



The Soviet Transition in Afghanistan

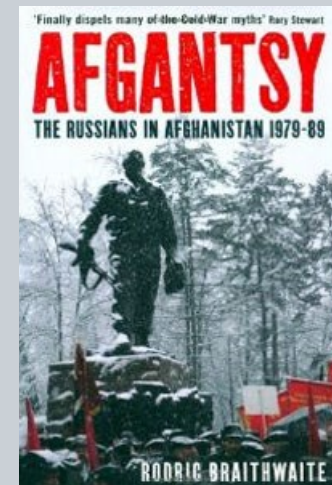
Brigadier (Retired) Tom Longland

Scope

- **Strategic context**
 - Western propaganda & perceptions
 - Similarities & differences

- **What happened**
 - Précis of events – historic narrative

- **Observations**



Strategic Context

- Western propaganda
 - Soviet expansion, warm water ports...
- Reality
 - Not to occupy, but to withdraw as soon as central Government & Afghan forces looked competent



Soviet political & military intent

- “How could the Russians withdraw their Army safely, with honour, without looking as if they were simply cutting and running, and without appearing to betray their Afghan allies or their own soldiers who had died? The 40th Army had not been defeated in the field, but how was the obvious blow to the Soviet Union and its Army to be avoided?”



Mikhail Gorbachev 1986

Strategic Context

- Differences important (lessons in context)
 - Soviet unity of military command, pol & mil interfaces
 - Consistent (if slow to develop) Soviet policy
 - Combat, combat support and combat service support
 - Soviet logistic tail
 - Local resources



Strategic Context

■ Similarities (geo-strategic 1)

- **Pulled into conflict & stabilisation?**
- **Regional influences; inability to control the borders**
- **Communism and democracy**
- **Soviet policy advice to Afghan leaders:**
 - Broaden the political base, allow religious freedom, observe rule of law (even when suppressing the insurgency), strengthen democratic rights through constitution, regulate activities of state organs...



Strategic Context

■ Similarities (geo-strategic 2)

- Build up of Afghan forces
- Political pressure to withdraw
- Lack of public popular support (for the war)
- Economic downturn
- Shortage of aid
- International perceptions of failure

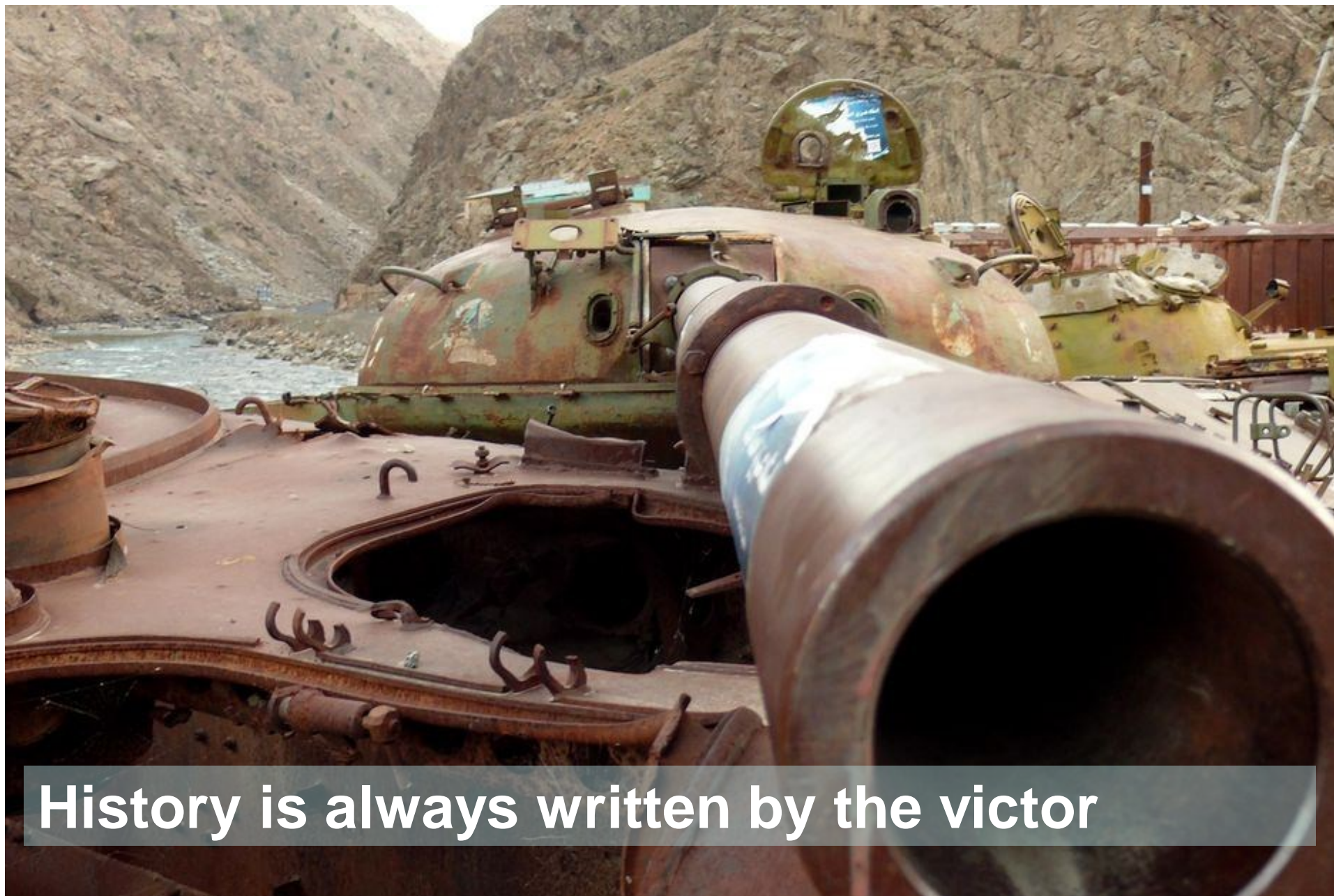


Strategic Context

■ Similarities (indigenous to Afghanistan)

- Unpopular central government
 - Strong fissiparous tendencies opposing it
- No viable economic base
- Large ungovernable areas
 - But no power vacuums
- Unresolved insurgency





History is always written by the victor



Strategic Context - Timeline

- 1979 Soviet troops deploy
- 1985 Soviet operational surge
- 1986 Najibullah installed
- 1987 Soviet transition begins
- 1988 Soviet withdrawal
- 1989 – 91 Najibullah versus the Mujahidin
- 1992 Soviet aid ends / Najibullah falls
- 1992 – 94 Civil war
- 1995 – 96 Rise of the Taliban



Western Perceptions

Soviets suffered a military defeat

Soviets did not prepare Afghan Govt for transition

Afghan forces incompetent and poorly equipped

Mujahidin defeated Afghan Government forces



The Reality

- Soviet forces were not defeated
 - Won all major battles, never lost a post
- Soviet administration left behind:
 - Functioning Government
 - Well prepared and equipped forces
 - Tolerable military situation
 - Strong advisory teams
 - Access to economic, military and technical aid



Afghanistan 1986



D—C—D—C

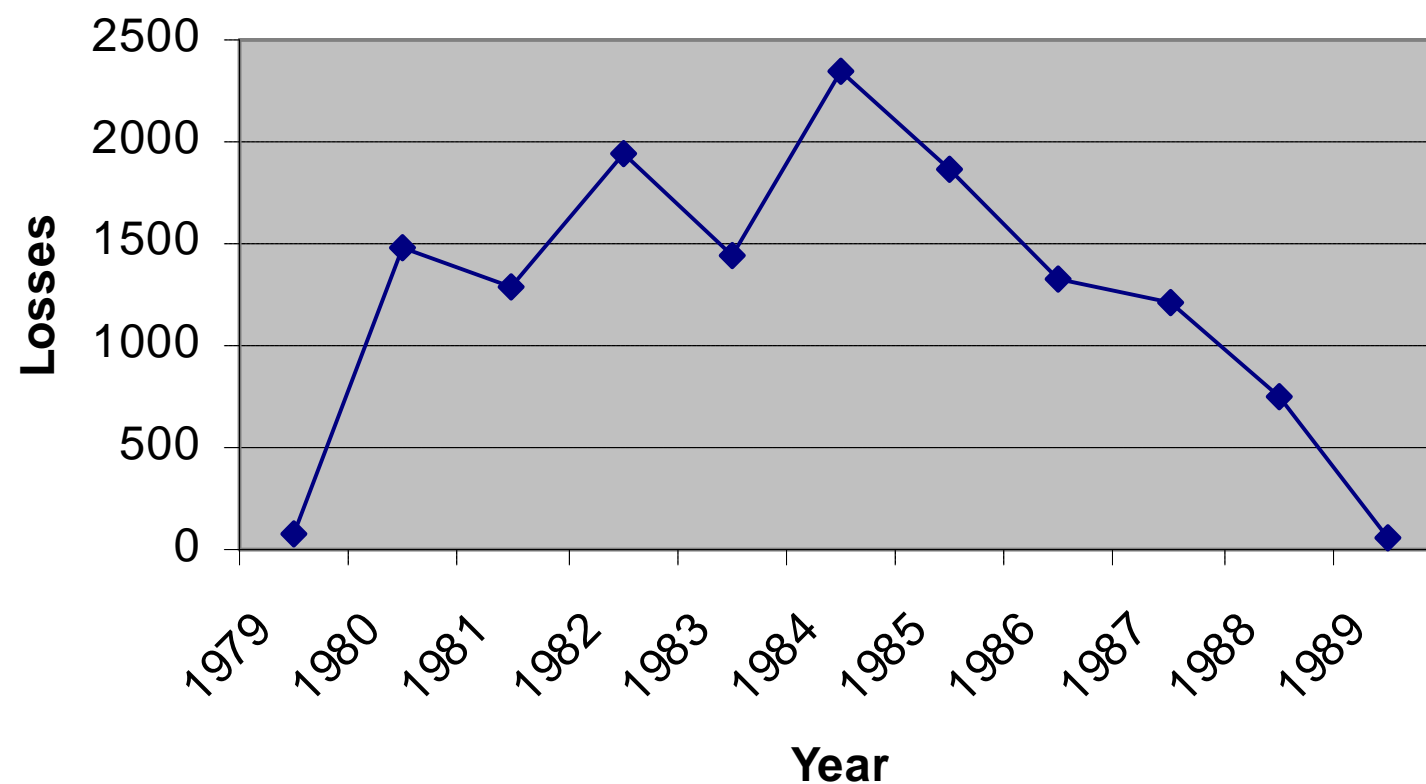
Drivers for the Soviet Withdrawal

- From the outset the Soviets viewed this as a short term intervention
- By 1986 Kremlin believed the war to be “unwinnable”
- In 1986 growing Soviet Political Reform



Soviet Losses Were Not a Major Factor

Soviet losses in Afghanistan 1979-89



Strategic Context

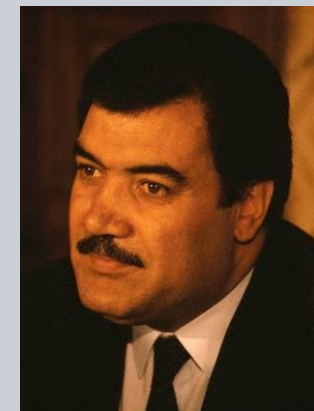


- People – Afghanistan
 - Political



Barak Karmal

Karmal tried to establish a support base for the PDPA including fundamental principles for the Democratic Republic and a general amnesty of those people imprisoned during Taraki's and Amin's rule



Mohammed Najibullah

“...theft, bribery and corruption on a scale previously unknown.”

Soviet High Level Civil Plan

Separate staff set up under General of the Army Varrenikov in 1987 to deal with preparing Afghan government for long term rule. Measures included:

Major increase in civil programme investment

Influx of advisors

The National Reconciliation Plan



Afghan National Reconciliation Programme 1986 Onwards

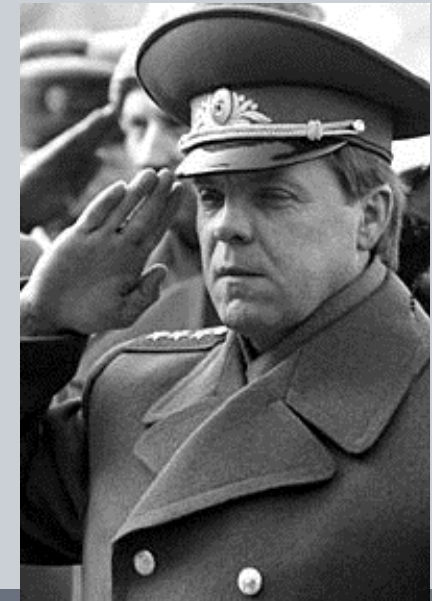
- Moves legal system towards Sharia
- State to be decentralised
- Ethnic minorities to be empowered
- Loya Jirga supports the National Reconciliation Programme
 - End of hostilities
 - Transitional Govt
 - Free General Election





High Level Soviet Military Plan

- From late 1986 General Gromov planned the withdrawal with a large, personally selected staff for over 16 months
 - Military plan was integrated with Afghan Government programmes
 - Unified plan for all forces involved
 - Maximum aid given to Afghan forces



Soviet Op Level Plan

- Planned as a handover not a fighting withdrawal
- 2 Soviet withdrawal routes (W+E) designed to produce collapsing overwatch of forces
- Phased plan with breaks to match the situation
- Locally negotiated ceasefires





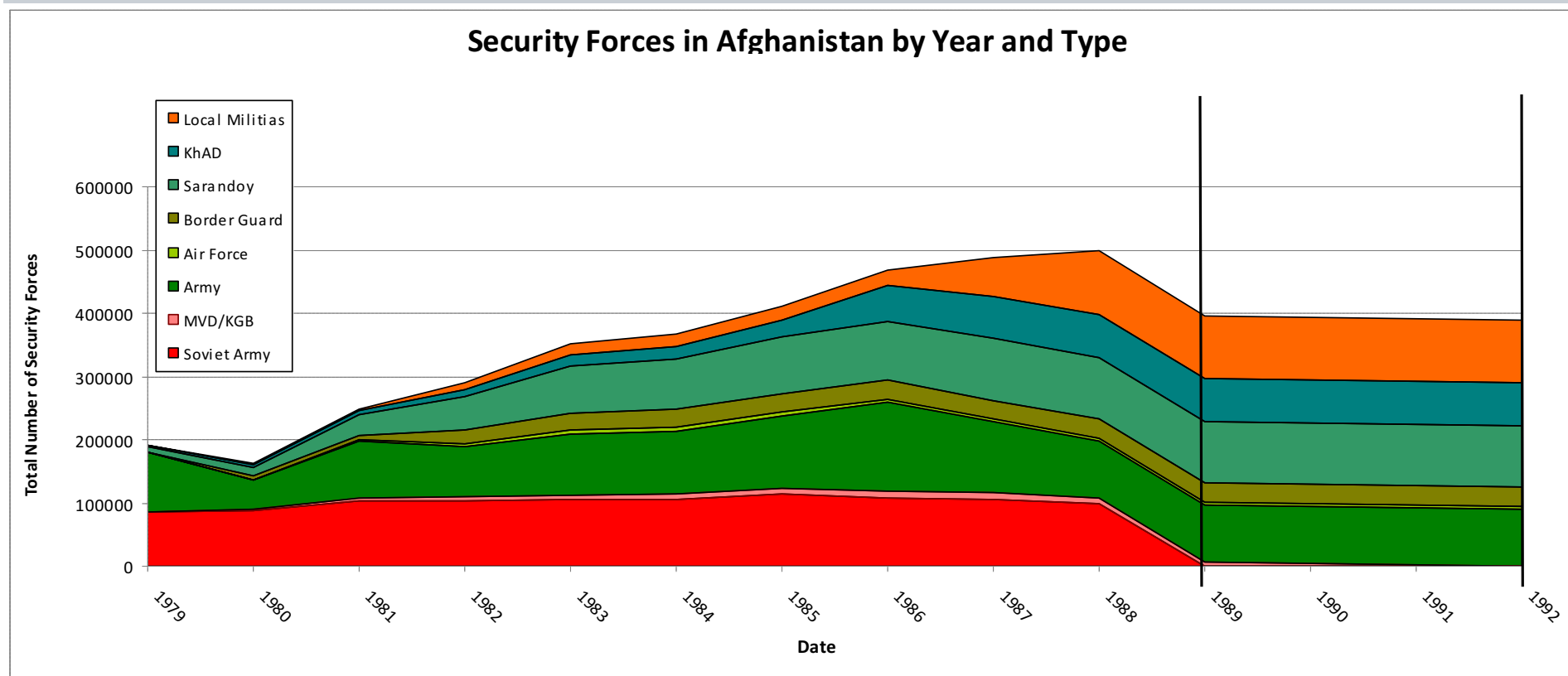
*However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at
the results.*

Winston Churchill



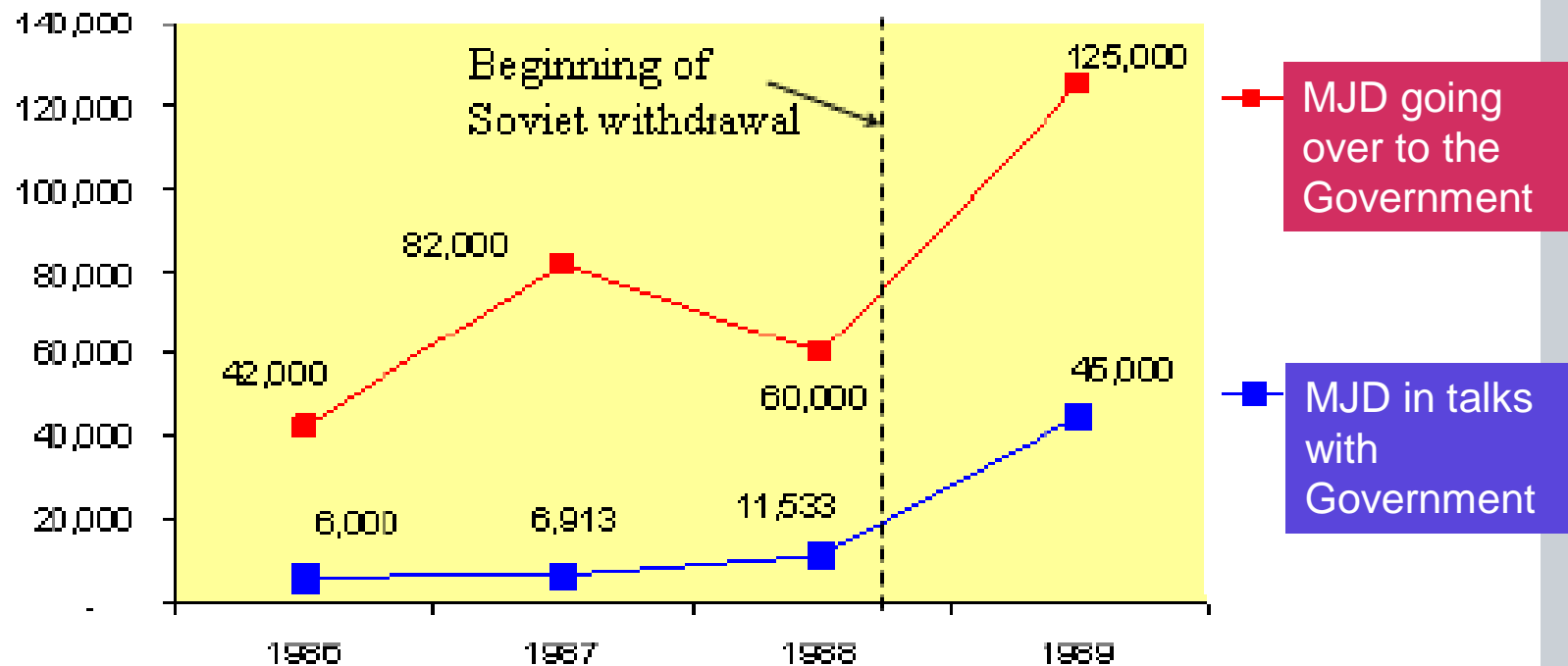
Outcomes

Afghan Forces Did Not Fragment After Soviet Withdrawal



The Reconciliation Process

By 1990 25% of all non government armed forces had entered the reconciliation process





Weaknesses in the Soviet Plan

- Exact Timetable for withdrawal was issued publically
- Local ceasefires and agreements were not observed
- Soviets failed to recognize the key influence of militias over local population
- Afghan military effort dependent upon Soviet support in several areas
- Civil advisors were not of correct quality
- Did not allow for the destabilising effect of regional powers (Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and USA)





Weaknesses in the Afghan Civil Plan

- **Loyalty of militias was bought**
 - Dependent upon continued Soviet financing

- **National Reconciliation Policy did not have time to become firmly established**

- **Assumption that external support for the Mujahidin would cease after Soviet withdrawal**





Najibullah Falls in 1992 because:

- External funding and materiel stopped in Jan '92 due to break up of Soviet Union leading to financial crisis.
- A self sustaining indigenous economic base had not been developed capable of supporting the population and government forces
- Soviet devastation of the countryside led to reliance on external food aid
- Afghan government had not established control/loyalty of the population.



Observations



Do Not Expect A Peace Dividend from Afghan Campaigns



Observations - Planning

- Hostile activity reduced after firm timetable for withdrawal announced
 - Misleading impression of winning the tactical battle
- Afghan Government heavily penetrated by agents of the Mujahidin
 - How good is NATO & national counter-intelligence?



Observations - Planning

- Soviets left robust & well-supplied military force capable of defending Afghan Government vital assets
- Afghan logistics too heavily dependent upon Soviet support



Observations

- Withdrawal of unifying factor (Soviet presence) fractured the Mujahidin
- Afghan forces became more effective once Soviet troops withdrew



Observations

- Regional actors were not stakeholders in the success of the process
 - Soviets did try; Andropov engaged Pakistan
- Fissiparous nation was not stabilised by the imposition of a central government
- The Soviet strategic communications policy failed and the military took a big (arguably unfair) hit
 - Despite much Soviet public sympathy



Observations

- **External support (financial, military and technical) required for significant time after withdrawal of combat forces**
 - indigenous economy had not developed



Observations

- Withdrawal plan needed considerable flexibility
- Breaking ceasefire agreements for short term gain damaged central government long term credibility



Overarching Points

Military success is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to achieve overall success

- **Political failure can be perceived as military failure**

Financial, Technical and military support has to continue after the withdrawal of combat units

A self-sustaining economy is essential to the survival of the government

The government must achieve popular support for its style of governance

- ***NB. Only one of these can be delivered by the Military***





“Rumi, who is one of the greatest Persian poets , said that the truth was a mirror in the hands of God.

It fell and broke into pieces.

Everyone took a piece of it and...thought that they had the truth. In Afghanistan this is the problem, because everyone...can claim that they hold the entire truth.”

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Afghan Comments upon the Study

- **“The aim of this paper by the British is to undermine and damage the USA”** —TOLO TV
- **“The release of such reports in such a delicate situation will add to the chaos in Afghanistan”** —Noor ul Haq Olomi
- **“The British have not yet changed the thinking that they used in the 19th Century”** – Abdul Hameed Mubarez – The Hasht e Subh Daily

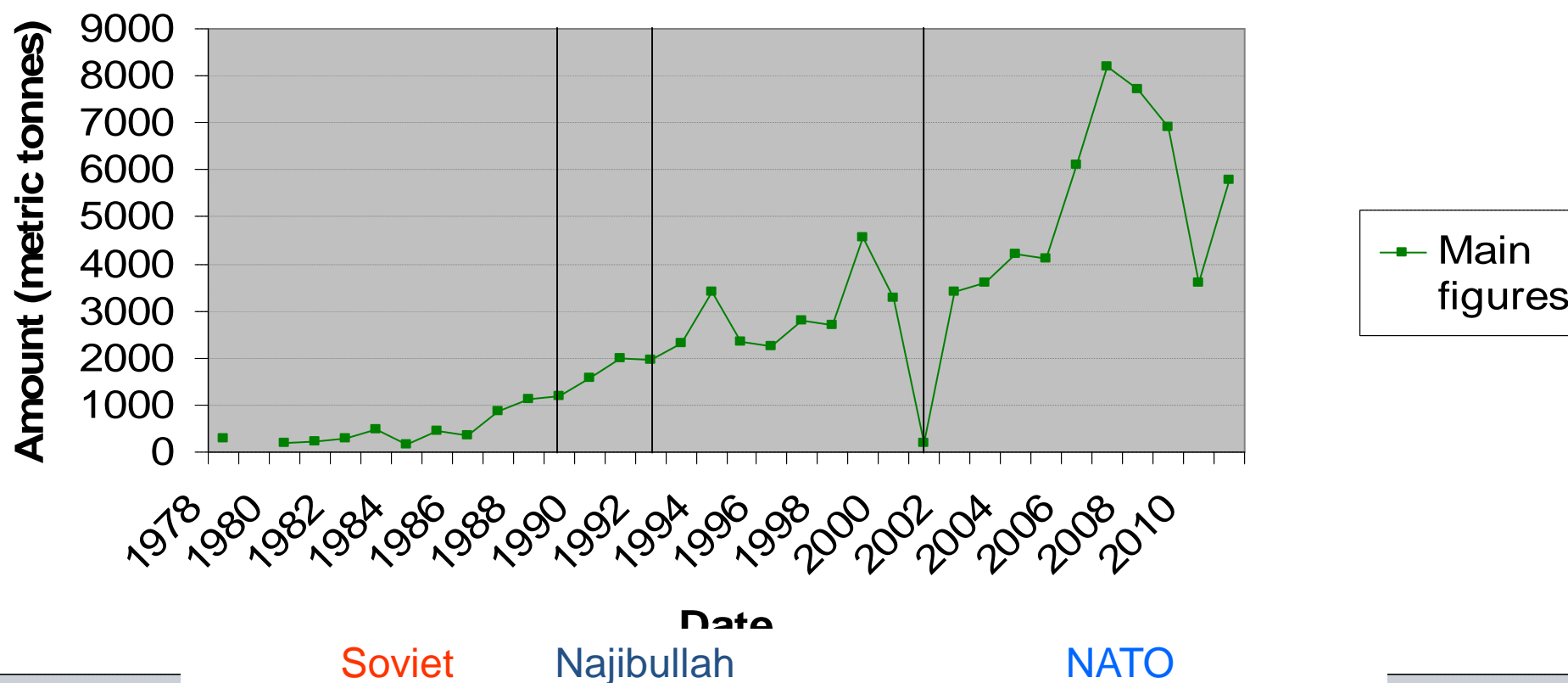


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It Doesn't Matter Who is in Power

Afghanistan production of opium



*Figures drawn from a series of UNCDP papers





Aid to Afghanistan

- Administrative costs can escalate when organizations operate in a war zone.

- So for every dollar from USAID only around 10 cents actually goes to aiding Afghans.

