US exit strategy in Afghanistan shadows 1989 Soviet withdrawal

On the twenty fifth anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban have likened the success of the holy war fought against the Soviets to the “jihad” now forcing the United States and its allies out of Afghanistan. While it remains unclear how post US involvement in Afghanistan will compare to what followed the Soviet occupation in 1989, there are important parallels that can be drawn from the experience of both former Cold War rivals as they sought to cut their losses and withdraw from the so-called “graveyard of empires”.

On December 27, 1979, after repeated calls for assistance by Kabul, the USSR entered Afghanistan in order to stabilize the country’s fledgling communist government. Supported by an estimated 80,000 troops, the operation was completed in just two days and marked the Soviet Union’s largest foreign military intervention since the Second World War.

But within just the first year, the Soviets recognized that the situation was not going well. Babrak Karmal, the Afghan president who Moscow installed following the invasion, had proved ineffective. Desertions within the Afghan National Army were rampant and the Soviets found themselves engaging a growing constellation of rebel groups amid rising causalities.

The arrival of Soviet Primer Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin coincided with a growing stalemate on the ground, and one of his first orders of business was to steer the war in a new direction. Thousands of more troops were sent in and tactics were shifted to include heavier use of Special Forces and helicopter gunships. Moscow also replaced president Karmal with the more able Dr. Mohammad Najibullah, a former head of the Afghan secret police. Najibullah began implementing a policy of national reconciliation and had improved the effectiveness of the Afghan army. But despite the augmented troop presence, which peaked at around 120,000, and the new military tactics and political approach, by 1986, it was clear that Moscow was already looking for a way out. In many respects, these changes were central to the broader exit strategy.

A decade later, on the pretext of responding the September 11, 2001 attacks in NYC, the US invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban regime due to its failure to hand over Osama bin Laden. In accomplishing its mission, the US used heavy airpower coordinated by Special Forces on the ground; these units also worked with local militias, which were fiercely opposed to the Taliban and had been fighting the Islamist movement since it came to power in 1996.

As with the initial stages of the Soviet intervention, the US’s invasion was swift and faced weak or limited resistance. Upon securing the capital and other major population centers, Washington launched a campaign of “nation building” with Hamid Karzai as the new leader and face of Afghanistan’s democracy. US troops meanwhile scoured the countryside for known or suspected members of Al Qaeda. But to ensure security throughout the country, the US increasing relied on former mujahedeen commanders who, following Afghanistan’s civil war in the early 90s, had effectively carved out personal fiefdoms in various parts of the country. Though anti-Taliban, these “warlords” were often despised by the local population. Indeed, their corrupt and chaotic rule was a main reason the
Taliban came into existence in the first place.

This seemingly contradictory policy of “spreading democracy” while empowering warlords, combined with the near immediate US shift its focus to regime change in Iraq after dislodging the Taliban, would later come back to haunt the US. Just months into the operation, Washington had already diverted substantial military and intelligence resources to the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, the Taliban – far from defeated - had simply melted away only to fight another day.

As with the arrival of Gorbachev five years into the Soviet Afghan war, the election of Barak Obama in 2008 severed as the catalyst for policy change towards Afghanistan. Though troop levels had been steadily rising even under the last year of out-going President Bush, in 2009 the US “surged” its troop presence in Afghanistan by 30,000, bringing the total foreign count to over 150,000. The appointment of new military leadership also saw strategy shift from counter-terrorism to counter-insurgency. This was buttressed by expanded use of development assistance to pacify key areas of the country.

But lacking the long-term commitment necessary to succeed, this strategy would prove overambitious. It was further stymied by Obama’s desire to set a timetable for withdrawal as more and more Americans began questioning the war’s rising costs and strategic purpose amid diminishing perceptions of the terrorist threat posed by Al Qaeda, the original rational for the war. Later, public support all but dropped off when on May 2, 2011, the US announced it had killed Osama Bin Laden in his Pakistani hideout, making it all the more difficult for Washington to justify a war largely perceived to be a fight against Pashtun tribes in the mountains of the Hindu Kush. The sudden spike in insider attacks on American troops by their Afghan counterparts throughout 2012-2013 was perhaps the tipping point for the US public. Despite what appeared to be widespread Taliban infiltration, this “Vietnamization” policy, i.e., shifting the burden on local forces to do the fighting has remained central to the US exit strategy.

Similarly, starting in the mid 1980s, the Soviets had also expended huge resources in building up the Afghan Army in order to leave behind a regime capable of fending for itself. With Soviet troops gone by 1989, the Afghan communist regime led by Najibullah which to the surprise of many US strategists at the time, would survive another three years, collapsing in early 1992 only after Soviet aid ceased with the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Unlike the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the US occupation enjoyed broad international backing by US allies and international donors. But unlike the Soviet efforts to build up the capacity of the local Afghan government to stand on its own, both the military tactics and international donor support under the US-led occupation has been inconsistent and undermined by a lack of coordination.

With local presidential elections scheduled for April, it remains unclear how Afghanistan will fare following the departure of US and NATO forces. Weather the new leadership in Kabul agrees to allow the US to retain a limited military footprint in the country or not, it is hoped that, as with the end of the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan in 1989, the departure of the bulk of foreign troops by the end of 2014 will help stem the on-going violence in the country.

*Martin Harris, a freelance journalist and analyst based in the Eurasia region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*