Hoover fellow: New revelations in Afghanistan are same old, same old

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Soviet depiction of the United States arming anti-Communist Afghan dushman (mujahedeen) with Stinger missiles (drawing by E. Milutka, Krokodil, #24, August 1986; P. Roth, “Afghanistan in der sowjetischen Informationspolitik,” Bericht des BIOst #18/1989). The Russian-language caption says, 'Catch! And I must also hurry to Angola!'

(PhysOrg.com) -- A Soviet-born political analyst says that revelations of treachery and double-dealing in Afghanistan are an old story - and that the U.S.S.R.'s war in the region has lessons to teach us still. Some of America's top military brass are listening.

For Soviet-Afghan political analyst Katya Drozdova, the Afghanistan war logs tell a familiar story of treachery.

The classified military documents made available this week by an organization called WikiLeaks suggest that Pakistan - America's ostensible ally - has organized and supported the networks fighting American soldiers in Afghanistan.

"This information is consistent with the history and underscores the difficulty of the fight, with uncertain allies and groups that need to be watched," said Drozdova, who is affiliated with the Princeton-Stanford Empirical Studies of Conflict Project (ESOC) and is a recent visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution.

"We need to have the backs of our troops," she said. "They are putting their lives on the line daily in very complex situations where they don't know who their friends and who their enemies are."

While the Soviet-born scholar emphasized she had not reviewed the documents, they "appear to confirm the longstanding history of the conflict in the region, where players from the Soviet times are still very much involved, and can switch sides."

And in many cases, the U.S. is dealing with the same cast of characters the Soviets did: former Afghan prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, Taliban leader Mullah Omar and Afghan insurgent leader Jalaluddin Haqqani.

"This underscores the relevance of Soviet history and the enduring challenge of this complex conflict where many of the key players from the past are still active, and many who were on our side are now our enemies," Drozdova said.

Drozdova is the principal investigator for a program called "Mining Afghan Lessons from Soviet Era." She is studying memoranda, Politburo transcripts, Soviet resolutions and other documents from Hoover's Soviet

Archives. The program is part of ESOC, and is supported by the Office of Naval Research, Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare and Combating Terrorism Department.

Advising U.S. military experts

She is advising some of America's top military experts on the successes and failures of the Soviet war, hoping her adopted country can learn from its painful lessons.

As a native Russian speaker who specializes in U.S. national and international security and counter-terrorism strategies, she is unusually qualified to offer guidance.

Speaking of the military experts she works with, Drozdova said that "all are combat veterans and published scholars." They include:

• Col. Joseph Felter, commander of the Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team of the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force in Kabul. Felter is also a research fellow and co-director of the Empirical Studies of Conflict Project.
• Col. Michael Fenzel, the commander of the Army's 1st Armored Division's Second Brigade Combat Team. He served as an airborne battalion task force commander and deputy brigade commander in Afghanistan.
• Lt. Colonel Stanton Coerr, the director for strategic plans at the Pentagon's Marine Corps Headquarters Department of Aviation. He also is the commander of the 4th Air/Naval Gunfire Liaison Company and an attack helicopter pilot.

Fenzel said Drozdova's work "will help military and civilian leaders cut through the fog of war and make better informed decisions in complex environments. "

Drozdova told a Hoover Archives Workshop presentation last week that "the relevance of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan is quite tremendous and not sufficiently recognized. Not only is the nature of the threat the same, but many of the individuals and the groups are the same."

Russia fought in Afghanistan off and on since the time of the czars. Although it had supplied arms to Afghanistan since 1919, its investment in the iron fist approach has been longstanding. When Stalin was warned in 1937 of "an espionage-nationalistic insurgent organization centered in the Herat (Afghanistan) preparing an armed insurrection," his approach was unequivocal.

In a handwritten note, Stalin gave permission to arrest all Afghan suspects. He eventually ordered more than 2,000 landowners and mullahs returning to the U.S.S.R. from exile in Afghanistan and Iran to be sent to forced labor camps.

In a 1938 government resolution (also archived at Hoover), the Soviet secret police was given instructions to immediately arrest and interrogate everyone captured illegally crossing the Soviet-Afghan border. All those found to be "without malicious intent" faced "10 years in prison"; and the rest - "mandatory execution by shooting."

"Problem solved," Drozdova said ironically. "There’s an immigration policy for you."

In 1979, a quarter century after Stalin's death, the communist government of Afghanistan "invited" the U.S.S.R. to help against the mujahedeen resistance, which eventually received backing from the United States, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Muslim countries.

"The Soviets overwhelmingly obliged with force," said Drozdova. Eventually, however, they had to learn to balance "the tension between the forceful approach and some humanitarian option," she said. Drozdova noted "the good things they were doing - like supplying food for the population, providing protection on the roads, promoting education and literacy campaigns."

"But by then the situation in the Soviet army was deteriorating, its soldiers demoralized by the pointless fight, disease and drugs," Drozdova said. "Some Soviet soldiers even switched sides and went to the mujahedeen - enough to be noticed."

Ultimately, the Soviet Union had to rely on "hurricane diplomacy," bringing in state-of-the-art weapons for heavier strikes against the mujahedeen and pointing a formidable multiple rocket system toward Pakistan as they left. This show of force led to Afghan-Pakistan talks, paving the way for Soviet withdrawal.

The Afghan government they left behind held for a time, outlasting the U.S.S.R. But the government collapsed after three years, undermined by internal conflicts and betrayals.

Lessons from the Soviet experience

In the end, the Soviet Union drew several conclusions from the experience - ones that can inform American efforts.

Soviet defense minister Dmitry Yazov warned that a "decisive struggle awaits all in Afghanistan" after Soviet troop withdrawal. It's a likely outcome after American withdrawal.

Striking another theme that still echoes, USSR Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and KGB head Vladimir Kriuchkov warned six months

after Soviet withdrawal: "If our Afghan friends fail, Islamic fundamentalists would most likely come to power" - another familiar theme.

The learning curve over the years brought both nations to the same point: a recognition that "insurgency is driven by ethnic and religious concerns as enduring motivators, and that the Afghans do not want foreigners - infidels - ruling the country, whether they are Soviets or Americans," said Drozdova.

And the Soviets reached the same impasse the U.S. now faces over education and women's rights.

"Empowering women, education of children is good in our view, and in the Soviet view," Drozdova said. "But it's opposed fundamentally by Islamists and the tribal culture."

When questioned about whether the Afghan mission was a hopeless endeavor, she said, "Afghanistan is not unique. We can handle it. But it's very complex on many levels."

But later she added, "I'm not making policy, I'm a scholar. Obviously, decision-makers in the field will make decisions. I focus on producing well-researched scholarly information and new insights to help them better understand and solve critical problems."

Provided by Stanford University

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