

Thirty years since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan

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In the press coverage of President Barack Obama's recent decision to deploy more US troops to Afghanistan, a historical milestone has gone curiously unmentioned—the 30th anniversary of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, which began on December 27, 1979.

An examination of the circumstances of this event undermines Obama's claims that American policy in Afghanistan is motivated by a "war on terror," revealing instead the imperialist aims behind US policy.

At the time, President Jimmy Carter seized on the Soviet intervention—which aimed to suppress mujahadeen rebels fighting the Soviet-backed regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)—to undo a decade of détente and escalate tensions with the USSR. This critical decision unleashed a conflict that would ultimately devastate Afghan society.

It emerged only years later that the Soviet invasion was itself a response to a deliberate US attempt to set up a new military front against the USSR in Afghanistan. Even before the Soviet invasion, Washington was secretly assisting the mujahadeen, with the aim of provoking a Soviet intervention and trapping the USSR in a bloody quagmire. The US foreign policy establishment's ultimate goal in pursuing this policy was to destroy the USSR and promote an expansion of US power in strategically located, oil-rich Central Asia.

In his 1996 memoir *From the Shadows*, Robert Gates, the current US secretary of defense, recalls US

deliberations in the winter and spring of 1979. He describes a March 30, 1979 meeting: "Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Newsom stated that it was US policy to [demonstrate] to the Pakistanis, Saudis and others our resolve to stop the extension of Soviet influence in the Third World... Walt Slocombe, representing Defense, asked if there was value in keeping the Afghan insurgency going, 'sucking the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire?'"

On July 3, 1979, President Carter authorized the CIA to fund and carry out propaganda for the Afghan rebels. The CIA reportedly sent its first shipments to the mujahadeen that summer.

The Kremlin Stalinists, guided by purely military and nationalist calculations, fell squarely into the trap set by Washington. The Soviet leadership thought that Afghan President Hafizullah Amin, from the PDPA's Khalq faction, was negotiating a separate deal with Washington to halt US aid to the mujahadeen. Moscow feared that a pro-US regime in Kabul might let the US deploy Pershing missiles to Afghanistan, where they would be aimed at the USSR.

It also feared that the US would use Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks for national-separatist propaganda aimed at Soviet Central Asia. Carter administration National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (now one of the main mentors of Barack Obama) publicly advocated an ethnic carve-up of the USSR.

As Soviet forces invaded, KGB commandos assassinated Amin. In his place, Moscow installed Babrak Karmal, leader of the conservative Parcham wing of the PDPA, as president. This was a signal to

the ruling classes that the PDPA would abandon its partial land redistribution and other reform measures. The Kremlin's strategy was to arrange a deal with Afghanistan's tribal elites, while crushing resistance to the PDPA regime with mass bombing raids.

Washington's policy towards the Soviet-Afghan war was marked by unsurpassed cynicism. It unleashed a barrage of sanctimonious protests against an invasion it had helped promote, including organizing a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. As it sent billions of dollars in weaponry to the mujahadeen, it publicly denied that it was giving the rebels any assistance.

Though Washington proclaimed that its Afghan proxies were "freedom fighters," the mujahadeen and their international backers were social reactionaries. With the assistance of right-wing Muslim regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the US promoted Islamic fundamentalist warlords within the resistance. Washington turned a blind eye as they exterminated competing mujahadeen factions and funded themselves through large-scale opium sales.

When the mujahadeen proved incapable of organizing attacks on Kabul and strategic roadways, the CIA armed and trained international Muslim recruits to launch terrorist attacks and suicide bombings. The young Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden oversaw these global recruitment networks, which later formed the core of Al Qaeda.

These networks gathered together recruits from the Muslim Brotherhood, those influenced by extremist Saudi Islam, and all the forces in the Muslim world that had historically been mobilized against the powerful socialist traditions of the Middle Eastern workers and intellectuals, including in Afghanistan.

Rising losses and popular discontent in the USSR prompted Moscow to withdraw its forces in 1989. This was followed by the Soviet collapse in 1991 and the 1992 collapse of the PDPA regime, as leading PDPA officials passed into the service of competing mujahadeen warlords. Afghanistan descended into civil war.

The architects of US policy in Afghanistan have recorded their callous indifference to the consequences of their policies. Asked in 1998 if he felt remorse about the Afghan tragedy, Brzezinski replied bluntly: "What's more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"

The world still faces the consequences of this eruption of US imperialist influence into Central Asia. Great power competition—unleashed by the Afghan civil war—for dominant influence over Afghanistan, strategically located at the center of the Eurasian land mass, initially saw an attempt by the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to unify Afghanistan under the fundamentalist Taliban militia in the mid-1990s. It culminated in 2001 in the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan—carried out under the fraudulent banner of a "war on terror"—against the same forces Washington had supported in the 1980s and 1990s.

As it seeks to use its position in Afghanistan to enforce its hegemony over an unstable Asian continent, Washington faces the toxic political results of its policy in 1979: Afghan narco-warlords, international terrorist networks, ex-Soviet republics socially devastated by the collapse of the USSR, and the general poverty of the region.

The catastrophes of the present emerge from crimes committed in the past. The history of US imperialism's first major push into Central Asia must be understood in order to assess the consequences the current US escalation will have for the region and the world.

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