

How to make peace in Afghanistan? Moscow has some lessons

Thirty years ago, the Soviets withdrew, but peace didn't follow. Let's hope the world can get it right this time



ARTEMY KALINOVSKY

On Feb 15, 1989, a column of Soviet armoured vehicles crossed the Friendship Bridge from Afghanistan into the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan. In a theatrical gesture, Lt Gen Boris Gromov, who was overseeing the withdrawal, dismounted and walked the final few feet to Soviet soil. There was not a single Soviet soldier left in Afghanistan, General Gromov told waiting journalists.

Since the first troops crossed into Afghanistan in December 1979, the Soviet Union had tried to help the socialist government in Kabul fight off a constellation of insurgents, the most impressive of whom received aid from the United States, working through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. Even China provided aid. By 1989, the Soviet Union was finally done fighting in Afghanistan.

Thirty years later, it's the United States that now seems desperate to withdraw from the country after a bruising war. And Moscow is once again getting involved in Afghanistan, though this time it wants to play peacemaker: In November, Russia organised talks between the Taliban, the High Peace Council and representatives of regional powers. On Feb 4, it hosted representatives of the Taliban and other groups opposed to the government of President Ashraf Ghani for further talks. The United States, and Ghani, view Moscow's efforts with suspicion. But thinking back to the Soviet experience can help make sense of what Moscow is up to — and also what the options are for the United States and its allies if they are serious about peace in Afghanistan.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985, had hoped that he could end the war by getting the United States and its allies to stop supporting the resistance (or mujahedeen, as they were known) in exchange for the withdrawal



A convoy of Soviet armoured personal vehicles crossed a bridge in Termez, during the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan in 1988.

of Soviet troops. But the Reagan administration would agree to end support only if the Soviets ceased all military aid to Kabul. And Washington saw the resignation of the socialist government as a precondition for any settlement.

Gorbachev understood that the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was unable to stay in power on its own, but he hoped that the socialists could form the core of a new coalition government. In the end, he announced a withdrawal without waiting for a deal, hoping that Washington, Islamabad and the mujahedeen would recognise the seriousness of Soviet intentions and do what was best for Afghanistan.

It didn't work out that way. By the time the Soviet Union ceased to exist at the end of 1991, the internal war in Afghanistan was no closer to a resolution than it had been in 1989.

Nor did Kabul's fall to opposition forces in April 1992 lead to peace. Instead, opposition forces turned on each other, heralding a new phase of what became vir-

tually 40 years of uninterrupted civil war.

Gorbachev's strategy might seem naïve in retrospect: Would the Americans have really allowed a socialist to remain in power? Could the key opposition figures be persuaded to join a government still led by their sworn enemy? Yet considering what followed the Soviet withdrawal — the rise of the Taliban, the role of Osama bin Laden, the new round of civil war after the United States-led intervention in 2001 — it is hard not to see 1989 as a missed opportunity.

Gorbachev did not expect miracles, just that the United States would apply enough pressure on its allies and clients to get them to the table, which would in turn make it easier for him to pressure his allies in Kabul to compromise.

That experience is worth considering as the United States plans to withdraw from Afghanistan. Talk of making Afghanistan a liberal democracy has long faded at this point, just as any serious consideration of building socialism had for the Soviets by 1989.

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But there is perhaps still some hope to end the cycle of killing.

In the past few years, Russia has taken a more proactive role in Afghanistan. Its involvement has been met with no shortage of skepticism from Washington, which worries that by treating the Taliban as legitimate, Moscow is undermining Ghani's government.

Yet Moscow's thinking on Afghanistan today appears to mirror its approach 30 years ago. Back

then, the Soviet leadership did not expect that the government in Kabul would last without foreign troops and was hoping to build some kind of coalition government with its allies at the core. This time around, Russia is not a party to the fighting, but the thinking is similar: As Russian officials say openly, they do not believe that the United States and its allies will be able to stabilise Afghanistan. The government of Ghani will not last without foreign troops. Much more worrying from Moscow's point of view (and indeed, Washington's) is the presence of the Islamic State or al Qaida. Moscow may not like the Taliban, but Russian officials see the group's participation in a future government as the only realistic possibility for a durable peace. And since the Taliban is unlikely to be going anywhere, it makes sense for Russia to secure some good will with the movement.

What Moscow's strategy supposes, however, is that the Taliban can be persuaded to become

one of the parties to a settlement, rather than the absolute master of the country. As recent talks in Doha, showed, Washington is not opposed to such an outcome.

Getting to an agreement will be difficult. On the one hand, the Taliban's stated position is much like that of the mujahedeen in the 1980s: They want all foreign forces removed and refuse to recognise the government in Kabul as legitimate.

On the other hand, the idea of the Taliban returning to power in Kabul is obviously hard to stomach for many in the West, as it is for many Afghans. Not only have the Taliban themselves wrought much destruction in their own country, but thousands of lives and billions of dollars have been spent fighting them.

Critics of both the Soviet and American-led wars often say that the people of Afghanistan should decide their own fate without the interference of outsiders. That would be just, but it is unlikely: The regional and global powers that have intervened in Afghanistan's civil wars since the late 1970s will not let that happen, if only because they fear their own loss will be someone else's gain.

But the reality is that the losses suffered by the Soviets in the 1980s and by the United States and its allies since 2001 are a fraction of what the people of Afghanistan have suffered over the past 40 years. Russia and the United States — and China, Iran, Pakistan and India — are all hoping to shape Afghanistan's future. Back in 1989, getting Afghanistan's warring parties to agree to a peace deal was difficult enough. Then the rivalries, ambitions and lingering mistrust among outside powers destroyed whatever prospects for peace had been created by the Soviet withdrawal. This time, other countries should take every opportunity to secure peace for Afghanistan.

(Artemy Kalinovsky is senior lecturer in East European Studies at the University of Amsterdam and the author, most recently, of "Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonisation in Soviet Tajikistan.")

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at the top of world rankings.

And who can blame those staff in all sectors who are leaving? With years of uncertainty and a hostile environment, we no longer seem the welcoming nation they came to be part of.

Even here in Scotland, despite our efforts to help our EU friends feel welcome, the cold facts of the UK Government's Brexit policies and bureaucracy have been sending a different message



Teresa May speaks in the House of Commons.

that people affected can't ignore.

We need these EU citizens staffing our public services if we want to protect the NHS and deliver a first-class education system for our children.

We need the public to have the final say on the Brexit deal, to check if Theresa May's botched Brexit Deal is still the will of the people.

Robert