

# Why Did the Soviet Union Invade Afghanistan in 1979?

Written by Uday Rai Mehra

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The near seventy-year history of the Soviet Union is one dominated by its tradition of foreign military interventions that spanned most of its existence and stretched geographically from Krakow to the Kuril Islands. Within this trajectory, the Soviet invasion of, and subsequent war with Afghanistan (1979-1989) stands out in particular, as a lasting legacy of the Cold War. Globally, its outcome continues to plague international society in the current struggle between the Western liberal democratic order and Islamic extremism. Domestically, the remains of the war have rendered the nation's political institutions, economy and society fragile, and transformed Afghanistan into a battlefield for factional rivalries and a breeding ground for religious fundamentalism. As a rooted historical understanding of the war is necessary to contextualize the struggles from the region that dominate our contemporary international affairs, the very nature of the event's historiography has evolved over time. Previously, it was commonplace among scholars to examine the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan within the Cold War framework: the USSR invaded foreign nations in the name of socialist internationalism, prestige and with the objective to thwart their Western enemies. However, this assessment failed to acknowledge the nuances of the Soviet decision-making process and account for those unique developments within the theatres of intervention. Contemporarily, a number of historians have analysed the events of the Cold War through a 'pericentric lens', which has shifted the scholarship from examining the events of the conflict from their 'core' – from the White House and the Kremlin – to the 'periphery'. This scholarly shift reshapes our understanding of, and approach to Cold War dynamics through elaborating the interplay of a range of factors, and magnifying the intricacies of the Soviet and American decision-making processes.

The invasion of Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's final foreign military intervention before its eventual dissolution in 1991. Soviet troops invaded Kabul on December 25<sup>th</sup> 1979, on order from Moscow to replace the radical Hafizullah Amin with the Soviet-endorsed Babrak Karmal as head of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. On December 31<sup>st</sup>, the Politburo announced, that by overthrowing Amin, they would ease the pace of Afghanistan's communist revolution and thereby protect the communist (PDPA) regime from collapsing due to its domestic unpopularity, and thereby ceding to Islamist and Western forces. Although in hindsight this provides the justification surrounding Moscow's decision, it gives little consideration of the concerns that drove the USSR to invade. Expanding upon those factors central to Soviet decision-making in 1979, this essay will argue that the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan was foremost driven by the security concerns a rapidly weakening Afghanistan, vulnerable to Islamic extremism and Western encroachment, posed to the Soviet Union's southern borders. As the attempts at negotiation and sending advisors had failed to stabilise the PDPA regime from collapse, and consequently facing an increasingly narrowing set of options, military intervention became the favoured alternative. Facilitating this decision was the threat of the 'reversibility of communism' pervading across fragile Third World socialist states like South Yemen, Ethiopia and Angola; the pressures imposed by the Ustinov-Gromyko-Andropov troika in Politburo decision-making, heightened by reports by on-ground Soviet staff and advisors who were increasingly involved in Afghan affairs; and the end of Détente framework following the rejection of the SALT II Agreement by the United States Congress.

In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion, a range of historians interpreted the invasion within the broader continuum of Russian and Soviet foreign Policy. Milan Hauner cited Russia's inherent desire to control Afghanistan, stemming from the Great Game (1813-1907), through which they would have access into warm water ports and the Gulf oilfields. A.Z. Hilali similarly places the invasion within the trajectory of Soviet Union's relationship with its satellites and emphasises Soviet prestige in sustaining its grip on client states. Matthew Ouimet broadens this analysis, pointing to Soviet 'grand strategy', which fuses Soviet national interests with those of left leaning states globally.

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Though these historians skillfully place the invasion within the nature of Russian/Soviet foreign policy, they fail to distinguish Afghanistan from other Soviet interventions. Unlike Hungary (1956) or Czechoslovakia (1968), communism emerged independent of Soviet interference in Afghanistan, which until 1978 was neutral within the Cold War and peripheral to Soviet-American rivalry. Furthermore, the decision to invade was not immediate: the Kremlin faced the option to intervene in March 1979 – following the Heart Rebellion – to stabilise the domestic situation, but rejected that proposal and instead only intervened in December. Therefore, it is vital to bridge an understanding and elaborate on those short-term factors that caused this volte-face from March to December.

The invasion was a culmination of a process whereby the USSR became increasingly, and actively involved in Afghanistan's domestic affairs after the PDPA regime emerged in 1978 and failed to procure widespread support for their socialist reforms. Following the Saur Revolution (27-28 April 1978) a Democratic Republic of Afghanistan emerged with Nur Muhammad Taraki as Premier and PDPA General Secretary; Babrak Karmal as his deputy; and Hafizullah Amin as Foreign Affairs Minister.[1] The USSR, quick to recognise the DRA, was cautious in engaging with Afghanistan, given the Kremlin's concerns over extent of political stability the PDPA would attain due to its lack of experience in Afghan politics. [2] In May 1979, Soviet ambassador Aleksandr Puzanov reported that the USSR would gradually set aside earlier reservations about the new regime and welcome the PDPA as comrades.[3] From its initiation, Taraki's regime sought to engineer Afghanistan into a new era and transform it into a modern socialist nation.[4] However, the contrast between Marxist-Leninist ideology and the influence of cultural and religious traditions over Afghan society proliferated domestic popular backlash and rural opposition in reaction to the PDPA's reforms. In spite of Puzanov's recommendations to ease the reforms's pace and preserve party unity between the rivaling Khalq and Parcham factions[5] as a bulwark to rural opposition,[6] the regime instead implemented land reforms and female literacy campaigns in early 1979. Moreover, Taraki purged Parchamites from cabinet, and subsequently dismissed Karmal from his post in July 1978 to strengthen the Khalq in government.[7] Opposition to the reforms gained momentum throughout the countryside, and culminated in the Herat Uprising in which rebels violently demonstrated against the PDPA.[8] Efforts to control the rebellion failed and instead military officers and soldiers defected and joined the rebels.[9] The Herat Uprising surfaced Soviet concerns over Afghanistan's future; statesmen like Gromyko declared that "under no circumstances may [the USSR] lose Afghanistan"[10] at the March Politburo meeting. Moscow was convinced that neither Taraki nor Amin could control the deteriorating situation alone, and in consequence Moscow increased their on-ground advisors from 1000 in January to 5000 in August 1979, and delivered large quantities of weapons consisting of tanks and helicopter gunships.[11] The impact of the Herat Uprising was two-fold: it exposed the inherent failures of the PDPA regime and the scant popular appeal of its revolution, and marked a significant shift in Soviet policy toward Afghanistan. The USSR no longer solely sought a successful PDPA revolution, but became entrenched in Afghanistan's domestic affairs to facilitate its stable socialist transformation.

The change in Soviet policy from sending advisors and being involved in Afghan affairs in March, to full-scale intervention in December, was the result of the narrowing of options available to the Politburo throughout 1979 as it failed to stabilise Afghanistan's continually weakening domestic situation. Although the Politburo vetoed military intervention in March, under the premise that its involvement in Afghan affairs would stabilise the domestic situation, Amin continued to implement policies following his own agenda. Amin used the Herat Uprising to consolidate his own political position, in which he assumed Premiership on 27<sup>th</sup> March[12] and by July he took office as Defence Minister.[13] His increased power position reflected Afghanistan's worsening domestic situation due to Amin's fixation on implementing reforms rapidly. This alongside his 'balanced' foreign policy, in which Amin sought rapprochement with the US, China and Pakistan[14] sparked the Kremlin's hostility toward his rule. They preferred Taraki as he retained close relations with the Soviets and was open to their advice on the pace of reforms. Having deployed Vasilii Safronchuk and General Ivan Pavlosky as advisors to Kabul to oversee and attempt to stabilise the political situation, Amin isolated Taraki by overthrowing pro-Taraki politicians in cabinet and retained his stance on the pace of reforms.[15] However, Amin's power struggle piqued on September 16<sup>th</sup> in which he overthrew Taraki in a bloody coup d'état and subsequently assassinated Taraki on October 9<sup>th</sup>. This provided a critical turning point for the Soviet decision-making process and pushed the Kremlin to take firm action. With Amin as the sole ruler of Afghanistan he would continue his reforms at a radical pace, consequently proliferating domestic turmoil. Having seen the failure of their methods, and Amin's resolute approach to the PDPA revolution, the Soviets were pushed to assert control over Afghanistan and replace Amin decisively in order to stabilise the country and safeguard the future

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of the Afghan revolution.

Trepidations over the regime that would overthrow the PDPA were central to the Politburo's decision to invade Afghanistan. The Soviets feared that the proliferation of Islamism in reaction to the PDPA and their reforms would subvert the crumbling socialist regime and give rise to an anti-Soviet, Islamist Afghanistan on the Soviets' southern border. As the PDPA initiated their early reforms, which sought to bring ethnic equality to rural tribes; cancel debts incurred by small farmers; and abolish bridal dowries in 1978[16], conservative landowners and clergymen who opposed reforms united against the government as the National Salvation Front.[17] The NSF actively opposed the PDPA and engaged in campaigns to overturn the course of their reforms. Though many Afghans would benefit from reforms, the PDPA's ideological basis and their intention to reshape Afghanistan sharply conflicted with the religious and cultural structures inherent in Afghan society. Contributing to this internal crisis was the support Pakistani General Zia ul-Haq gave to Islamist Afghans. The ISI endorsed Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his radical Islamist group, Hezbi-i-Islami to undermine and overthrow the PDPA, and armed them with supplies and the military resources necessary to achieve this.[18] Similarly, the land reform provoked the emergence of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan led by Pir Sayed Gailani.[19] Though these different rebel groups rivaled one another, their opposition to the reforms united them against the PDPA, and their existence and active resistance discredited the Taraki-Amin regime. PDPA rule decentralised under the autonomous rule of rebel groups and by September 1979 rebel formations were active in 25 out of 28 provinces, and controlled 17 of those provinces.[20]

Ultimately, Soviet fears that a weakened PDPA would succumb to internal subversion by these groups, and result in an Islamist Afghan regime accentuated the perceived need for intervention. These concerns heightened as the Iranian Revolution overturned the Shah and resulted in an anti-American Islamist state ruled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.[21] Although historians like A.Z. Hilali argue that Islamism instigated Soviets alarm of Islamist spillover into their Central Asian Republics, which would disenfranchise Soviet rule,[22] examination of Soviet archival material suggests otherwise.[23] Instead, the Soviets feared that an Islamist Afghanistan would ally itself with Iran and Pakistan, and assert hostility toward the USSR due to Moscow's association with the failed PDPA regime.[24] This outcome would weaken the Soviet's southern border and encircle the USSR with hostile powers: China to the Southeast; Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to the South; and the Western Bloc to the West.

The Kremlin's security apprehensions intensified with intelligence of American counter-insurgency forces subverting the PDPA. Misgivings surrounding Soviet encirclement through external forces emerged after October as Soviet relations with Amin broke down. Once Amin overthrew Taraki, he engaged in a more balanced foreign policy whereby he engaged with America.[25] In October, Amin signaled a distancing from the Soviets as his staff openly criticised Moscow in a meeting with other Ambassadors[26] and throughout November and December, the Soviets saw Amin make desperate attempts to establish relations with Pakistan.[27] Moscow consequently became increasingly suspicious of Amin and doubted his commitment to the USSR and socialism. The KGB accused him as a CIA agent and posthumously, Brezhnev denounced Amin as "an agent of American Imperialism." [28] Although for the Soviets this led to direct intervention, Matthew J. Ouimet rightly contends that this simply justified Soviet intervention.[29] Nevertheless, until the Saur Revolution, Afghanistan maintained a neutral Cold War policy and engaged in friendly relations with both the USA and the USSR. It was equally in the Americans' interests to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan to protect their Pakistani allies, as it had been in the Soviets' to protect their southern border. However, the triumph of the Iranian Revolution, and presence of American warships in the Persian Gulf and the consequent speculation over an American attack on Iran intensified threat of similar American counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan.[30] It would serve to both contain Afghan Islamism, and then to make Afghanistan a base by which to later invade Iran, and thereby stabilise the Gulf region. American encroachment – like Islamism – would geopolitically isolate the Soviet Union and would also foster a situation in which the American missiles would point up at the USSR as experienced with Turkey in the 1950s. The Soviets calculated that by invading Afghanistan, they could safeguard their border from American encroachment and depose Amin to stabilise the deteriorating domestic situation in the country. Therefore, the decision to intervene was made on the basis of a calculus that a failure to do so would facilitate Islamist or American encroachment on the Soviets' southern border.

However, Islamism and Western Encroachment alone did not compel the Politburo to pursue action. KGB officers on the ground in Afghanistan heightened the perceived security threat that these two factors posed to the Soviets, thus

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fostering a feeling that full-scale invasion was needed. Since the 1950s, the KGB had been active in Afghanistan, building a covert station there, making contact with local communists and becoming versed in Afghan politics.[31] The Politburo depended upon these officers to assess the Afghan situation as they did on the growing PDPA crisis. However, having been 'localised' in Afghan affairs, the KGB invested much of its financial and political capital in the Parcham. Therefore, once Taraki exiled Karmal from the government and Amin overthrew Taraki in his coup, the KGB reported to the Politburo that "the situation in Afghanistan could be saved only by the removal of Amin from power" and his replacement by Karmal and his Parcham colleagues.[32] To achieve this, in November, the KGB brought Karmal to Moscow to plan to oust Amin and set up a new Parcham government.[33]

Faced with resistance from the military bureaucracy that argued against intervention, thus influencing the Politburo against invading in March, the KGB staff played on Soviet security concerns to achieve their aims. KGB reports exaggerated the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and consistently championed that the only plausible action was intervention. The KGB alleged that Amin was a CIA agent and supported their claims with confirmations from Afghan secret police chief – a long time KGB contact – Assadullah Sarwari who had leveled this accusation against Amin since 1967.[34] Concerns over Western encroachment in Afghanistan were matched with exaggerated KGB reports on increases in Mujahedeen control across Afghanistan's provinces and the increasing influence wielded by Pakistan and China having armed insurgent groups like Hizbi-i-Islami.[35] Although Moscow deployed senior Soviet officials to provide a secondary assessment of the situation, those officials sent reports contradicting the KGB[36], exacerbating the Politburo's Afghanistan dilemma. Ultimately Moscow trusted the KGB reports as Afghanistan rapidly deteriorated after Amin's take-over because those officials, unlike the KGB, were, as Braithwaite contends, "men with little or no experience" in Afghanistan.[37] The on-ground KGB staff's ability to expose and heighten the threat Islamism and Western Encroachment posed on Soviet security induced the fear and panic necessary in the Politburo by which they agreed that only decisive action could resolve Afghanistan's situation.

Ultimately, the decision was taken by the Dmitriy Ustinov (Defence Minister), Andrei Gromyko (Foreign Minister) and Yuri Andropov (KGB Chairman) 'troika', which dominated the decision-making process whereby invasion was sanctioned as they controlled the key foreign policy institutions.[38] Preoccupations with Soviet security and ideology resonated in reports sent by the KGB whereby they championed the decision to invade Afghanistan. The trio feared that the failure to act would instead permit the emergence of a new regime that would ultimately encircle, and confront the Soviets with a hostile power on their Southern border.[39] Such a situation would mirror the years before the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which America encroached on the USSR's western border in deploying Jupiter missiles to Turkey. Although these fears were contingent, Gibbs rightly asserts that such 'old-school' perceptions of rivalry influenced decision-making.[40] Andropov served as Ambassador to Hungary during the Hungarian Revolution (1956) and convinced Khrushchev to intervene militarily.[41] Brezhnev too, viewed the spiraling situation in Afghanistan from the same decision-making lens as in the Prague Spring (1968): that it was necessary to restore order to preserve socialist rule.[42] Furthermore, he saw Afghanistan within the framework of the larger Cold War struggle: the failure of the PDPA in Afghanistan would expose the 'reversibility of socialism' and threaten those other politically fragile socialist Third World nations like South Yemen, Ethiopia and Angola.[43] However, as Afghanistan alongside these states were never within the Soviet sphere, prestige did not directly influence Brezhnev. Rather, it heightened the security threat and necessitated invasion to safeguard the socialist model to protect Soviet borders from being confronted by adversaries.

Therefore, the decision-making process within the troika also determined the decision to invade, achieved primarily through the troika's manipulation tactics within the Politburo. Andropov supported KGB claims of Amin's Western links by confirming that the CIA recruited Amin while studying in America. Andropov simultaneously ignored conflicting reports that underplayed the domestic situation's deterioration.[44] Similarly, Ustinov championed intervention, asserting that anything other than a military invasion would "seriously alter the military-strategic situation in the region" to the detriment of Soviet security.[45] Furthermore, to sanction intervention, this trio regularly silenced those Politburo voices against intervention.[46] The troika's influence on Soviet decision-making ultimately shaped the final decision to invade. Brezhnev was confident to pursue intervention, as it appeared to be the only effective way the USSR could both safeguard the PDPA from increasing threats and protect their own Southern border.

The demise of détente in 1979 and the stable security framework détente set up for the USA and the USSR provided

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the timing by which the Soviet Union could invade Afghanistan. Throughout the duration of Politburo meetings, Soviet decision-makers were concerned with the impact that any military action in Afghanistan would have on the USA and the damage it may make to the détente framework. As Ouimet explains, détente constrained the Soviets from acting as freely on the basis of upholding socialist internationalism like in Hungary or Czechoslovakia, to save a Third World communist coup.[47] As archival documents highlight, Brezhnev was strongly committed to détente and was concerned with American views of the Soviets had they intervened in Afghanistan immediately after the Herat Uprising.[48]

Ultimately, the end of détente limited the potential strain on Soviet-American relations, which consequently made it easier for the Soviets to choose intervention. Brezhnev and Carter were still negotiating SALT II throughout 1979[49] and it could have been seen as hypocritical for the Soviets to invade Afghanistan while simultaneously discussing limiting their armaments stockpiles. Nevertheless, as the United States Congress failed to ratify SALT II in July 1979, the Soviets were freed from this binding security framework. While some historians claim that the deployment of Pershing II missiles in Europe in December 1979 pushed the Soviets intervene due to its unsettling effect on the otherwise stable European balance, the missile deployment and the Soviet decision occurred on the same day.[50] Moreover, the information lag time from Soviet agents to Moscow limited the likely impact deployment would have had on Moscow. Therefore, by December, with détente no longer constraining Soviet policy, the Politburo ratified the decision for a full-scale invasion.

In conclusion, the decision to invade Afghanistan was the result of an intertwined set of concerns and interests within Moscow. The political crisis within Afghanistan threatened the survival of the PDPA regime, and simultaneously gave way to rising Islamism and the potential for Western encroachment. Crucially, in either scenario, the Soviets would face a hostile power encircling their southern border, thus posing a major threat to their security. Although the Kremlin reached such a realisation by March, following the Herat Uprising, it was the limiting of alternative options between March and December that compelled the Soviets to choose a military approach to Afghanistan. Although this was the major reason behind the Soviet's decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979, a number of other factors exacerbated or accelerated this underlying process. Notably, trusted field KGB staff exploited Moscow's security threats by exaggerating and distorting the true situation, whereby invasion would take place and satisfy their own vested interests in deposing Amin and replacing his rule with a Parcham-dominated cabinet, led by the much-favoured Karmal. Combined with the troika's dominance of the Politburo decision-making process, the KGB agents' manipulation of other cabinet members and ability to play on Brezhnev's 'old school' fears and perceptions of power and security, encouraged the final decision to intervene, which on an international level was also facilitated by the coterminous demise of détente and its constraints on Soviet decision-making.

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*Document 1*: "Political Letter from USSR Ambassador to Afghanistan A. Puzanov to Soviet Foreign Ministry, 'About the Political Situation in the DRA'", 31 May 1978

*Document 2*: "Record of Conversation, Soviet Ambassador A.M. Puzanov and Taraki", 18 June 1978

*Document 6*: "Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussion on Afghanistan", 17-19 March 1979

*Document 30*: "Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC", 29 October 1979

[1] Urban (1990), 7-8

[2] Hilali (2003), 114

[3] Document 1 in CWIHP (2001), 133

[4] Giustozzi (2000), 9

[5] The *Khalq* (led by Taraki and Amin) were a faction within the PDPA formed by Pashtuns of non-elite classes, while the *Parcham* (led by Karmal) comprised of middle and upper class socialists. The two factions differed on their approach toward socialism: the former advocated a radical transformation, while the latter championed a gradual process.

[6] Document 2 in CWIHP (2001), 134

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- [7] Urban (1990), 19-20
- [8] Galeotti (2001), 7
- [9] Urban (1990), 30
- [10] Document 6 in CWIHP (2001), 137
- [11] Urban (1990), 32
- [12] Urban (1990), 29
- [13] Ibid., 36
- [14] Hilali (2003), 115
- [15] Kakar (1997), 35
- [16] Galeotti (2001), 6
- [17] Urban (1990), 17
- [18] Saikal (2010), 127
- [19] Urban (1990), 28
- [20] Giustozzi (2000), 6
- [21] Saikal (2010), 114
- [22] Hilali (2003), 130
- [23] Document Collection in CWIHP (2001)
- [24] Document 6 in CWIHP (2001), 141
- [25] Galeotti (2001), 11
- [26] Braithwaite (2011), 71
- [27] Garthoff (1994), 1027
- [28] Girardet (2012), 27
- [29] Ouimet (2003), 92
- [30] Ibid., 93
- [31] Hauner (1991), 88
- [32] Kakar (1997), 50
- [33] Mitrokhin et al. (2005), 398

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[34] Garthoff (1994), 1026

[35] Ibid., 1027

[36] Braithwaite (2011), 61

[37] Ibid., 75

[38] Kalinovsky (2009), 49

[39] Document 30 in CWIHP (2001), 158

[40] Gibbs (2006), 255

[41] Mitrokhin et al. (2005), 398

[42] Hilali (2003), 119

[43] Ibid., 123

[44] Braithwaite (2011), 77

[45] Ouimet (2003), 93

[46] Kalinovsky (2009), 50

[47] Ouitmet (2003), 92

[48] Document 6 in CWIHP (2001), 143

[49] Garthoff (1994), 1039

[50] Kalinovsky (2009), 50

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