

**PROTRACTED CONFLICTS IN AFGHANISTAN
AND CHECHNYA: AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES
ON RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE****

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Since the early 1980s, American scholarly and analytical literature has discussed the effectiveness of Soviet, and subsequently Russian, management of low-intensity conflicts. Though both the Soviet and Russian experience has been examined from many perspectives, including the military, economic, social and political, the American academic community does not tend to deem such an approach relevant and useful in terms of understanding US foreign policy. This disjoint is even harder to understand given the fact that the American military faced the same problems in Afghanistan and Iraq as the Soviet army experienced in Afghanistan (1979–1989), and Russian forces experienced during the First Chechen War (1994–1996). The greatest perplexity for American authors was the ability of Soviet and Russian leaders to recreate a power hierarchy on the ground while relying on their former adversaries – the Afghan Mujahideen and Chechen separatists. According to American intellectual discourse, reliance on a former enemy cannot be considered, by definition, during post-conflict state-building. Since the condition of the Russian conflict settlement model was pragmatism that is opposite to normative approach of the American policies in conflicts, this experience was not in demand in American foreign policy practice. The number of works by American scholars that include the comparison between the Soviet/Russian and the US campaigns is significantly smaller than the number of papers focusing on Soviet and Russian conduct, let alone their experience of nation-building. The aim of this study is to analyse American academic discourse about the Soviet/Russian experience of conducting low intensity conflicts. In the first part, the authors analyse the key mistakes of the Russian leadership during the campaigns, according to the estimates given by American researchers; the second part examines Russian strategy and its

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conflict settlement drawing comparison with the American experience. The authors conclude that US adaptation on the basis of Russian experiences in Afghanistan and Chechnya has proved impossible due to normative imperatives dominating American academic papers and policies. These imperatives bind the conflict resolution with the level of sophistication of a given country's institutions. Perhaps, the vice versa claim could have grounds, yet it exceeds the limits of this study.

Keywords: war in Afghanistan; war in Chechnya; peace settlement; USSR; Russia; USA; post-conflict state-building; US strategy; low-intensity conflict.

Предметом исследования является анализ американской академической мысли об опыте СССР и России в конфликтах низкой интенсивности, который изучается в американской научной и аналитической литературе с начала 1980-х гг. Хотя опыт рассмотрен с множества исследовательских ракурсов – военного, экономического, социального и политического – он получил в американском научно-исследовательском сообществе оценку как нерелевантный и оказался невостребованным во внешнеполитической практике США. Это усугубляется тем, что американские вооруженные силы столкнулись с теми же проблемами в Афганистане и Ираке, что Советский Союз в Афганистане (1979–1989) и Россия в Чечне (1994–1996). Наибольшее недоумение американских авторов вызывала способность советских и российских руководителей воссоздавать властную иерархию на месте при опоре на своих бывших оппонентов – афганских моджахедов и чеченских сепаратистов. С точки зрения американского интеллектуального дискурса, российский подход по вовлечению в сотрудничество бывшего врага, основанный на комбинации силового давления и системы компромиссов, не является постконфликтным урегулированием. Вследствие того, что условием российской модели урегулирования был прагматизм, отрицающий классический для американской политики нормативно-ценностный подход, этот опыт оказался не востребован в американской внешнеполитической практике. Количество работ американских ученых, проводящих параллели между кампаниями СССР/России и США, существенно меньше количества их работ, изучающих сугубо советскую/российскую модели ведения войн и постконфликтного урегулирования. В первой части статьи исследуются американские представления о ключевых ошибках советского/российского руководства в военных кампаниях, во второй сравниваются российская стратегия и методы урегулирования конфликтов с американским опытом. Авторы приходят к выводу, что адаптация Соединенными Штатами российского опыта постконфликтного урегулирования в Афганистане и Чечне оказалась невозможна из-за доминирования в академических исследованиях и политической практике нормативных установок, увязывающих урегулирование конфликта с уровнем развития политических институтов.

Ключевые слова: война в Афганистане; война в Чечне; мирное урегулирование; СССР; Россия; США; постконфликтное строительство; стратегия США; конфликт низкой интенсивности.

The US military's participation in low-intensity conflicts has been the most acute issue of American foreign policy for the last 30 years. Although US academics have thoroughly studied their own foreign policy campaigns, the question of how Americans evaluate other nations' experience in the same type of conflicts remains unaddressed. In this article we aim to study American academic perspectives on Russian performance in low-intensity conflicts, mainly Russia's participation in both Chechen wars and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Although Russian experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya has been studied at length, it is generally not considered relevant for US foreign policy, even though the United States has faced the same consequences of their interventions in Afghanistan as the Soviet Union did in the 1980s. As Oliker points out, "eighteen years after the U.S. went to war, the parallels with Russia's experience seem obvious. Not least of them is the difficulty of leaving Afghanistan" [Oliker, 2019].

We start with a theoretical evaluation of the American negligence of Russia's foreign policy experience. Then we look at how American political and International Relations (IR) specialists evaluate Soviet and Russian conflict experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Having analyzed over a hundred works, we find that their scholars draw out four primary arguments, which in their view provide grounds for understanding the ultimate Russian failure in both Afghanistan (1979–1989) and the First Chechen campaign (1994–1996). Thus, we divide these causes into two major groups, accounting for military and political aspects. The Military aspect encompasses (1) conventional military strategy inadequately applied to insurgency and (2) lack of resources to support the military campaign. The Political aspect includes (1) unclear political goals and immersion in local politics and (2) lack of legitimacy among the local population. Also, many works discussing the Soviet/Russian experience look at the process of withdrawal from both wars. Thus, we analyze how Americans look at the final stages of both conflicts as well.

We argue that the Russian experience of post-conflict settlement was seen as irrelevant by the US due to three major factors dominating political and academic discourse: (1) normative bias towards Soviet/Russian political strategy, (2) emphasis on nation-building through developing democratic institutions, and (3) American exceptionalism that prevents learning from others. All three aspects lead to linking successful post-conflict settlement to the establishment of democratic rule.

What makes the US think normatively?

This section deals with the US normative worldview that, we believe, made it almost impossible to accept external foreign policy experience, especially that of the Soviet Union.

American exceptionalism and its impact on US foreign policy has been studied at length. Since the neoconservative turn during the first Bush Administration, American exceptionalism has gained a greater role in US foreign policy discourse [Holsti, p. 381; Mearsheimer]. This growing role has

been substantiated by the authors using quantitative methods [McCoy]: by 2010, the term's mentions in Google Scholar database reached 4,172. American exceptionalism affects the reasoning behind the neglect of the Soviet experience of nation-building per se. When taking a closer look at American scholarship on nation-building, it is evident that US experts do not tend to take external experiences seriously.

The same is true for the US normative bias towards the USSR. Although a small amount of works explore US perceptions of the USSR as a malevolent actor and, thus, neglect its foreign policy experience, there are constructivist works which analyze US foreign policy discourse in relation to the actions and existence of the Soviet Union. Using quantitative methods, the authors analyzed approximately three thousand sources¹, revealing the USSR and Communism as the most significant 'other' that shaped US foreign policy. Also, US self-identity underscored such categories as democracy (in contrast to totalitarianism and tyranny – 89 sources), freedom (86 sources), and egalitarianism (in contrast to discrimination – 45 sources). All the data aggregated by our study demonstrates that the US has developed a normative lens for studying foreign policy conduct.

Another root cause of US scholars dismissing the Russian experience of nation-building as irrelevant lies in the broader distinction between two contrasting aspects of post-conflict settlement: one either seeks to build an entire nation from scratch, or tries to stabilize the situation in the country by relying on its national government². The majority of those American authors studied [Dobbins, p. 73; Dobbins et al.; Rubin, 2006, p. 179–181; Talentino, p. 573; Statebuilding and Intervention; Rupp] believed that genuine nation-building implies a broader package of measures aimed at establishing democratic rule.

By contrast, historically, Russia sought to rebuild security structures that would guarantee stabilization at the expense of democratic development, even to the extent of cooperating with the enemy, which is grossly different from the American experience of post-conflict reconstruction [Fayutkin, p. 371]. Having been at war in the Caucasus for many decades during the XIX century, Russia has adopted the policy of "zamirenye" [Венюков], which means achieving peace through striking deals with its enemies. This was the case, for example, with the Chechen leader Shamil. The same is true for the Russian Civil War (1918–1921). Despite the initial conflicts witnessed between Bolshevik and nationalist forces in Asia, all major Muslim leaders were befriended by Moscow, which provided invaluable leverage over the Basmachi insurgents [Bennigsen]. In contrast, US scholars see Soviet cooperation with the mujahideen – the so called Mujahideenisation, adopted after the term Vietnamisation, which was coined during the

¹ The count has been conducted based on 2624 sources written between the 1960s–1970s [Cascander].

² As regards to any potential distinction between these two terms, there is none. As far as the distinction between nation-building and stabilization concerned, the question will be examined further below.

Vietnam war (1969–1979) – not as a nation-building process but rather a realpolitik power bargain. In the case of US involvement in Vietnam, its Vietnamisation – leaving the war burden against Vietcong to the Hanoi government – was considered as a last resort before a humiliating defeat. Thus, some realist authors favor American withdrawal from Afghanistan, viewing the Soviet’s pulling out from the country as an historical template [Hess; Grau].

Afghanistan and Chechnya: views on the military factors behind the failure

The first argument deals with a wrong military strategy. Russia has previously applied strategy devised for the European theatre of operations to low-intensity conflicts in mountainous areas (Afghanistan and Chechnya). The Soviet army, primarily trained to conduct conventional high-intensity warfare on the plains of Europe could not adapt to far more sophisticated geographical conditions of the mountains in Afghanistan and urban districts in Chechnya [Cassidy, p. 33; Johnson, p. 90]. The Soviet Union did change its strategy later, introducing several tactical innovations, but by that time the character of the war had already transformed to a protracted one [The Bear Went Over the Mountain, p. 202].

The Russian Federation made the same mistakes in the First Chechen War (1994–1996). Instead of applying counterinsurgency tactics that could undermine the trust of civilians in the insurgents, Russian military forces used heavy artillery against the population; thus, the battle for the hearts and minds of the Chechens was lost [Cassidy]. Oliker underlines that the Russian army could not “bloodlessly and effectively capture a large urban area from an insurgent force” [Oliker, 2001, p. 84].

Misunderstanding the asymmetrical nature of conflict is another argument of American scholarship when interpreting the causes of Soviet/Russian failure. When describing the classic paradox of the asymmetric conflict, asymmetry is viewed in two forms: the asymmetry of military hardware and resources (stronger part) and the asymmetry of a will to quell an invader (weaker part). The American discourse emphasizes these asymmetries, stressing freedom above rational reasoning. Speaking of the underestimated identity component, Cassidy pinpoints “the Chechen tradition, as tempered and hardened by the historical experience of the past two hundred years” [Cassidy, p. 27]. Misperception of the manifold components of asymmetric warfare in both cases became one of the reasons why the conflict transformed into a prolonged one.

The problem lay in not only the wrong tactics being applied but also the inadequate supply of resources, meaning the country was either unwilling to invest more (as in case of Afghanistan), or there was a lack of material resources, which is relevant for both the late-Soviet period and the early days of the Russian Federation. American discussion of Soviet/Russian resources in low-intensity conflicts centers on two aspects: a disproportionate amount of resources invested for the scale of the threat, as well as

the unwillingness of the state's leadership to deploy additional resources to fight Mujahideen and Chechen rebels.

According to Derleth and Reuveny, when governments showed little desire to increase their commitment of resources to the conflict, this ultimately resulted in the poor performance of the army [Reuveny, Prakash; Derleth]. After 1980, Moscow realized it could not deploy 500,000 men, as the United States did in Vietnam, for both domestic economic-political reasons, and because of the theater's undeveloped infrastructure [Blank].

Cassidy describes the causes of failure in the First Chechen campaign, stating that, from the very beginning of the Chechen War, Russia lacked the will to prosecute it [Cassidy, p. 30]. Undoubtedly, what should be taken into account is that during both campaigns the country was experiencing structural problems in both political and economic life during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In a similar vein, Olikier highlights disproportionately large losses on the part of Russian officers during the First Chechen campaign compared to the number of soldiers [Olikier, 2001], which cannot be explained in any way except a poor level of training.

Military means realist?

We assume that these arguments demonstrate a realist view on Soviet/Russian foreign policy conduct. First, they compare the Soviet/Russian wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya with US experiences in the Middle East [Frankel; Canfield; Fayutkin; Marshall; Grau; Hess; Granville]. For instance, Marshall points out that the Soviet Union failed to preserve a stable regime in Afghanistan, which led to the spread of terrorism throughout Central Asia [Marshall, p. 69]. In this sense, the case of US failure to secure a monopoly on the use of force in Iraq is the same [Marshall, p. 83; Donini, Minear, Walker]. Other works provide similar comparative reasoning: for instance, Granville [Granville, p. 115–124] points out that both countries attempted nation-building and failed to soberly assess all the risks that these military campaigns might have entailed [Ibid., p. 118].

Second, they see Soviet withdrawal tactics as the template for how to end the war. In this vein, Hess mentions the Soviet experience [Hess, p. 184], suggesting that the Obama administration should have looked at it as a mere technical solution to a long-term American entanglement. The same opinion is expressed by Grau, stating that “the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan provides an excellent model for a disengagement from direct military involvement” [Grau, p. 260].

Afghanistan and Chechnya: views on the political factors behind the failure

The second group of arguments deals with the political aspects of Soviet/Russian strategies. The first argument describes the Russian inability to avoid immersion in local politics and its lacking coherent goals in both conflicts [see: Cassidy; Feifer; Derleth; Goodson, Johnson; Grau; The Bear

Went Over the Mountain]. Debates are still being held concerning the goals the Soviet Union pursued when sending troops to Afghanistan. One thing that most American scholars agree on is that Afghanistan was a region of strategic interest for Soviet foreign policy. Gibbs states that, due to “the emergence of Iranian influence, Daoud’s anti-communist repressions, the PDPA takeover” that took place in late 1970s, the Politburo had to address the issue in a manner different from any approach they had previously adopted [Gibbs, p. 372]. When moving away from a macro level analysis to more practical considerations, American views on the Soviet Union’s goals in Afghanistan become blurry and often unconvincing. Cassidy believes that the Soviet army opted for a long war by undermining and dividing the Mujahideen with an indirect strategy, so the prospect of a sweeping victory was off the table [Cassidy, p. 27].

The second argument in this group addresses the USSR’s problem of legitimacy when conducting military operations. In the case of Afghanistan, it deals with the prevailing Brezhnev doctrine, which made it impossible to withdraw from the region and allowed anti-communist forces to take over [Grau]. Still, the Afghan population viewed the Soviet soldiers as invaders. With a wide range of actors involved, each with varying degree of legitimacy and power, after the failure of the National Reconciliation Policy initiated by Mohammed Najibullah in 1986, the conflict had little chance of being resolved. This was proved after Soviet troops left Afghanistan in 1989 and a civil war broke out in the country.

There is no wide interest among American scholars in the Soviet post-conflict settlement strategy³. The exception is Benningsen’s policy memo, analyzing the Soviet experience of counterinsurgency operations, as well as its consideration of the failed attempts of the USSR to establish a viable government system in Afghanistan [Benningsen, p. 18–21].

From a normative standpoint, American scholars believe that the USSR pursued a policy of preserving an authoritarian regime and imposing its own ideology, while the US, in contrast, has been trying to conduct a proper nation-building process, to forge a government “with democratic aspirations, and a claim on prosperity” [Collins, p. 33–34]. The same argument is shared by Millen, claiming that the USSR “destroyed the socio-economic fabric of Afghanistan” [Millen, p. 1].

The same group of political arguments (the lack of coherent aims and legitimacy) apply to American analysis of the Russian conduct of the First Chechen War. The variety of goals present include keeping the republic as a part of Russia, fighting terrorism and ousting the Dudaev regime [Cassidy, p. 22]. The disorganized Russian government, which lacked an understanding of the purposes of the conducted campaign, did not fully comprehend the state of its military forces. Lieven points out that the Soviet and Rus-

³ Although there is a considerable amount of literature dealing with Soviet economic policy in Afghanistan [Rubin, 1995; Robinson, Dixon] a political strategy of the USSR is generally omitted. Also, for more examples demonstrating how American scholarship views the Soviet withdrawal through a technical lens, see: [Marshall; Hess; Grau].

sian military commander, Colonel General Vorobyov, was denouncing the “moral cowardice of Grachev in not telling Yeltsin that the army was not prepared for intervention” [Lieven, p. 106].

Echoing them, Lapidus states that the ultimate failure to either oust the Dudaev government or achieve legitimacy for the Kremlin-backed Zavgayev was coupled with increasing domestic and international turmoil, which resulted in “half-hearted attempts of negotiation [that] were combined with a relentless pursuit of military victory” [Lapidus, p. 13]. Kramer also emphasizes that, in the 1990s, Russian troops did not manage to gain legitimacy in the eyes of most Chechens [Kramer], as they had similarly failed to do in Afghanistan.

Concerning Moscow’s post-conflict actions in Chechnya, there is a group of authors who analyze the Russian conduct in Chechnya in mere technical aspects [Frankel; Canfield; Fayutkin] and they are considered realist. These perspectives drive American scholars to compare the then ongoing Iraq War with the Russian operation in the Caucasus [Kramer].

Yet the Chechen case feeds the normative discourse of US scholarship greatly [Hodgson; Thomas; Ware; Lyall, Blair, Imai]. The work of Ware is typical in this regard: he declares that the Chechnya campaign greatly influenced the evolution of Russian federalism. The terrorist attacks perpetrated by Shamil Basayev gave Russian president Vladimir Putin a cue to transform Russian regional politics in a more “oppressive and authoritarian fashion” [Ware; Russel]⁴. The most profound difference between American perspectives on the Afghan and Chechen cases is that Chechnya is seen primarily as the product of Russian internal politics – national federalism during the conflict has grown into a coercive system being described as the Chechenisation of Russian politics.

Political means idealist?

We have analyzed political arguments in American thinking on the failure of Russian strategy in both protracted conflicts. We assume that the majority of American scholars develop a normative/idealistic perspective on both conflicts. Concerning war in Afghanistan, the Soviet’s lacking legitimacy is always put against the democratizing purposes of US military operations, therefore, American academia is certain that the US operation is legitimate.

The same goes for the purposes of the conflict: in Afghanistan, the Soviet forces divided a nation while conducting military crimes and, thus, failed to win over the hearts and minds of the Afghani nationals. In contrast, the US is presented as defending the Afghani nation against Taliban terrorists. Apart from a different reading of what nation building is, the American scholarship has introduced a term Chechenisation that attests to the fact

⁴ Russel suggests that the Chechen war has created “an iron Putin”, an autocrat seeking to freeze the Russian political process.

that the rise of authoritarianism in Russia is due to its flawed conflict strategy. Normative bias in the American reading of the political strategy of Russia/Soviet Union is clear.

* * *

We have studied a body of American works on Soviet/Russian experiences during small/counterinsurgent conflicts, paying special attention to whether these experiences are considered relevant for understanding comparable American foreign entanglements. Our research has found several promising research patterns.

First, American scholars look at Soviet/Russian failures in both campaigns through the lens of broadly similar factors – strategy deficiencies, lack of resources, wrong objectives, lack of understanding of conflict, and lack of legitimacy. Second, we have examined how American academia understands Soviet/Russian practices of peace building in both cases: As regards to Afghanistan, American scholarship (apart from the literature on technical issues) does not see Soviet withdrawal, or the subsequent deal-making with the mujahedeen, as a proper conflict settlement strategy since it is lacking genuine nation-building. Concerning Chechnya (again, besides the few exceptions noted above) Russian post-conflict policy is branded as Chechenisation and viewed as a part of the Russian internal evolution towards authoritarianism.

For a long time, the US has been mired in protracted military entanglements and continues to search for ways out. Yet, President Obama, in responding to the US military presence in Syria, called America ‘exceptional’. For the US to end its protracted conflict in Afghanistan, it is important to adopt a policy similar to the Soviet approach, which was based on securing deals with the key players on the ground and withdrawing forces out of the country. It is symbolic that Russia is ready to broker peace talks between the US and Taliban. It is time to open the Soviet/Russian handbook on how to build peace, instead of seeking to build an imagined nation.

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