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## **Comparing the US Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Learning from the Past and Planning for the Future**

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# Comparing the US Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Learning from the Past and Planning for the Future

## Abstract

As the Russo-Ukrainian war continues to rage, the decisions of the present are of paramount importance. In order to make the most positive and well-supported decisions in this ongoing conflict, it would be wise to look to past instances of similar situations. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is such an instance. The parallels between the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the past Soviet invasion of Afghanistan are extensive and, more importantly, informative for U.S. foreign policy. It is with this lens that this paper will pursue a historical foreign policy analysis of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, its circumstances and consequences, and suggest that based on these understandings, the U.S. ought to make it a top priority to avoid repeating the Afghanistan situation. The rise of the Taliban was fueled by U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and as extremist movements in Ukraine become ever more threatening, the U.S. would do well to avoid the mistakes made in Afghanistan should it hope to avoid another war on terror.

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**Comparing the US Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the  
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Learning from the Past and Planning for the Future**

Zachary Hogan

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**Abstract:**

As the Russo-Ukrainian war continues to rage, the decisions of the present are of paramount importance. In order to make the most positive and well-supported decisions in this ongoing conflict, it would be wise to look to past instances of similar situations. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is such an instance. The parallels between the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the past Soviet invasion of Afghanistan are extensive and, more importantly, informative for U.S. foreign policy. It is with this lens that this paper will pursue a historical foreign policy analysis of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, its circumstances and consequences, and suggest that based on these understandings, the U.S. ought to make it a top priority to avoid repeating the Afghanistan situation. The rise of the Taliban was fueled by U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and as extremist movements in Ukraine become ever more threatening, the U.S. would do well to avoid the mistakes made in Afghanistan should it hope to avoid another war on terror.

## History's Tendency to Repeat Itself

In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded the small country of Afghanistan, Cold War tensions between the world's two great superpowers had been easing thanks to the mutual pursuit of detente.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet's bold move to invade the country reignited these easing tensions and led to President Jimmy Carter declaring the invasion to be the "most serious threat since the Second World War."<sup>2</sup> This new period of Cold War calculations saw the US framing Soviet aggression as an opportunity to weaken and embarrass the Soviet Union<sup>3</sup> severely—an opportunity to grant Moscow its own Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup>

The ten-year conflict saw massive US covert aid to the Mujahedeen resistance fighters in Afghanistan, leading to grueling guerilla warfare that eventually forced Soviet forces to withdraw. The US goal of embarrassing and weakening the Soviet cause was found to be a success as the conflict seriously demoralized Moscow and was instrumental in facilitating the eventual breakup of the USSR.<sup>5</sup> Such success quickly turned, however, as Afghanistan, a country then ravaged by over a decade of harsh guerilla warfare, was all but forgotten and left in the hands of US-trained and US-armed extremists.<sup>6</sup> These extremists were able to consolidate power and eventually undertake an international terror campaign targeting their former benefactors.<sup>7</sup>

As one turns their attention to the contemporary issue of Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, it would seem history is repeating itself. In February 2022, Russia invaded the neighboring country of Ukraine, and the US response has generally mirrored that of Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Dimitrakis, Panagiotis. 2012. "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: International Reactions, Military Intelligence and British Diplomacy." *Middle Eastern Studies* 48 (4): 511–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2012.682304>.

<sup>2</sup> Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Cold War: A New History*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Dylan, Huw, and David Gioe. 2020. "The CIA and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan." In *The CIA and the Pursuit of Security*, 211–25. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Álvarez, José M. S. 2022. "Unpredictable Muse: The Ukrainian War and History in Progress in Putin's Russia, the Past Erupts into the Present." *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 9 (7): 803–31. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.97.12712>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Carassiti, Aaron. "Myths about the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan." *Agora* 57, no. 2 (2022): 26–29.

<sup>7</sup> Dylan and Gioe, "CIA and the Soviet Invasion."

The Russo-Ukrainian war, though likely early in its development, has seen US foreign policy adopting what some have called Cold War economic warfare calculations by funneling financial and military aid to the struggling Ukraine and instituting severe trade sanctions and embargos against the aggressor in Russia.<sup>8</sup>

As will be shown, it is almost assuredly so that lessons learned from US involvement in the historical Soviet invasion of Afghanistan are informing current US foreign policy regarding the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine; moreover, this paper will further argue that the outcomes of US involvement in the Soviet invasion, specifically the rise of the extremist Taliban, ought also directly inform future US foreign policy concerning Ukraine. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine each of these conflicts in turn, consider their similarities and differences, and, based on this knowledge, advance the claim that there are important parallels between the US responses to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that are informative about how major powers respond to rivals. This claim will then be furthered to show that the US's response to the Ukrainian invasion has demonstrated that the US has learned several valuable lessons from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and ought to continue to follow this trend to ensure Ukraine stays a foreign policy success where Afghanistan did not.

## **Literature Review**

Before starting this investigative process, it would be wise to briefly consider what salient prior scholarship has said about these conflicts and their similarities and differences, particularly any scholarship relevant to the purposes of this paper. Of the extensive literature available concerning these two conflicts, there is a marked lack of comparative scholarly work on the

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<sup>8</sup> Fernandes, Benjamin J., and Nathan K. Finney. "The Myth of Russian Aggression and NATO Expansion." The Strategy Bridge, December 16, 2016. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2016/12/16/the-myth-of-russian-aggression-and-nato-expansion>.

subject. The most poignant of this lacking comparative academic work examining the similarities between the conflicts focuses only briefly on Afghanistan in its analysis of the Russo-Ukraine war. The article nevertheless contends that the US response to the Russo-Ukrainian war directly mirrors and is informed by lessons learned from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> This argument is not fully developed, and its implications are likewise not fully considered, given the horrific consequences of the US abandonment of Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal.

Despite the wealth of information, there is a distinct gap of focused scholarship on the relationship between these two conflicts. This research gap could exist for several reasons, including the recency of the Ukrainian conflict, a belief that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan lacks contemporary relevance, or the belief that other historical precedences are more critical to the current Ukraine conflict. Whatever the case, there is a clear and present void in attention to the connection between these two conflicts despite the important implications such an understanding has for current policy. This article intends to fill that gap and offer avenues for future research on this topic by first examining each conflict in its own right, then comparing and contrasting the crucial pieces of each conflict to finally argue how the similarities between each conflict necessitate current and future policy considering the successes but also the mistakes of the past.

## **The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the US Response**

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began on December 25th, 1979, when the Soviet Union landed airborne troops on Afghanistan soil following the Soviets having concentrated significant forces near the border with Afghanistan. Days prior, the Carter administration had been warned of a substantial number of flights leaving Soviet airfields headed toward the Afghan

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<sup>9</sup> Álvarez, “Unpredictable Muse.”

border.<sup>10</sup> The lead-up to the Soviet incursion saw political turmoil confronting the Afghan state with an Islamist uprising threatening the acting President of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin, who, like the recently assassinated President Taraki, turned to the Soviets for support.<sup>11</sup> The reasoning for Moscow's intervention is complex. Soviet leadership officially stated that their actions were justified due to foreign intervention in Afghanistan and preventing the creation of a "bridgehead" for Soviet enemies.<sup>12</sup> Additional factors like emotion, Cold War calculations, Soviet hegemony, and defensive measures have also been cited as likely reasons for the Soviet invasion.<sup>13</sup>

At the outset of the Afghanistan invasion, the Moscow 40th army entered the country and enjoyed early success, having captured most major cities and access routes by the summer of 1980.<sup>14</sup> The country of Afghanistan, nevertheless, posed significant difficulties for Soviet forces due to the rugged terrain and growing resistance of the Mujahedin.<sup>15</sup> This resistance group operated to hamper Soviet objectives throughout the country by remaining dispersed.<sup>16</sup> By 1983, the Soviets had to increase their commitment to the invasion due to struggles with these resistance fighters. Still, they were eventually forced to withdraw beginning in 1988 and concluding in February of 1989.<sup>17</sup> The invasion, which had initially been believed to be a straightforward operation, grew into a massive embarrassment for Moscow,<sup>18</sup> in no small part due to US involvement in the conflict.

The US response to the conflict was swift and exacting, wherein on December 26th, just a day after the invasion, the US State Department held a press conference calling for the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Carassiti, "Myths about the Soviet Invasion."

<sup>12</sup> Dylan and Gioe, "CIA and the Soviet Invasion."

<sup>13</sup> Carassiti, "Myths about the Soviet Invasion.,"; Dylan and Gioe, "CIA and the Soviet Invasion."

<sup>14</sup> Dylan and Gioe, "CIA and the Soviet Invasion."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

international community to condemn the invasion.<sup>19</sup> President Carter felt that the invasion presented no immediate threat to US interests, thereby not requiring military action, but was nevertheless persuaded by advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to do anything possible to prevent further Soviet aggression.<sup>20</sup> One such channel the US took was diplomatic with threats of a grain embargo, withdrawal from the SALT II treaty, and even a boycott of the 1980 Olympics.<sup>21</sup> The Olympic boycott saw bipartisan support in Congress, with the House of Representatives voting 386 to 12 and the Senate voting 88 to 4 in favor of abstaining from the games.<sup>22</sup>

US involvement in the conflict was not limited merely to diplomacy, however, as the US immediately realized and exploited the incredible opportunity the invasion provided. The US had already been assisting the Mujahadeen insurgency in Afghanistan six months prior to Soviet troops stepping foot in the country.<sup>23</sup> As early as July 3rd, 1979, the Carter administration authorized the CIA to send \$650,000<sup>24</sup> of aid to Afghan resistance to the communist government, which included propaganda, radios, medicine, and money.<sup>25</sup> There have been those who have said that this initial package of aid was designed to lure the Soviets into Afghanistan in order to give the Soviets their own version of the Vietnam War.<sup>26</sup> This view seems to make some level of sense, but the truth is that the covert program was designed to deter Soviet aggression that could occur should Soviet influence entirely prevail.<sup>27</sup> Even at the beginning of the invasion, it was believed that Soviet forces would eventually emerge triumphant and that any chance for success

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<sup>19</sup> Dimitrakis, "Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: International Reactions."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> US Department of State. "The Olympic Boycott, 1980." State.gov. US Department of State, 2019. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/qfp/104481.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Álvarez, "Unpredictable Muse.": Dylan and Gioe, "CIA and the Soviet Invasion."

<sup>24</sup> Tobin, Conor. 2020. "The Myth of the 'Afghan Trap': Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978–1979." *Diplomatic History* 44 (2): 237–64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhz065>.

<sup>25</sup> Gates, Robert M. *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996

<sup>26</sup> Álvarez, "Unpredictable Muse."

<sup>27</sup> Tobin, "Myth of the 'Afghan Trap'."



from a disorganized rebel force was minimal at best.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the US strategy was not precisely to bait the Soviets into a trap but rather to “create a frame of mind in the Politburo that is tired of costly activities in the Middle East which do not produce results.”<sup>29</sup>

Though it is clear that it was not the intention of the US to create or turn the invasion into a trap for the Soviets, it likewise seems that Afghanistan developed into a trap retroactively. By the end of the conflict, the US had funneled \$7 billion through Pakistan into the hands of resistance groups,<sup>30</sup> well beyond the measly \$650,000 of support authorized in 1979. This support was delivered through the Pakistani government in order to ensure as much secrecy and deniability as possible.<sup>31</sup> The extremist Mujahadeen fighters frequently engaged in deplorable acts of violence, which the US and Pakistan were not only aware of but actively rewarded with more aid, in effect undermining Mujahadeen groups with less questionable methods.<sup>32</sup> With US support, Mujahadeen fighters won numerous confrontations with Soviet forces.<sup>33</sup> In the end, despite substantial evidence refuting that the US intentionally laid an Afghan trap for the Soviets, the US had effectively done just that by turning the insurgencies into a severe threat and forcing Moscow to either authorize a massive military intervention to save the communist regime in Afghanistan or admit defeat.<sup>34</sup>

## **The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the US Response**

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> United States. National Security Council. Staff. *[Middle East Tensions; Attached to Cover Memorandum Dated July 26, 1973]* 1973. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1679086586?accountid=15172>

<sup>30</sup> Carassiti, “Myths about the Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>31</sup> Settelmeyer, Brad, and Alison O’Neil. 2022. “Party like It’s 1979: Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion.” *Realist Review*. Realist Review Staff. March 17, 2022.

<https://realistreview.org/2022/03/17/party-like-its-1979-comparing-ukraine-and-the-last-soviet-invasion/>; Leake, Elisabeth. “Spooks, Tribes, and Holy Men: The Central Intelligence Agency and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 1 (October 28, 2016): 240–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009416653459>.

<sup>32</sup> Carassiti, “Myths about the Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>33</sup> Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash. 1999. “The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union.” *Review of International Studies* 25 (4): 693–708. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210599006932>.

<sup>34</sup> Tobin, “Myth of the ‘Afghan Trap’.”

Turning then to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Maidan Revolution in February 2014, which ousted President Viktor Yanukovich from power following increasing Western temptations and support,<sup>35</sup> marked the end of Ukraine's historical association with Russia and an embrace of Western ties.<sup>36</sup> The subsequent election of Volodymyr Zelensky merely crowned the end of Ukrainian-Russian ties.<sup>37</sup> The Russian Federation resisted these changes and proceeded to invade Crimea in what has been termed the Ukrainian Crisis of 2014.<sup>38</sup> Prior to these events, the US had made a great effort to treat Russia as a partner, even obligating upwards of \$18.1 billion in military and economic assistance from the collapse of the USSR to 2014.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Russia viewed the West, particularly the US, as a potential threat.<sup>40</sup> Eight years later, the Kremlin would announce a ceremony that would start the process of the "annexation of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia."<sup>41</sup>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been argued to be directly tied to NATO expansion.<sup>42</sup> Russia, for instance, was quick to voice its objection to NATO expansion once discussions began.<sup>43</sup> There are even reports of Russian President Vladimir Putin stating that "if Ukraine joins NATO it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions. It will simply fall apart."<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Russian imperialism might be behind the invasion, as Putin has also described the

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<sup>35</sup> Shiffrinson, Joshua R. I. 2023. "The NATO Enlargement Consensus and US Foreign Policy: Origins and Consequences." In *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War*, edited by James Goldgeier and Joshua R. I. Shiffrinson. Palgrave Macmillan Cham.

<sup>36</sup> Delanty, Gerard. 2023. "Introduction to the Special Issue on the Russo-Ukrainian War: A New European War? Considerations on the Russo-Ukrainian War." *European Journal of Social Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310231174098>.

<sup>37</sup> Shiffrinson, "The NATO Enlargement Consensus."

<sup>38</sup> Delanty, "Special Issue on the Russo-Ukrainian War."

<sup>39</sup> Fernandes and Finney, "The Myth of Russian Aggression and NATO Expansion."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Guterres, António. "Secretary-General's Remarks on Russian Decision on Annexation of Ukrainian Territory." Press Briefing, September 29, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1129047>.

<sup>42</sup> Moskowit, Ken. 2022. "Was NATO Expansion Really the Cause of Putin's Invasion?" *American Diplomacy*, 1–4; Liu, Kerry. 2023. "NATO's Expansion and Russia's Aggressiveness: An Empirical Study from the Perspective of the U.S. Public." *Statistics, Politics and Policy* 14 (2): 163–82. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1515/spp-2023-0003>.

<sup>43</sup> Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: A Net Assessment." *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (May 11, 2020): 371–400. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00235-7>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

collapse of the USSR as “‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe’ of the twentieth century” that ought to be reversed.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it would seem Putin may have concluded that the West would not stop any Russian aggression due to Ukraine’s minimal relative value.<sup>46</sup> Whatever Russia’s reasons for the conflict in Ukraine may be, it seems unlikely at this point that they will achieve their goals.

Initially, Russian forces found success on all fronts but quickly ran into unexpectedly effective Ukrainian resistance.<sup>47</sup> Following the onset of the invasion, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) saw great success in hindering, deflecting, and imposing significant costs on Russian forces.<sup>48</sup> All this success was achieved despite the UAF not having announced a general mobilization order until a day after the invasion commenced on February 24th and being at a qualitative and quantitative disadvantage to the Russian forces.<sup>49</sup> The conflict has since evolved into a protracted insurgency<sup>50</sup> that has assumed the appearance of a proxy war between the US and Russia, at least in the view of Putin.<sup>51</sup> Ukraine is effectively “presenting a united front against the Russians,” with President Zelensky representing the face of this resistance.<sup>52</sup> It now seems likely that the conflict will result in a military stalemate and eventual withdrawal of Russian forces from the country due to a lack of forward progress and increasing cost of the war.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Woźniak, Michał. 2016. “The Ukraine Crisis and Shift in US Foreign Policy.” *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 18 (2): 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ipcj-2016-0011>.

<sup>46</sup> Fernandes and Finney, “The Myth of Russian Aggression and NATO Expansion.”

<sup>47</sup> Bowen, Andrew S. “Russia’s War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects.” *CRS Reports*. Congressional Research Service, September 14, 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47068/9>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Settlemeyer and O’Neil, “Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>51</sup> Delanty, “Special Issue on the Russo-Ukrainian War.”

<sup>52</sup> Settlemeyer and O’Neil, “Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>53</sup> Moskowitz, “Was NATO Expansion Really the Cause of Putin’s Invasion?”

While it is not wrong to say that Ukrainian resistance can be partly attributed to effective resistance by the UAF and incompetency on the part of Russia,<sup>54</sup> US support has undoubtedly played a massive role as well. The US response to Russia's invasion was immediate and enormous, such that the onset of the invasion entirely altered what form US national security and defense had taken.<sup>55</sup> In response to the conflict, the US has deployed over 20,000 armed forces to Europe, effectively increasing US military personnel in the region to 100,000.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Congress has appropriated \$113 billion for Ukraine emergency funds to date.<sup>57</sup> Of this \$113 billion, \$44.8 billion has been in the form of security assistance, including tanks, helicopters, mortars, artillery, infantry equipment, and ammunition.<sup>58</sup> US total support for Ukraine is more than half of the total support from the EU and every European country combined, and the US has committed more military aid than every other country combined.<sup>59</sup> Given the extensive amount of aid the US has provided to Ukraine, it is not inaccurate to say that without US support, Ukraine would have likely suffered a similar fate as Belarus.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to massive economic and military support, the US has been outspoken in its condemnation of Russia for the attack and its diplomatic action. In response to the invasion, the US has imposed sweeping sanctions and embargos against Russia, affecting hundreds of

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<sup>54</sup> Bowen, "Russia's War in Ukraine."

<sup>55</sup> Ward, Alexander, and Quint Forgey. "Is the U.S. Providing Ukraine with Targeting Intel? Maybe." Politico, March 3, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2022/03/03/is-the-u-s-providing-ukraine-with-targeting-intel-maybe-00013954>.

<sup>56</sup> Belkin, Paul, Rebecca M. Nelson, and Cory Welt. "Russia's War on Ukraine: U.S. Policy and the Role of Congress." *CRS Reports*. Congressional Research Service, January 30, 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12277>.

<sup>57</sup> Belkin, Nelson, and Welt. "Russia's War on Ukraine: U.S. Policy and the Role of Congress."

<sup>58</sup> US Department of Defense, "Ukraine Fact Sheet – 3 Nov.," *US Department of Defense* (US DoD, November 3, 2023), [https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/03/2003333874/-1/-1/1/UKRAINE\\_FACT\\_SHEET\\_3\\_NOV.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2023/Nov/03/2003333874/-1/-1/1/UKRAINE_FACT_SHEET_3_NOV.PDF); US Department of Defense. *One Year of Committed Support*. February 21, 2023. Infographic. *US DoD*. <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/23/2003166204/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-UKRAINE-INFOGRAPHIC-FINAL-2-21-2023.PDF>.

<sup>59</sup> Kiel Institute for the World Economy. "Ukraine Support Tracker - a Database of Military, Financial and Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine." Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2023.

<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

<sup>60</sup> Delanty, "Special Issue on the Russo-Ukrainian War."

companies and even more individuals.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the US has called Russia's actions a direct violation of international law and called on other members of the international community to condemn the invasion.<sup>62</sup> Along with condemnation and sanctions, the US has rapidly admitted Finland and Sweden to NATO and further asserted that NATO is committed to an open-door policy for any other nations seeking to join.<sup>63</sup> It is also worth noting that the US Congress has, on the whole, been showing bipartisan support for assisting Ukraine in this crisis, with several pro-Ukrainian bills and resolutions being authored and sponsored by both Democrats and Republicans; however, more recently, there has been some pushback against continued support by several Republicans which does not bode well for the future.

### **The Soviet Invasion Compared to The Russian Invasion**

Having thusly established sufficient context for each conflict, it is now proper to move on to a comparison. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine share numerous significant similarities beyond just being perpetuated by the ruling Russian government at the time. One such similarity is that both invasions are targeted against weaker neighbors of Moscow, at least in part for Moscow to extend or secure a sphere of influence. Concerns about the attacked nation potentially becoming a platform for an invasion of Moscow are likewise shared between the two conflicts.<sup>64</sup> Both conflicts also had or currently have the makings of a prolonged insurgency, all but assuring extreme costs for both sides.<sup>65</sup> In both conflicts, Moscow has also had allies supporting their endeavors. In Afghanistan, these allies took the form of the ruling communist government and President Amin.

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<sup>61</sup> Al Jazeera. "West Condemns Russia's 'Illegal' Annexation of Ukraine Provinces." Al Jazeera, September 30, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/30/west-condemns-russia-illegal-annexation-of-ukrainian-provinces.>; Woźniak, "The Ukraine Crisis and Shift in US Foreign Policy."

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Shiffrinson, "The NATO Enlargement Consensus."

<sup>64</sup> Moskowitz, "Was NATO Expansion Really the Cause of Putin's Invasion?"; Dylan and Gioe, "CIA and the Soviet Invasion."

<sup>65</sup> Settlemeyer and O'Neil, "Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion."

In contrast, in Ukraine, these allies are merely Moscow sympathizers, but in either case, the invading party has a significant ally in the invaded country.<sup>66</sup> A further similarity can be seen in the use of foreign fighters by the defending country. In the case of Afghanistan, foreign fighters like Osama Bin Laden joined the Mujahadeen resistance forces to fight against the Soviets.<sup>67</sup> In Ukraine, there have been explicit calls for foreign fighters, which have raised concerns that extremists will take advantage of the crisis, as was the case in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup>

Along with the already mentioned similarities is the most crucial equivalence: the US response. In both the Russian invasion and the Soviet invasion, there was immediate condemnation and international outcry. US-imposed sanctions and embargos also permeate both of these conflicts with considerable bipartisan support for the opposition. Most significant of all is the massive economic aid to the resistance against the invasion, which in both cases essentially turned the conflict into a proxy war between Washington and Moscow.<sup>69</sup> The Afghanistan-funded Mujahadeen were sent support through neighboring Pakistan, primarily funded by the US, which is being essentially mirrored in the Ukrainian case with Poland serving as this conflict's "Pakistan," receiving the aid and funneling it to the Ukrainian resistance.<sup>70</sup> The development of each conflict into a proxy war has also made it such that both Afghanistan and Ukraine would not have subsisted for as long as they had and have if not for US support.

Despite the myriad similarities between the two conflicts, there are also significant differences. For one, and perhaps most notably, in contrast to the focus on a wholly covert

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<sup>66</sup> Kakissis, Joanna. 2023. "A Bitter Truth of the War in Ukraine Is That Russia's Invading Troops Have Allies." NPR. October 20, 2023.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/10/20/1207367362/a-bitter-truth-of-the-war-in-ukraine-is-that-russia-s-invading-troops-have-allie>.

<sup>67</sup> Settlemeyer and O'Neil, "Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion."

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Delanty, "Introduction to the Special Issue on the Russo-Ukrainian War."

<sup>70</sup> Álvarez, "Unpredictable Muse."

military strategy with Afghanistan,<sup>71</sup> the US has been more than vocal in its support for Ukraine.<sup>72</sup> Washington nevertheless has maintained that they do not want to appear to be another party to the war<sup>73</sup> and want to avoid treating Ukraine as a “Cold War chessboard,”<sup>74</sup> even if the situation may seem that way to Putin.<sup>75</sup> While this difference is significant, it can primarily be attributed to the different geopolitical situations of the time. These differing geopolitical situations—a bipolar Cold War versus a unipolar global hegemony<sup>76</sup>—have made it so that the US need not maintain enhanced secrecy in their involvement to maintain deniability in the case of Ukraine as they did for Afghanistan.<sup>77</sup>

Another critical difference between these two conflicts, beyond other conspicuous differences like location, participants, and timeframe, is mortality. In late May 2023, after only 15 months of fighting, Russian casualties were already triple that of the over ten years of fighting in Afghanistan.<sup>78</sup> The war in Ukraine in less than  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the time is already more than three times bloodier for the invading force, which is a testament to the weakened strength of Russia as compared to its predecessor, the Soviet Union, and the increased brutality of war.

A final consequential difference between these two conflicts is the political situation in the invaded country. In the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the ruling political party was a communist regime led by President Amin, who had explicitly requested Soviet assistance with resistance.<sup>79</sup> The political situation in Ukraine is quite a different story, with current President

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<sup>71</sup> Coll, Steve. 2004. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin Press.

<sup>72</sup> Settelmeyer and O’Neil, “Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>73</sup> Ward and Forgey, “Is the U.S. Providing Ukraine with Targeting Intel?”

<sup>74</sup> Woźniak, “The Ukraine Crisis and Shift in US Foreign Policy.”

<sup>75</sup> Fernandes and Finney, “The Myth of Russian Aggression and NATO Expansion.”

<sup>76</sup> Shiffrinson, “The NATO Enlargement Consensus.”

<sup>77</sup> Settelmeyer and O’Neil, “Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>78</sup> Seibt, Sébastien. 2023. “‘Three Times the Soviet-Afghan War’: New Data Sheds Light on Scale of Russian Deaths in Ukraine.” *France 24*. July 12, 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230712-three-times-the-soviet-afghan-war-new-data-sheds-light-on-scale-of-russian-deaths-in-ukraine>.

<sup>79</sup> Carassiti, “Myths about the Soviet Invasion.”

Zelensky actively defying the Russian incursion and acting as the figurehead for a united front against Russia.<sup>80</sup> These contrasting situations are highly relevant regarding the eventual consequences of both wars. In the case of Afghanistan, when the Soviets withdrew their troops, a power vacuum was left over that allowed extremists of the US-supported Mujahadeen to take advantage of the chaos. In the case of Ukraine, should Russia choose to withdraw its troops, Zelensky might be able to keep the country united and stalwart against a collapse like Afghanistan experienced.<sup>81</sup>

### **Results of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Planning for Ukraine**

After ten years of fighting in Afghanistan, Soviet forces finally withdrew all military forces from the country in February 1989. Two years later, the Soviet Union would collapse, which many attribute to economic instability and leadership failures.<sup>82</sup> The Afghanistan invasion also had a significant effect on the collapse of the USSR as the extreme lack of preparedness for the war haunted the Soviet cause for the entirety of the war and put on full display the ineptitude of the Red Army.<sup>83</sup> With help from US support, the Mujahadeen were able to win several conflicts with Soviet forces, which eventually forced the Soviet withdrawal.<sup>84</sup> The war was instrumental in discrediting the Soviet army, which had a horrific effect on the survivability of the domineering Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup> The Soviet failure in Afghanistan also had profound implications for the non-Russian Soviet states. Anti-militarists framed the war as a rallying point for opposing Soviet rule, eventually leading to pushback that the Soviet Union could not

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<sup>80</sup> Settlemeyer and O'Neil, "Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Reuveny and Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union."

<sup>83</sup> Grau, Lester W, Michael A Gress, and Russia (Federation). General'nyi Shtab. *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2002.

<sup>84</sup> Reuveny and Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union."

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



withstand.<sup>86</sup> While the Soviet Union may have eventually collapsed had they emerged successfully from Afghanistan, it is undoubtedly true that the failed invasion marked the tipping point for the downfall of the global superpower.

Beyond ensuring the collapse of the Soviet Union, the failed invasion of Afghanistan also had a profound effect on the country of Afghanistan. After a decade of war, the country lost 50% of its agricultural production and 70% of its roads, along with a third of villages being razed.<sup>87</sup> The devastated country was full of extremist fighters from the war who were armed and trained by the CIA and would easily rise to power in the war-torn country and eventually orchestrate the most infamous terrorist attack in history.<sup>88</sup> The resulting rise of the Taliban was not predestined, but waning US interest after the Soviet withdrawal and lack of emphasis on nation-building left the country primed for extremist influences.<sup>89</sup>

What does all of this mean for Ukraine? Well, it seems clear that the US is “resort[ing] to the formula used in Afghanistan,”<sup>90</sup> wherein Poland is being employed just as Pakistan was as a sanctuary and secure border state to funnel weapons and aid into the invaded country.<sup>91</sup> This argument finds further support when it is considered that the US has very little strategic reason to support Ukraine. Ukraine is quite simply an unimportant partner for the US and would only marginally benefit the US as a partner both economically and militarily.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, the risks that a Ukrainian alliance would pose are much more extreme.<sup>93</sup> In order to ensure Ukraine remains a partner of the West would and has required massive economic and military investment

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Carassiti, “Myths about the Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>88</sup> Dylan and Gioe, “CIA and the Soviet Invasion.”

<sup>89</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*.

<sup>90</sup> Álvarez, “Unpredictable Muse.”

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Shiffrinson, “The NATO Enlargement Consensus.”

<sup>93</sup> Menon and Ruger, “NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy.”

at little benefit.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, as NATO's primary military power, the US has taken on the role of defender for those threatened by outside forces, which, in the case of Ukraine, has been incredibly costly and draining.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, Ukraine is incalculably valuable to Russia, given its status as a border country and more proportional economic and military capabilities. Given the extreme asymmetry of interest, there is not enough of a tangible reason for the US to so insistently contest the Russian invasion.<sup>96</sup>

One alternative explanation is that the US merely miscalculated in its push towards expansion, which has now necessitated that it defend Ukraine from Russian aggression. In essence, the survival of Ukraine is inextricably linked to global perceptions of US hegemony, and, should Ukraine fall, it might seriously damage US power in Asia and even put Taiwan at risk of a Chinese invasion.<sup>97</sup> Another more pessimistic reason for US support might be that the US is using Ukraine to strengthen its position as a global superpower further.<sup>98</sup> This explanation falls in line with the fact that Russia is an annoying threat to the further expansion of US power, and so Ukraine is being used as a way to inadvertently defeat the Russian threat, just as was the case during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Whether or not this strategy was planned and designs for a "Ukraine Trap" were floated prior to February 2022—a situation which seems unlikely—is ultimately irrelevant as what is now occurring is suspiciously similar to the invasion of Afghanistan.

It seems evident that the precedent fully informs current US foreign policy concerning Ukraine of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. More importantly, though, is that future policy is also informed by this precedent. The results of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were initially a

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Shiffrinson, "The NATO Enlargement Consensus."

<sup>96</sup> Fernandes and Finney, "The Myth of Russian Aggression and NATO Expansion."

<sup>97</sup> Woźniak, "The Ukraine Crisis and Shift in US Foreign Policy."

<sup>98</sup> Delanty, "Introduction to the Special Issue on the Russo-Ukrainian War."

great success for the US but quickly became a massive problem. While Ukraine does have Zelensky as a rallying point to unify the country, unlike Afghanistan, if something were to happen to Zelensky, it seems entirely plausible that Ukraine would break down into factions mirroring 1990s Afghanistan.<sup>99</sup> Even with Zelensky, such an eventuality is possible given that Ukraine has already been razed to the point of requiring an estimated \$400 billion cost for reconstruction.<sup>100</sup> The potential of donor fatigue and drifting Republican opposition to further aid only enlarges this potential problem.<sup>101</sup> Suppose the US were to treat Ukraine the same way they treated Afghanistan. In that case, it is highly likely, if not inevitable, that Ukraine will likewise become a breeding ground for extremist thought and even terrorism.

## Concluding Remarks

There is no way to say what the eventual outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian war will be until that outcome emerges. It is nevertheless unquestionably true that lessons learned from past military operations are often referred to in helping strategize for the current situation.<sup>102</sup> History tends to repeat itself, and the unwise individual often passively allows this repetition to occur, whether good or bad. In the case of Ukraine, it is absolutely essential for the past lessons of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to inform the decisions of today. Whether or not Ukraine suffers the same fate as Afghanistan is inconsequential because the potential for such an occurrence exists. If anything can be done to prevent such a situation from occurring, it ought to be pursued. Therefore, the US should plan for the future by maintaining and cultivating relationships with allied countries well beyond the current hot-button issues, lest it risk potential catastrophe.<sup>103</sup>

Future research on this topic could focus on other conflicts that might inform the Ukrainian

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<sup>99</sup> Settlemeyer and O'Neil, "Comparing Ukraine and the Last Soviet Invasion."

<sup>100</sup> Belkin, Nelson, and Welt. "Russia's War on Ukraine: U.S. Policy and the Role of Congress."

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Grau, Gress, and Russia (Federation), *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*.

<sup>103</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*.

situation and, as the situation in Ukraine continues to develop, expand on these findings based on further developments.

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