Understanding Power in Counterinsurgency: A Case Study of the Soviet-Afghanistan War

Military interventions and counter-insurgency campaigns have proven to be a hard-to-tackle problem for powerful states in the 20th and 21st century. Military campaigns in Somalia (1992-1995), Yemen (2015-present), Afghanistan (1979-1989, 2001-present) and Vietnam (1965-1975) are harsh reminders for states that military superiority is no guarantee for a successful military campaign. Posen (2003) argues that insurgents have the capability to defy the balance-of-power vis-à-vis a more powerful actor due to their 'home-court advantage'.[1] This entails that insurgents operate on their own territory, consequently providing them with an advantage in terms of knowledge of the terrain, popular support, and access to resources in comparison to a foreign military force.[2] What strategy allows states that are engaged in counter-insurgency (COIN) operations to counter this position of power? Practice shows that policy-makers seek to challenge the home-court advantage of insurgents with strategies that rely on the exercise of military power. Saudi-Arabia's aggressive counter-insurgency operations against the Houthis in Yemen are evidence of this paradigm in strategic thinking.[3] The proposed approach of the USA under the Trump administration on the conflict in Afghanistan serves as another example, as the president stated that "[America] is not doing nation-building again … we are killing terrorists."[4] Apparently, Trump believed that the best way to exercise American power was to rely on military superiority, which would be used to eliminate insurgents. It is a strategy that relies on the assumption that the USA will derive power from the exercise of violence. Other, more subtle concepts of power, are disregarded by stating that the USA will not participate in nation-building again. Are these kind of strategies doomed to fail, or the key to success? An answer to this can be found in the analysis of the military campaign of the Soviet-Union in Afghanistan between 1979-1989.

This essay will illustrate how different conceptions of power played a role in the Soviet-Afghanistan war. It will be argued that violent conceptions of power proved to be less useful for the achievement of the political objectives that were set out by the Soviets. Contrarily, other conceptions of power, proposed by Joseph Nye and Hannah Arendt, proved to be more relevant and useful in this situation. The incorporation and consideration of these conceptions of power in strategies on counter-insurgency campaigns are therefore critical. First, various conceptions of power, proposed by John Mearsheimer, Hannah Arendt and Joseph Nye will be introduced and explained. Additionally, it will be mentioned how these conceptions relate to the Soviet-Afghanistan war. The Soviet-Afghanistan war underscores the relevance of soft power and the power behind violence. The essay will conclude by linking the findings of the case study to the debate that was mentioned in the introduction.

A counter-insurgency is a military operation of an actor that aims to stabilize the authority of the government by repressing domestic actors that undermine the authority of the government through violent means. Most counter-insurgencies strategies are built on realist conceptions of power, which rely on military superiority and the exercise of violence.[5] Thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes argue that a political structure needs to exercise violence in order to assert power. On this assumption many other theories and thoughts on power have been constructed, most famously Mao's quote: 'Power grows out of the barrel of the gun.'[6] Following this line of thought brings one to the conclusion that he who has the most capabilities to exercise violence is the most powerful actor in a conflict. John Mearsheimer's theory of power fits into this realist way of thinking.

Mearsheimer argues that power lies in the material possessions of an actor. Therefore, power is a property that can

Understanding Power in Counterinsurgency: A Case Study of the Soviet-Afghanistan War
Written by Marnix Middelburg

be owned. Mearsheimer distinguishes two concepts of power: (1) latent power, which stems from the socio-economic resources that an actor possesses and (2) military power, which stems from the size and quality of the military tools than an actor has at its disposal.[7] A critical part in Mearsheimer's theory lies in the conversion of the resources that a state has. For example, a state can posses vast military resources but, due to problems in the 'conversion process', fail to translate these into military power. This can also occur in the process of converting socio-economic resources into latent power.[8] The realist conception of power, with an emphasis on asserting authority through violence and a heavy reliance on material superiority, is applicable to many powerful states that engage in counter-insurgencies. In the case of the Soviet-Afghanistan war it is applicable to the initial strategy of the Soviet-Union and the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The failure of the Soviet-Union in Afghanistan can be attributed to the conversion process of military resources into military power. The Soviet-Union possessed more military capabilities than their opponents, often collectively named as the Mujahideen (collective name for the Afghans engaged in armed resistance). Mearsheimer's theory is not capable of addressing which concepts of power thwarted the conversion process of military resources into military power. Other conceptions of power need to be applied, which are diametrically opposed in their assumptions and thinking on the realist conceptions of power, in order to understand this.

Hannah Arendt provides us with a theoretical framework of power that helps to understand how the Mujahideen prevented the Soviet-Union from achieving their political objectives. Her conception of power diverts from the realist theories as she rejects the assumption that power resides in the exercise of violence. Rather, power resides in: (1) the obedience of humans to certain institutions and authorities, (2) the ability of people to act in concert. She emphasizes the importance of the number of people that support an authority, arguing that this is where power resides.[9] As long as people obey certain laws and institutions that allow them to act in concert, these institutions are powerful. When these objects lose the support of the majority of the population, it ceases to function as a tool to make people act in concert. This means that the object lost its power.[10] Arendt argues that violence is a means to make people obey. However, the consequences of the applications of those means are unpredictable. Often, violence breeds violence instead of creating obedience.[11] She explains the distinction between violence and power in this way: "The extreme form of violence is one or a small number against all. The extreme form of power is all against one."[12] Arendt's conception of power is useful to analyze how the Mujahideen were able to withstand the military power of the Soviet-Union. It serves as a theory to understand the conversion process of Mearsheimer's theory. Since Arendt's conception of power emphasizes the importance of the number of people that obey a certain actor or authority, it useful to understand how people are attracted to actors and authorities.

Joseph Nye provides us with a theoretical framework of power that explains this process. He introduces soft power, the power to attract people to a cause without forcing them to do so. It is the opposite of hard power, which forces compliance through violence. Soft power is about attracting individuals to your cause by the appeal of the values you are defending. This can be done through framing the agenda, persuading, and stimulating positive attraction.[13] The aforementioned conceptions of power will be explored in the analysis of the Soviet-Afghanistan war.

In 1978, the PDPA took power in Afghanistan through a coup d'état. The PDPA aimed to modernize Afghanistan through radical policy reforms which were met with resistance, especially in the rural parts of Afghanistan.[14] The PDPA repressed this resistance through force. As a result, the popularity of the leader of the PDPA, Nur Mohammed Taraki, decreased with the population and his own government. This led to him being assassinated by Hafizullah Amin in 1979.[15] Amin seemed to enhance the relations of his government with the USA. The assassination of Taraki, combined with re-emerging tensions between the Soviet-Union and the USA in the international political arena after a period of détente, convinced the Soviet-Union that an intervention in Afghanistan was necessary in order to safeguard their interests.[16] The objectives of the Soviet-Union were to install a Soviet friendly leader in Afghanistan and stabilize the regime of the PDPA, through force if necessary. This happened in 1979, when the Soviet-Union deployed around 75.000 – 80.000 troops in Afghanistan and staged a coup d'état to put Babrak Karmal in power.[17]

The arrival of the Soviet-Union in Afghanistan gave the Mujahideen, which were already engaged in armed resistance around 1978, the opportunity to attract more people to their cause. They posed themselves as defenders of the Islam, a stance which created a lot of attraction in relation to the rural population of Afghanistan. Propaganda

Understanding Power in Counterinsurgency: A Case Study of the Soviet-Afghanistan War
Written by Marnix Middelburg

against the Soviet-Union was quickly distributed through the country.[18] The Mujahideen were able to frame themselves as the defenders of Afghanistan against a foreign invader while fighting for religious values. This attracted a large amount of supporters from different sides of the Afghan society to their cause, ranging from nationalists, mercenaries, religious fanatics, tribal leaders, to moderates who loathed the communistic regime.[19] The Soviet-Union and the PDPA increasingly sought to repress this resistance through violent means. The Soviet-Union had sought to boost the military capabilities of the PDPA before deploying army contingents in 1979 in Afghanistan by providing the government with 50.000 guns, 140 artillery pieces and around 1.000 grenade launchers.[20] This deal was struck in the wake of the uprising in 1979 in Herat, where Soviet citizens had died at the hands of Afghan rioters.[21] The more violence the Soviets and the PDPA inflicted on the Mujahideen in the years following the invasion of 1979, the more they alienated the local population from their cause. This was also observed by Russian policymakers, who argued that the key to achieving their political goals lay in broadening the support for the PDPA government.[22] Contrary to their goals, the Soviet-Union continued to launch military offenses which limited the support for the PDPA in the country.[23] Additionally, the Mujahideen started receiving large sums of money and weapons from states like the USA, Saudi-Arabia, private donors and religious charities. Apart from the USA, these actors were attracted to the religious values that the Mujahideen were defending. This increased the military capabilities of the Mujahideen.[24] Around fifty commandeers of the Mujahideen were paid around $60,000 per month by the USA to support their fight against the Soviet-Union, besides receiving ammunition and weapons like Stinger missiles.[25] The Soviet-Union realized that it could not achieve its goals in Afghanistan through military means. In 1987 they installed a new prime minister in the PDPA government, Mohammed Najibullah, who had more potential to win support for the PDPA amongst various parts of the Afghan society than his predecessor.[26] Following international negotiations with the USA and Pakistan, the Soviet-Union started planning the withdrawal of their military from Afghanistan. It tried to withdraw from Afghanistan whilst simultaneously strengthening the authority of the PDPA, but had little success. The Soviet-Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 and in 1992 the government of the PDPA was overthrown by the Mujahideen.[27]

It becomes clear that the most powerful actor in the Soviet-Afghanistan war was the actor who managed to gain broad support for their cause, which is empirical evidence that Arendt's and Nye's conceptions of power are the most relevant and useful in order to understand the power balance in this war. The observations of the Soviet policymakers reflect these findings by stating that the key to achieving their political objectives lay in broadening the support for the PDPA. This connects to Arendt's conception of power, which argues that power resides in numbers. It should be noted that the assertion of authority through violence only led to more violence in the Soviet-Afghanistan war. This started in 1978, when the PDPA suppressed an uprising through violent means. As a reaction, violent resistance increased, after which the Soviet-Union thought it was necessary to support the PDPA by providing them with more means to repress these insurgents. Here, another connection can be made to Hannah Arendt who stated that violence only breeds violence and has the tendency to destroy politics.[28]

A combination of soft power and a foundation of power in the popular support for the cause of the Mujahideen explains why they became more powerful than the Soviet-Union in the Afghan war. From Mearsheimer's theoretical framework, the Mujahideen were the weaker side in this conflict due to their military inferiority in regards to the Soviet-Union. However, the Mujahideen were in a more powerful position from Nye's conception of soft power due to their ability to frame their cause in the light of fighting a foreign invader for the good of Afghanistan. This attracted large numbers of people from various parts of the Afghan society to their cause, ranging from nationalists, mercenaries, religious fanatics, tribal-leaders and people who opposed the communistic regime. Additionally, the Mujahideen were able to increase their military capability through soft power: the shared religious identity between them and other Middle-Eastern & North-African countries who provided them with money and weapons. Consequentially, the Mujahideen were supported by a large number of people from the Afghan society who related to and obeyed the values and institutions that they were defending. This made it possible to let this large group of people act in concert against the Soviet-Union and the PDPA. The Soviet-Union undermined the popular support for the PDPA, and consequently its ability to make people act in concert, through its military offenses. This strategy decreased the power of the PDPA and the Soviet-Union.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that soft of power, power through obedience, and power in numbers are relevant conceptions to take into consideration when devising a counter-insurgency strategy. Relying on military superiority

Understanding Power in Counterinsurgency: A Case Study of the Soviet-Afghanistan War
Written by Marnix Middelburg

and the exercise of violence tends to alienate the actor in question from the local population, with a decrease of popular support and obedience as a result. Simultaneously, it gives a chance to insurgents to frame their cause in a nationalistic manner, whilst appealing to other shared values with the local population. This increases their soft power and popular support, which has proven to be extremely important. Therefore, this analysis of the Soviet-Afghanistan War challenges the current paradigm in strategic thinking on counter-insurgency operations. COIN operations that solely focus on the exercise of military power are likely to suffer the same problems that the Soviets encountered in Afghanistan. The key to achieving political objectives in a COIN operation lies in winning the support of the people for the institutions and authorities that military forces are defending. Therefore, actors that are combatting an insurgency should put more causal weight on increasing popular support and the effective employment of soft power. This would facilitate a comprehensive approach to counter-insurgency operations that would circumvent some of the problems that states have encountered in recent history.

Bibliography:

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Stellar Classics, 2014.

Byman, Daniel L. "Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Have a Disastrous Yemen Strategy." Brookings. Brookings, July 17, 2018. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/07/17/saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates-have-a-disastrous-yemen-strategy/.

Clark, Kate. "'Not Nation-Building,' but 'Killing Terrorists': Trump's 'New' Strategy for Afghanistan." Afghanistan Analysts Network – English, August 23, 2017. https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/international-engagement/not-nation-building-but-killing-terrorists-trumps-new-strategy-for-afghanistan/.

Frankopan, Peter. *The Silk Roads : A New History of the World*. New York: Vintage Books, 2017.

Frazer, Elizabeth, and Kimberly Hutchings. "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon."*Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (February 2008): 90–108. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300328.

HALLIDAY, FRED. "Soviet Foreign Policymaking and the Afghanistan War: From 'Second Mongolia' to 'Bleeding Wound.'" *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 4 (October 1999): 675–91. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210599006750.

Jardin, Eric. "The Tacit Evolution of Coordination and Strategic Outcomes in Highly Fragmented Insurgencies: Evidence from the Soviet War in Afghanistan." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012): 541–72.

Kalinovsky, Artemy. "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal."*Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 4 (October 2009): 46–73. https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.4.46.

Mcfate, Sean. *Goliath : Why the West Doesn't Win Wars. And What We Need to Do about It* . London: Penguin Books, 2020.

Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.* New York: Norton, 2001.

Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics*. New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2012.

Posen, Barry R. "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony." *International Security* 28, no. 1 (July 2003): 5–46. https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803322427965.

Notes

[1] Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (July 2003): 5–46, pp. 21-24.

Understanding Power in Counterinsurgency: A Case Study of the Soviet-Afghanistan War
Written by Marnix Middelburg

[2] Ibid.

[3] Daniel L Byman, "Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Have a Disastrous Yemen Strategy," Brookings (Brookings, July 17, 2018).

[4] Kate Clark, "'Not Nation-Building,' but 'Killing Terrorists': Trump's 'New' Strategy for Afghanistan," Afghanistan Analysts Network – English, August 23, 2017.

[5] Sean Mcfate, Goliath : Why the West Doesn't Win Wars. And What We Need to Do about It (London: Penguin Books, 2020), pp. 84-102.

[6] Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon," *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (February 2008): pp. 99-102.

[7] John J Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 57-60.

[8] Ibid., 60-75.

[9] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Stellar Classics, 2014), pp. 40-51.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon," *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (February 2008), pp. 99-102.

[12] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Stellar Classics, 2014), pp. 42.

[13] Joseph S Nye, Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2012), pp. 1-15.

[14] Peter Frankopan, The Silk Roads : A New History of the World (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), pp. 461-487.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Artemy Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 4 (October 2009), pp. 46-51.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Eric Jardin, "The Tacit Evolution of Coordination and Strategic Outcomes in Highly Fragmented Insurgencies: Evidence from the Soviet War in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012), pp. 553-558.

[19] Peter Frankopan, The Silk Roads : A New History of the World (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), pp. 461-487.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Artemy Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 4 (October 2009), pp. 51-54.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Peter Frankopan, The Silk Roads : A New History of the World (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), pp. 461-487.

[25] Ibid.

[26] FRED HALLIDAY, "Soviet Foreign Policymaking and the Afghanistan War: From 'Second Mongolia' to 'Bleeding Wound,'" *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 4 (October 1999), pp. 680-688.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Stellar Classics, 2014), pp. 50-54.

Written at: Leiden University College The Hague
Written for: Dr. Kai Hebel
Date written: October 2020