

# HISTORICAL SCIENCES

## AFGHAN EVENTS 1979—1989: XINJIANG FACTOR

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### Abstract

Based on contemporary historiography, the reasons for the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan in 1979 are reviewed, the factors that forced the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to directly get involved in a long-drawn-out armed conflict are analyzed, and the planned and factual scale of the military presence is reported. The author notes that the Soviet troops were not prepared for a prolonged military campaign in Afghanistan and had fundamentally different military-political objectives. In the author's opinion, the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan was the initial stage of their subsequent deployment to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The unique role of the Soviet special forces in the events under review is also discussed.

**Keywords:** armed conflict in Afghanistan 1979–1989; Soviet-Chinese relations; history of Soviet foreign policy.

Since the Second World War, the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 was the first large-scale attempt by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to extend its sphere of military influence beyond the borders of the pro-Soviet countries. There is no holistic vision of the Afghan events among professional historians. The prevailing view in historiography of the Afghan war suggests that the United States provoked the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and the situation in Afghanistan stemmed from a long and continuing history of US challenges to Soviet influence there [8, p.1505]. Another researchers continue discussions about justice and the need for military intervention [11, p.4].

It should be noted that since the late 1950s and for decades thereafter, the United States, along with the Soviet Union, engaged in resource exploration in Afghanistan, built energy and transport facilities, and divided their spheres of presence and influence. In fact, Afghanistan was neutral territory, despite the height of the Cold War [10, p.387]. This was mainly due to the country's opiate production.

The lack of US interest in the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan is due to the fact that since the late 1950s the United States controlled the production of opiates in southern Afghanistan, which accounted for about 90% of the world's production [22]. In 1967, with the active assistance of the United States, the construction of a hydroelectric power plant (northwest of Kandahar) with a capacity of 33 MW and transport infrastructure, including two highways from Kabul to Pakistan, began [21].

Soviet experts were charged with extracting coal and gas and building power plants, roads, and social infrastructure facilities. During the course of 20 years, they have built approximately 140 facilities [23], including those paid for by natural gas supplies from Afghanistan. Annual production from two fields west of Mazar-i-Sharif on the border with Turkmenistan amounted to more than 106 billion cubic feet, of which about 80% were sent to the USSR. [1] Among the energy facilities built by the USSR in Afghanistan during

the 1950s–1970s were dozens of power plants with a total capacity of about 300 MW [2, p. 32–34].

According to the US National Security Archive documents, starting in 1978, China became economically active in Afghanistan, providing loans to the Kabul government for the construction of industrial and social facilities. In 1978–1979 annual trade turnover between China and Afghanistan reached a maximum of about \$16 million [6, p.12].

Thus, China was gradually forcing out the Soviet construction workers and specialists from Afghanistan using economic methods. At the same time, the most alarming trend for the Kremlin leadership was the activation of Chinese radical Islamic cells in Afghanistan from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China (hereafter referred to as Xinjiang). Fearing the invasion of Soviet troops on their territory, the China made attempts to influence Amin, inclining him to abandon the orientation towards the Soviet Union, exposed the "threat of Soviet expansion" [6, p.9–10].

Pikhoya, a renowned researcher of Soviet history, shifted the focus in the study of the Afghan conflict, pointing out the need to clarify the reasons not for entering but for involving the Soviet troops in the internal Afghan conflict: "The question regarding the reasons for the USSR's direct involvement in an armed conflict still remains largely unclear. In all likelihood, several factors acted simultaneously." [18, p.353]. Within the framework of this methodological approach, the author's proposed thesis is as follows: two events—the entry of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan and their further involvement in the intra-Afghan conflict—had different reasons and mutually exclusive goals, which are examined henceforth. For this purpose let us consider Soviet-Chinese relations in the late 1970st.

### Xinjiang factor

In the imperial worldview of the Kremlin leaders, Xinjiang historically has been a disputed territory. Xinjiang was a kind of buffer zone between the two states from 1921 to 1949. Soviet troops repeatedly participated in military operations in Xinjiang. In January

1941, Governor-General of Xinjiang Sheng Shicai approached the leadership of the Soviet Union with a proposal to accept Xinjiang into the USSR as the seventeenth union republic, but was refused. After this, in 1942, he took the side of Germany. He unleashed repression against the communists — in particular, by executing Mao Zemin (brother of Mao Zedong). In 1962, about 100,000 people fled from Xinjiang to the USSR. After these events, the Chinese leadership began to make claims to the border territories of the Soviet Union.

In a study by Shi Ninbo, it is emphasized that “in the late 1970s, China saw the Western countries as its ally in the fight against the Soviet Union.” [17]. In general, this position reflected the spirit of the preamble to the Chinese constitution of 1975, which declared preparations for war against Soviet social imperialism. In 1979, the United States and China, for pragmatic reasons, became temporary allies in the face of the threat of nuclear weapons use by the Soviet Union.

In preparation for a likely war with its northern neighbor in 1978, the Chinese government approved a strategic program to move the oil and gas base from the west to the east of the country, despite the presence of the largest oil and gas fields in Xinjiang. If this was a preparation for a planned invasion by the Soviet troops to “pacify” the Xinjiang separatists using the Soviet servicemen as a result of an agreement between the leadership of the USSR and the People’s Republic of China, then this was contrary to the United States’ interests.

During Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Washington, DC, in January 1979, the American leaders were able to convince him of the need to formally abrogate the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which expired in 1979. In response to this decision, Washington withdrew the American military base from Taiwan and provided China with large loans for the purchase of American weapons. In Washington, technology transfer contracts in the fields of electronics and space technology were signed. To prevent Soviet intervention on Vietnam’s behalf, Deng Xiaoping warned Moscow that China was prepared for a full-scale war against the Soviet Union. According to Pao-min Chang, “China in early February of 1979 had put her troops along the Sino-Soviet border on an emergency war footing, set up a new military command in the remote Xingjiang Autonomous Region, and even evacuated 300,000 civilians from the exposed areas along the border” [5, pp.88-89]. The main part of the active forces of China (up to one and a half million military personnel) was deployed along the border of China with the Soviet Union [20, p.28].

On February 17, 1979, a week after Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Washington, the Chinese troops invaded Vietnam. The Soviet troops in the eastern military districts were placed on heightened alert, and on March 12, the large-scale Soviet military exercises began along the Chinese border. The Soviet troops on the territory of Mongolia and ships of the Pacific Fleet were also placed on heightened alert.

After unit cohesion training during 2-week military exercises, the Soviet 39th Army of the Central Asian military district remained on the western section of the Mongolian-Chinese border, i.e., north of Chinese Xinjiang, bordering Afghanistan. At the same time, the number of military advisers in Afghanistan was increased several times.

According to our hypothesis, in 1979, the northern provinces of Afghanistan were assigned the role of a springboard for the transfer of Soviet troops to Xinjiang. The ideological cover for the invasion of Soviet troops in China could be the fulfillment of an international duty “to protect” the Muslim peoples of Xinjiang, the fraternal peoples of the Soviet republics. Against the backdrop of strengthening US-Chinese ties, the Soviet Union could view its military presence in western China as an opportunity to control the Beijing government and an alternative to defeat in the Cold War.

In the author’s opinion, the chief military-political objectives assigned by the Politburo to the General Staff could be as follows: 1) support of the pro-Soviet regime of Hafizullah Amin in Kabul with limited forces, which he repeatedly asked the Kremlin leadership to do; 2) blocking the process of China’s entry into the US political and economic orbit; 3) liquidation of the centers of the Islamic movement on the territory of Afghanistan and western China.

#### **The entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan**

The head of the Afghan government, Hafizullah Amin, like his predecessor Nur Muhammad Taraki, was sympathetic to the communist ideology. At his persistent request, the question of sending troops to Kabul to help provide personal security was repeatedly brought up for discussion by the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The decision to send troops to Afghanistan was made on December 12. According to General V. Khristoforov, Russian military historian: “The course and content of the fateful meeting on December 12, 1979, according to researchers, remains one of the greatest mysteries of the Cold War.” [11, C. 16].

The decision of the Soviet political leadership to eliminate Hafizullah Amin is known to be based on the report of the closest adviser of Hafizullah Amin — General Boris. Ivanov, Special Representative of Yuri Andropov to the government of Afghanistan. Hafizullah Amin was falsely compromised as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent [15]. On this basis, a decision was made behind closed doors to overthrow the legitimate leader of the Afghan government. It should be noted that Ivanov’s professional activity took place in those periods and in those countries where there were coups d’état or assassinations of state leaders, starting with John F. Kennedy, the events in Prague in 1968 and ending with Hafizullah Amin.

The leadership of the corps of military advisers of the USSR Ministry of Defense in Kabul held an opposite opinion about Hafizullah Amin and the military leadership of Afghanistan. Their relationship with the Afghan counterparts was based on respect and trust. According to the political-military adviser General Va-

sily Zaplatin, military advisers refused to sign unreliable reports to Moscow prepared by intelligence officers [15].

Meanwhile, the Soviet political leadership made decisions based on reports from the Committee for State Security of the USSR (KGB). On this basis, we can assume that General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and members of the Politburo were subjected to the information blockade organized by Yuri Andropov.

According to Yuri Felshtinsky, a Russian-American historian, "based on the assumption that the leader of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin, is collaborating with the American intelligence agencies and plans to reorient his policies to align with the United States, the entire Soviet notion of the need to invade Afghanistan has been built, which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union a few years later. None of these assumptions were true. It was a deliberate provocation by the KGB against the Soviet state." [7, p.159].

On December 23, 1979, the Soviet ambassador informed Hafizullah Amin that the Soviet leadership had decided to satisfy his request to send troops to Afghanistan. Hafizullah Amin considered the Soviet troops the guarantor of his security and political stability in the country. The Kremlin ideologists saw Afghanistan as a "second Mongolia" capable of "jumping" from feudalism to socialism [18, p.352]. In the context of the events, Afghanistan was assigned the role of a springboard for the transfer of the 40th Army to Xinjiang from the west, just as the territory of southern Mongolia could serve as a springboard for the invasion of the 39th Army into China from the north.

The United States position regarding the two pro-Soviet leaders of Afghanistan was noted by Galster, the head of the National Security Archive's Afghanistan project: "in August 1979, the American embassy in Kabul issued a secret report, which concluded that the fall of the Taraki-Amin regime would serve the broader interests of the United States despite any negative consequences for any future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan." [8].

On December 25, 1979, the troops entry operation to Afghanistan began. According to T. Rabush, the leading Russian researcher on Afghanistan, "the initial reaction in the United States to the entry of the Soviet troops was characterized by shock, but soon the American leadership set a course to "wear down" the Soviet Union in the Afghan conflict." [19].

Shortly after the start of the entry of troops, two motorized rifle divisions (108th and 201st) took responsibility for the northeastern provinces of Afghanistan, the 68th division covered the border with China, the 56th separate air assault brigade guarded the Salang pass north of Kabul, and the 103rd Airborne Division began the movement of personnel and equipment to Kabul airport.

Two motorized reconnaissance groups of the 35th detachment of the border troops of the KGB of the USSR, stationed near the Soviet-Chinese border in Murgab (Tajikistan), passed through the Wakhan Corridor towards the unguarded Afghan-Chinese border.

Everything was ready for the planned deployment of the 40th Army from the Afghan Badakhshan Province through the Wakhan Corridor to Xinjiang. On the eastern administrative border of the Xinjiang, the 39th and 40th Armies meeting was planned, which made it possible to cut the region off from the main territory of China.

### **Kabul coup d'état and its consequences**

On December 27, the situation changed dramatically and took a completely unexpected turn. During the storming of the government residence (Tajbeg Palace), the KGB special forces troops killed Hafizullah Amin, his family, and his personal guards — the unit of the special forces of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the USSR Ministry of Defense (GRU). A coup took place in Kabul.

Special forces of the KGB used the Soviet troops as a "Trojan horse" to penetrate into Kabul and carry out a coup. The Soviet embassy and the GRU unit in Tajbeg Palace had no information about the planned storm of the palace. Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, to whom the GRU reported, had been removed from leading the operation to send troops into Afghanistan shortly before it began.

In Kabul, 23 objects were seized, including government buildings, banks, state television and radio, as well as a prison in Puli-Charkhi, where about 10 thousand political prisoners were released. After the destruction of the communications center in Kabul, the Afghan military command was paralyzed.

The government coup in Kabul signaled the declaration of jihad against the Soviet troops in the northeastern provinces [9, p.47]. This circumstance made it impossible for the movement and the planned deployment of troops to the Xinjiang. The uprising then spread throughout the country.

General Yuri Drozdov, the former head of Soviet intelligence in China (1964-1968) and the United States (1975-1979), future head of illegal intelligence of the First Main Directorate of the KGB of the USSR (1979-1991), was charged with leading the key operation to destroy the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Having completed the task, he refused the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for the successful elimination of the rightful leader and destruction of the special forces unit of the GRU of the USSR Ministry of Defense that, based on the orders of the Soviet military command, guarded Hafizullah Amin.

It's obvious that this unexpected appointment to this position of a person with no combat experience was due to the need to coordinate the coup in Kabul and the actions of Soviet agents to organize an uprising in the Badakhshan province, bordering Xinjiang.

Thus, the Kabul coup was part of a large-scale operation carried out by the KGB on the territory of Afghanistan to disrupt the planned deployment by the Soviet General Staff of large military units of the 40th Army through the Afghan bridgehead to Chinese Xinjiang toward the 39th Army. This task was completed.

The question regarding the role of the American embassy in Kabul headed by James B. Amstutz in the coup, who was stating that the Afghan Communists are "a bunch of scorpions biting each other to death" and

that Amin had “a semi-psychopathic desire to humiliate and revenge himself against the United States” remains open [3].

Elimination of the legitimate leader of a sovereign state, Hafizullah Amin, and his government by the Soviet special forces constituted interference in the affairs of a sovereign state and an act of international terrorism, no matter who was behind it.

Our hypothesis is fully consistent with the testimony of General Gromov, commander of the 40th Army, Hero of the Soviet Union: “I was the authorized representative of the Soviet government for the temporary stay of the 40th Army in Afghanistan. There was not a single document, not a single order to defeat someone there <...> There was no war as such <...> The goals were set for the command to deter potential and real external threats, including from the Chinese territory bordering with Afghanistan, as well as to support the existing political regime and stability within Afghanistan.” [10, p.385, 386].

Another participant in the war in Afghanistan, Deputy Head of the operational unit of the USSR Ministry of Defense in Afghanistan General Merimsky, maintained that in Afghanistan “the army command did not have an objective of achieving a military victory.” [16, p.349]. A war without an order to defeat the enemy raises questions. However, the answer is simple: the goals set for the limited contingent of the Soviet troops were not directly related to the occupation of Afghanistan and carrying out of combat missions on its territory.

In addition, all 9 years of the Afghan events showed that the Soviet troops were not prepared for waging the war in the mountainous region and were not equipped for this, the methods of conducting guerrilla warfare were not practiced before deployment, and water availability and water quality challenges were not foreseen. The Soviet General Staff did not set such goals for the troops. That is why the redeployment of units of the 40th Army to the places of future garrisons located throughout Afghanistan, which began in January 1980, became a “triumph of improvisation.” [4, p.157; 10, p.388].

According to Khristoforov, “an attempt to master new combat tactics with the transition to raid maneuver operations as part of reinforced battalions in unfamiliar mountain conditions did not bring results. Unusual climate, mountainous or desert terrain, diseases quickly exhausted the soldiers, and the troops suffered unjustified losses.” [11, C.13].

The Afghan population started to treat the 40th Army as an army of invaders. Afghan insurgents enjoyed the active support of local residents. A total of 179 Soviet military units of the 40th Army, stationed in 34 garrisons, surrounded themselves with minefields and barbed wire.

The objectives of the coup d'état in Kabul corresponded to the geopolitical goals of the two temporary allies—the United States and China, interested in weakening the Soviet Union, which had the largest nuclear arsenal.

### Consolation prize

The escalation of hostilities in Afghanistan in 1985–1988, associated with the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary, ensured a shift toward the USSR of a significant part of the production of opiates in the south of the country, which was controlled by the United States for more than 20 years. A “veil” zone was created along the entire southern and eastern Afghan border. Soviet army units, which provided protection and cover for individual special forces units, were located in garrisons in the following areas: Asadabad, Baraki, Ghazni, Jalalabad, Shahjoi, Kandahar, Lashkargah and Farah.

Due to the active actions of the Soviet side, during the 9 years of the war, the area under cultivation for opiates was multiplied, including through the liquidation of private farms and their owners. The volume of opium production in Afghanistan until 1979 ranged from 200 to 400 tons per year; by the time of the Soviet troops' withdrawal in 1989, it reached 1000–1500 tons [7, p.165]. For the delivery of drugs to the territory of the USSR, Soviet military transport aircrafts and other channels controlled by the KGB were used [7, p.169].

As a result of coordinated actions, the “Northern Route” of drug trafficking was formed (Afghanistan – Central Asia – USSR (Russia) – Europe), which began operating at full capacity in the early 90s [13, p. 111]. One of the points of application for income from the Afghan drug business was Xinjiang, where, according to A. Kulagin, “separatists operated and terrorist acts were committed” [13, p. 112].

According to the CIA reports on Afghanistan declassified in 2010, starting in 1982, the use of toxic and chemical substances began on the territory of Afghanistan [14], the stocks of which, according to the author, were intended for use in Xinjiang to suppress the resistance of a million-strong Chinese army. Large losses among the Afghan population over 9 years could be the result of the fact that the stock of chemical weapons that arrived in transit to Afghanistan was not sent to its destination to Xinjiang.

According to Harvard professor M. Kramer, an American researcher of the Afghan war: “during the nine years of fighting, more than 2.5 million Afghans (mostly civilians) were killed or maimed; millions more were displaced or forced into exile.” [12].

The international outcry and the reaction of the Muslim world after the coup in Kabul forced Moscow in 1982 to take the initiative to start negotiations with Beijing, the 12th round of which ended in March 1988. Immediately after that, in April 1988, the Geneva Accords were signed. Thus, the determining factor in the settlement of the Afghan problem was the position of Chinese diplomacy.

The imperial plans of Kremlin politicians to seize the oil-rich western region of China — a country that embarked on the path of economic and political reforms in the late 1970s — were not realized. At the same time, the USSR gained control over drug trafficking.

Following the ancient rules of military art, China was able to defeat the enemy in Afghanistan without entering the battlefield and take the place of the

USSR in confrontation with the United States, shaping the new geopolitical reality.

### Conclusion

Afghan events showed who was the main subject in the system of Soviet public administration at the turn of the 1970-1980s. The involvement of the USSR in the Afghan conflict was the final phase of the struggle between the party and security forces and a starting point for the era of the actual power of the state security agencies in the country.

After the disappearance of the USSR from the political map of the world, the Soviet empire did not completely disintegrate. The economic reforms announced by Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the early 1990s were reduced to the large-scale privatization of property and assets in the hands of the ruling elite by the skillful actions of intelligence officers infiltrated into business. In the work of the Russian intelligence services business interests began to prevail over government interests. Most European countries benefited from the oil and gas Russian economy.

More than a third of a century after its formal end, the war in Afghanistan received a logical continuation, but already in Eastern Europe. Essentially, this is an attempt to take revenge and bring back the Soviet Union from the past. China and the United States are once again faced with the dilemma of identifying temporary allies on the path to overcoming the new Cold War mentality. They are once again united by one interest – prolongation the war in order to weaken Russia.

Historical analogies are not always appropriate, but today Ukraine is the Afghanistan of our time, and Europe being saved by Ukraine, is the Xinjiang of our days.

Millions of Afghan citizens were sacrificed on the altar of victory in the Cold War in the 20th century. How many victims will be there this time depends on many countries, and primarily on European countries. Today, however, the price of delaying the decision may become too high.

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