AFGHANISTAN: THE SOVIET UNION’S VIETNAM

The former Soviet Union was bogged down in Afghanistan for a decade after Moscow’s 1979 invasion, but the way it was dragged in owed a lot to US designs.

Amal Hamdan | 23 Apr 2003 19:01 GMT

When former US National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski bragged about prompting the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan so that it could get its "Vietnam" he was not making an empty boast.

Afghanistan was the ground for one of the last Cold War battles between the United States and the Soviet Union, after the Red Army rolled into the country on December 24, 1979.

For the next decade the Soviet Union became bogged down in a guerrilla war against anti-Soviet mujahideen. Faced with rugged, mountainous terrain and stiff resistance, the supposedly invincible Red Army was humbled, leading according to some experts, to the empire’s collapse. Observers give a number of reasons for the Soviet invasion. Until 1973 Afghanistan was a monarchy led by King Mohammad Zahir Shah before he was overthrown by his cousin Mohammad Daoud, whose party consisted of pro-Communist elements.

Daoud was overthrown by the Afghan communists. Internal struggles among the communists led to another coup in which Hafizullah Amin took the reins of power. According to experts, the Soviets perceived Amin as a potential Tito - he was in touch with both China and the United States and the Soviets saw Afghanistan slipping out of its orbit.

Cold War battlefield?

According to former CIA Director Robert Gates, US intelligence services began aiding the anti-Soviet Union mujahideen six months ahead of the Red Army’s invasion.

Brzezinski said he convinced Carter to sign the first directive for secret aid to opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul on July 3, 1979 in an effort to goad the Red Army into invading, in a 1998 interview.

“I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention,” said Brzezinski.

The former National Security Advisor’s plan was a success: the Afghan quagmire forced the Soviet Union to stay in the Central Asian state for a decade.

The initial thrust of the Soviet invasion was made by some 40,000 troops. By late 1985 this number swelled to 118,000, of which 10,000 were reported to be in the Soviet secret police and other special units trying to face down the Afghan resistance.

Two days after the Soviet invasion, Brzezinski sent a memo to the US President expressing concern that, "if the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan...the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled.”

But Harrison said the Soviet Union was never scheming towards the Indian Ocean, adding Brzezinski promoted confrontation between Washington and Moscow in the Afghan arena.
“Brzezinski’s hardline policy towards the Soviet Union was reflected in his policy towards Afghanistan,” he said.

**Blowback**

Over the ten years the CIA pumped some $2 billion of aid, weapons and logistic support to the mujahadeen, who fervently believed they were fighting a jihad.

“Washington was using resistance groups for its own anti-Soviet purposes,” said Selig Harrison, South Asia expert at the Washington based Centre for International Policy.

Brzezinski knew that a Communist country’s invasion of a Muslim state would raise the hackles of the Muslim world. In a memo to former President Carter the national security advisor said, “Muslim countries will be concerned and we might be in a position to exploit this.”

The mujahideen put up fierce resistance. They employed guerrilla tactics against the Soviets by launching successful raids before disappearing into the numerous caves tucked into Afghanistan’s many mountains.

The majority of aid from Washington went to the faction led by strongman Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who former US Ambassador to Afghanistan Robert Neumann described as “an extremist and a very violent man.”

In 1987 the United States provided hand-held Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to the resistance fighters. With these deadly missiles the mujahideen shot down Soviet planes and helicopters daily.

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 some elements of the mujahideen evolved into groups Washington today includes in its so-called war against terror, including the Taliban.

“The blowback effect is quite far-flung,” said Harrison. “We still have Stinger missiles turning up in strange places,” he added.

While it seemed like a good idea at the time to provide the mujahideen with CIA training, funding and equipment, Afghanistan evolved into a breeding ground for Islamist groups which had little love for the US either.

The most prominent figure to rise from Afghanistan is Osama bin Laden, leader of the al-Qaeda group, accused by Washington of masterminding the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington.

The CIA followed a “myopic, short-sited policy” in Afghanistan by focusing its energies on only trying to make it hot for the Soviets and disregarding agendas of groups it supported, said Harrison. “These groups were using (CIA) aid to fight the Soviets to prepare for the day to fight the United States,” he said.

When asked if he regretted supporting these factions to fight the Soviets, Brzezinski replied, “What was more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of central Europe and the end of the Cold war?”

From the onset of the invasion the United States had no genuine concern for the problems of the Central Asian state, said Harrison. When Washington was satisfied it had beaten the Soviets, it turned its back on Afghanistan and allowed the country to slide into turmoil.