

Box 6.1 SOVIET LESSONS LEARNED

From 1979 until 1989, the Soviet Union fought a grueling war in Afghanistan. The Soviets invaded the country ostensibly to support the pro-Soviet communist leadership and to “stabilize the country.”ⁱ They expected a quick and successful military operation, but the plan backfired in the face of significant resistance from US- and Pakistani-backed mujahidin, the Kabul regime’s weak capacity for governance, and Afghanistan’s unforgiving geography.ⁱⁱ

Soon after the invasion, the war “devolved into a fight for the control of the limited lines of communication, [specifically] the road network which connected the cities of Afghanistan with each other and to Pakistan and the Soviet Union.”ⁱⁱⁱ Despite the Soviets’ massive influx of troops, which at the height of the war topped 100,000, the mujahidin became skilled at conducting ambushes on Afghanistan’s road network. These disrupted Soviet supply lines and contributed to heavy personnel and equipment losses, including “11,389 trucks, 1,314 armored personnel carriers, 147 tanks, [and] 433 artillery pieces.”^{iv} The mujahidin’s weapons of choice against the convoys included “antitank, antipersonnel, and dummy mines, as well as controlled mines and improvised explosive charges.”^v

In the face of repeated losses, the Soviets eventually learned that for a convoy escort to have a chance at success, it needed dedicated security units with a rapid reaction capability; armored vehicles, armed with sufficient firepower and forces ready for ground combat; route reconnaissance units reinforced with ground forces to secure flanks and identify ambush sites; planned air and artillery support; engineers embedded with the convoys for route clearance; and operational security underpinned by unpredictability of movement.^{vi}

(Box continues)