



Institute for the Study of Diplomacy  
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

*Discourse, Dissent, and Strategic Surprise:  
Formulating American Security in an Age of Uncertainty*

## **The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: Failure of Intelligence or of the Policy Process?**

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### **Introduction**

Afghanistan, long neglected as a strategic backwater as far as US national security was concerned, burst upon our national consciousness with the September 11th, 2001 attacks. Suddenly, the chaos and extremism plaguing that failed state connected closely to our own security and national interests. Afghanistan's importance to American national security, however, is rooted in events taking place over many decades. Because of Afghanistan's key role in our security, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy's (ISD) working group considered the lessons learned from two historical cases of strategic surprise relating to US intelligence and policy there.

The first meeting, held on September 26th, and discussed in detail in this report, examined the role of intelligence in influencing American policy prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Declassified intelligence reports show that analysts and policymakers had significant information about the extensive military preparations being undertaken in the Soviet regions bordering Afghanistan. Neither the intelligence nor the policy community, however, reached a consensus about the implications of these devel-

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opments and, indeed, many dismissed the idea that an invasion would actually take place.

The working group met again on November 16th, focusing mainly on the period 1989–1991, after the official Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, when both the Soviets and the US nevertheless continued to support their proxies in the Afghan conflict. The group also considered the consequences of American policy decisions to withdraw from engagement in Afghanistan; consequences which not only gave free license to years of internal Afghan turmoil, but profoundly impacted US strategic and security interests as well. The full report from that meeting can also be found on the ISD website at <http://isd.georgetown.edu>.

Although these cases have historically been described as significant examples of intelligence failures, the project's objectives in examining them is not to ascribe blame or make counterfactual assertions. Rather, several general project goals are to:

- identify the degree to which these cases were not simply intelligence failures, but failures in the policy process, or a combination of the two;
- examine the interaction between intelligence collection/reporting and policy;
- examine the degree to which the issue was not the absence of intelligence, or actual information, but policymakers' reluctance to accept information or analysis that contradicted commonly held assumptions;
- identify systemic similarities between cases; and
- develop lessons for future national security policy.

### **Historical Background: Alarm Bells Sound, But Who Is Listening?**

#### *Moscow's Long-Standing Investment*

A critical benchmark in the events that culminated in the Soviet invasion was the April 1978 communist coup ousting Afghan's ruler, Sadar Muhammad Daoud. Ironically, Daoud was killed by the faction of the same communist party and contingent of Soviet trained military officers who had backed his takeover five years earlier.

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The earlier seizure of the government had been viewed both in Moscow and Washington as a major revitalization of a long-standing Soviet investment in establishing a client state relationship with Afghanistan. As Prime Minister, Daoud had established close ties with Moscow, resulting in the equipping of the Afghan military forces with Soviet weapons, assignment of large numbers of Soviet military advisors to Afghanistan, and training Afghan military officers in the Soviet Union. This was accompanied by economic aid and other actions shaping the political landscape in Afghanistan.

After seizing power, however, Daoud had become liability for Soviet aspirations in Afghanistan. He reduced his dependence on the Soviet Union, aggressively cutting his ties with the Moscow-allied political and military factions in Afghanistan. By early 1979 he had removed all communist party members from his cabinet and drastically reduced the numbers in other government positions. Dozens of Soviet-trained military officers had been dismissed or re-assigned to minor posts. He also had put forth a new national constitution that would outlaw all communist party factions, including the one that had supported his seizure of the government. The communist coup in April, 1978, thus presented a halt and prospective reversal of what had been a deterioration of the long-standing Soviet investment in Afghanistan.

The Soviets took immediate steps to cement the new communist regime. Teams of Soviet political and military advisors were dispatched to Afghanistan, and Moscow signed a new agreement for \$250 million in military assistance. By the end of the year, intelligence reported that at least 1,000 Soviet military advisors were in Afghanistan, three times the number at the time of the coup. More importantly, Moscow signed another agreement on “cooperation and friendship” with the Afghan regime, which US intelligence analysts described as enabling the Afghan Government to request military assistance from the Soviet Union.

*Internal Fissures and Soviet Reaction*

That provision attracted the attention of US intelligence analysts because an armed insurrection was burgeoning throughout Afghanistan in reaction to the new regime’s attempts to impose a “socialist revolution.” The challenges they posed to the power of the tribal leaders and Islamic leaders, as well as the regime’s dictatorial methods, fueled violent resistance. Large numbers of insurgents were receiving arms and assistance from ethnically allied guerrilla organizations in Pakistan, and intelligence reported the loyalty of the Afghan army was eroding, with a number of defections from the army to the

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insurgents. In mid-March, insurgents attacked Herat, killing as many as 20 Soviet advisors stationed there. The uprising was crushed, but many viewed the event as a clear indication that the Soviet client regime in Kabul was steadily losing ground to the insurgency.

After the Herat attack, US intelligence reported significantly increased Soviet military activity in and around Afghanistan. Two Soviet divisions north of the Afghan border, which had been essentially dormant in the past, were suddenly observed conducting training exercises. The Soviets shipped more weapons into Afghanistan, including tanks, artillery, small arms, fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships. In July, the Soviets crossed a new threshold of involvement by deploying a combat unit—an airborne battalion—to the Bagram airbase north of Kabul. There were now between 2,500 to 3,000 military advisors in Afghanistan, not counting the airborne battalion. Some of these Soviet military personnel were attached to Afghan units engaging in combat, including piloting helicopters in combat operations.

Signs of internal fissures in Afghanistan grew during an attempt in August, 1979, by a group of army officers to seize the Presidential Palace. The move was crushed, but, as an intelligence memorandum noted, the event demonstrated a dramatic deterioration of the loyalty of regular Afghan army units, and that the Soviets now faced the prospect that the army to which they were providing assistance might come apart. Shortly after the August attack, US intelligence reported Soviet divisions raising their readiness, including moving components out of garrison.

This led to an Intelligence Community “Alert Memorandum” on September 14, 1979, stating, “Soviet leaders may be on the threshold of a decision to commit their own forces to prevent the collapse of the regime and protect their sizeable stakes in Afghanistan.” The Memorandum qualified this judgment by saying that if Moscow ultimately did increase its military role it was likely to do so only incrementally, by raising the number of military advisors and expanding their role in assisting the Afghan army in combat operations, and possibly bringing in small units to protect key cities.

*Tensions Escalate*

US intelligence continued to reported increasing Soviet combat force activity north of the Afghan border, including a third ground force division and apparent airlift preparations in two Soviet airborne divisions in the Southern USSR. These events led National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to request an intelligence appraisal “of Soviet involvement to date, so that we

can distinguish between creeping involvement and direct intervention.” In response, all Intelligence Community agencies participated in an “Interagency Intelligence Memorandum,” with no dissents about its conclusions.

The memorandum outlined two options for the Soviets. One would involve gradually increased assistance to the Afghan army’s campaign against the insurgency, including limited commitment of Soviet combat troops to protect key cities and critical transportation nodes. The second option would mean sending in Soviet forces to take over the main burden of combat operations. The assessment said this course of action would require a “massive” military intervention with a “multidivisional” force well beyond the one airborne and four ground force divisions stationed north of the Afghan border, which had already been observed increasing their readiness.

The assessment concluded that even if the current Afghan regime fragmented and no “viable Marxist alternative” emerged, “rather than accept the political costs and risks of a massive Soviet invasion to fight the insurgency,” the Soviets “would promote installation of a more moderate regime willing to deal with them.” What would make “the chances of large-scale and long-term Soviet intervention . . . substantially greater,” according to the assessment, would be prolonged political chaos and “the prospect of an anti-Soviet regime, or foreign military intervention.”

Two weeks after this assessment was disseminated, the potential for fragmentation of the Afghan army was again demonstrated when an entire division near Kabul mutinied, the largest such mutiny to date, and launched an attack toward the capital that was crushed only after several days of combat.

### *Loading for the Invasion: Finally Setting Off Alarms*

US intelligence reported increasingly extensive Soviet military preparations in November and early December. On December 14, Secretary of State Marshal Shulman sent President Carter an assessment of the implications for Soviet policy of a “continuing downslide” in US-Soviet relations. While Shulman focused mainly on issues involving the SALT II agreement and NATO agreement to long-range US missiles in Europe, he noted that “the advantages of more direct intervention in Afghanistan now outweigh the inevitable price in . . . US relations.” The next day, Shulman called in the Soviet charge and demanded that Moscow explain the increase of its military presence in Afghanistan; the US ambassador in Moscow issued the same

demand directly to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. The Soviets immediately rebuffed this demarche.

At a White House meeting of top national security cabinet officials two days later, on December 17th, the DCI reported that yet another Soviet airborne battalion had arrived at Bagram, bringing the number of Soviet troops in the country to well over 5,000. He also reported that a Soviet military command post had been set up just north of the Afghan border, that two additional ground combat divisions were deploying out of garrison, and that the buildup of combat aircraft was continuing. The senior officials decided to explore with Pakistan and some other allied governments the possibility of providing funds, weapons and other materials support to the Afghan insurgents “to make it as expensive as possible for the Soviets to continue their efforts.” They concluded, however, that meanwhile the US would keep its diplomatic demarches to Moscow in private channels, on the premise that “there was no benefit in going public at this time.”

Meanwhile, preparation of an intelligence community “Alert Memorandum” on the situation was ensnarled in debates among analysts over the implications of the Soviet military buildup. All agreed by now that Moscow was preparing to engage directly in combat operations, but disagreed on the magnitude and role of Soviet forces and how soon the actions would begin. The majority view was that Moscow intended a graduated “augmentation” to shore up the deteriorating Afghan military. A small minority contended the Soviets were about to launch a major military intervention with the full scale deployment of the ground force divisions seen moving out of garrison and one or more airborne divisions, amounting to 30,000 to 40,000 combat troops. These analysts argued that the preparations indicated the move was imminent.

On December 24th and 25th, waves of military aircraft were detected flying into Afghanistan, and it became clear the airborne divisions observed in preparation activities were now being mobilized. Initial intelligence reporting still described these forces as intended to provide security for Soviet personnel in Afghanistan, and said that if they were used in combat operations, it would be on small scale to assist the ailing Afghan regime.

The perception of a limited “security enhancement” operation was finally squashed on December 27. Soviet troops attacked the palace compound where the nominal president of Afghanistan, Hazibullah Amin, had taken refuge. The Soviets saw Amin as the main instigator of the agenda and methods fueling the anti-Soviet insurrection, and were deeply unhappy with his

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rule. Amin had survived a previous assassination attempt, but this time he was killed. A broadcast allegedly from the Kabul radio station (but identified as actually coming from a facility in Soviet Uzbekistan) announced that Babrak Karmal, a communist party member who had been exiled by the Amin regime several months earlier, was heading a new government then being formed, and had requested Soviet military assistance.

The next day, two Soviet divisions crossed the border into Afghanistan. Intelligence analysts assessed these divisions, combined with the airborne forces already deployed in Afghanistan, as comprising an invasion force of some 30,000 combat troops. At a White House meeting on December 29th, according to National Security Advisor Brzezinski, “All knew that a major watershed had been crossed.”

### **Key Themes for the Working Group Discussion**

Although US intelligence had monitored Soviet activity vis-à-vis Afghanistan for quite some time, analysts reported an alarming uptick in Soviet military activity in and around Afghanistan throughout the fall of 1979. Some significant indicators of that activity included Soviet troop mobilization on Afghanistan’s borders, the continued and growing number of Soviet advisors arriving in Afghanistan, and deployments of regular Soviet military units to key airbases in Afghanistan. Top national security cabinet officials held meetings in November and December at the White House discussing these developments as well as methods for aiding the anti-Soviet Afghan insurgents. Nevertheless, President Carter expressed his shock and surprise when it became clear by December 27th that a full-fledged Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was underway.

Co-Chair Douglas MacEachin summarized the long record of Soviet efforts to establish dominance in Afghanistan and the intelligence reporting and analysis disseminated to policy officials prior to the invasion. Fritz Ermath, currently Director of National Security Programs at the Nixon Center, provided perspectives from both the intelligence and policy vantage points. He served for several years as Chairman of the DCI’s National Intelligence Council and, during the invasion of Afghanistan, on the National Security Council staff. Several key issues emerged from these presentations:

- Why was the extensive information on Soviet physical preparations not, with few exceptions, viewed in either the intelligence or policy

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communities as indicative of an impending invasion?

- Why was there not a more concerted policy effort to deter such Soviet action by impressing on Moscow the severe consequences of doing so?
- Did the lack of serious discourse on a Soviet invasion stem from traditional “intelligence failure,” the policy environment and process in which intelligence was presented, or both?
- How did mindsets, wishful thinking, policymakers’ preoccupations, and policy factions in the government (“hawks” vs “doves”) play a role in the policymaking environment, and how did it contribute to the strategic surprise?

## Summary of Working Group Discussions

### *Did Intelligence “Fail?”*

The working group discussed in detail whether the case was one of traditional “intelligence failure.” One participant, who worked on the NSC staff at the time, gave the intelligence community an “excellent” grade on what he called its “first job,” describing the situation on the ground as fully as possible in terms of facts and trends. From his perspective, the main uncertainty in the intelligence he read in the months leading up to the invasion was its potential magnitude, although even then he thought the preparations described in the intelligence strongly implied something *big*.

Several participants reinforced this view, saying that the intelligence community did a good job in tracking and describing the Soviet military deployments and preparations. One participant, who was a member of an NSC Soviet working group at the time, said that in April 1979, this group began closely tracking the intelligence reporting on Soviet actions relating to Afghanistan. The group prepared weekly assessments delivered directly to National Security Advisor Brzezinski, who passed them to the President. The incoming intelligence convinced the group members that the Soviets were going to invade, and thus no one in the group was surprised by what happened, nor was National Security Advisor Brzezinski. Nonetheless, as the participant point out, the President said the invasion came as a terrible surprise.



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Other participants who had not been privy to the intelligence reporting at the time expressed surprise at the contrast between the amount of information that had been reported on developments on the ground and the apparent absence of any US policy game plan. One participant pointed out that the Soviet divisions detected in training and reservist call-ups prior to the invasion were historical kept at very low manning levels—no more than 30 percent and more likely as low as 10 percent—and thus their preparatory activities were all the more exceptional and indicative of some major event.

Several participants noted that pre-invasion intelligence erred by giving only “glancing attention” to the possibility that the Soviets would try to oust Afghan communist party leader Amin, despite intelligence showing Moscow was seeking alternatives to Amin, including reports that the Soviets had sanctioned, if not outright proposed, a plot to assassinate Amin. Thus the prospect of a Soviet military intervention for the purpose of removing rather than reinforcing the existing regime did not feature prominently in the US assessments of the Soviet military preparations being observed. Several participants pointed out that such a scenario, given the unpredictable state of the Afghan army, would have required a bigger force than the graduated augmentation option touted in most US intelligence assessments, because Moscow would need to be at least prepared for the contingency that rather than supporting the Afghan army, they might be fighting some factions of it.

*The Policy Community Environment*

Participants generally agreed that there was little in the way of significant policy deliberation on Afghanistan until rather late in the game, and cited several main reasons for this.

**Policy Divisions in Government**

Many participants agreed that the Carter Administration was affected by deep divisions on national security issues between the “hawks” and the “doves.” As one participant put it, “The doves wanted the problem to go away, because of the détente agenda, and the hawks almost wanted the problem to occur,” in the belief that the political reaction would work to their advantage in the national security policy debates. Another participant echoed this: “The Soviet invasion was the hope of one wing of our government, and the fear of another.”

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One participant who served at the time on the NSC Soviet working group said that by mid-1979 the White House preoccupation with getting the SALT II treaty through Congress had become a critical impediment to discourse on Afghanistan, and was a source of tension between and within the State Department and the NSC—including between Secretary of State Vance and National Security Advisor Brzezinski—and the Pentagon. The President was very committed to the treaty, according to the participant, and until the end of 1979 was maintaining efforts to promote its acceptance in the face of divisions within his administration and reservations in the Senate.

**Wishful Thinking and Mindsets**

Conventional wisdom in Washington held that Moscow had a strong interest in SALT II, and interpreted Soviet behavior in this context. In the case of Soviet policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, it was presumed that Moscow would refrain from a major military intervention because it would almost certainly squelch the treaty. Declassified documents show that many intelligence analysts shared this view. The participant argued that officials who were “surprised” by the invasion, despite having read the intelligence reports and the memos produced by the NSC working group, could only have read those documents “in a wishful context.”

The other main policy faction in the Administration interpreted Soviet intentions quite differently. Some members of the NSC Soviet working group, and Brzezinski as well, according to a former member of that group, viewed Moscow’s interest in SALT II as mainly a tactical maneuver in the Soviet Union’s manipulation of its geopolitical status. This outlook was consistent with a now-declassified 1977 National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded Moscow viewed its buildup of strategic and conventional military forces, and the institutionalization of détente, which made this military power acceptable, as an opportunity to advance Soviet geopolitical leverage. Many US officials saw this period as the highpoint of Moscow’s confidence and ambitions in expanding its global reach. Another participant in Moscow during this period noted a common perception of Soviet self-confidence at the time, viewed by many as the most explicitly expansionist period of the Brezhnev era. The common belief was that the Soviets considered Afghanistan to be “theirs,” and would accept no reversal.

### Preoccupation

The group also focused on the importance of political context and preoccupation. Several participants noted that in addition to the Carter Administration's preoccupation with the SALT II treaty negotiations, the White House was also intensely preoccupied with the Iranian hostage crisis. These participants emphasized the degree to which the planning for what turned out to be an unsuccessful rescue attempt (Desert One) resulted in another "distraction" from the situation in Afghanistan.

#### *"Predictions" vs. "Contingencies:" Was An Opportunity Missed?*

One participant, noting that different elements of the US government received the same information on Soviet military preparations, but nonetheless interpreted them very differently, asked why there was not a more rigorous discussion at the time to illuminate the kinds of thinking that produced these different assessments of the implications of the intelligence. This set the stage for an ensuing discussion of whether US policymakers missed vital opportunities to influence the Soviets before the invasion was a foregone conclusion in Moscow, or at least to prepare for the contingency that the invasion might occur.

Declassified documents show that by the second half of September 1979, the National Security Council staff was outlining courses of action the US could take with regard to Soviet actions in Afghanistan. These included efforts on a contingency plan for responding to a Soviet military intervention. As of the beginning of October, this was still in the outline stage, however, and all these efforts were entangled in the complexities generated by the rivalries among the states in the region (e.g., India vs. Pakistan) and the situation in Iran.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, as declassified documents from the Soviet archives show, even by early December, 1979, the Politburo hadn't fully committed to an invasion.

Several participants felt that if in the months preceding the invasion, policy officials had received a stronger line of predictive judgment from the intelligence community, there might have been a more proactive discourse on potential policy actions aimed at deterring the Soviets from carrying out the invasion. Another participant again emphasized that a missing part of the intelligence assessments was the examination of a broader spectrum of con-

1. See for example Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from Thomas Thornton, "Regional Cooperation in Afghanistan," September 24, 1979; Memorandum for David Aaron from Thomas Thornton, "Soviet- Afghan Contingency Planning," October 2, 1979, at the National Security Archive.

tingencies that included the one—imposing a regime change in Afghanistan—that “converted preparation” into action. The participant also contended, however, that what was being seen were contingency preparations and that “not every set of military preparations against contingencies leads to the execution of the contingency plan in the absence of that contingency occurring.” He argued there was no indication before the end of November or early December that the Soviets were moving from contingency preparations to imminent action.

This outlook was contested by a participant who cited as an analogy his experience as a military officer in Germany during the Cold War, when he was stationed at the key node known as the Fulda Gap. He said when intelligence disclosed that Soviet forces on the East German side of the Gap were out of garrison, US forces made cautionary adjustments in their own posture, regardless of whether any “strategic warning” was in effect, because the potential costs of not doing so were too high. In applying this principle to situations such the Afghanistan invasion, the participant said that the question we must ask is: given what the observed actions indicate “they” *can* do and *might* do, what is it “we” *should* do in an effort to minimize the negative and hopefully maximize the positive.

Another participant emphasized that while it was certainly true that the “imminence” of the Soviet military action did not become evident until late in the game, this is the natural course of events. He said that one does not have to await “imminence” before addressing the indications that the contingency is on the table, and exploring what measures might be taken to prevent it from taking place, or whether to simply gamble that it won’t happen. Waiting for proof of “imminence” means waiting until the decision has been made, as is now known was the case in the Soviet invasion. The objective of the intelligence-policy interaction should be to influence the decision before it is made.

## Conclusion

The case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan does not seem to be one of traditional “intelligence failure.” US leaders were not surprised by the invasion because they lacked clear evidence of Soviet military preparations and movements in and around Afghanistan prior to the invasion. As the historical record unequivocally demonstrates, such intelligence was regularly reported to top US policymakers. Rather, a combination of mindsets, wish-

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ful thinking, political divisions in the policy community, and Administration preoccupation with other issues helped preclude a discussion of alternative US policy options vis-à-vis Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. The point of examining the case was not to lay blame on particular policymakers or to argue the US could necessarily have forestalled a Soviet invasion. Instead, the objective was to examine systemic issues within the intelligence and especially policymaking communities that impeded even basic consideration of alternative policies, which may have changed US strategy.

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**Discourse, Dissent, and Strategic Surprise**

With generous support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy has established a Working Group of senior experts to examine how the U.S. national security establishment at critical junctures has ignored information or analysis that challenged prevailing policy assumptions—to the detriment of American security interests

Given the many urgent security challenges on the horizon, the project seeks to identify ways American officials might learn contemporary lessons from past experience. What lessons can be learned for future policy from historical cases of "intelligence failures" which were actually failures to take that information into account?

Drawing on several key case studies, this new project seeks to provide insights into the dynamics among national security and intelligence agencies, the president and key advisers, the Congress, the media, various interest groups and experts in evaluating intelligence and defining national security priorities and policy choices. This project complements ISD's ongoing Schlesinger Working Group on Strategic Surprise, which seeks to anticipate future challenges to U.S. national security interests.