

Five Crucial Reasons the US Began Its Decades-long Involvement in Afghanistan

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1) Iran's independence

The Iranian revolution was a leading factor which set Jimmy Carter's government to incite division and conflict in Afghanistan, which shares an extensive western border with Iran.

From the early spring of 1979, plans were formulating in Washington to surround, isolate and overthrow the new Islamic Republic of Iran; while simultaneously a US strategy was developing to back the Afghan mujahideen jihadists, with president Carter officially sanctioning such support on 3 July 1979. Afghanistan was an important piece on the chess board in this imperialist game, as its neighbour Iran had made the swift transformation from US client state to staunch enemy of America.

Carter's successor as president, Ronald Reagan, said that “Iran encompasses some of the most critical geography in the world”, of which Afghanistan is interlinked with. Reagan noted also that Iran occupies “a critical position from which adversaries could interfere with oil flows from the Arab states that border the Persian Gulf. Apart from geography, Iran's oil deposits are important to the long-term health of the world economy”. (1)

As the Americans knew too well, their old enemy the Soviet Union was in early 1979 watching Iran's independence with glee – while American allies in the region, like the dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, were hardly reassured. Of further concern to Carter was that, in late April 1978, a Marxist-Leninist government had taken power in the Afghan capital Kabul.

On 30 April 1978 Harold Saunders, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, warned that Washington should “seek to avoid driving the new regime [in Afghanistan] into a closer embrace with the Soviet Union than it might wish”. (2)

On 17 May 1978, an unspecified number of Soviet Communist Party advisers arrived in Kabul, to assist the Afghan communist leader Nur Muhammad Taraki in safeguarding his

government (3). President Taraki's position was vulnerable, as his rapid and progressive reforms faced resistance from fundamentalist and conservative muslims. Among those Russians arriving in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) on 17 May were Yuri Gankovsky and Nikolai Simonenko, the latter holding the status of head of the Afghanistan sector for the Soviet Union.

On 27 June 1978, a group of 48 Soviet officials landed in the Afghan capital, so as to provide counsel to Taraki's cabinet. In mid-July 1978 David D. Newsom, the US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, said that the US should continue a "monitoring action" on Afghanistan. According to president Taraki following a meeting with Newsom, the American diplomat said he felt there was a "new chill" in US-Afghan relations. (4)

On 23 August 1978 Taraki, reflecting on anti-communist skirmishes in Afghanistan which had occurred that summer, told the Soviet representative in Kabul, Alexander Puzanov, that he had freshly uncovered "an anti-government plot" (5). Taraki claimed it involved the US, West Germany, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and also China.

In January 1979 on the recommendation of the American ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs, the US State Department proposed a \$310,000 program for 1979-1980, in order to train Afghan officers. (6)

2) Prestige

The presence of a new far-left government in Afghanistan was, from the American point of view, serious enough, while Iran's revolution was especially grating with the power brokers in Washington.

Dean Acheson, former US Secretary of State, said in 1962 that a reaction by America when its "power, position and prestige" are challenged is not a "legal issue", and that the US should feel no constraints by international law in such circumstances (7). Acheson was a lawyer too one might add, and he was speaking here to the American Society of International Law.

On 14 November 1978 the Soviet diplomat in Afghanistan, Puzanov, outlined that "already more than 700 Soviet advisers and experts work on a free-of-charge basis in civil ministries and in the military field in Afghanistan". (8)

Eight days later on 22 November 1978, the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev said Russian material assistance should go to "such states as the People's Republic of Yemen, Ethiopia, Angola, Afghanistan, and some others".

On 5 December 1978, presidents Brezhnev and Taraki signed a milestone 20 year Treaty of Friendship centred on "co-operation in the military field". The treaty stipulated that Taraki could request Soviet military aid, if he felt threatened. The official response in Washington to this deal was apparently mild concern, but in private the Carter White House was increasingly disconcerted at the Soviet-Afghan links (9). It was a natural development for Moscow to pursue such relations, considering the close proximity of Afghanistan to the Soviet Union coupled with the political leanings of Taraki's government.

On 17 December 1978, Puzanov informed Taraki of Moscow's decision to furnish the Afghan communists with military supplies and armaments, worth 24 million roubles (10). In addition, Afghanistan would receive a bonus loan of 12 million roubles, with the Kremlin

allowing the Afghans 10 years to pay it back, a welcome gift.

3) Strategic importance

By the spring of 1979, the Soviet Union looked to be in a position where it could start making inroads into US hegemony in the Middle East. Were this to unfold, and if Moscow could avoid becoming caught in a spider's web in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that the USSR would have collapsed in 1991.

Afghanistan is situated in the heart of the long-coveted Eurasia: lying beside the Middle East, China, South Asia and Central Asia. It can be remembered that close collaboration, between Afghanistan and Soviet Russia, was not merely a phenomenon that can be recalled in living memory.

The Belarusian-born Soviet diplomat, Andrei Gromyko, wrote that

“Shortly after the October 1917 revolution the Soviet Republic and its neighbour, Afghanistan, established diplomatic relations. Soviet political and material support was one of the chief factors in Afghanistan's victory, in its almost 100 year struggle for independence from its British colonisers. It is therefore not surprising that Soviet-Afghan relations have long been of a friendly nature”. (11)

In January 1979 Zbigniew Brzezinski, the powerful National Security Advisor, had gained control over US covert operational planning with president Carter's full support. Brzezinski, born in Warsaw, Poland, was by instinct hostile to the USSR, and it had long bothered him how, in the post-World War II period, Poland was under the Soviet sphere of control. Even the New York Times, continually supportive of aggressive US militarism, admitted that Brzezinski had “a rigid hatred of the Soviet Union”. (12)

One of Brzezinski's great hopes was to have a role in harming the Soviets, “of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War”, he insisted to Carter. From early 1979, Brzezinski and other Carter administration officials were pushing for Washington to begin clandestine activities in Afghanistan, and to support the mujahideen insurgency there. A US National Security Archive chronology highlighted,

“Having control over covert operations enables Brzezinski to take the first steps toward a more aggressively anti-Soviet Afghan policy, without the State Department's knowing very much about it”. (13)

By early February 1979, moves had already been made by the Americans against the Afghan communists (14). On 2 February, the Washington Post reported on a joint program run by the CIA and Pakistan's ISI, in which at least 2,000 Afghan militants were being trained in former Pakistani army bases beside Afghanistan.

4) Overthrowing the USSR

The Carter administration's plan to suck the Russians into the Afghan trap was intent on delivering a heavy, perhaps grievous blow, to the USSR. Brzezinski said that US covert actions in Afghanistan, which largely enticed the Soviets to engage militarily there, had induced “a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire”. (15)

The West's desire to eliminate communist Russia had preceded the Second World War. At Soviet Russia's founding when World War I was reaching its end, the leading Western states (America, Britain and France) and their allies had attempted to oust the Bolshevik government by invading Russia in 1918. Part of the aim was to restore a pro-Western, White Russian outfit in the Kremlin.

Through Winston Churchill's firm support, in autumn 1919 the British deployed poison gas in northern Russia against Bolshevik troops (16); and this despite the horrors of chemical warfare fresh in the memory from the First World War. Scholars and diplomats, like John Lewis Gaddis and George Kennan, traced the Cold War's origins to around 1917-1918.

By 1920, it was clear the Western military attack on Soviet Russia had failed to achieve its objectives. A generation later, with the defeat of Nazi Germany becoming a probability in World War II, the Soviet Union was again identified as the West's principal foe from 1942-1943.

US Brigadier General Leslie Groves assumed control of the Manhattan Project (America's atomic bomb program) in September 1942. In March 1944 Groves confided to the Polish physicist Joseph Rotblat,

"You realise of course that the main purpose of this [Manhattan] project is to subdue the Russians".

On another occasion Groves remarked again on America's atomic bomb development,

"There was never, from about two weeks from the time I took charge of the project, any illusion on my part that Russia was our enemy, and the project was conducted on that basis". (17)

This crucial testimony from a prominent US military official like Groves, indicates that as early as October 1942 the Soviets were beginning to be thought of as the Americans' next major adversary.

5) The Domino Theory

- Within the space of a year (1978-79), the US had seen both Afghanistan and Iran become independent of its influence.

It sparked fears in Washington about the recurring domino theory: that other countries could fall like dominoes outside of US control, with revolution in Iran potentially spreading to nearby Iraq and Saudi Arabia, two further states rich in oil reserves. This was among the worst of scenarios for the White House. It was, for example, partly out of fear of dominoes falling that US governments launched wars of aggression in Indochina from the early 1960s.

On 15 February 1979, the Carter administration issued an official protest about purported Soviet activity in Iran of an "anti-American" nature. (18)

Five days later on 20 February 1979 president Carter, presumably referring to the Soviet Union, warned "other nations" against meddling in Iran, during a speech he gave at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. Carter continued that any such interference "will have serious consequences and will affect our broader relationship with them". (19)

On 1 March 1979, US government departments conceded that the vital CIA TACKSMAN Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) sites – which had been located in northern Iran – were now closed down by the new Iranian leadership. In the Cold War era, the most important sites operated by the CIA were precisely these TACKSMAN intelligence facilities; which among other things enabled the Americans to secretly monitor Soviet missile tests. (20)

In the spring of 1979, the CIA was surveying Afghanistan as a replacement for its TACKSMAN sites (21). In mid-March 1979, an anti-communist revolt erupted around the ancient city of Herat, in western Afghanistan. It lasted for just a few days but resulted in many thousands of deaths. Among the men behind this insurrection was the Afghan-born Ismail Khan, who would later command a large mujahideen force against the Red Army in Afghanistan.

During the Herat revolt, Pakistani author Ahmed Rashid wrote that Khan's forces were responsible for "killing Soviet and communist Afghan officers" and "Hundreds of Russians were killed" (22). Among the dead were some of the families of Soviet officers and military advisers. Herat's civilian population, caught between the exchanges of gunfire and heavy weaponry, suffered a loss of life running into the low thousands at a minimum.

The 72-year-old Brezhnev was irate when informed about the Russian death toll in Herat. He agreed to increase military aid to the Afghan communists. However, no evidence existed through 1979 that Soviet troops were directly participating in combat operations in Afghanistan (23), until the Russian military offensive began in late December that year.

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Notes

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Featured image: Brzezinski visits Osama bin Laden and other Mujahideen fighters during training.

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