

Afghan Air Wars

Soviet, US and NATO Operations, 1979–2021

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At first blush, air wars in Afghanistan may not seem like an intuitive topic for air power theorists to consider. When one thinks of the record of the Afghan Air Force, images of World War II-style dogfights between the Allies and Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain don't immediately spring to mind. Nor did the Taliban infrastructure present an industrial base warranting a strategic bombing campaign on the scale of those against Imperial Japan or North Vietnam.

However, the time from the beginning of 1979 through the end of 2021 is a remarkably dynamic one in the advancement of air combat technology and combat tactics that range from surface-to-air weapons to the introduction of unmanned aircraft systems. Furthermore, the successive combat operations of first the Soviet Union in the 1980s and then the U.S.-led coalition after the 9/11 attacks encompass a broad range of military missions for both fixed-wing and rotary-wing air power, including airborne logistics, rapid troop deployment, surveillance and reconnaissance, in-flight refueling, and aeromedical evacuation.

Additionally, the physical environment of Afghanistan poses unique challenges for air combat operations. Many airfields, such as those at Kabul and

Bagram, are at significant altitude above sea level where thinner air impacts engine performance and wing lift, potentially lengthening takeoff distances and reducing load capacity. High summer month temperatures—when ground combat in Afghanistan and the ensuing need for close air support is historically at its peak levels—further exacerbate the aerodynamic challenges. Afghanistan's mountainous terrain and limited road and rail infrastructure curtail surface transit in ways that necessitate air transport even for nonmilitary purposes. All of these factors provide a rich environment for a student of air power to learn from and to inform the future of air combat.

Michael Napier's *Afghan Air Wars: Soviet, US and NATO Operations, 1979–2021*, is a richly illustrated coffee table book that tackles this topic. The primary value of this book is in the extensively curated, high-resolution, glossy photographs

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of all types of aircraft, which appear on almost every page of the approximately three hundred-page book. It is a story told principally in five parts: the Soviet era during the 1980s, the initial coalition invasion in the early 2000s, the growth of the Taliban insurgency in the mid-2000s, the Obama-era Surge in the early 2010s, and the drawdown in the late 2010s through the eventual U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

Many of the book's key narrative moments will be familiar to those who have followed the Afghan conflict through other lenses of ground combat or covert action. The Soviet invasion in the 1980s was one-sided in the sky until the U.S. provision of surface-to-air missiles to the Afghan resistance, when during a roughly year-and-a-half turning point in 1984–85, a tenfold increase in surface-to-air missile launches forced a drastic reevaluation of Soviet tactics and deployments. In the twenty-first century, the use of unmanned systems like the Predator drone, initially deployed as prototypes under the shadowy guise of intelligence services and then more generally as widespread tools in the Department of Defense arsenal, became a critical part in the United States' counterterrorism hunt for al-Qaeda and its associates.

Perhaps less well appreciated generally were the workhorses of modern combat: the air cargo and tanker craft. These were crucial for the U.S. coalition first to provide timely logistics to the battlefield in a landlocked country, and then eventually for the withdrawal from that same country in 2021. These cargo craft as well as their flight and ground crews were critical to sustaining military and humanitarian logistics supplies for two decades. At the strategic level, cargo planes brought material into and out of Afghanistan as an alternative to navigating sometimes politically challenging ground routes through Central and South Asia. Within Afghanistan, fixed- and rotary-wing transport provided routine supply to austere locations and rapidly provided material to forward units in contact to press operational advantages. Because flights sometimes originated

from basing in the Gulf States or involved naval units in the Indian Ocean, in-flight refueling was a critical extender for range and duration of flight missions.

In 2021, these logistics craft had a last mission, steadily bringing people and supplies out of the country. That June, approximately nine hundred C-17 loads left Bagram before the United States closed that air base. At Kabul airport, with its lone runway for both take-offs and landings and at constant risk from potential ground antiaircraft fire, approximately thirty to fifty international flights left daily during the last month of the U.S. mission, evacuating an average of 7,500 people with them according to the author's figures. During August drawdown operations, one C-17 heroically flew with a load of 823 people in a memorable photograph naturally included in this book, which is about three times its normal safe passenger count. In the final few short weeks of the U.S. mission, aviation was responsible for moving the equivalent of half of Afghanistan's fifth largest city out of the country—a wildly successful achievement by any measure and a noncombat mission for military aircraft that should be deeply appreciated by aviation aficionados.

A reader critical of this book would focus on the extensive use of jargon that will alienate a casual reader. The text makes heavy use of specific terminology for unit designations and weapons armaments without context for the layman on what they are or why they matter. Narrative anecdotes mention specific pilots by name without any introduction or epilogue to explain the level of detail. In many places, the book reads like a compilation of mission logs, contrasting in writing style with other air power books that are a tactical analysis of competing weapons systems or a journalistic memorializing of medal-winning heroism. Furthermore, the production quality could be improved, as there are several typographical errors, and the binding feels like it might not hold up over time due to being laid open in ways that showcase the richness of the photography. ■