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“Excellent Propaganda”

Zbigniew Brzezinski’s Narrative for the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

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The series of regime changes in Kabul that resulted in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979 is a story of poor intelligence, false narratives, and missed opportunities to avoid conflict for both the Soviet Union and the United States. When a small faction of Afghan communists overthrew the government of Mohammed Daoud Khan and replaced him with Nur Muhammad Taraki on April 30, 1978, the United States and the Soviet Union embarked on a path of mutual suspicion and lack of trust that led to an American involvement in Afghanistan that is ongoing – forty years later. As the architect of the American response from its very beginning, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor, bears responsibility for much of what happened. Recently declassified documents published by the State Department show Brzezinski fully understood that the Soviets became mired in Afghanistan within six weeks of the invasion, and sought ways to withdraw from the landlocked country.¹ The documents also show the Soviets had invaded with regional - not global - goals to shore up a communist government on their southern border, fearing that without their help, it could be replaced by either another non-aligned government, or, a pro-American one.² Brzezinski knew what Soviet leaders wanted from the United States: to stop secretly providing weaponry to the Mujahadeen, the Afghan rebels who comprised the armed resistance to the USSR.³ If the Americans allowed Moscow to consolidate new Afghan President Taraki’s government in Kabul, Soviet leaders planned to remove their troops as soon as possible. However, Brzezinski pushed Carter to engage in a harsh response of covertly arming the rebellion.⁴

¹ Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, January 15, 1980, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 478.

² Ibid.

³ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, February 11, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 575.

⁴ Memorandum From Thomas Thornton of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), February 26, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 601.

Brzezinski's decision to confront the Soviets in Afghanistan compelled leaders inside the Kremlin to remain in Afghanistan for years. As former Major General and leading Russian authority on the Soviet war in Afghanistan, Alexander Lyakhovsky, recalled of Soviet leaders in February 1980, "withdrawal of troops would have meant a concession to the aggressive policy of the United States; would have strengthened the positions of the proponents of the harsh course toward the Soviet Union in the United States and in other Western countries, would have hurt the prestige of the Soviet Union."⁵ As soon as Soviet officials concluded the United States would continue to arm the Mujahadeen, they resolved to stay and slog it out, whatever the cost, no matter how long it took, rather than back down to an American-supported rebellion on their southern border.⁶

Brzezinski prepared for the long fight. The Soviet invasion alarmed the national security adviser because he viewed it as part of a larger unraveling of U.S. influence in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. As Brzezinski warned, "an arc of crisis stretches along the shores of the Indian Ocean, with fragile social and political structures in a region of vital importance to us threatened with fragmentation. The resulting political chaos could well be filled by elements hostile to our values and sympathetic to our adversaries."⁷ The turmoil in the region and the increased Soviet presence in these areas stood out to Brzezinski as vital to the United States in this new phase of the Cold War. He feared the vacuum created by the absence of a strong American defense of this pivotal area.

Brzezinski's "arc of crisis" theory had gained such persistence in internal discussions in the Carter White House that the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, called it

⁵ Alexander Lyakhovsky, "On the Changing Mission of the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan, The Tragedy and Valor of Afghan," *The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Russian Documents and Memoirs*, National Security Archive, Doc. 14.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Iran: The Crescent of Crisis," *Time Magazine*, Jan. 15, 1979, 16.

“most excellent propaganda.”⁸ The NSA’s view of totalistic, global ambition regarding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan relied on a conscious choice he made, despite evidence to the contrary, of actual Soviet intentions in Afghanistan. Brzezinski believed the Soviets sent tanks into Afghanistan with larger ambitions to drive through Pakistan and India to the Gulf. His willful misunderstanding of that key point prompted the Carter administration to vastly increase the U.S. military and diplomatic presence in the region. The covert arming of the Mujahadeen via the CIA *would* have been a proper response to an invasion of Afghanistan as an opening salvo in a wider policy of Soviet hegemonic ambition. However, Soviet leaders never had such intentions.

Although many officials in the Carter administration participated in the U.S. response to the Soviet invasion, none looms as large as Brzezinski. In his memoirs, he says he recognized Soviet intentions well in advance and responded forcefully and correctly to those moves. But State Department documents released in December 2018, in addition to former Soviet-era primary sources made available through the Cold War International History Project, paint a more complex picture. They show Brzezinski misreading Soviet intentions, and being deeply involved in facilitating a response that later metastasized into something the United States could not control once the Reagan administration continued Jimmy Carter’s policy of arming the most radical elements of the Afghan rebellion. They also show little evidence supporting his view the Soviet war in Afghanistan significantly influenced the collapse of the Soviet Union, and ended the Cold War.

Despite the fact that Brzezinski’s efforts to increase the U.S. footprint in the Middle East have had such a consequential impact on American foreign policy during the past 40 years, scholars

⁸ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books, Random House, 1995), 420, 452.

are only beginning to understand the full weight of these moves during the final years of the Carter administration. Justin Vaïsse's recent biography of Brzezinski recounts the transition Brzezinski faced when his initial agenda fell by the wayside. Having engaged China as a Cold War ally, he initiated a framework focusing American military strength in the Persian Gulf on the heels of the Iranian revolution.⁹ Yet, Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker depict a Brzezinski contemptuous of the balance of power politics advocated during the Nixon-Ford administrations, wanting instead to confront the Soviets. But their focus is largely on how Brzezinski wanted to use China as a counter to Soviet power.¹⁰

David Crist notes in his study of U.S.-Iranian relations how Brzezinski linked the Middle East to the Cold War, pressing Carter to neglect traditional post-WWII focus on Europe and replacing it with an obsession on the Persian Gulf and the possibility of Soviet incursions there threatening the world's oil supply.¹¹ This strongly reflects the argument made by Olav Njolstad in 2004, and the growing consensus, articulated most recently by W. Taylor Fain, of how the U.S. shifted its priorities from the protection of Western Europe to the Indian Ocean.¹² Fain, however, views Brzezinski's "arc of crisis" as a result of a decade-long series of discussions, going back to Henry Kissinger, and not solely a result of Brzezinski himself.

All these authors rightly connect the creation and implementation of the arc of crisis strategy as the ground on which Brzezinski and the Carter administration built its response to the Soviet invasion. What they overlook, however, is how Brzezinski used the invasion to pursue his larger strategic objectives, and that he consciously overlooked a crucial point in his efforts: the Soviets

⁹ Justin Vaïsse, *Zbigniew Brzezinski, America's Grand Strategist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 272.

¹⁰ Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Beijing's Friend, Moscow's Foe," in Charles Gati, ed. *Zbig: The Strategy and Stagecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), 87.

¹¹ David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (London: Penguin Press, 2012), 36.

¹² W. Taylor Fain, "Conceiving of the 'Arc of Crisis' in the Indian Ocean Region," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 42:4 (September 2018): 694–719; Olav Njolstad, "Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in US Strategic Planning in the Carter Years," *Cold War History* 4 (April, 2004), 21-55.

did *not* invade Afghanistan with larger ambitions to drive through Pakistan and India to reach the warm waters of the Gulf.

Six weeks after the Red Army entered Afghanistan, Kremlin leaders knew they had made a serious mistake. When Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev originally authorized the 30,000 troops to cross their southern border, they anticipated engaging in a short-term mission to reinforce the Afghan Army, take control of the cities and supply routes in and out of the country, and install Babrak Karmal, an Afghan communist party leader, as the new head of the government. Behind closed doors, Moscow clearly stated its reason: “the Soviet leaders believed the step is intended to promote the interests of strengthening the state, and pursued no other goals.” This memo came from K.U. Chernenko, a Soviet politician and the fifth General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. His minutes of the meeting became an internal Politburo document kept secret for many years, indicating the goals of invasion as limited, and not including broader, expansionist plans.¹³

Instead, the Mujahadeen declared a jihad, a struggle or fight against the enemies of Islam, against the Soviet invaders. Although the Soviets had superior weaponry, and controlled all of the major cities within three months of the invasion, the Mujahadeen, taking advantage of the mountainous terrain, held 80 percent of the country. Within six weeks of the invasion, the U.S. intelligence community was predicting this could turn into their Vietnam.¹⁴

Moscow had hoped to set up the security necessary for the new Babrak Karmal government to establish itself and be able to resist political and military challenges. Nevertheless, within several months of the invasion, any hope of a quick turnaround evaporated. Originally, Soviet troops had

¹³ Alexander Lyakhovskiy, “On the Changing Mission of the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan, The Tragedy and Valor of Afghan,” *The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Russian Documents and Memoirs*, National Security Archive, Doc. 5.

¹⁴ Analysis Paper Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, February 21, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 594.

entered to save a revolutionary government from an erratic leader and to make sure Afghanistan did not give in to U.S. influence. Now, they were there to make sure Karmal's government, installed through Soviet intervention, would stay in power. However, it was impossible for Moscow to ignore the worries of the military. Andropov and the KGB senior commanders overruled them before the invasion, and while Soviet leaders hesitated to invade, they gave in to KGB influence. Now, the military, fighting what was shaping up to be an unwinnable war against a determined enemy, the Mujahadeen, told Moscow they should get out.

In early 1980, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, General Valentin Varennikov, and General Sergei Akhromeev, all top commanders, concurred that there was no military solution to the unfolding situation in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Meanwhile, in Moscow, the evidence suggested that some leaders were genuinely concerned about the consequences of keeping troops in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Proposals floated for the troops to come home. Top General and historian Alexander Lyakhovskiy cited a document from late February 1980 that suggested Brezhnev brought up the question of a withdrawal, but Andropov and Dmitry Ustinov, a politician and Marshall of the Soviet Union, talked him out of his proposal.¹⁷

The implications of Zbigniew Brzezinski's strategic, political, and intellectual mindset on what he believed Soviet intentions to be in the arc of crisis region are profound as far as their effects on American foreign policy during and after his tenure as National Security Advisor. When Jimmy Carter lost the 1980 election to Ronald Reagan, the Carter presidency seemed a failure, bogged down by Carter's lack of strong leadership. Reagan took over as a guardian of

¹⁵ Yuri Gankovskii, "Afghanistan: From Intervention to National Reconciliation," *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* 4:1 (Spring 1992): 134–135.

¹⁶ Alexander Lyakhovskiy, "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979," *Cold War International History Project*, Aleksandr Antonovich Lyakhovskiy, Translations by Gary Goldberg and Artemy Kalinovsky, Working Paper 51, January 2007.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

America's truest self; a bold and passionate defender of liberty at home and abroad who fully intended to correct a domestic and foreign policy that had veered off course under a weak Democratic administration. The Soviets needed warning, and if necessary, confrontation, as the Cold War reemerged into a new U.S.- Soviet power struggle. However, American foreign policy towards the USSR, set by Carter and based on the strategy of Brzezinski, escalated under Reagan. With the arming of the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan, Brzezinski watched his grand theory of Soviet trouble-making in the arc of crisis march America to what has now become a 40-year involvement in the affairs of the Afghan people. Brzezinski's strategic thinking had burrowed itself into the bones of U.S. policy. As a counter to former NSA and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's focus on détente, Brzezinski's inherent mistrust of the Soviet Union pulled America back into a period of active conflict with the Russian bear.

In an interview in 2010, Zbigniew Brzezinski described the influence of his family's experience with the Soviet Union during his childhood, recalling "the extraordinary violence that was perpetrated against Poland did affect my perception of the world, and made me much more sensitive to the fact that a great deal of world politics is a fundamental struggle."¹⁸ The "fundamental struggle" of Brzezinski's mindset regarding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan clearly identified a great power, the USSR, threatening the peace. That power needed opposition by the only power capable of doing so – the United States.

Before Jimmy Carter selected a National Security Advisor, he received advice from several people trying to talk him out of his eventual choice. Henry Kissinger, Lawrence Eagleburger, Clark Clifford, and Richard Holbrooke all described Zbigniew Brzezinski as too "hawkish," not enough of "an honest broker," and "too emotional."¹⁹ Carter's choice as Secretary of State,

¹⁸ Brzezinski Interview With Riz Khan. *One On One*. Al Jazeera English, December 11, 2010.

¹⁹ Vaïsse, *Brzezinski*, 154.

Cyrus Vance, seemed too much of a diplomat for Brzezinski to work with. When President Carter finally offered Brzezinski the job, the new NSA knew why Vance and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown had already been appointed, while the position of National Security Advisor remained vacant - opposition to him.²⁰ Brzezinski came with a paper trail from his time at the Trilateral Commission, a non-governmental, nonpartisan discussion group he created with the financial backing of David Rockefeller in 1973, as well as his time at Columbia University. His views resonated in foreign policy circles, and his heritage as a native Pole who grew up experiencing the brutality of the Soviet Union first hand factored into his hawkish views. These advisers told the President that Brzezinski concerned them as a firebrand who, due to his hatred of the USSR, plus his ambition and aggressive instincts, would create unhelpful tension among a group of otherwise temperate men making up the president's closest counsellors.²¹

Carter, swayed by his personal regard for Brzezinski's brilliance and Brzezinski's support for the new president before his election, picked him anyway. He had coached Carter in his mock-debates prior to the real one with President Gerald Ford and had been a foreign policy advisor to the former Governor of Georgia.²² Carter had run for president as an outsider who rejected the status quo approaches of men like Vance. The President appreciated Brzezinski's outspoken and aggressive positions on a series of geopolitical questions. He also liked Brzezinski personally and Brzezinski certainly cultivated Carter's regard. Once he settled in as Carter's pick, with his direct access to the President in the West Wing, his flattery of the President's wife, Rosalynn Carter, and the demands of international travel placed on a Secretary of State as opposed to a

²⁰ "Zbigniew Brzezinski, along with William Odom, Leslie G. Denend and Madeleine K. Albright," interview conducted at the Miller Center (University of Virginia) for the Carter Presidency Project, February 18, 1982.

²¹ Vaïsse, *Brzezinski*, 154.

²² Jimmy Carter, Interview at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, for the Carter Presidency Project, 38.

National Security Advisor, Brzezinski began to dominate Vance.²³ Vance viewed this influence as moving Carter's decisions in favor of unrestrained anti-Soviet aggression and he began to doubt Brzezinski's motives and seemingly open opposition to Vance's counsel to the President. Vance later vented his frustration in his memoir, observing that, "the tenuous balance between visceral anti-Sovietism and an attempt to regulate dangerous competition could no longer be maintained. The scales tipped towards those favoring confrontation."²⁴

Vance, guided by a belief that the Soviets displayed less an all-encompassing plan of global ambition, saw a series of opportunistic reactions to specific events, while Brzezinski felt the opposite to be true. What the documents show is a Soviet Union determined to protect its own interests, in stabilizing Afghanistan.²⁵ Despite much conjecture, little evidence indicates the Soviets felt a desire to push through Afghanistan, into Pakistan, India, and eventually to the Persian Gulf.²⁶ This placed Vance in opposition to what Brzezinski fervently believed, and the disagreement over the motivations of the Russians was one factor in souring their relationship.²⁷ As Brzezinski complained about Vance, "he was a member of both the legal profession and the once-dominant WASP elite, and operated according to their values and rules, but those values and rules are of declining relevance not only in terms of domestic American politics but particularly in terms of global conditions."²⁸ Vance remained a diplomat and a traditionalist in favor of the Nixon-Kissinger ideology of détente. He believed in negotiations to work out

²³ Douglas Brinkley, "The Lives They Lived; Out of the Loop," *The New York Times*, December 29, 2002.

²⁴ Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 393-394.

²⁵ Alexander Lyakhovskiy's Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan, *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, December 10, 1979.

²⁶ Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 11.

²⁷ Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, December 26, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 265-67.

²⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 87.

differences and had soured on the use of force once he turned against the Vietnam War, a position he shared with Carter. Nevertheless, Carter revealed in his diaries that Vance became his second choice for Secretary of State, after the Kennedy and LBJ advisor George Ball.²⁹ Carter saw Ball as too liberal and felt he would not pass Senate confirmation hearings due to his views on the Middle East, so he landed on Vance. This gave him a contemporary with whom he shared many foreign policy views. However, it set up a clash with the anti-Soviet hardliner Brzezinski.



Left to Right: Stansfield Turner (CIA), Harold Brown (Secretary of Defense), Walter Mondale (Vice President), Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Advisor), Jimmy Carter (President), Cyrus Vance (Secretary of State)

This clash exemplified the NSA's view that the Soviet Union, despite its domestic stagnation, pursued a policy of geopolitical assertiveness. Brzezinski saw the Soviets using the remnants of détente to stabilize the relationship with the United States on issues like arms control, while at

²⁹ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 390.

the same time exerting influence in the Third World. To balance the relationship, Brzezinski pushed for a more confrontational approach that challenged Soviet and Cuban presence in the Horn of Africa, engaged the Chinese, and countered Soviet initiatives in West Africa and the Near East.³⁰ The advantage that Brzezinski gained over others regarding Afghanistan, as well as the other major foreign policy concerns of the administration, arose in his ability to dominate Vance, Brown, Vice President Mondale, and CIA's Stansfield Turner.³¹ While there is no evidence he consciously manipulated information that went to Carter to promote his own agenda, there is clearly a record of reduced access for these other advisors.³²

According to historian David J. Rothkopf, Carter proposed to strengthen trilateral relations, expand political and economic relations with emerging powers, enhance North-South relations by stimulating greater economic stability in the developing world, move from strategic arms limitation talks to strategic arms reduction talks with the USSR, normalize U.S. - Chinese relations, obtain a comprehensive Middle East settlement, promote peaceful transformation in South Africa and rebuff a Soviet-Cuban presence in southern Africa, restrict the level of global armaments, promote human rights, and maintain a strong defense.³³ This agenda ended up being overshadowed by the Iran crisis and the Afghanistan invasion later in Carter's term, but the ambition of the proposals is remarkable, and the degree to which they accomplished each one, or at least made some forward movement in only one term in office, is testament to the strength and vision of the Carter-Brzezinski partnership.

The planning for the strategic changes President Carter, Brzezinski, and Harold Brown hoped to make started well before the invasion of Afghanistan. In February 1979, Carter sent Brown to

³⁰ Vaïsse, *Brzezinski*, 89.

³¹ Luis da Vinha, "Selling the Arc of Crisis: Promoting Foreign Policy Change during the Carter Presidency," *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences*, April 22, 2016, Vol. 16, Issue 2.

³² Vaïsse, *Brzezinski*, 254.

³³ Gati, *Zbig*, 70.

the Middle East to encourage Egypt and Israel to make peace, convince the Saudis of the support of the U.S. and its commitment to defend them, and to look for ways to beef up the U.S. military presence in the region. Carter instructed Brown that “you should emphasize our conviction that a new strategy for peace and security in the region will require new policies on the part of the U.S. and the governments of the region, demanding the resolve to affect them at home and internationally.”³⁴ Brown told Carter that neither Saudi Arabia, Egypt, nor many other nations in the area would permit U.S. bases on their soil due to objections concerning religious traditions and sovereignty.³⁵

While Brown represented the wishes of the President, neither he nor the Joint Chiefs felt the need to move as fast as Brzezinski, who also wanted U.S. troops to offset Soviet forces present in the area. Brown’s hesitation arose due to concerns over a detraction of military readiness in Europe and Asia.³⁶ Disinclined to draw down naval presence in the Mediterranean or Pacific to accomplish a full-time naval presence, Brown recommended moving deliberately and studying alternatives, such as land-based activities (joint tactical air and ground-based exercises) or even a U.S. base in the Gulf. Brown argued that “the issue is not yet ripe for decision,” as recommended by Schlesinger.³⁷

The Defense Secretary saw no real progress on his trip in terms of stopping destabilization efforts by the Soviets in Iran, or reducing the number of Soviet-Cuban advisors in Libya, South Yemen or Ethiopia. He also advised Carter after the trip that he saw no chance of a military base on Saudi Arabian soil, something Brzezinski hoped for. The Joint Chiefs certainly felt the threat

³⁴ Letter from President Carter to Secretary of Defense Brown, February 9, 1979, *FRUS*, Middle-East Region; Arabian Peninsula, Vol. XVIII, 1977-1980, 36.

³⁵ Edward C. Keefer, Harold Brown *Offsetting the Soviet Military Challenge, 1977-1981* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), 357; Minutes of a Policy Review Committee Meeting, February 1, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, VOLUME XVIII, MIDDLE EAST REGION; ARABIAN PENINSULA, 40; *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. IX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978–December 1980, Document 178.

³⁶ Keefer and Brown, *Offsetting*, 336.

³⁷ Memo, Brown for Carter, 25 Sep 1979, 0000CF75.pdf, CD-2, Declassified SecDef Files.

was real, and the coming Soviet invasion increased their fears of Soviet abilities to threaten the Gulf. As Brzezinski observed, “we cannot duplicate NATO in this region; a more eclectic mix of bilateral, multilateral, and informal arrangements must suffice.”³⁸ The Carter administration did not have in the arc of crisis the type of natural, European, post-WWII allies in whose best interest it was to go along with the United States against the Soviets. This was a group of governments in a very different part of the world, naturally suspicious of Carter and his envoys, who understood the selfish goals of both the United States and the Soviet Union.

In an area traditionally defended by the British, the American base at Diego Garcia, a small island in the southern Indian Ocean, became the sole instrument of U.S. military power in the region. Having inherited responsibility for a part of the globe previously seen as a hodgepodge of disparate littoral states sharing few interests by earlier, post-WWII approaches to the region, the arc of crisis theory reframed the area as one political unit. Henry Kissinger first broached the idea that the United States examine Southwest Asian, East African, and Middle Eastern states and their people, in addition to the Indian Ocean, and no longer view it as a disorganized assembly of disparate interests. Washington had a U.S. Atlantic and Pacific military command, but nothing comparable in the Indian Ocean. Brzezinski built on and focused Kissinger’s thinking into his own arc of crisis strategic approach that this area, given the potential for Soviet influence, needed a formalized and comprehensive American presence should that Soviet influence assert itself. ³⁹

To understand Brzezinski’s drive to strategically reimagine the region, one must remember how the 1973 Middle East war had completely changed the way the national security elements of the U.S. government thought about the Indian Ocean. The vulnerability of oil shipments from the

³⁸ Ibid., 339.

³⁹ Fred Halliday, “The Arc of Crisis and the New Cold War,” *MERIP Reports*, No. 100/101, *Special Anniversary Issue* (Oct. - Dec., 1981), 14-25.

Persian Gulf and the oil embargo during the Nixon administration by the Arab states turned the ocean routes of oil tankers into a major source of worry. Both Japan and Western European nations relied heavily on oil from the Gulf. The Soviets had small installations at both the Port of Aden in Yemen, and the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, directly across from each other, straddling this crucial water passage at the base of the Red Sea. The Horn of Africa, just south of this area, featured Cold War clashes due to the USSR's predilection for viewing Africa as a future bastion of socialism.

It was the Soviet intervention in the Horn of Africa that prompted Carter's conversion from the cooperative spirit of the Nixon-Ford years to the containment of the Reagan years. Certainly, it is unusual that such a marginal conflict served to alter the course of the foreign policy of the United States. Nevertheless, given American and Soviet mindsets, the next Third World crisis after Angola was going to bring Soviet insertion in Africa to a crisis point, especially if Washington felt it could not find an acceptable outcome on the ground. The conflict on the Horn happened while the U.S. extinguished the memory of the failure of Vietnam. The President did not commit troops to another Third World conflict, due to that painful reminder of the limits of American power. However, the United States was once again eager to prove its status as a dominant world power. Jimmy Carter was anxious to reassert the U.S. in diplomatic, economic, cultural and scientific matters, areas where the United States remained confident. Moscow, on the other hand, was about to learn the lesson that the United States had learned in Vietnam. Simply put, that in a massive military intervention into a nation whose people do not want to be occupied by a foreign power and know they have nothing to lose, "victory" becomes impossible.

Debates or disagreements are essential to a democracy. Therefore, both Vance and the NSA felt compelled to convey their differences of opinion and their reasons behind them to the

President, so Carter could make decisions based on as much information as possible. As Vance and Brzezinski's debated over the proxy battles in the Horn of Africa, they competed for influence over the President, and pressured him to make decisions on individual matters. Yet, it is clear that Carter did not fully grasp what those decisions meant in relation to Brzezinski and Vance's overarching ideas. This was not a purposeful omission by both men, but the president might have reacted with more consistency if he better understood how his advisors pictured the larger role of the United States in the geopolitical arena.

Opposing Vance, Brzezinski saw the U.S.-Soviet proxy battles in Ethiopia and Somalia as indicative of global Soviet ambition; however, the Soviets claimed they were simply trying to stabilize the region out of fear of crossing the United States.⁴⁰ Historians take different views on Soviet motivation. Raymond Garthoff presents the situation in Ethiopia and Somalia as a chance for Moscow to promote its own interests.⁴¹ Odd Arne Westad argues that the Soviets rode the success of their victory in Angola in 1975, prompting them to venture further into Africa.⁴² Regardless of Moscow's motives, Brzezinski believed that the Soviets were breaking the rules of détente and Cyrus Vance did not. This point of contention became the trigger to their feud and their disputes over an appropriate response. Brzezinski's reaction to the coming Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, seeing it as fitting into his arc of crisis theory, countered the objectives of an aging Soviet leadership trying to achieve short-term goals with the Afghan incursion. This

⁴⁰ Radoslav Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa during the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (New York, Lexington Books, 2016), 78. See also Louise Woodroffe, *"Buried in the Sands of the Ogaden": The United States, The Horn of Africa and The Demise of Détente* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2013), 127.

⁴¹ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 717.

⁴² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 253.

disconnect is at the heart of the missed opportunities to de-escalate, rather than intensify, the growing and mutual mistrust of both nations.⁴³

By 1978, crisis in the Horn of Africa started affecting the sea lanes through the Gulf of Aden. The USSR shipped weapons from Yemen west across the base of the Red Sea, to Ethiopia to assist its war with Somalia, “to provide full support to the Ethiopian revolution and its leadership in order to defend the country from aggression and realize its internal and foreign policies.”⁴⁴ Brzezinski and Carter took note of Soviet warships appearing with increasing frequency to facilitate the operation. Then, when Moscow signed a treaty of cooperation and friendship with Ethiopia in December of 1978, the insertion of Soviet influence convinced Brzezinski of Moscow’s larger intentions. Soon after, Soviet client South Yemen, just across the Red Sea, increased its pressure on pro-Western North Yemen. This in turn alerted the government of Saudi Arabia to the possibility of war on the Arabian Peninsula. On December 20, 1978, Brzezinski presented his arc of crisis thinking to the Foreign Policy Association, then broadcast to Americans by the press.⁴⁵ The resulting publicity made the area seem more menacing and fraught with impending peril than ever, and lent Brzezinski’s theory legitimacy as the region appeared awash in a series of new dangers.

Once the Soviets moved into Afghanistan, the “mental maps” concerning Brzezinski’s arc of crisis theory needed to be redrawn. As he wrote to Carter on December 26, 1979, one day after news of the attack, “If the Soviets succeed in Afghanistan, and Pakistan acquiesces, the age-long dream of Moscow to have direct access to the Indian Ocean will have been fulfilled.... It could

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Aleksandar Vojinovic, “Message from Yugoslav Embassy in Addis Ababa, ‘The Soviet Ambassador on the Ethiopian-Soviet Relations’,” *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, September 2, 1977.

⁴⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 446.

produce Soviet presence right down to the edge of the Arabian and Oman Gulfs.”⁴⁶ Harking back to geopolitical thinking from mid-nineteenth century Great Britain that referenced Peter the Great and the Russian desire for warm water ports, Brzezinski’s reaction bore little relation to actual strategy on the part of Soviet leadership.⁴⁷ The new paradigm created by the invasion prompted the term “Southwest Asia,” which stretched from the western edge of the Indian continent to the eastern borders of the Arab world. This is now the *new* “arc of crisis.”

The Carter administration began a concerted public relations effort to inform the American public how to think anew about this region. The Russians had invaded Afghanistan, possibly to drive through Pakistan, then India, to take over the world’s oil supply, and Brzezinski wanted public opinion supporting American efforts to counter the Soviets, if necessary, by force. Americans absorbed a message detailing this *new* Cold War, foisted upon them while still under the impression that the *old* Cold War, as understood since WWII, had softened in the age of détente. All of this attempted to prepare Americans for what might be coming if Moscow took control of Afghanistan, then violated Pakistan’s northern border. The enormous implications plunged the nation into a new crisis with an old adversary the Carter administration told them to fear - yet again.

⁴⁶ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, December 26, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 265.

⁴⁷ William C. Green, “The Historic Russian Drive for a Warm Water Port,” *Naval War College Review*, XLVI (1993), 80–102.



Time Magazine Cover, January 15, 1979

What becomes clear is that the decisions made and policies set forth in 1979 and 1980 by Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Carter administration had an impact on not only the two major combatants involved in the conflict, but also on the American nation itself and a number of other Middle East and Southwest Asian countries in the region as well. The Kremlin's decision to venture militarily into Afghanistan compelled the American government to respond to the Soviet's continued aggression against other nations. The Red Army's march south could not go

unopposed. Shortly after the invasion, Carter sent a tough note to Brezhnev, and called the Soviet action a “clear threat to peace,” which could mark “a fundamental and long-lasting turning point in our relations.”⁴⁸ Brzezinski, in fact, recalled that during the December 28 NSC meeting “everyone in attendance knew the situation was grave and that a major watershed had been reached in the American-Soviet relationship.”⁴⁹

Carter told the nation on January 4, 1980 that, “A Soviet-occupied Afghanistan threatens both Iran and Pakistan and is a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world’s oil supplies.”⁵⁰ From this last remark, it appeared that Brzezinski and the Carter administration had finally seen enough. Previous administrations through the years had witnessed the spread of Soviet influence into Europe in countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and also watched the Soviet’s impact grow on the continent of Africa in places like Angola, Ethiopia, and South Yemen. Much of Southeast Asia had also become significantly influenced by the Soviet Union as evidenced in nations such as North Korea, China, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Even Latin America felt the Soviet’s impact in Guatemala, Chile, and Cuba. Now, the Soviet threat emerged in the formerly non-aligned nation on their southern border, which brought Moscow one step closer to the strategically important oil reserves of the Persian Gulf.

In the context of Brzezinski’s arc of crisis reasoning, where would the Soviets go next if the United States did not confront the Red Army’s march into Afghanistan? CIA’s Turner downplayed Brzezinski’s thoughts on hegemonic Soviet ambitions. Less than three weeks after the Soviet invasion, Turner told Carter, “It is unlikely the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan constitutes the pre-planned first step in the implementation of a highly articulated grand design

⁴⁸ Editorial Note, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VI, Soviet Union, 716.

⁴⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 478.

⁵⁰ Jimmy Carter, “Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,” January 4, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*.

for the rapid establishment of hegemonic control over all of Southeast Asia.”⁵¹ Then, in a direct counter to the Turner’s advice to Carter, Brzezinski replied with his own memorandum, “it (Turner’s memorandum) does not examine the possibility the Soviets may move more forcefully with their military power against Iran, and possibly Pakistan, in the near future.”⁵²

The short-term political considerations facing Jimmy Carter weighed heavily on him regarding his decision-making in reaction to the Afghan invasion. On January 9, 1980, barely two weeks after the attack, Carter met with Averell Harriman, George Ball, James Schlesinger, John McCloy, Arthur Goldberg, and Bill Scranton, at the White House. He said, in his diary, “they are highly supportive of our action in Iran and Afghanistan, and thought, if anything, we should be even more forceful.”⁵³ The pressure on Carter intensified to respond strongly to the crisis in Afghanistan, and appeared reinforced by this august group of former politicians, statesmen, presidential advisors, former cabinet members, and a former member of the Supreme Court. Politically, he understood that if he faltered in the Iran hostage crisis, or in response to the Soviets, that his challenger in the presidential campaign of 1980, Ronald Reagan, would pounce, and his chances for reelection would be severely diminished. The NSA’s awareness of the political reality facing Carter made Brzezinski’s ambitions for U.S. - Soviet policy possible. What ambitions? To continue détente? Or, to use this unquestioned act of Soviet aggression as a pretext for pushing Carter towards confrontation? The record indicates the latter. Could Carter have heard the cautious advice of Vance over Brzezinski?

When you read the President’s clear sense of relief in the feedback from the group of unofficial advisors who visited him days after the invasion, one can sympathize with Carter’s

⁵¹ Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, January 15, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 478.

⁵² Undated and Unsigned Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Materials, Country File, Box 82, USSR, 1/ 16-31/80), Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, January 15, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 478.

⁵³ Carter, *Diary*, 390.

growing impulse to take a tough stance.⁵⁴ However, the leaders of the USSR operated, at that exact time, with a sudden panic that they made a colossal mistake.⁵⁵ They misjudged the response of the Afghan army, and underestimated the intensity of the Mujahadeen's rebellion. They knew they needed to get out, and looked for a way to do so.⁵⁶ But, the domestic political pressure preventing Carter from taking the time to seek out that development through diplomacy overwhelmed him, forcing him to make a series of decisions: the grain embargo, the Olympic boycott, the Carter Doctrine, and the arming of the Mujahadeen, that pushed the Soviets into a corner, a dangerous place to put them. Carter wrote, in his 2010 addition to his real-time diary entry from January 3, 1980, "the Soviets' occupation is a threat to the security of the United States. If they consolidated their hold and moved into adjacent countries, I would have been forced into military action against them."⁵⁷ What Soviet documents show, however, is the absence of larger global ambition, and occupation plans to be short-term. They planned to install Soviet puppet Babrak Karmal as the new leader, stabilize the Afghan government under his leadership, insert an influential group of advisors and personnel, and frame the invasion as aid to another communist state in its "revolution," asked for by Afghan leadership itself.⁵⁸

On January 9, the same day Carter met with the group of unofficial advisors at the White House, Brzezinski sent Carter a memo, in which he spelled out the views previously discussed in the SCC (the NSC Special Coordination Committee) on the three interrelated central strategic zones and on the consequent need for a new "Regional Security Framework" for the Middle

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, February 5, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 555.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Carter, *Diary*, 388.

⁵⁸ Extract from CPSU CC Politburo Decision, A.A. Lyakhovskiy, *The Tragedy and Valour of the Afghani*, Cold War International History Project, Doc. 14.

East.⁵⁹ He intended to show the President, “how the Egyptians, the Saudis, the Pakistanis, and the Turks could all be a part of this new alliance to combat Soviet aggression.”⁶⁰

According to Vice President Walter Mondale, Brzezinski would not budge from the position that the United States “deliberately provoked” the Soviets into a trap in Afghanistan, knowing it would hasten the collapse of the USSR.⁶¹ He also has a clear recollection of the stunned reactions of both Carter and Brzezinski to the invasion, which corresponds with the view that the event surprised the Carter Administration - they missed it - and in choosing to respond the way they did, they reacted with a willful misunderstanding of Soviet intentions. Brzezinski, warned by his staff member, Thomas Thornton that “we should be careful in implying blank endorsement to the Muslim forces in Afghanistan,” rejected this advice.⁶² Thornton told Brzezinski of little reason to think the Mujahadeen liked the United States any more than the Soviet Union. He advised his boss that they are likely to take “the Khomeini approach” against any non-Muslim governments in Islamic countries.⁶³ That meant no acceptance of non-Islamic governments in Muslim lands. But Brzezinski, in his anti-Soviet mindset, saw the Afghan rebels as amenable to doing the bidding of the United States, and he advised President Carter that America would be in a position to exploit Muslim reaction to the invasion. He also initially felt it would be “too sanguine” to think it would turn into the Soviet’s Vietnam.⁶⁴ Brzezinski, much more hawkish than the CIA, displayed partisan instincts informed less by the intelligence available to him, and more by his belief in an inevitable move by an expansionist, evil Soviet

⁵⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 444.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Walter Mondale, *The Good Fight: A Life in Liberal Politics* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 274.

⁶² Memorandum From Thomas Thornton of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski), *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 601.

⁶³ Ibid., 601.

⁶⁴ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, December 26, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 265.

Union that would challenge the United States, the sole entity capable of stopping it, to do just that.⁶⁵

In the minutes of key leadership meetings discussing the response to the Soviet invasion, Harold Brown advocated aid to the Afghan rebels, along with Brzezinski and Vance.⁶⁶ Jody Powell, the White House Press Secretary, posed the question, “what is the ultimate aim of the American government?” Carter responded, “to get the Soviets to withdraw.” Brzezinski, Vance and Brown replied, “to make it as costly as possible for the Soviets.” Vice President Mondale responded that the Soviets “had created a satellite out of a buffer state.” At that point, Brzezinski expressed his overarching suspicion of a wider, predictable Soviet motive, calling it simply an opening in a larger effort to topple the nations that stand in the way of the USSR to reach the Persian Gulf.⁶⁷ Brzezinski saw Carter react with stunned surprise to the Soviet move into Afghanistan, and seized the moment as a way of implementing his own political, strategic, and intellectual thinking.⁶⁸

For perspective on this “enemy of my enemy is my friend” blowback, it is worth considering the reaction of the Soviets themselves. “Al-Qaeda is a religious-extremist catalyst used by the United States during the Cold War - with, as it turns out, no thought to the consequences. It came into being with the aid of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for the purposes of fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan.”⁶⁹ These words of Yevgeny Primakov, former head of the intelligence services, who also served as Prime Minister of Russia from 1998-1999, are blunt in their assessment of the unintended consequences of Carter’s arming the rebels in Afghanistan.

⁶⁵ Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, January 15, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 478.

⁶⁶ Minutes of a National Security Meeting, December 28, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 298-305.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Mondale, *The Good Fight*, 275.

⁶⁹ Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East From the Cold War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 91.

Brzezinski also often said the U.S. had lured the Soviet Union into a trap.⁷⁰ However, documents clearly show him cautioning President Carter against any false hope that the Soviets would *not* prevail.⁷¹ He convinced Carter of the invasion being the most serious action by the Soviets since 1945, the last time they had deployed troops outside their sphere of influence. Carter grasped the importance of the crisis and responded with rhetoric that surprised the Soviets.⁷² The president worried about SALT II, the pending nuclear arms reduction treaty with the Soviets, but felt the invasion transcended the ongoing talks to secure a deal.⁷³ He stated that the goal must be to get the Soviets to withdraw and authorized lethal aid to the Afghan rebels through Pakistan in a Presidential finding dated December 28, 1979.⁷⁴ He also hesitated about raising the invasion at the U.N., instead wanting it to be dealt with via NATO. Carter preferred that allies bring it up at the U.N. so as not to complicate the U.S. messaging and efforts on behalf of the hostages in Iran.⁷⁵

As to whether or not SALT II became mortally wounded by the time the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Brzezinski hesitated. “I think it was dying. It was dying, but once we normalized relations with the Chinese, the Russians all of the sudden became more interested in having it. And there was a brief period of time when we looked as if we might get it. Over here is a picture of us signing SALT. And I notice the only person standing there and grinning, it’s me. Because, I

⁷⁰ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 581.

⁷¹ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, December 26, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 265.

⁷² Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, December 28, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 302-303.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Memorandum From Robert Blackwill of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) and the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Aaron), December 28, 1979, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 308.

thought the whole thing was a little bit of a farce. And, it's pretty late by then. It's pretty late. If we had gotten SALT a year earlier, we'd have had a chance.”⁷⁶

The repercussions of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were that the United States virtually ceased to even pretend to support détente. In fact, Brzezinski wished to fundamentally redefine the concept. He believed détente needed to be more of a practical give and take. This meant that “we should insist on equal treatment (retaliating in kind, if necessary) and that the Soviets could not have a free ride in some parts of the world while pursuing détente where it suited them.”⁷⁷ In his earliest days in office, Jimmy Carter had no real plan of his own for maintaining this relationship with Moscow, and he looked to Vance and Brzezinski for his policy on détente. The NSA was unsure if the President fully understood the significance of the terms “comprehensive” and “reciprocal.” As another sign of the disconnect between State and the NSC, they both clashed over the use of these terms. Brzezinski recalled that “as the months went on, Vance and his colleagues started objecting to the use of these words, and the drafting of almost every Presidential speech involved Vance crossing them out and me reinserting them.”⁷⁸ This demand for “reciprocity” would become what motivated Brzezinski’s insistence on linking events on the Horn of Africa to other aspects of bilateral relations, including Iran and Afghanistan.

President Carter reacted angrily to the invasion, calling the event “the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War.”⁷⁹ The president outlined his Carter Doctrine in the State of the Union address on January 23, 1980. The President remained a Cold Warrior who found himself caught by surprise by the Soviets, who themselves perpetrated a falsehood. Their justification for occupying Afghanistan appeared as flawed as the United States’ response. Carter told the U.S.

⁷⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 136.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷⁹ Philip Geyelin, “The Carter Doctrine and the Draft,” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 1980.

Congress, “Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”⁸⁰ Brzezinski wrote this sentence, basing it on the Truman Doctrine. He was one of the main instigators of the Carter Doctrine that reasserted American military presence in the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean and created a new security framework for the region. Thus, Soviet-American relations in the final year of Carter’s term seemed characterized by renewed confrontation. The situation of the American Hostages in Iran overshadowed all other foreign policy considerations during 1980, but nonetheless, this shift back toward the Cold War was a blatant one. Had the Soviet motivation been to drive to the Gulf, and threaten the flow of oil to the United States and its allies, such a doctrine would have properly described the situation. However, the Soviet motivation, described in Politburo discussions and other internal correspondence, as well as conversations of Soviet officials with Western officials, did not align with the NSA’s assumptions, or Jimmy Carter’s Doctrine.

Nevertheless, Brzezinski still carried his own strong personal beliefs regarding the deliberations in recalling them through journal notes of this period in writing. “Had we been tougher sooner,” he recalled, “had we drawn the line more clearly, had we engaged in the kind of consultations that I had so many times advocated, maybe the Soviets would not have engaged in this act of miscalculation. As it is, American-Soviet relations will have been set back for a long time to come. What is done had to be done, but it would have been better if the Soviets had been deterred first through a better understanding of our determination.”⁸¹ The former NSA then

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Karen Elliot House, Thomas J Bray, “An Interview With Zbigniew Brzezinski,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 15, 1980, 20.

asserted how, “The collapse of Iran; and the growing vulnerability of Saudi Arabia had dictated the need for such a wider strategic response.”

The situation in Afghanistan and Brzezinski’s fears regarding the overall threat to the Persian Gulf region posed by the Soviet military occupation absorbs much of the Carter administration’s focus between 1979 and 1981. The reaction of Brzezinski and the Carter administration in the immediate aftermath of the Red Army’s incursion, and then in turn, their year-long response to the Soviet troop’s presence in this geopolitically vital nation reveal how the Kremlin’s invasion brings about the end of détente. A major turn in the superpowers’ relationship had now taken place as a new decade began. Leading policy advisors such as the NSA and Vance hold markedly different views regarding the significance of the situation inside Afghanistan. Both attempted to influence the President on just how the American government should handle the Politburo’s decision to invade their neighbor. While the Secretary of State wanted Carter to take a “wait and see” approach in determining the Soviet’s intentions, Brzezinski wanted him to reignite the power of the CIA so the intelligence wing could engage the Soviets before it became too late to do so.

In line with his anti-Soviet leanings, Brzezinski turned for advice to William Odom for perspective on the Soviet Union. Odom, being a Russia specialist and a hardliner often skeptical of Moscow's intentions, fueled Brzezinski’s views and suspicions with his thoughts on Soviet advances in ICBM technology and the increasing strength of their “launch-on-warning” capabilities.⁸² Brzezinski then passed this information onto Carter.⁸³ The influence of Odom, an Army Lieutenant General, and West Point graduate with a PhD in comparative politics from

⁸² William Odom, “William E. Odom to Zbigniew Brzezinski, ‘Soviet Launch-on-Warning Capability, Top Secret, excised copy,” *The National Security Archive*, January 23, 1978, Doc. 24.

⁸³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Zbigniew Brzezinski to President Carter, ‘Information Items,’ 24 January 1978, Top Secret,” *The National Security Archive*, January 24, 1978, Doc. 25.

Columbia on Brzezinski, then transferred to Carter, resonated with the President due to his background as a nuclear engineer and a former nuclear submariner in his time in the Navy.

Carter set arms control with the Soviets as a priority for his administration, and Odom, tasked by Brzezinski, produced a series of Presidential Review Memorandums (PRM's) focused on nuclear arms. "For the next two years, based on the kind of analyses we had done in PRM-10," Odom explained, "we had to work slowly to try to bring the realities to the eyes of the President, the eyes of the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and make them realize that we had to tackle some of those policies from very fundamentally different directions."⁸⁴

The expansion of the potential targeting priorities of the Soviet Union by the U.S. became codified in the "Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy," signed by Carter, over the objections of Vance. Again, Carter's approach to the USSR saw increased tension as a result of the recommendations of hardliner Brzezinski, in direct contrast to other top advisors, and took away traditional oversight from the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, placing it in the hands of the NSC and the Executive.

The collection of tools in Brzezinski's toolbox accumulated over time, giving him added weight with the President, both in the advice he gave to Carter regarding the Soviets, as well as influence over the responses Carter would later employ. Vance had negotiated on arms control with Brezhnev himself back in April of 1978, delivering proposals worked out mainly by Brzezinski with the input of Odom. The talks did not go well, but Vance could not improvise, one of Kissinger's strengths in his Nixon-era meetings with the Soviet leader. As a result, when the talks failed, Brzezinski publicly blamed the Soviet leadership for its inability to respond in a

⁸⁴ Gati, ed., *Zbig*, 73.

positive way, when it appeared his own aggressiveness pushed an aging and paranoid Soviet leadership into a corner.⁸⁵

There emerged a pattern of this in Brzezinski's dealings with the Soviets, whether on arms control or his manipulation of Carter's response to the Afghanistan invasion. Brzezinski showed a tendency to push Moscow, against their will, into responses that had disastrous consequences. This aggression, opposed by Vance, led to escalation and conflict, rather than giving these aging Russian Cold warriors a way out of something they hoped to avoid – a ten-year war in Afghanistan against a rebellion financed and armed by the United States.⁸⁶

Based on Odom's work, but against the objections of Vance's State Department, Brzezinski helped update the American deterrent through the presidential directive PD-59, with an approach known as "countervailing strategy."⁸⁷ The previous doctrine, based on mutual assured destruction and due to American superiority, stipulated that if an increase in tensions arose, America would assert itself, forcing Moscow to reverse course – something seen in the Cuban Missile Crisis. The recommendation from Odom and Brzezinski, countered the recommendation of Cyrus Vance and the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Paul C. Warnke.⁸⁸

Vance instead favored the upcoming Indian Ocean demilitarization talks, as well as the arms control initiatives pursued with the Soviets, but *not* increasing military readiness and capabilities in the Gulf.⁸⁹ The linkage of suspected Soviet power-moves into the Gulf created, in Brzezinski's mind, the need for projected nuclear capabilities in the region. This, in addition to the Rapid Deployment Force, informed Brzezinski's plan to protect U.S. interests there.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁶ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 56.

⁸⁷ Vaïsse, *Brzezinski*, 66.

⁸⁸ Njolstad, "Shifting Priorities," 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.



Anti-Communist Mujahadeen propaganda cartoon from the Soviet-Afghan War 1979-89

As to fostering co-operation with political Islam, Brzezinski went on record early encouraging the involvement of the Muslim world to counter the Soviet threat after the invasion of Afghanistan. In a meeting in Riyadh on February 4, 1980, just forty days after the attack, Brzezinski told Saudi Crown Prince Fahd that the Soviet invasion called for a response on all levels, “none more so than the Islamic world.”⁹⁰ He told Fahd that while the United States did not *currently* seek actual military bases in Islamic countries, the U.S. *did* seek to increase its military presence in the region, to provide quick response in case of trouble. Known as the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, this included 100,000 men deployed at a moment’s notice to the Gulf to counter a Soviet take-over. Brzezinski included a nuclear deterrent as well, by strengthening U.S. readiness. There had been, on December 12, 1979, 13 days before the Soviets

⁹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, February 4, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 551.

invaded Afghanistan, a NATO vote to deploy medium-range and cruise missiles to counter Soviet SS-20 missiles.⁹¹

Brzezinski then revealed this willful misrepresentation of Soviet motives in Afghanistan in brazen fashion. He told Saudi's Foreign Minister, Prince Saud, "I am prepared to accept the fact that the Soviet motives are limited to Afghanistan itself."⁹² This resulted from him being told by the CIA, as well as intelligence coming into the State Department, that the Soviets bogged down in Afghanistan and needed a way to withdraw their forces from what had already turned into a quagmire with long-term negative consequences for the USSR. However, he had made a conscious decision to view the invasion as anything *but* "Soviet motives limited to Afghanistan itself." If the square peg of the Soviet invasion did not fit into the round hole of Brzezinski's arc of crisis thinking – he refused to do anything but pound away.

During the meeting with the Saudis, he claimed that "the rationale for entering Afghanistan is *irrelevant*; the results are to create a strategic dynamic which is not limited to Afghanistan. The effects of the invasion are of global significance regardless of their immediate interests" (italics mine).⁹³ Brzezinski added that "history" told him that acts of limited intention often lead to general outcomes, such as Germany's limited goals in WWI igniting a wider war with catastrophic consequences. He told Prince Saud that the Soviet invasion of a Muslim nation needed a response by political Islam. "You represent a revitalized religious renaissance which is on the move," he said. ⁹⁴ This is perhaps the most relevant evidence of Brzezinski's rigid thinking regarding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as well as his deliberate proposal to a vital Middle-Eastern ally, Saudi Arabia, to encourage weaponizing the response of the Muslim world

⁹¹ Vaïsse, *Brzezinski*, 68.

⁹² Memorandum of Conversation, February 4, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 547.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 548.

to counter the Soviets. The consequences of this defining series of statements by Brzezinski led to actions by the American government backing a policy of getting fully behind the Mujahadeen.

The Persian Gulf Security Framework, signed by Brzezinski on January 15, 1981, delineated his larger geopolitical objectives for the region. This statement, preceded by the invasion of Afghanistan, plus the Iranian revolution, gave rise to fears the USSR might overwhelm the Gulf. Written and conceived of by Brzezinski, the document pushed his own regional security framework for the Middle East. He saw the region as the apex of Soviet political and military influence. Once Carter had delivered his address to congress, Brzezinski pursued agreements with Egypt, Oman, Kenya and Somalia to secure military installations that would house air bases, supply depots, as well as joint exercises.

The reallocation of funds to protect this area, as opposed to upgrading to similarly advanced capabilities in the more traditional zones of American protection, directly resulted from Brzezinski's belief that the preeminent threat had shifted to his arc of crisis. Defending Europe had suddenly dropped down the priority list, unthinkable only a few years prior. Carter, advised by Brzezinski, spoke to West European leadership and asked them for a commitment to a common response if Iran collapsed, and, with Afghanistan, fell into the Soviet sphere of influence.⁹⁵ The Europeans balked at such a request, and when the dire predictions of the Iranian disintegration and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan came to pass, they reeled from the loss of assured American protection, something they had come to take for granted.

Upon Carter's loss to Reagan in the election of 1980, hope for a negotiated settlement with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan essentially evaporated. The "Reagan Doctrine" doubled down on Brzezinski's approach, increasing the costs of Soviet support for Third World socialist governments. Pakistan had been increasingly involved in Afghanistan, from the pro-Soviet

⁹⁵ Ibid., 9.

overthrow of Daoud in 1978 onward, taking in thousands of Afghan refugees in the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. “Operation Cyclone” became the code name for the arming of the Mujahadeen, and Carter, lobbied by Brzezinski, urged Turner and the CIA to explore using Pakistan as a conduit for arming the rebels.⁹⁶

The new ruler of Pakistan, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, had declared martial law in Pakistan in 1977, and installed *Sharization* or *Islamization* as the centerpiece of the new government. Zia, a devout Muslim, dictated Pakistan’s absolute control of American aid going into Afghanistan to supply the Mujahadeen after the Soviet invasion. Prior to that, the political fallout from the Taraki coup replacing Daoud with a pro-communist government had certainly reverberated throughout the region. This represented an overhaul of history going back two-hundred years, according to Zia. The Afghan leader Taraki, however, had called it “a revolution,” in line with Brezhnev’s framing of the coup in Marxist-Leninist terms.⁹⁷ Zia convinced himself the USSR had participated in the coup, despite no real evidence showing that. He said Soviet MIGs, tanks, as well as Soviet officers participated in the attack on Daoud and his family.⁹⁸

The precarious nature of Pakistan’s existence weighed heavily on Zia. He suspected India of conspiring with the Soviets, and bought into the “gateway to the Gulf” thinking shared by, among others, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Zia’s reaction reflected prior leaders’ traditional paranoia about the stability of a country cut from whole cloth by the Indian partition. Ruled by the military, and ninety-eight percent Muslim, an atheistic, Soviet-controlled Afghanistan looking to regain territory given away by what Afghanistan viewed as an arbitrary “colonial” division (the

⁹⁶ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter, January 3, 1980, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 400.

⁹⁷ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to Secretary of State Vance, May 8, 1978, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 36.

⁹⁸ Letter From Pakistani General Zia to President Carter, May 9, 1978, *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. XII, 37.

Durand Line), contained a direct threat to Pakistan's sovereignty and existence. Zia quickly set upon a strategy to arm the Mujahadeen by supplying the multiple Afghan tribal groups concentrating on the Pakistani side of the Afghan border.⁹⁹

Carter cut aid to Pakistan at the time due to concerns about Zia's nuclear ambitions and negative approach to human rights and democracy. Nevertheless, when Pakistan became the base of the Afghan insurgency, the U.S. gave Zia complete control over the funneling of financial and military aid to the Mujahadeen. Days after the invasion, Carter offered millions in aid to Pakistan if Zia would facilitate the rebellion in Afghanistan, a policy encouraged by Brzezinski.¹⁰⁰ Then, under President Reagan, Zia went from a potentially volatile and unstable military dictator, to an ally supporting the "freedom fighters" of the Afghan resistance.

The legacy of Brzezinski's weaponization of political Islam began to metastasize into something much larger, and much more dangerous, with implications for the national security of the United States. Later in his life, Brzezinski flatly rejected criticism of this initiative as "a crazy question," and argued that the buildup of covert U.S. support for Afghan rebels via the CIA leading up to, and after the Soviet invasion, could be viewed only in the context of the time.¹⁰¹ According to Brzezinski, subsequent permutations of the Afghan resistance, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, could not be confused with the rebels he urged Carter to finance and arm via the CIA. In his mind, those original fighters remained an unalloyed American asset, who served a distinct and vital purpose: they rejected the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, thwarted the USSR's expansionist ideology, and stopped the larger Soviet movement to the Gulf. Brzezinski remained

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Steve Galster, "Introductory Essay: 'Afghanistan: Lessons From the Last War - Afghanistan: the Making of U.S. Policy, 1973-1990,'" *The National Security Archive*, October 9, 2001.

¹⁰¹ Adam Garfinkle, "'I'd Do it Again' Talking About Afghanistan With Zbigniew Brzezinski," *The American Interest*, May 1, 2008, 3-4.

convinced the Soviet loss in Afghanistan in 1989 directly contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later.¹⁰²

The blowback of supporting the Mujahadeen had its roots in Zia's focus on arming the more radical Islamic Afghan groups, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i Islami. This covert policy certainly played into Soviet objections, as Moscow insisted Washington stop secretly arming a form of radical Islam to fight the Red Army in Afghanistan, while publicly denying it. Brzezinski, hiding U.S. involvement, supplied no U.S.- made weapons to the rebels to provide plausible deniability for the Carter, and later, Reagan administrations. The CIA purchased Russian, Chinese, and Egyptian arms, then transported them to Pakistan, starting in 1980.¹⁰³

By February 22, 1980, barely two months after in the invasion, Moscow began to pivot to an age-old Soviet, Cold War strategy: blame the United States.¹⁰⁴ Brezhnev, unable to take responsibility for listening to Andropov and the KGB, rather than the Soviet military, mourned the complete evaporation of hope for a quick resolution of the situation in Afghanistan. Instead, he realized the Soviets would need to stay; to save face, to achieve anything positive for the strategic interests of the Soviet Union, and to do this, he needed to blame someone else. Thus began the Soviet rhetoric that the Soviets would withdraw "as soon as all forms of interference from outside directed against the government and people of Afghanistan are fully terminated."¹⁰⁵ One can imagine Brzezinski taking great satisfaction in this intelligence assessment of the status of the Soviet effort as a green light to arm and finance the Mujahadeen. The hated Russians had badly miscalculated, and the United States should aid the rebels, the "freedom fighters," so courageously battling the full might of the Red Army. What could go wrong?

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Galster, "Afghanistan," *The National Security Archive*.

¹⁰⁴ Kevin Klose, "Martial Law Declared After Kabul Violence," *Washington Post*, February 23, 1980.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Afghanistan proved disastrous for the Soviet Union. It greatly tarnished the reputation of the Red Army, got 15,000 Soviet soldiers killed, and 35,000 wounded. The war killed over a million Afghans. While it did not significantly contribute to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, it turned into a major miscalculation.¹⁰⁶ The war drained resources and failed in its central goals: shore up and stabilize Afghanistan, keep the Afghan government communist and pro-Soviet, establish another buffer state on the southern border of the Soviet Union, expand Soviet influence, prestige, and reputation. Zbigniew Brzezinski hoped to exhaust the Soviet's efforts in Afghanistan by supplying and financing the Afghan rebels through Pakistan, do it via the CIA and keep American fingerprints off the effort as much as possible.

However, Brzezinski's embrace of the Mujahadeen, and the complicity of the Carter administration in arming the more radical Afghan groups, began to develop into what the Soviets themselves had warned America would result: the turning of the muzzle of the gun toward the United States. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of the group Hizb-i Islami, that the Carter administration allowed Zia to arm and finance, eventually turned into the man who trained, led, and inspired the terrorist and guerrilla foreign fighters who poured into Afghanistan to aid the Mujahadeen.¹⁰⁷

Once the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, both nations had greatly changed. The USSR teetered on the brink of collapse, largely from economic mismanagement and subsequent decline.¹⁰⁸ The war had destroyed Afghanistan, leaving over one million dead and three million refugees having fled to Pakistan. For the American public, tired of a covert war in distant Afghanistan, and thinking the U.S. had "won," interest in helping the Afghan people recover quickly waned. Financial and military aid dropped and reorganizing the country America had

¹⁰⁶ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 107.

¹⁰⁷ John Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America, and International Terrorism* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 47.

¹⁰⁸ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 107.

helped decimate ground to a halt. Instead, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia remained in control the situation.¹⁰⁹

The U.S., viewed as having betrayed the Afghan people, left unrestricted warlords filling the power vacuum that opened up once the Russians withdrew.¹¹⁰ In 1994, the Taliban emerged, formerly a militia of Pashtun Islamic fundamentalist students based in Pakistan. They received their training in religious schools in Pakistan, populated by former refugees from Afghanistan who fought with the CIA-armed-and-financed Mujahadeen.¹¹¹ In 1996, after the Taliban captured Kabul and declared themselves the official government of Afghanistan, they vowed to end chaos and corruption and instill a new peace. However, their definition of peace became their own brand of radical Islamist policy, and the training facilities they used to house their followers, built and installed by the CIA, housed Osama bin Laden, who first appeared in Afghanistan to give financial aid to the Mujahadeen in 1982.

The United States supported the government of the Taliban in the years 1994-1996, mainly due to the support for the Unocal project called the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline; an attempt to build a pipeline through Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the Indian Ocean. In 1996, Unocal opened an office in Kandahar, Afghanistan, while the Taliban took control of the country.¹¹² U.S. State Department officials openly promoted the pipeline, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger served as a Unocal consultant.¹¹³ The company suspended work on the project following the U.S. cruise missile strikes on Afghanistan in response to the 1998 U.S. embassy.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 176.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Michael Rubin, "Who is Responsible for the Taliban?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 2002, 74.

¹¹² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 342.

¹¹³ Gail Sheehy, "Ex-Spook Sirrs: Early Osama Call Got Her Ejected," *The New York Observer*, March 14, 2004.

Designating blame for the United States supporting an Afghan opposition demands context. In the early part of the war, the overwhelming pressure to act prevailed, so as not to condemn Afghanistan to Soviet domination, which would result in an extension of Soviet influence into Pakistan. However, documents show Moscow recognizing the quagmire they had gotten into within weeks of the invasion, looking for a way out, then making a long-term commitment when Washington rebuffed their terms for withdrawal: stop arming the Mujahadeen while telling the world you are not.¹¹⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski's aggressive and ambitious drive to frame American policy in the region in his own anti-Soviet terms made possible the covert arming of the Mujahadeen, weaponizing political Islam in an unprecedented and dangerous way. Decisions to fully back Pakistan in its arming the more radical Islamist Afghan groups is a price Brzezinski and others felt they had to pay at the time.

After the Carter administration, Washington might have pressured Pakistan to reduce support for Islamic fundamentalism, especially after the emergence of the Taliban. Instead, the U.S. yielded responsibility, handing Pakistan a sphere of influence in Afghanistan unblocked by any other foreign pressure. While the rebellion in Afghanistan did eventually drive the Russians out, the argument that the war led to the fall of the Soviet Union, and therefore justified backing the Mujahadeen, is no longer an accepted rationale for Brzezinski's response.¹¹⁵ The question is not whether he believed what he did to be right. Rather, historians should be concerned with *was he right?* The evidence shows Brzezinski, by viewing everything through the prism of his grand arc of crisis geo-political strategy, directly contributed to a transformational national security threat that haunts the United States to this day.

¹¹⁴ Alexander Lyakhovsky, "On the Changing Mission of the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan, The Tragedy and Valor of Afghan," *The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Russian Documents and Memoirs*, National Security Archive, Doc. 5.

¹¹⁵ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 107.

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