

BREAKING CONTACT WITHOUT LEAVING CHAOS: THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

Lester W. Grau

There is a literature and a common perception that the Soviets were defeated and driven from Afghanistan. This is not true. When the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, they did so in a coordinated, deliberate, professional manner, leaving behind a functioning government, an improved military and an advisory and economic effort insuring the continued viability of the government. The withdrawal was based on a coordinated diplomatic, economic and military plan permitting Soviet forces to withdraw in good order and the Afghan government to survive. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) managed to hold on despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Only then, with the loss of Soviet support and the increased efforts by the Mujahideen (holy warriors) and Pakistan, did the DRA slide toward defeat in April 1992. The Soviet effort to withdraw in good order was well executed and can serve as a model for other disengagements from similar nations.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-1989, its occupation force, the 40th Army conducted 220 independent operations and over 400 combined operations of various scales.¹ Many of these large-scale operations accomplished little, since this was primarily a tactical commanders' war. Some large-scale operations, such as the initial incursion into Afghanistan, Operation Magistral, which opened the highway to Khowst and the final withdrawal, were effective because the force employed was appropriate to the mission.²

Getting in

In April 1978, a small band of Soviet-trained leftist Afghan officers seized control of the government and declared the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA)—yet another client state on the Soviet Union's borders. President Nur M. Taraki, the Marxist leader installed by the putsch, announced a broad program of land redistribution, greater freedom for women, and the destruction of Afghanistan's old, tribal social structure. This progressive program found adherents among many city dwellers, but ran counter to traditional Afghan political and social structures and mores—most of which reflected tribal custom. Splintered in two factions, the Communist Party members spent more time fighting each other than carrying out the reforms. This infighting cost the support of the city dwellers. Consequently, the new government had little popular support. Armed resistance spread and civil war broke out. Religious leaders proclaimed *jihad* against the Communist regime and bands of Mujahideen took to the field to defend the faith. Quite naturally, disaffection and desertion swept the army.³

The DRA was a nominally Socialist state governed by a fragmented Communist Party. The government controlled the cities with their more liberal population. Tribal elders and clan chiefs controlled the countryside with its more conservative populace. In September 1979,

Taraki's prime minister, Hafizullah Amin, seized power and murdered Taraki in a naked power bid. Amin's rule, however, offered no improvement and the Soviet leadership watched this new Communist state spin out of control. Leonid Brezhnev, the aged and infirm Soviet General Secretary, decided to intervene to rescue his client state from complete chaos. The Afghan government had repeatedly asked for Soviet assistance in combating the Mujahideen. The Soviets decided to intervene under the guise of providing additional military assistance. The Soviet and Afghan General Staffs jointly planned the subsequent incursion.

The Soviet incursion was quick, decisive and well-executed. The *coup de main*, conducted from 25-27 December 1979, seized control of the central government, killed the president and installed their own man in his place. Their plan was to stabilize the situation, strengthen the DRA's army, garrison the cities and airfields, permit the DRA's army to conduct primary combat missions against the Mujahideen and to withdraw the bulk of Soviet forces in two–three years. The Soviets, however, had seized the cities, but not the countryside—and soon the latter was in full rebellion. Since the DRA's Army became demoralized and was unable to cope, the Soviets found themselves involved in a protracted guerrilla war on some of the most rugged terrain on the planet.

During the ensuing occupation, the Soviet military leadership recommended withdrawal, but political leaders provided the 40th Army with little relief. Troop strength increased from three divisions to five and two-thirds division-equivalents. General Secretary Brezhnev was incapacitated in 1980, but did not die until 1982. No one was really in charge of the Soviet Union and all decisions were made by a collective leadership in committee fashion. Yuri Andropov, who replaced Brezhnev in 1982, was also in poor health and died in 1984. He was replaced by the elderly and ill Konstantin Chernenko. The “twilight of the general secretaries” culminated in March 1985 when Chernenko died and the comparatively young and dynamic Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. Once in power, Gorbachev imposed a one-year deadline for making the military approach work.⁴ As a result, 1985 proved to be the bloodiest year of fighting in the war. Although the Soviets came close to breaking the back of the Mujahideen, the Mujahideen held on and it became evident that the Soviets could not win the war without a massive troop buildup and severe international and internal repercussions. Unwilling to pay this price, Gorbachev opted to withdraw Soviet forces from Afghanistan—in good order. Accordingly, at the February 1986 Party Congress, he announced plans to “Afghanize” the conflict and to intensify negotiations for a withdrawal.⁵

The Diplomatic Plan: Stonewalling to Graceful Exit

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan produced an international shockwave and created a number of serious diplomatic difficulties for the Soviet Union. When the United Nations Security Council met during the first week of January 1980, non-aligned members presented a draft resolution condemning the invasion. Although the Soviet Union predictably rejected the resolution, United Nations members convened the Sixth Emergency Special Session of the United Nations from 11-14 January 1980 at which 104 nations called for the immediate and

unconditional withdrawal of Soviet troops. Two weeks later, the first-ever extraordinary session of Islamic Foreign Ministers convened in Islamabad (25-27 January). After their session, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) convened and passed a resolution similar to that of the United Nations.⁶ The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which was chaired by Cuba, understandably avoided an immediate response. Thereafter, India, Cuba and the DRA blocked action until February 1981 when the NAM issued a resolution calling for “political settlement based on the withdrawal of foreign troops, full respect for the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-aligned status of Afghanistan and strict observance of the principle of non-intervention and non-interference.”⁷

On 11 February 1981, UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim appointed Javier Pérez de Cuéllar as his “personal representative” to promote peace talks among the parties.⁸ Waldheim’s representative tried visits and shuttle diplomacy, but the Soviets and DRA were clearly stalling. After Pérez de Cuéllar was elected the new UN Secretary General in 1981, Diego Cordovez took over his position as under secretary general for political affairs and with it the responsibility for promoting peace talks among the parties. Cordovez, however, enjoyed little more success than his predecessor—until 1986. Round after round of talks droned on at Geneva, to little real avail.

Tiring of his efforts to pacify Afghanistan, Gorbachev decided to withdraw Soviet forces from the country. He signaled this intent on 26 February 1986 at the 27th Communist Party Congress:

We would like, in the nearest future, to bring the Soviet forces—situated in Afghanistan at the request of its government—back to their homeland. The schedule has been worked out with the Afghan side for a step-by-step withdrawal, as soon as a political settlement has been achieved that will provide for a real end to, and reliably guarantee a non-renewal of, the outside armed interference in the internal affairs of the DRA.⁹

The Soviets were ready to begin the withdrawal process, but it was going to be on their terms. The Mujahideen would not have any standing in the negotiations and the United States and Pakistan were to represent their concerns. Iran, too—despite providing support and sanctuary to the Mujahideen, would not take part in the negotiations. The future of the DRA Communist regime was nonnegotiable and the Soviets made its stability the precondition to their withdrawal. The withdrawal agreement eventually ended up as a bilateral pact between Pakistan and the DRA, with the United States and the Soviet Union as guarantors. In addition, the US and Pakistan agreed not to interfere with the DRA government.¹⁰ Under the terms of the final agreement, signed on 14 April 1988, the United States and other nations would cease providing armaments and training to the Mujahideen, and Pakistan would deny the Mujahideen sanctuary and camps, but the Soviet Union was permitted to continue providing economic and military aid to the DRA. This aid would be significant—an estimated three to four billion dollars a year. Afghanistan was already the fifth largest arms importer in the world during 1986-1990, trailing India, Japan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.¹¹ This influx of arms into Afghanistan would not slow down

after the Soviet departure.

Reaching agreement was a difficult process requiring considerable diplomatic skills and pressure by the Soviets. In November 1986, Gorbachev expressed his annoyance with the pace of negotiations at a Politburo meeting. “At this point, we have been fighting in Afghanistan for six years. If we do not change our approaches, we will fight there for another 20 to 30 years. We must bring this to an end in short order.” Andrei Gromyko, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and now Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, agreed and stated that, if it was necessary to terminate Soviet involvement, he would accept Afghanistan as a neutral state. This was clearly a departure from the Brezhnev doctrine—which permitted no such retreat.¹² Despite Gorbachev’s impatience, almost half of the war would be fought under his leadership.

Getting the DRA Ready for Effective Self-government and Eventual Soviet Withdrawal

When the Soviets killed Amin, they killed the leader of the Khalq faction. The Khalq was largely Pushtun and had an urban and rural base. The Soviets installed Babrak Karmal as president. Karmal was a member of the Parcham faction, a faction that was urban-based with a large number of Tajik and Uzbek members in addition to the dominant Pushtun. Karmal had been in informal exile, as the DRA ambassador to Czechoslovakia. Prior to the Soviet’s arrival, the Khalq-Parcham infighting had been fierce. Some 3,500 Parchamis had reportedly been killed by the Khalqis, so there was a lot of bad blood between the factions.¹³ When Karmal came into power, backed by the Soviet military, he faced near revolt from the Khalqis. The DRA Army was dominated by Khalqis who were loyal to the murdered Amin. Karmal consolidated power, sending the most prominent Khalqi, Deputy Prime Minister Assadullah Sarwari, into exile as Ambassador to Mongolia. He appointed fellow Parchamis to key posts. Only two members of the eleven-member Presidium were Khalqi and only four Khalqis were members of the eleven-member Politburo. Karmal’s approach to consolidating control of the countryside had four priorities: first, despite the atheistic flavor of the Communist Party, the government openly projected an Islamic image, repairing mosques, hiring clerics and stressing the compatibility of Islamic ideals and Marxist-Leninist socio-political objectives. Second, the DRA strengthened the counter-insurgency effort by building the army, the forces of the Ministry of the Interior (*Sarandoy*), the forces of the secret police (*Khad*) and the paramilitary forces of trusted cadres. Third, the DRA tried to build stronger links with the tribal and ethnic groups. Fourth, the DRA built stronger economic and political ties with the Soviet Union.¹⁴

Karmal was Moscow’s man, but he was not the ideal leader. He was interested in personal perks, was lazy and inconsistent. He had health problems with ulcers, high blood pressure and liver disease. He also had a drinking problem. The Soviets found it hard to get their programs implemented by their man. He was not the man Moscow wanted to lead the DRA once they were gone. Karmal addressed the 27th Communist Party Congress in Moscow, but made no reference to Gorbachev’s withdrawal announcement. Reportedly, during the Soviet Congress, no Soviet leader received him.¹⁵ In late March 1986, Karmal returned to Moscow, reportedly for medical treatment. On 5 May 1986, right before the seventh round of the Geneva talks, Karmal resigned

as General Secretary and was succeeded by his head of the secret police (*Khad*), Dr. Mohammad Najibullah.¹⁶ Moscow gave him two years to get his country in order.

Najibullah had completed his medical studies at Kabul University and had discontinued using his first name since it conflicted with his Marxism. He was a member of Karmal’s Parcham faction. During Khalqi rule, he had been exiled to Iran as the Ambassador. Then he was stripped of his citizenship and forced into European exile. He returned with the Soviet Army. Before he became General Secretary, he had established a reputation as a ruthless and effective head of the *Khad*. Tens of thousands of Afghans were killed by the *Khad* during Najibullah’s tenure as head of the secret police. In 1987, despite Moscow’s opposition, he further consolidated his power by assuming the symbolic post of President and taking the posts of head of the National Defense Council and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Forty years old in 1987, Najibullah was a tall man, full of confidence, energy and poise. He also enjoyed power. He had a sense of history and a sense of humor. It was rumored that his wife spoke English, although she never met with foreigners. He also had a cunning and slyness that assisted him in managing internal Afghan politics.¹⁷ Although Najibullah was born in Kabul, he was an Ahmadzai Pushtun from the Gardez region. Despite the number of Uzbeks and Tajiks in the Parcham faction, most of Najibullah’s appointments to senior positions were also Pushtun.

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan modeled its government institutions after those of the Soviet Union. There were three ministries with armed forces—the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of the Interior (*Sarandoy*) and the Ministry of State Security (the secret police or *Khad*). The Soviets had adopted this system for internal security to prevent a *coup de etat* by fielding counter-balancing forces.¹⁸ Chart 1 shows the paper strength of the armed forces of the DRA.¹⁹

Armed Forces of the DRA Ministry of Defense

Total (thousands)	132
Army	
Divisions	14
Separate Brigades--	
Air Assault	1
Tank	3
Artillery	1
Road–Commandant’s Service	2
Separate Regiments	9
Frontier Forces	
Brigades	7

Regiments	2
Battalions	65
Air Force	
Combat Aviation Squadrons	12
Transport Squadrons	5
Helicopter Squadrons	9
Air Defense	
Air Defense Missile Brigade	1

Armed Forces of the Ministry of Interior (Sarandoy)

Total (thousands)	70
Combat Battalions	50
Separate Combat Companies	92
Garrison Brigades	5
Garrison Regiments	2

Armed Forces of the Secret Police (Khad)

Total	100
Combat Brigades	3
Combat Regiments	23
Separate Combat Battalions	82
Special Purpose Regiments	10
Special Purpose Separate Battalions	43

Total Armed Strength of the DRA: 302,000

The actual strength of the armed forces of the Ministry of Defense was some 52,000—not 132,000. The army was plagued by desertions—which totaled over 32,000 annually.²⁰ In 1986, the DRA had tried to bring the armed forces of the Ministry of Defense up to 200,000, but had fallen far short. At this same time, they increased the *Khad* by 25% to 80,000 and the armed forces of the Ministry of the Interior by 30% to 100,000. The *Khad* were up to strength, however the *Sarandoy* were about 10,000 short.²¹ The secret police and the *Sarandoy* were both bigger than the army. Map 1 shows the location of the field forces of the three ministries prior to the

start of the withdrawal of Soviet forces.²² The forces of the three ministries were usually collocated so that one force could not build a local following, clientele and power base unnoticed. It was hardly an efficient way to organize to fight a counter-insurgency, but it helped prevent *coups de etat* and *coups de main*. The forces were deployed to protect cities, lines of communication and key installations such as power-generating facilities and factories. There was no central command that coordinated and directed the activities of the three Afghan armed forces. The Afghan General Staff only directed the actions of the forces of the Ministry of Defense. Forces from one ministry could not be subordinated under the commander of another ministry—even when they were in the same garrison or on the same mission. There was no unity of command.²³

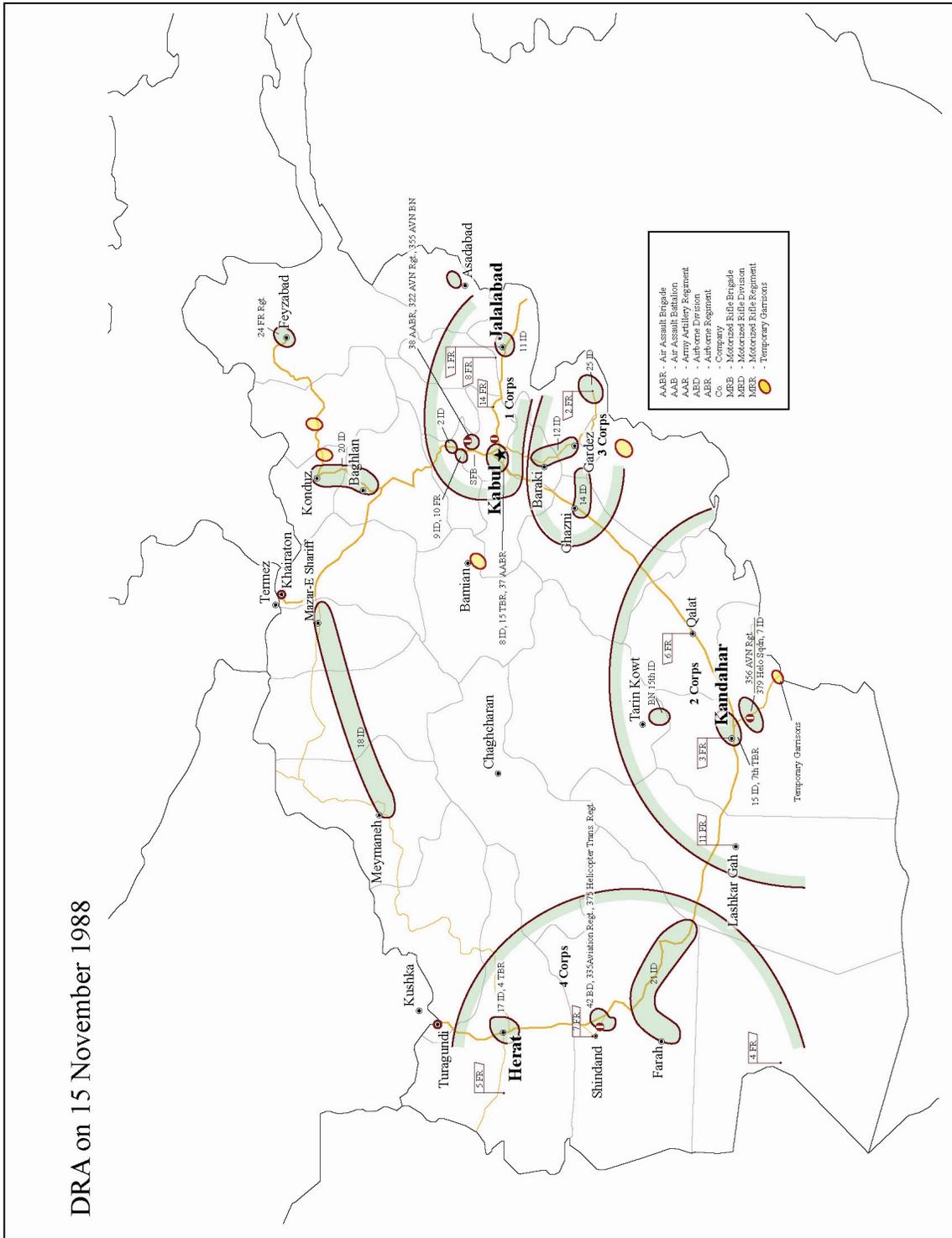
As the Soviets conducted their withdrawal, they turned over garrisons to the DRA. The Mujahideen started a land grab for these areas. The Mujahideen needed to capture a major Afghan city that they could declare the capitol of the Mujahideen government. The Mujahideen tried and failed to take Jalalabad and Faizabad. They had better success at Konduz, where a greatly outnumbered, but audacious Mujahideen force seized the city and held it until a DRA relief force and Soviet bombers drove them out.²⁴

The DRA started shifting forces to compensate for the withdrawal of Soviet forces. They also formed five new divisions which were stationed in Balkh Province. These divisions were formed into “Group North” with the mission to protect the northern approaches to the Salang tunnel. Map 2 shows the locations to which the Ministry of Defense deployed its forces to compensate for the withdrawal of Soviet forces.²⁵ Spread thin, the army was forced to surrender control of several areas in order to retain more important ones. The DRA also constituted several temporary base camps to which it would move forces when it was operationally necessary.

At the end of 1988, the Soviets estimated Mujahideen strength at 4,530 detachments and groups with a total of 173,000 personnel. Of these, 1,920 of the detachments and groups were full-time (82,300 personnel).²⁶ Although the DRA had more men under arms, the recommended ratio of counter-insurgent forces to guerrillas is 10:1. The DRA did not enjoy a 2:1 ratio.

Najibullah tried to get his political house in order. In November 1986, he introduced a new constitution which introduced a multi-party system and an Islamic legal system. On 30-31 December 1986, he announced a National Reconciliation Program that proposed a cease fire, dialogue with opposition leaders, and a possible coalition government²⁷. In November 1987, he introduced yet another constitution which changed the name of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) to the Republic of Afghanistan (RA) [for the purposes of clarity in this study, DRA will be used throughout]. He convened a Loya Jirga on 29 November 1987 to approve the new constitution and his assumption of the presidency.²⁸ In 1988, he changed the name of the Afghan Communist Party from the Peoples’ Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to the Hizb-i Watan (Homeland Party). He brought non-Communists into the government, although never in positions of real power, in an effort to gain popular support. He also continued to limit the number of Khalqis in positions of authority. When the Soviets withdrew, the chief executive

DRA on 15 November 1988



Map 2: Relocation of DRA MOD Forces in Response to Soviet Withdrawal

department (the president and four deputies) had two Parchami, one Khalqi and two non-party members. The 21-member Supreme Soviet had 14 Parchami, six Khalqi and one non-party member.²⁹

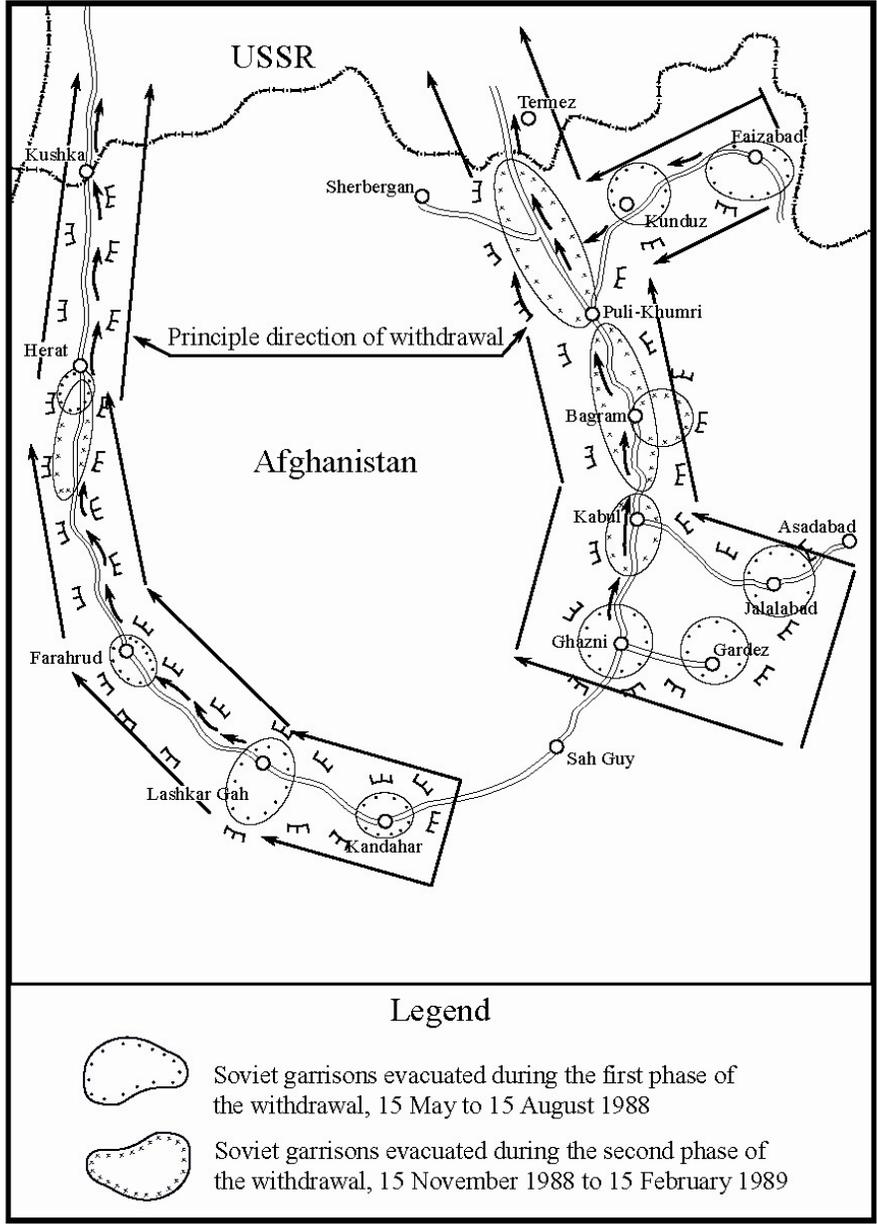
Getting Ivan Home—Phase One

Soviet historiography divides the war into four periods. The fourth (withdrawal) period began in January 1987, with the Soviet forces' participation in the Afghan government's program of national reconciliation. During this time the Soviets curtailed action to lessen casualties and generally reacted to Mujahideen attacks or supported combat by the Afghan forces. They did launch a large offensive during May-June along the Arghandab River and in Paktia toward Jajji. From November through January, they conducted the successful Operation Magistral. Still, the primary Soviet task during the withdrawal period of the war was to prepare and conduct a successful withdrawal.³⁰ On 7 April 1988 (a week before the Geneva Accords were signed), the Soviet Ministry of Defense issued the order for withdrawal. It specified the order of withdrawal and measures that needed to be taken for route security. The withdrawal would be conducted in two phases.³¹

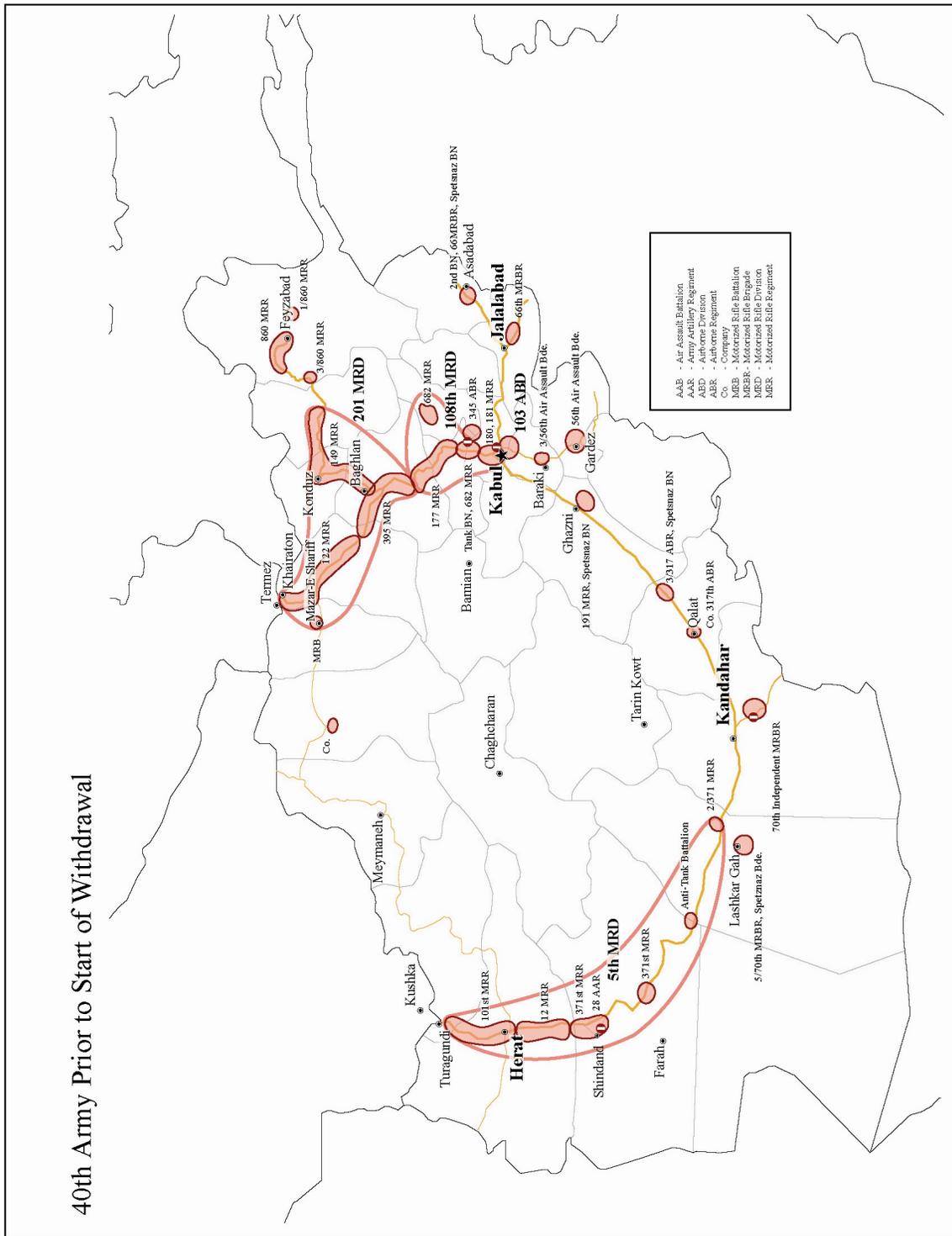
The Ministry of Defense order was based on a plan developed by the General Staff, the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense deployed in the DRA, the staff of the Turkmenistan Military District and the 40th Army staff. The plan had been developed and approved during the negotiation period preceding the Geneva Accords.³² Map 3 shows the general concept and scheme of the withdrawal.³³

Map 4 shows the location of Soviet units prior to the beginning of the withdrawal. As with the maps of the locations of the DRA units, the Soviet 40th Army was deployed primarily along the main lines of communication (LOCs) and major cities and airfields. The Mujahideen had free run over 85% of the country. The Soviet force was not equally distributed, but heavily loaded along the eastern corridor.³⁴

The first phase of the Ministry of Defense order officially began on 15 May 1988 and lasted through 15 August. However, during the April-early May period, the Soviets withdrew their small garrisons at Asadabad, Gul'bakhar, Bamian, Baraki, Chagcharan and Shadzhoi. These small garrisons did not initially leave the country, but folded into their parent regiments or brigades.³⁵ The initial major phase withdrew 50,000 troops from ten major garrisons. The Soviets completely withdrew from Jalalabad, Ghazni, Gardez, Lashkargah and Kandahar cities. They also withdrew some combat support and combat service support units from Kabul. The final phase began in December 1988 and ran until 15 February 1989.³⁶ The following chart shows the strength of the Soviet 40th Army at the start of the withdrawal. It is down from the peak strength of 124,000 to 100,300. These figures do not include Soviet military advisers to the Afghan MOD armed forces, forces from the Soviet Ministry of the Interior (MVD), forces from the Soviet Ministry of State Security (KGB) and civilian contractors.



Map 3: General Concept and Scheme of Soviet Withdrawal



Map 4: Location of Soviet 40th Army Forces Prior to the Beginning of Withdrawal

Two conclusions hit the reader. First, the tooth to tail ratio heavily favors the combat forces vice the combat support and combat service support forces. By Western Army standards, this is a very lean structure. The fact that the 40th Army was able to sustain combat for over nine years with such an austere support structure speaks volumes as to the Soviet’s professional planning and logistics abilities and the soldiers’ ability to carry on indefinitely under austere conditions. Second, the bulk of the combat force is dedicated to security missions and less than a third of the force is available for offensive combat.

Chart 2: Soviet 40th Army prior to the start of the withdrawal³⁷

40th Army: 5th, 108th, 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions; 103rd Airborne Division; 66th, 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigades; 191st, 860th Separate Motorized Rifle Regiments; 345th Separate Airborne Regiment; 56th Air Assault Regiment; 15th, 22nd Spetsnaz Brigades; one aviation regiment; one fighter regiment; one independent ground attack regiment; one separate composite aviation regiment; three separate helicopter regiments, seven squadrons.

	Total	Western Corridor	Eastern Corridor
Personnel (thousands)	100.3	42.8	57.5
Headquarters personnel	3.6	0.8	2.8
Combat personnel	70.7	36.4	34.3
Service and Support personnel	14.3	2.4	11.9
TOTAL COMBAT BATTALIONS	93	21	72
Battalions securing DRA cities & facilities	40	7	33
Battalion securing LOCs	15	4	11
Battalions reinforcing LOC & DRA facilities	9	2	7
Battalions on convoy escort	3	1	2
Battalions securing factories & plants	5		5
Battalions available for combat	30	8	22

The Soviets organized press coverage of the withdrawal. Unlike the past, they opened Afghanistan to coverage by more than the journalists of the Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact and Third World. Included in the 212 accredited journalists were 22 Western journalists from Australia, Canada, the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, Italy, Japan, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. APN, TASS and GOSTELRADIO provided coverage for the Soviet Union with ten correspondents. Clearly, the Soviets wanted a coverage of the withdrawal

that extended beyond the Soviet bloc. The journalists were allowed far greater access than in the past. Naturally, the journalists wanted to ride along with the troops to provide better coverage and human interest. Although the Soviets were convinced that their route security plan was good, there was no guarantee that the Mujahideen would not attack the withdrawing force and dead foreign journalists would not create favorable publicity. Some Soviet journalists rode with the troops, while the rest had to be content with the 14 May press conference in Kabul and then being flown to the Soviet border locations of Khariton and Termez to witness the return of Soviet forces to the Soviet Union.³⁸

The 40th Army was taking no chances on route security during the withdrawal. Airborne forces and other combat forces were deployed to supplemental security and blocking positions along the route to strengthen the already-significant route security effort. Some 10,000-12,000 Soviet and DRA forces covered the withdrawal of the 3,000-plus 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade from Jalalabad to Kabul. Some 100,000 Soviet and DRA troops covered the rest of the 66th withdrawal route from Kabul to Khariton. The 40th Army deployed additional artillery and aviation support on the routes to cover the withdrawal. Illumination aircraft stayed on station over the night-rest stops to prevent the Mujahideen from moving undetected against the night-lager positions. Mujahideen action against this phase of the withdrawal was light.³⁹ In fact, after initial Mujahideen attempts to take Jalalabad, Konduz and Faizabad from the DRA failed, Mujahideen activity slowed for the rest of the withdrawal. The Mujahideen were building for the contest with the DRA in the aftermath of the withdrawal.⁴⁰

Jalalabad was the first Soviet garrison handed over to the DRA. The Soviet 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade had been stationed there and took maximum effort to ensure that the garrison and its equipment was transferred correctly. The 66th left a three-month reserve of ammunition, fuel and food at the Jalalabad garrison. The garrison had barracks buildings, mess halls, steam baths and a hospital. The soldiers fixed everything that needed repair including the weapons and equipment that were going to be transferred to the DRA. Afghan inspectors from the Ministry of Defense test-fired all the weapons and drove the equipment before they accepted it. The soldiers cleaned the barracks and made up all the bunks with clean blankets and linen. The soldiers had to sleep outside the night before the turnover to keep the barracks spotless. On the morning of 14 May, 1988, the Afghan 1st Corps Commander signed for the garrison and the entire 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade left Jalalabad by convoy heading toward Kabul and eventually home. The Afghans took over the garrison and stripped it bare by that afternoon. Soviet televisions, radios, air conditioners, furniture and bunks were now for sale in the city shops. They even stripped the doors, windows and window frames from the buildings. Several days after this, the DRA 1st Corps Commander requested urgent resupply from Najibullah. He stated that the three-month reserve of ammunition, fuel and food had not been left. The 1st Corps Commander had actually personally signed for it. The 40th Army learned from this sad experience. In the future, they insisted that an MOD official sign for property and material and they videotaped the entire transfer procedure of inspection and acceptance.⁴¹

In all, the Soviets transferred 184 garrisons worth 699 million rubles and transferred

government equipment worth 98.3 million rubles. Since some of the equipment was new to the DRA, the Soviets trained military and civilian specialists in its use. The Soviet garrison at Kandahar trained 350 DRA specialists for the Ministry of Defense, 110 specialists for the Ministry of the Interior (*Sarandoy*) and 63 specialists for the Ministry of State Security (*Khad*). Three-month reserves of ammunition, fuel and food were also transferred to the DRA at Kandahar, Gardez, Kabul, Konduz, Herat, Faizabad and Shindand.⁴² The three-month reserves constituted over 85,000 tons of material including 13,269 tons of artillery rounds, 3,570 tons of aviation fuel, 24,320 tons of vehicle fuel and 27,074 tons of food. In addition to the three month reserves, the 40th Army transferred another 55,500 tons of material to the DRA. This included 15,000 tons of ammunition, 3,000 tons of food and 37,500 tons of fuel. The 40th Army transferred some 990 armored vehicles, some 3000 trucks, 142 artillery howitzers and cannons, 82 mortars, 43 multiple rocket launchers, 231 air defense systems, 14,443 small arms and 1706 rocket launchers to the Afghan armed forces.⁴³

Originally, the plan called for the 40th Army to evacuate all of the Western corridor during the first phase. However, Najibullah did not feel ready to assume responsibility for the entire West at this time, so he requested that the evacuation of Shindand and Herat be postponed until the second phase. The 40th Army evacuated the Eastern garrison at Konduz instead—to maintain the treaty obligation of 50% of the force withdrawn during the first phase. UN inspectors verified the withdrawal of 50,200 Soviet soldiers. 40th Army troops remained in six provinces (Kabul, Herat, Parwan, Samangan, Balkh and Baghlan). There were 50,100 troops remaining.⁴⁴

Getting Ivan Home—Phase Two

The Second Phase was supposed to begin in November 1988. The snow would begin in November and the 40th Army did not want to extract the rest of its forces hurriedly over the hazardous mountain roads of the Hindu Kush during the winter months. The snow would be fairly light in November, but it was hardly ideal. However, things hit a snag. Setting an exact timetable for withdrawal, without tying the timetable to the achievement and maintenance of specific political and military conditions, is a recipe for trouble. The British proved this during their withdrawal from Aden.⁴⁵ Treaties need to be drawn up with provisos to stop or reverse the withdrawal if conditions change to upset the fulfillment of that treaty. Guerrillas were still operating freely and unrestrictedly from Pakistan and there was no apparent lessening of the guerrilla arms and ammunition supplies. Moscow began passing messages to Islamabad hinting at the possibility of postponing or abrogating the treaty.⁴⁶

The unsuccessful Mujahideen attempts to take Jalalabad, Konduz and Faizabad following the withdrawal of their 40th Army garrisons unnerved the Najibullah government. They wanted more guarantees for their survival. Najibullah requested that 20,000 Soviet volunteers remain behind to secure the Kabul airfield and the road between Kabul and Khariton.⁴⁷

The Soviet Union and the DRA needed a stable urban population. In November 1988, the Soviet Union established an air bridge to Kabul and Kandahar. The chief cargo was flour! Daily, 15 to 20 of the huge IL-76 transport aircraft carried flour, along with weapons, ammunition and

equipment. The Soviets flew in 15,000 tons of flour monthly to Kabul. Returning truck traffic from the Soviet Union also carried hundreds of tons of equipment daily.⁴⁸

Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Scheverdnadze met with Najibullah. Shortly thereafter, the withdrawal stopped. No Soviet troops would leave in November or December. Instead, the Soviet government and the DRA discussed several schemes to stabilize the DRA. These included:

- retain one Soviet division in country (11,000 personnel) to keep the LOC open between Khariton and Kabul;
- withdraw Soviet forces while replacing them with United Nations forces to secure the LOC and provide food and fuel (an informal sounding among United Nations representative made this a non-starter);
- complete the withdrawal of Soviet forces, but then reintroduce Soviet regiments to escort the convoys and maintain a steady supply of humanitarian material to Afghanistan;
- do not complete the withdrawal, but retain Soviet volunteers to secure the LOCs. Pay the volunteers 800-1,000 rubles a month.

During these considerations, the DRA government also pressured the Soviet Union to maintain the right to call on Soviet air strikes after the withdrawal.⁴⁹ The Soviet government decided to abide by the treaty timetable despite apparent noncompliance by Pakistan and the United States. Eventually, the DRA would use another variant not discussed during the consultations with the Soviets—completing the withdrawal, while hiring Afghan militias to protect the LOCs. Valuable months had been lost. The second phase of the Soviet withdrawal would now begin on 2 January—in the dead of winter. Over 30,000 troops in the Eastern Corridor would have to travel through the Salang tunnel at a height of 4,300 meters above sea level despite ice and snow, fog, narrow roads and rugged driving.⁵⁰

The 40th Army was now holding two truncated pieces of the Eastern and Western corridors (see Map 5). They still had more forces on the Eastern corridor, securing the Kabul-Khariton LOC.⁵¹

40th Army on 15 October 1988: 5th, 108th, 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions, Army Aviation. Operational control of 103rd Airborne Division, 345th Separate Airborne Regiment Army Aviation: 120th Aviation Regiment; 134th Fighter Regiment; 378th Separate Composite Aviation Regiment, 263rd Separate Aerial Reconnaissance Squadron; 254th, 262nd, 302nd Separate Helicopter Squadrons.

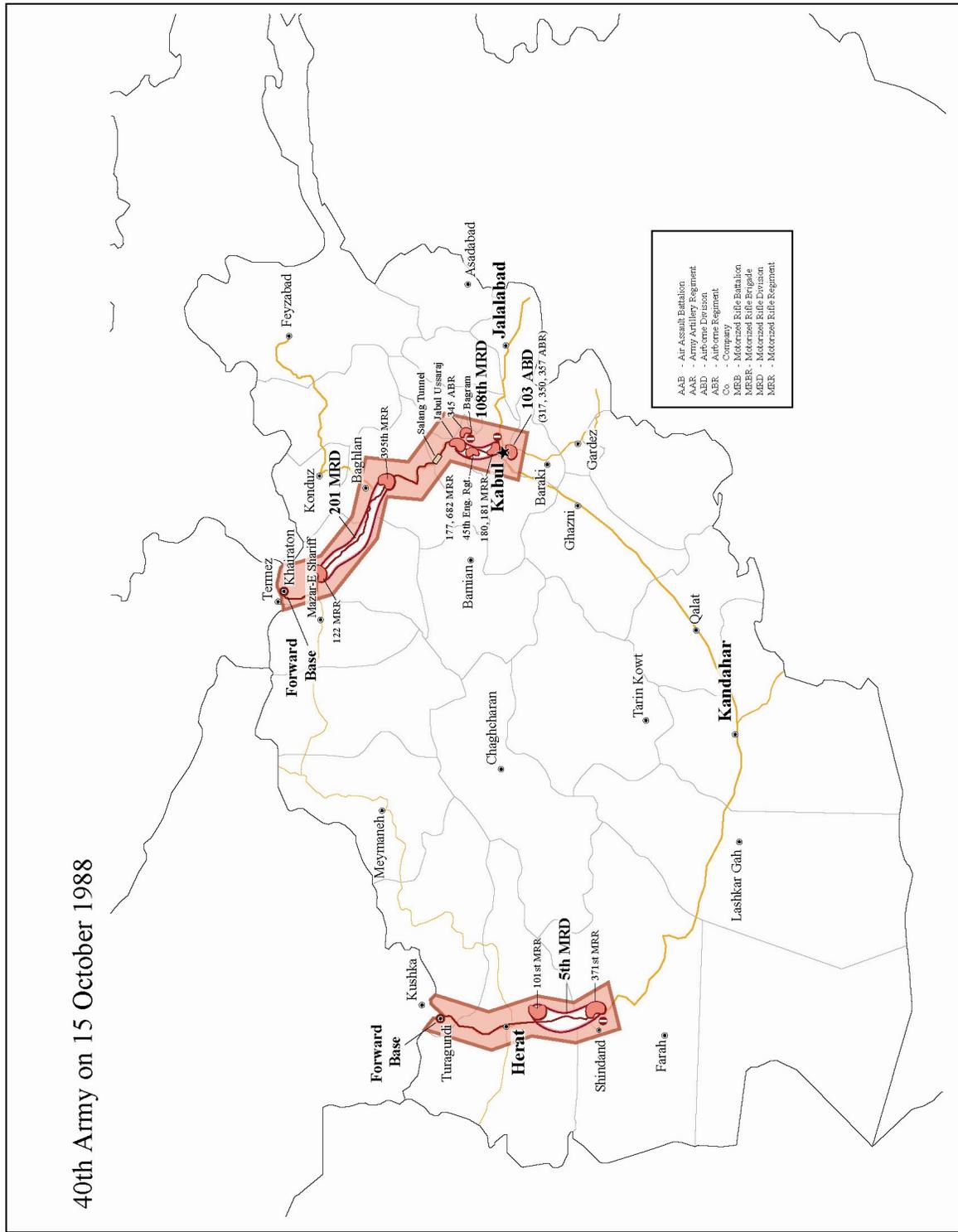
	Total	Western Corridor	Eastern Corridor
Personnel (thousands)	50.1	10.1	40
Headquarters personnel	2.4	0.4	2
Combat personnel	29.2	6.7	22.5

Service and Support personnel	18.5	3	15.5
TOTAL COMBAT BATTALIONS	56	10	46
Battalions securing cities & facilities	29	6	23
Battalions securing LOCs	15	3	12
Battalions on convoy escort	2		2
Battalions securing factories & plants	5		5
Battalions available for combat	5	1	4
ARMY AVIATION			
Transport aircraft	21		21
Jet aircraft	97	27	70
Helicopters	81	17	64

The Eastern corridor remained the critical corridor and the bulk of 40th Army forces were stationed there. Soviet forces remained in the Western corridor only at the special request of Najibullah.

The Najibullah government was worried about the possible future lack of immediately responsive Soviet air power and sought to build up DRA air power and long-range artillery to compensate. The DRA already had the BM-27 “Urugan” [hurricane] long-range multiple rocket launcher system capable of sending massive strikes up to 40 kilometers away. What they did not have was the R-300 SCUD missile. This massive system was originally designed to deliver a nuclear warhead over a 600-kilometer distance. It also has a conventional warhead that carries over 2000 pounds of high explosives. One SCUD missile battalion remained in the 40th Army at the end of 1988. From November to January, it would fire 92 missiles in support of the withdrawal.⁵² The battalion would then transfer its equipment to the DRA which had sent some of its best troops on a crash-training course for SCUD missilemen at the Soviet 720th Training Center in Termez.⁵³ The 1st SCUD battalion of the DRA Armed Forces would belong to the *Khad*—the secret police.⁵⁴ The Soviets would end up providing over 300 SCUD missiles to this Afghan battalion.

As the Soviets began the second phase of the withdrawal, they had two concerns—repatriation of Soviet prisoners of war and security of the Soviet force during withdrawal. Since the Soviets refused to negotiate with the Mujahideen at Geneva, prisoner release was a problem. Some 315 Soviet service personnel were unaccounted for—missing in action, prisoners of war or deserters. Others had publicly accepted relocation to the United States, France and Canada. Over the years, the Soviets had quietly ransomed key prisoners. Reportedly, they had payed over a



40th Army on 15 October 1988

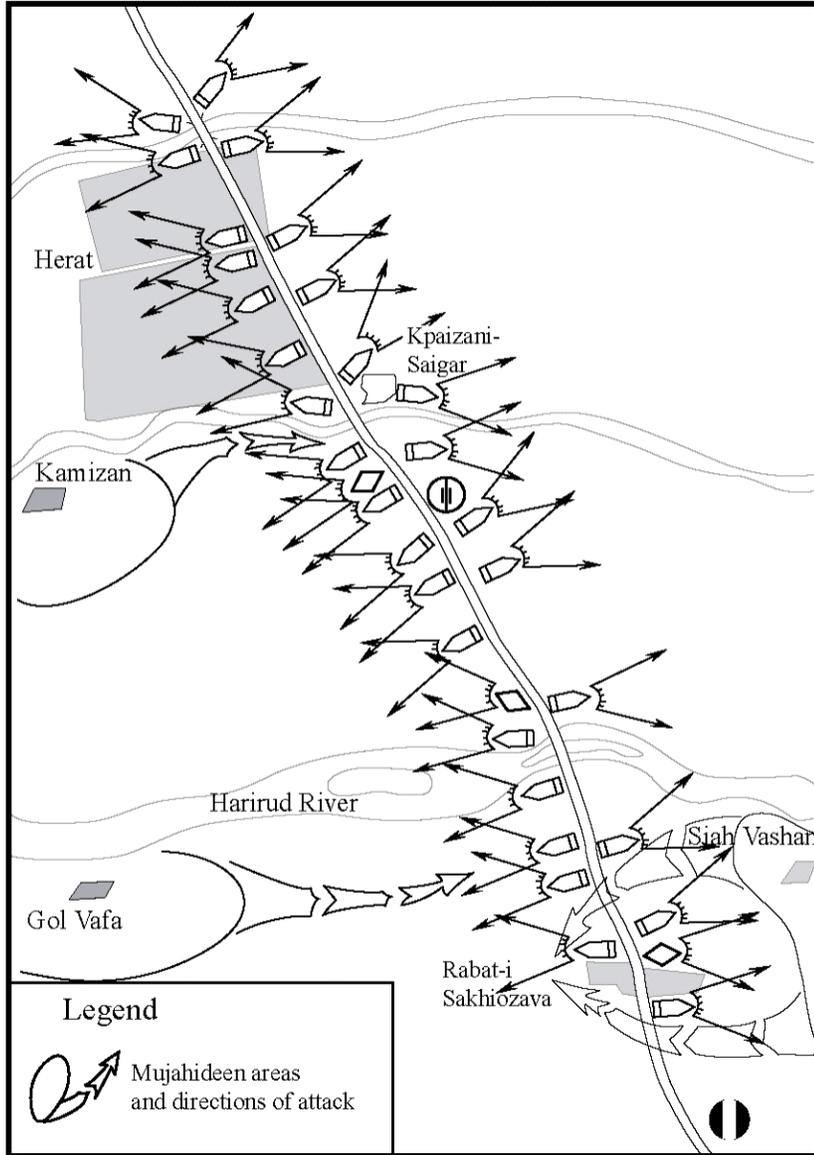
Map 5: Location of Soviet 40th Army Forces Prior to Execution of Phase Two of the Withdrawal

million US dollars for the return of Colonel Alexandr Rutskoi, a pilot downed over Afghanistan. He became Yeltsin's Vice President from 1991-1993, before he joined the conspiracy against Yeltsin in September 1993. The Soviets would work off line after the withdrawal to repatriate their missing troops. They would eventually get 15 back.

Security of the withdrawing force was also a problem. The Soviets arranged local cease fires, hired local security forces and paid guerrilla groups not to attack them. One of their main concerns was the guerrilla leader, Ahmed Shah Masood, who commanded a large force in the Panjshir Valley. Withdrawing Soviet forces would all be liable to attack from the Panjshir Valley which opened onto their route's Eastern flank between Bagram and Jabul Ussaraj. The Soviets had contracted a cease fire with Masood in the past. In 1983, Masood and the Soviets agreed to a cease fire to allow both sides time to consolidate and reconstitute their forces. In April 1984, after the cease fire agreement expired, the Soviets resumed their offensive in the Panjshir. Now, the Soviets again entered into direct negotiations with Ahmed Shah Masood for the safe passage of Soviet forces. The agreement was signed, the funds were delivered and Masood's forces became more apparent as they no longer had to hide from Soviet air power. Najibullah feared Masood as one of his principle enemies. When he learned of the safe passage agreement, he protested to the Soviet government. General Yazov, the Soviet Minister of Defense, ordered the 40th Army to violate the agreement and attack the relaxed and exposed forces of Masood. General Gromov, the 40th Army Commander, objected but had to obey orders. He reluctantly initiated "Operation Typhoon" against the Southern approaches to the Salang tunnel on 23-25 January 1989. The 40th Army launched over 1,000 air sorties and 400 massed long-range artillery missions against Masood's forces.⁵⁵ "Typhoon" began on 23 January and continued for three days. The Soviets reported destroying over 600 Mujahideen, 32 mortars, 15 rocket launchers, 46 heavy machine guns, 10 supply dumps, 36 strong points and 15 trucks.⁵⁶ Masood had not threatened the withdrawal to this point, and with over half the troops of Phase Two already withdrawn, the attack did not support the withdrawal. Rather, it supported the Najibullah government following the withdrawal.

The withdrawal continued. On the Eastern corridor, 26 combat battalions provided LOC security. Some 14,500 troops manned 199 outposts and guard posts on the route. On the more-open Western corridor, three battalions tried to do the same job. Seven thousand troops held the airfields.⁵⁷ On 4 February, the last Soviet unit drove out of Kabul. From 30 January to 3 February, all the Soviet aircraft flew out of Bagram—they took their security element with them. By 8 February, all the 40th Army on the Eastern corridor had passed through the Salang tunnel. By 10 February, the bulk of the forces in the Eastern corridor were lagered on the border waiting to cross into the USSR. On the Western corridor, the force departed Shindand on 4 February and Herat on 8 February.⁵⁸

Map 6 shows how the Soviet's organized their forces to cover the final withdrawal.⁵⁹ The Soviets established a steel corridor of armored vehicles to provide flank security for the withdrawing forces. Artillery was incorporated into the corridor to provide immediate fire support. As the last vehicles entered the corridor, the corridor slowly disappeared as the southern-most elements entered into the corridor themselves and began the drive to border.



Map 6: Western Corridor Security Plan for the Withdrawal

From 11-14 February, the force crossed over into the Soviet Union. On 15 February, with a large amount of press coverage and fanfare, the last elements crossed. General Boris Gromov's son met him on the "Friendship" bridge and they walked into the Soviet Union together. General Gromov was the last member of the 40th Army to cross over. The Soviets lost a final 39 men killed between 1 and 15 February.⁶⁰

Aftermath

The Soviets did not abandon the Afghanistan government—the Russian Federation did. The Soviets left an advisory contingent behind to help coordinate logistics and air strikes. After the withdrawal, the Afghan government ran a 600-truck convoy weekly to the Soviet Union for resupply. The Soviet Union maintained its air bridge, flying in cargos as diverse as flour and SCUD missiles. The first big test for the DRA was the mutiny led by the General Tanai, the Minister of Defense. He and other Khalqi officers joined the Mujahideen leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in an attempt to oust Najibullah. The mutiny lasted from 2-7 March 1990. The DRA suppressed the mutiny with air and missile strikes and bloody fighting.⁶¹ The next big test for the DRA was the Mujahideen attempt to capture Jalalabad in April-June 1990. The Mujahideen joined forces in a rare display of unity and attempted to capture the city. The DRA conducted a tough, determined defense and then launched a coordinated counter-attack that defeated the Mujahideen effort. The DRA army was becoming a better army while the Mujahideen had a hard time converting from a guerrilla force to a conventional force. Many of the Mujahideen went home after the Soviet departure. They had joined the *jihad* to fight the Soviets and could care less who was in power in Kabul. Najibullah hired many of these to help guard the LOCs and facilities. Najibullah exploited the change in political climate created by the departure of the Soviets to create and exploit those internal dynamics that would further divide the Mujahideen.

The Soviet Union dissolved on 31 December 1991—and most of the DRA's economic, political and military support disappeared with it. Russia was too involved merely trying to survive and prevent civil war. Support for all the old client states disappeared. Deprived of this support, Afghan troop morale faltered. Kabul was locked in a siege and rations were short. General Dostum, a key commander in the North, defected to the Mujahideen and joined in the siege of Kabul. On 27 April 1992, Mujahideen forces entered Kabul. Najibullah sought sanctuary in the United Nations facility in the city. The DRA was history and a new and bloody chapter in Afghanistan's history began.

Conclusions:

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan provides an excellent model for disengagement from direct military involvement in support of an allied government in a counter-insurgency campaign. It demonstrates the need for comprehensive planning encompassing diplomatic, economic and military measures, both during and subsequent to direct military involvement. It underscores the necessity for the host government to become able to function on its own and the

supporting government to continue to provide adequate support subsequent to its departure. It shows how the internal divisions within both the host and supporting government may be almost as lethal as the guerrilla opposition. It clearly shows the necessity for a good advisory and logistics effort following the departure.

One major mistake that the Soviets made was to establish a public timetable for the withdrawal without any proviso for modifying or reversing the withdrawal if the political or military situation drastically changed. This hurt the efforts of the Soviet Union and the DRA to conduct a smooth transfer of authority and withdrawal.

The ground withdrawal plan was masterfully executed, even if the attack on Masood was a violation of national decency. Secure withdrawal routes are an essential precondition for success.

The Najibullah government did much to sustain itself before and after the withdrawal. It liberalized its policies and allowed some expression of other political ideas and ideologies. It backtracked sharply from its earlier communist reforms that had created so much consternation. It made a serious attempt toward national reconciliation before the Soviet withdrawal began. It continued that effort throughout the withdrawal and afterwards. Once the Soviets left, many of the Mujahideen quit the field and returned home. The Najibullah government hired these returning warriors and put them to work guarding the LOCs that kept the cities supplied. Najibullah reckoned that the cities were his main source of support and he kept them fed. He worked actively to frustrate Mujahideen unity.

Perhaps the major lesson is that withdrawal from a counter-insurgency should not be viewed as a defeat or a chance to get rid of an unpleasant nuisance. Creating bloodbaths and calling them progress is more than cynical and self-serving. It is an abrogation of humanity. The interest and investment in a country does not end with the withdrawal of forces. Rather, the elevated economic and political effort in support of the host government should remain if it is to survive and to prevent chaos. Ironically, in this case, the fall of the DRA was conditioned more by political change in the supporting government (i.e, the collapse of the Soviet Union and emergence of the Russian Federation) than in Afghanistan itself.

ENDNOTES:

1. The Russian General Staff (translated and edited by Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001, 73.

2. For an account of the initial incursion, see The Russian General Staff, 15-20 and Lester W. Grau, "The Takedown of Kabul: An Effective Coup de Main" in William G. Robertson and Lawrence A. Yates (Editors), Block by Block: The Challenges of Urban Operations, Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2003, 291-324 and Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy, Tragediya i doblest Afgana [The tragedy and valor of the Afghanistan

veteran], Moscow: Iskona, 1995, 61-173. For accounts of Operation Magistral, see The Russian General Staff, 85-88; Lester W. Grau, The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan, Washington: National Defense University Press, 2005, 61-66; and B. V. Gromov, Ogranichennyi kontingent [Limited contingent], Moscow: Progress, 1994, 298-305.

3. This section paraphrased from The Russian General Staff, xxii-xxiv.

4. Barnett R. Rubin, The Fragmentation of Afghanistan, Second Edition, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, 146.

5. Up to this point, the diplomatic effort was designed to stave off criticism and conduct meaningless negotiations to prevent a negotiated settlement or a Soviet withdrawal.

6. The Foreign Ministers provided direction to the OIC.

7. Riaz M. Khan, Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal, Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1993, 11-20. Riaz Khan was the Director General for Afghanistan Affairs in the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He participated in all meetings on Afghanistan in the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference and all of the Geneva negotiating rounds (1982-1988).

8. Khan, 42.

9. Pravda, 26 February 1986 at cited by Khan, 146.

10. Text found in Diego Cordovez & Selig S. Harrison, Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 389-397. This is a good account of the United Nations role in sponsoring the talks although it is not always accurate regarding the conflict. Ambassador Cordovez enjoys his comforts, and the book has the additional value as a guide to fine dining on the diplomatic circuit. Selig Harrison continues his predictable Reagan bashing throughout the work.

11. Rubin, 109.

12. Makhmut A. Gareev, Moya poslednyaya voyna [My last war], Moscow: INSAN, 1996, 73-74. General Gareev was the last Soviet senior military advisor to Afghanistan. He served after the departure of the 40th Army.

13. Khan, 56.

14. Khan, 56-64.

15. Khan, 178.

16. Khan, 147.

17. Gareev, 287-288.
18. The Soviet armed forces of the Ministry of the Interior were the MVD and the Soviet armed forces of the Ministry of State Security were the KGB. In the Soviet model, the frontier forces were under the KGB. The Afghans put the frontier forces under the Ministry of Defense.
19. Map legend from official map of the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense provided to the author by Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy
20. Gromov, 323.
21. Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy, Plamya Afghana [The flame of the Afghan veterans], Moscow: Vagriis, 1999, 445. General (then Colonel) Lyakhovskiy was a member of General Varrenikov's Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense that served in Afghanistan. Their job was to advise and assist the 40th Army in planning while keeping the Ministry informed.
22. Map derived from official map of the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense provided to the author by Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy. Hommy Rosado converted all the maps used in this study.
23. Gareev, 120.
24. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 431.
25. Map derived from official map of the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense provided to the author by Aleksandr Lyakhovsky.
26. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 439.
27. Khan, 188-189.
28. Khan, 231. A Loya Jirga is a council of tribal chiefs, village elders and other political/social leaders from throughout Afghanistan. It is convened for extraordinary national functions.
29. Gareev, 109-110.
30. The Russian General Staff, 13.
31. Gromov, 306. Boris Gromov argues that there were actually three stages to the withdrawal. The first was conducted in October 1986, when the Soviets publicly withdrew six regiments from Afghanistan as a sign to the Soviet military and the Afghan government that the withdrawal was really going to take place. The Soviets claim that the regiments were three air defense regiments, a tank regiment and two motorized rifle regiments. Western sources indicate that these were probably the air defense and tank regiments of the 5th, 108th and 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions—forces that were not needed for guerrilla war. During this time, the Soviets brought in another Spetsnaz brigade and two motorized rifle regiments, so it is a withdrawal, but not on the

scale advertised. Boris Gromov commanded the 40th Army during the withdrawal.

32. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 419.

33. The Russian General Staff, 33.

34. Map derived from an official map of the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense provided to the author by Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy. The legend on the original map is included as chart 2.

35. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya...,419

36. Gromov, 306-307 and Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 419.

37. Map legend from official map of the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense provided to the author by Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy.

38. Gromov, 309 and Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 420.

39. Gromov, 307-308 and Lyakhovskiy, Plamya...,419-420.

40. Gromov, 314.

41. Gromov, 311-312.

42. Gromov, 312. Detailed charts of the material transferred at each site are available at Lyakhovskiy, Tragediya..., Appendix 12. Of particular interest, they show which Afghan Armed Forces (MOD, MVD or *Khad*) received what commodities.

43. Gareev, 85.

44. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 420-421.

45. For an examination of the British withdrawal from Aden, see Les Grau, "Urban control in Aden: The British Experience, 1964-1967" in Urban Population Control in a Counterinsurgency, by Mounir Elkamri, Lester W. Grau, Laurie King-Irani, Amanda S. Mitchell and Lenny Tasa-Benet, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS, October 2004.

46. Gromov, 313-314.

47. Gromov, 313-314.

48. Gromov, 311 and 316.

49. Gromov, 316-319.

50. Gromov, 325.
51. Map derived from an official map of the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense provided to the author by Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy. The legend on the original map is included as chart 3.
52. Gromov, 328.
53. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 452-453.
54. Gareev, 329.
55. Gromov, 326-328.
56. Lyakhovskiy, Plamya..., 503.
57. Gromov, 329.
58. Gromov, 330. There is a detailed spreadsheet of the sequencing of the withdrawal of Soviet forces during Phase Two in Lyakhovskiy, Tragediya..., Appendix 10.
59. Map derived from The General Staff, 90.
60. Gareev, 77.
61. Gareev, 129-150.