

Russian envoy cautions US on Afghan troops surge

By [Douglas Birch](#)

Global Research, September 13, 2009

[Associated Press](#) 12 September 2009

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KABUL — Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan has some advice for top NATO commanders fighting the Taliban based on the Soviet Union's bitter experience battling Islamist insurgents here in the 1980s: Don't bring more troops.

"The more troops you bring the more troubles you will have here," Zamir Kabulov, a blunt-spoken veteran diplomat, told The Associated Press in an interview.

In 2002, he noted, there were roughly 5,000 U.S. soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and the Taliban controlled just a small corner of the country's southeast.

"Now we have Taliban fighting in the peaceful Kunduz and Baghlan (provinces) with your (NATO's) 100,000 troops," he said this week, sitting on a couch in the Russian Embassy in Kabul. "And if this trend is the rule, if you bring here 200,000 soldiers, all of Afghanistan will be under the Taliban."

Kabulov served as a Soviet diplomat in Afghanistan from 1983 to 1987, during the height of the Kremlin's 10-year Afghan war, when Soviet troop levels peaked at 140,000.

The Soviet war here, which is estimated to have cost the lives of 14,500 Soviet soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Afghans, ended in 1989 in a humiliating withdrawal.

Kabulov has little sympathy for the U.S. or NATO. He said the U.S. and its allies are competing with Russia for influence in the energy-rich region.

But the 55-year-old envoy speaks from experience, and NATO leaders have sought his advice.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the new top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, asked Kabulov a number of "precise" questions about the Soviet war at a diplomatic function last month, the Russian envoy said.

McChrystal is supervising the expansion of U.S. combat forces to 68,000 and is likely to soon request thousands of more troops. Forty-one other NATO countries have another 35,000 troops here.

Air Force Lt. Col. Tadd Sholtis, a public affairs officer assigned to the NATO commander's staff, said: "Gen. McChrystal is a voracious student of Afghan history and welcomes any opportunity to learn from people with experience in Afghanistan or perspectives on our situation here. That certainly includes the Russians."

While Kabulov called raising troop levels a mistake, he said he approved of McChrystal's

overall strategy, which includes holding and clearing Taliban areas, training more Afghan security forces and better-coordinated intelligence efforts.

But he said the NATO commander faces daunting challenges.

“Gen. McChrystal is trying to do his best to make this mission a success and to reduce the number of casualties of his soldiers, which is very noble and normal,” Kabulov said. “But I’m afraid at this stage it will be very difficult for him to change the direction” of the war.

The Soviet war here was by most accounts a brutal one, with Soviet forces mounting indiscriminate attacks on civilians. But in Kabulov’s view, the war effort was successful overall, though crippled in the end by the decline and fall of the Soviet Union.

The U.S. and NATO, he said, made the same fundamental mistake the Kremlin made after its December 1979 invasion, when Soviet special forces killed President Hafizullah Amin and Moscow replaced Amin’s Communist regime with another judged more loyal.

“We should have left Afghanistan as soon as possible after the job had been done,” Kabulov said. “It should not have taken more than six months. Same as you. You came and you stayed. And all the problems have started.”

In some ways, Kabulov, named ambassador to Afghanistan by then President Vladimir Putin in 2004, is an unlikely figure to be advising NATO.

The New York Times said in October 2008 that he served covertly as the KGB’s Kabul resident, or top officer, during the Soviet war. But when asked about this, Kabulov insisted he was just a diplomat.

“My career was quite transparent and well known,” he said. His only role in Afghanistan during the Soviet war, he said, was as the embassy’s second secretary, serving as press attache, from 1983 to 1987.

While NATO has made some of the same mistakes the Soviets made in Afghanistan, in some ways the Kremlin was more successful, Kabulov said.

The Soviets, he asserted, were better than NATO at providing security in major cities and along main highways. And he said the Soviets completed more major construction and development projects.

The Soviet government bankrolled those efforts out of its own pocket, he said, in contrast to the U.S. and its Western allies, which have made what amount to charity appeals at donor conferences.

“We never arranged international conferences with high pledges of dozens of billions of dollars which never came to this country,” he said.

And Kabulov said the Soviets trained and employed Afghans, rather than importing highly paid and, in his view, pampered foreign contractors. When it comes to Westerners, he said, “guards also need guards.”

Afghanistan, a resource-poor, landlocked country of mountainous deserts, has long played a

pivotal role in Moscow's dealings with the West.

In the 19th century, Russian and British spies and diplomats competed for access to markets here in what was known as "The Great Game." During the 1980s Afghanistan became the principal battlefield of the Cold War, as the U.S. covertly supported Muslim resistance groups fighting the Soviets.

Today, Kabulov said, Afghanistan remains a strategic prize because of its location near the gas and oil fields of Iran, the Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

Russia has a major stake in NATO's success in Afghanistan, Kabulov said. If the alliance withdraws before Afghanistan is stabilized, he said, the aftershocks could weaken Moscow's allies throughout former Soviet Central Asia.

But the Kremlin has bitterly opposed NATO's expansion into former Eastern bloc and former Soviet countries, and has accused the alliance of trying to encircle and weaken Russia.

Kabulov said Russia has questions about NATO's intentions in Afghanistan, which he said lies outside of the alliance's "political domain." He suggested that Moscow is concerned that NATO is building permanent bases in the region.

"We agreed and supported the United States and later on NATO operation in Afghanistan under the slogan of counterterrorism" after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S., he said.

"And we believed that this agenda is a genuine one and there is no other hidden agendas. But we are watching carefully what is going on here with the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure in all of Afghanistan."

From Russia's perspective, Kabulov said, NATO should accomplish its goals in Afghanistan and quickly leave.

"We want NATO to successfully and as soon as possible complete its task and to say goodbye and to go back to their own geographical and political domain," he said. "But before their departure they should help establish a real, independent, strong, prosperous, peaceful Afghanistan with self-sustainable government."

NATO's Sholtis said the purpose of the alliance's presence in Afghanistan is "not some kind of imperial project," but an effort to stabilize the country.

"U.S. and NATO officials have been clear that we have no long-term interest in a military presence in Afghanistan," he said.

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