

Soviets near a key victory

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By Eric Margolis

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December, 1979, the West reacted with shock and fear. Even the liberal Western media, which resolutely downplays any threats from the Soviet Union, could not ignore the truly ominous implications of this act of aggression. But after more than three years of guerrilla warfare, the media have managed to convince our leaders and the public that the Soviets are hopelessly bogged down in another Vietnam from which they want to withdraw, but cannot.

In fact, there is now ample evidence that the Soviets already have won the war and may be setting about to make the worst nightmares of the West come true. Russia has been attempting to seize Afghanistan since the middle of the 19th Century, recognizing that possession of this very strategic nation would give her dominance in southwest Asia and the long-sought access, through Baluchistan, to the Arabian Sea.

The Soviets' strategy has been to secure population centers, communications lines and airbases; the rest of arid, mountainous Afghanistan is of little interest. While the Soviets were certainly surprised by the ferocity of Afghan resistance, the lingering guerrilla war in the mountains poses little problem to Moscow. Most of the 160,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan were based originally along the Soviet-Afghan border; they were simply moved south a few hundred miles at the end of short supply lines. The Red Army's casualties in the war have amounted to no more than 15,000 dead and wounded, a tiny number for a nation that lost 20 million in World War II.

The Soviets have made effective use of the Afghan conflict, their first shooting war in 38 years, to test new weapons, develop specialized tactics and to gain field experience for their officer corps. Soviet exploitation of Afghanistan's extensive mineral deposits has gone too far to compensate for the cost of this low-budget war. The Soviets are also busy building road and rail links into Afghanistan, integrating its

communications and economy into the Soviet Union. This process of absorption has become so pronounced that it is estimated that Afghanistan will, in only a few more years, become an integral part of the USSR, another Lithuania or Outer Mongolia, forgotten countries that are nations in name only.

The Soviets now appear to have established satisfactory security over all those areas in which they have tactical interest: The guerrilla forces have been largely driven into the remote mountains. Much of the rural population, the essential base for any successful guerrilla movement, has been driven by bombing and shelling out of the uplands into the cities, where they can be easily policed. Fully one quarter of Afghanistan's original population are now refugees in Pakistan, and this flow continues at the rate of 25,000 a month. The remaining civilians and guerrilla forces in the mountains are now regularly subjected to massive bombing and the widespread use of chemical and biological warfare that includes nerve gas, blistering agents, poisons, toxins and some lethal agents, such as the mysterious Blue-X, which are not yet even understood by Western scientists.

According to Israeli intelligence sources, only one out of the seven Soviet divisions in Afghanistan is involved in regular combat operations; the remainder do normal garrison duty or are building a series of top-secret bases in the southwest around Farah and Shindand. These bases reportedly are being used by newly created mobile Soviet desert warfare units that clearly are being positioned and trained to strike instantly at the vital Strait of Hormuz only 470 miles away, the West's main oil artery.

Moscow, unlike the West, has always moved slowly but decisively to attain its grand strategic goals. Once Afghanistan is pacified and absorbed, and the transit routes to the south assured, the Soviets can be expected to begin intriguing against the now-isolated Pakistan, first by igniting rebellions in the secessionist provinces of Baluchistan and Pushtunistan, and then simply by moving their tanks south.

While Moscow pours arms into Central America, the West does not even dare supply arms to the Afghans for fear that the Soviets will strike immediately, against Pakistan, the conduit for weapons supply.

Afghan resistance may continue for a few more years but, inevitably, it will be eliminated unless actively supported by the West. Every other resistance movement in the Soviet empire has been ruthlessly crushed; in spite of the epic bravery of the Afghans, there is no reason to believe their fate will be different.

Future historians probably will rank the West's abandonment of Afghanistan and Pakistan as marking, much like its refusal to support Ethiopia and Czechoslovakia before World War II, the ultimate failure of the Free World to stand before the rising of tide of totalitarian aggression.



Eric Margolis is an international affairs columnist for the Toronto Sun.