“In the evening, D. Ustinov gathered the Ministry of Defense Collegium and informed the narrow circle of officials from among the highest military leadership that possibly in the near future the decision would be made to use the Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and that they had to start preparing the appropriate forces.”

The Soviet military was being put in motion, despite its own misgivings. The “small Politburo” had carried the day with Brezhnev and shortly he provided a hand-written note for key signatures. The following evidence that essentially three men were responsible for the decision to invade was placed in Politburo records on December 12, 1979:

“1. Ratify evaluations and measures set forth by Andropov Yu. V., Ustinov, D.F., and Gromyko A.A.... Execution of all those measures should be entrusted to Comr[ades] Andropov Yu. V., Ustinov D. F., and Gromyko A. A.

“2. Entrust Comrs. Andropov Yu. Y., Ustinov D.F., and Gromyko A.A, to keep the CC Politburo informed on the status of the execution of the outlined measures.””

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was about to begin its first aggressive war with Soviet troops by invading Afghanistan – a response to the fears of three key leaders, Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko rather than the results of a wide debate within the larger Politburo or the Central Committee. In spite of the misgivings of key military officers, the Soviet Union was entering a war with Muslim extremists in Afghanistan.

And what were the fears that drove these three men to this decision? Several are obvious when

viewed with the hindsight provided by time and the declassified documents.

First, Brezhnev was ill and each of the three members of the “small Politburo” viewed themselves as possible successors to him. This was not the time to be indecisive, if they were to be able to rise to the top of the Soviet government. There were potential enemies gathering on the southern border for the first time in the history of the U.S.S.R. and newly socialist Afghanistan was threatened from within. Brezhnev’s recent doctrine that stated that once a country was socialist, it would not be allowed to reverse course provided them with the necessary “top cover” for their actions.

Second, they were fearful that connections initiated by the Shah between Iran and Afghanistan would continue under Ayatollah Khomeini and any Islamic fundamentalist victory in Afghanistan could unite the two nations against Soviet regional interests. Any militant Islamic activity along the Soviet Union’s southern border might spread easily into their southern republics that were inhabited by Muslim populations.

Third, American regional strength had grown at Soviet expense during the decade. Egypt and Somalia were now American allies, for all intents and purposes. After Muhammad Taraki was ousted by [Hafizullah Amin](#) in Kabul, there were increasing Soviet fears that Amin might follow the course taken by Egypt’s Sadat and Somalia’s Barre and break relations with the Soviet Union. Having a pro-American regime on their southern border was a serious potential problem. Amin’s repression of the Afghan population was fueling the Islamic insurgency and his removal might tamp down both problems they potentially faced.

Fourth, China, Pakistan, and the United States were cooperating against Soviet regional interests. Pakistan had allowed American U-2 flights to depart from their airfields and facilitated [Henry Kissinger’s](#) 1971 visit to China that led to [President Nixon’s](#) visit in 1972. Meanwhile, the Soviets were engaged in border skirmishes with China’s Peoples Liberation Army in 1969 and 1972. The geo-strategic implications of these three countries working together in the region were not lost on the Soviet leadership.

The minutes from a Politburo Session on March 17-18, 1979, read: “...Bands of saboteurs and terrorists, having infiltrated from the territory of Pakistan, trained and armed not only with the participation of Pakistani forces, but also of China, the United States of America and Iran, are committing atrocities in Herat.”

Finally in the midst of all these major concerns, the select members of the “small Politburo” had to be concerned about the loss of Soviet prestige and the parallel loss of their international momentum. The key players were keenly aware that if they didn’t maintain their momentum regarding political issues that were important to them, someone else would gain it. At this key point in the Cold War, Soviet decision-makers could not have been pleased with the potential emergence of a United States-China-Pakistan alliance with bases on their border with Afghanistan, a hostile Shi’a regime in Iran, and their own restive, Muslim republics and their rapidly growing populations in the general vicinity of these enemies. In their view, they had plenty to fear as the decision to invade Afghanistan was forced by the Kremlin’s politicians upon the Soviet military leadership.

But as interesting as “getting in” turned out to be, the method the Soviets chose to “get out” are far more suggestive of history repeating itself. They had been led by a series of old, ill men (Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko) who often as not ruled from their hospital rooms. The arrival on the scene of a young, dynamic leader who had not experienced the Soviet’s “Great Patriotic War” with Hitler’s Germany and was far more pragmatic precipitated an exit strategy:

At the Politburo session of October 17, 1985, [General Secretary Gorbachev](#) proposed to make a final decision on Afghanistan and quoted from citizens’ letters regarding the dissatisfaction in the

country with the Soviet actions in Afghanistan. He also described his meeting with Babrak Karmal during which Gorbachev told the Afghan leader: “We will help you, but with arms only, not troops.” Chernyaev noted Gorbachev’s negative reaction to the assessment of the situation given by Defense Minister Marshal [Sergey Sokolov](#).

Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March, 1985. Lester Grau provided an excellent analysis of history that may have repeated itself in Iraq and potentially in 2009 Afghanistan: Given a limited period to show progress, the Soviet military “surged”.

Once in power, Gorbachev imposed a one-year deadline for making the military approach work. As a result, 1985 proved to be the bloodiest year of fighting in the war. Although the Soviets came close to breaking the back of the mujahedin, the mujahedin held on and it became evident that the Soviets could not win the war without a massive troop buildup and severe international and internal repercussions. Accordingly, Gorbachev opted to withdraw Soviet forces from Afghanistan – in good order. Accordingly in the March 1986 Party Congress, he announced plans to “Afghanize” the conflict and to intensify negotiations for a withdrawal.

Obviously, this failed to win the war, and in spite of indications that mujahedin resistance was nearly broken, the mighty Soviet army withdrew.

One has to admit that essentially we put our bets on the military solution, on suppressing the counterrevolution with force. We did not even fully use the existing opportunities for neutralization of the hostile attitudes of the local population towards us. We have to assess critically some aspects of functioning of our adviser apparatus in Afghanistan as well. It did many things to provide assistance in strengthening the PDPA and the people’s regime. However, often our people, acting out of their best intentions, tried to transplant the approach we are accustomed to onto the Afghan soil, encouraged the Afghans to copy our ways. All this did not help our cause, it bred the feelings of dependency on the part of the Afghan leaders in regard to the Soviet Union both in the sphere of military operations and in the economic sphere.

Meanwhile the war in Afghanistan continued, and our troops were getting engaged in extensive combat actions. The situation developed, which made any way out more and more difficult as the time passed. Combat action is combat action. Our losses in dead and wounded—and the CC CPSU believes it has no right to hide this—were growing, and becoming more and more heavy.

And so the Soviet Union’s leadership withdrew its combat forces from Afghanistan as the Iron Law of Unintended Consequences began to have its impact. National confidence slipped, the ability of the Communist bureaucrats to govern was questioned, long dormant secessionist movements began to emerge as entire new nation states slipped from Russia’s once powerful hands. The impact? Locate a world map and look for the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.

Bin Ladin recently warned that the United States was repeating Brezhnev’s mistakes in its dealings with the Muslim World and it would be wise to consider a key comment made in an Arabic language article prepared by Mustafa Hamid (the father-in-law of [Osama Bin Ladin’s](#) recent military chief, Sayf al-Adl) who wrote in “Chats from the Top of the World”:

“Arab mujahedin in Afghanistan started serious military training in 1987.”

And the Arabs began serious training not long after the Soviet decision to begin troop withdrawals.