

# Learning from the Soviets in Afghanistan

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**This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Geneva accords that facilitated the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. On April 14, 1988, in Geneva, representatives of the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan signed three bilateral agreements intended to end the war in Afghanistan. These agreements addressed the principles of mutual relations, in particular non-interference and non-intervention as well as the voluntary return of Afghan refugees.**

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan has been compared to the U.S. experience in Vietnam, but the most recent Iraq War is a better fit for comparison. Both the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. invasion of Iraq stemmed from a decision made exclusively at the highest echelons of power. Both the Soviet Union and the United States did not intend to occupy their host countries, but merely to impose their own political systems. Both countries faced the dilemma of withdrawal. And one of the worst-case scenarios of U.S. withdrawal is Iraq's Afghanization—the cultivation of extremism brought on by the overthrow of a weak central authority followed by violent rivalry between opposing factions.

Despite this Soviet experience, the Afghanistan analogy suggests that the best choice for the United States in Iraq is precisely the path opened up by the Geneva Accords. Some may argue that like the strong arm of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, U.S. forces in Iraq keep a failing state from slipping into dangerous chaos. However, the great contribution of the Geneva accords is that they offered a starting point, not the final deal, for stabilizing the country.

Both Moscow and Washington squandered the potential benefits of the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Moscow, for instance, effectively abandoned President Mohammad Najibullah after the withdrawal. However, to be fair, Moscow had its own share of domestic problems at that time, which culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Washington's mistakes, such as siding with the Taliban, have become a popular subject for critics of the Bush administration. At that time, the United States wanted to construct a Central Asian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through western Afghanistan to Pakistan, thereby bypassing Russia. Ironically, this came at a time when the US-Russian relations were at their peak.

What can the United States do to avoid the kinds of mistakes the Soviet Union made in Afghanistan? On the international level, it is critical that Iraq does not become a platform for another great power rivalry. Global and regional powers, including Russia, China and, very importantly, Iran, must pledge their commitment to stability in Iraq and agree on a definition of this stability. On the regional and domestic levels, the various militias and factions vying for power in Iraq will use not just violence, but public sentiment. Most Americans did not support the war in the first place; many have become desensitized to the headlines about the situation there.

However, completely abandoning Iraq is not viable. Creating real economic opportunities for Iraqis would be a good pre-withdrawal step that would help cement the legitimacy of the Iraqi government in the eyes of the Iraqis and promote more durable and reciprocal U.S.-Iraqi relations.

Finally, when it comes to Iraq, the United States has a live opportunity to unveil a new foreign policy course one that takes into account other countries interests. Its no secret that the world community was offended by what it saw as a unilateral decision to invade Iraq. In withdrawing, the United States can redefine and reaffirm its leadership by engaging, both actively and symbolically, the international community. The Soviet Unions withdrawal from Afghanistan represented the new thinking that Mikhail Gorbachev brought to Soviet foreign policy, which contributed to ending the Cold War. U.S. withdrawal from Iraq could have a similarly dramatic effect on international relations.