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Briefing Paper

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There and Back Again...and Again?

A Realist Comparison and Analysis of Key Elements of the Wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan

Introduction

Before the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001, the longest war in American history was waged in Vietnam through the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. However, over the past two decades, US involvement in Afghanistan has eclipsed the time spent in Vietnam, making it America's new longest war. Both conflicts have left tremendous impacts over the time they occurred, from destruction in the lands where they were fought, to domestic foreign policy implications, and especially, on the people who fought in them and those caught amidst the fighting. With the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, a picture was taken of a US Chinook helicopter landing on top of the US embassy building in Kabul, and anyone seeing the image who was familiar with Vietnam saw an eerie similarity to a famous helicopter image from the fall of Saigon in 1975. This and other similar echoes of war from Vietnam begged many Americans to ask: Did the US repeat mistakes from Vietnam in Afghanistan? How similar or different are these two conflicts? Researchers and historians will notice both similarities and differences between the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan, but this paper will focus on three significant points/events: first, the reasons for entering into war/conflict in both

Vietnam and Afghanistan; second, the concepts of “Vietnamization” and “Afghanization”; and third, the withdrawal processes from both conflicts. By comparing these three things in both conflicts, it becomes clear from a realist perspective that a lack of clear and achievable national interests led to defeated withdrawals in both cases, and the ultimate takeover of both countries by oppositional forces.

Brief Historical Overview of US Involvement in Vietnam and Afghanistan

In the early 1950s, Vietnam was embroiled in a battle between the Vietnamese people for independence, and the French for control of their colony of Indochina. Seeing the rise of a Communist threat through the Viet Minh in Vietnam, the United States chose to support the French in opposition to Communism, and since 1951 had “greatly increased all forms of assistance to the French in Indochina, particularly military aid.”¹ Ultimately, aid from the US failed to help the French achieve victory in Vietnam. After the crowning defeat of the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the subsequent Geneva Accords negotiated in its wake, French control of the colony was effectively eliminated with the cessation of hostilities and the agreement to separate North and South Vietnam with a demarcation line drawn near the 17th parallel.² With the victory of the Viet Minh in Vietnam, the US hoped for the building of a legitimate government to support in the South, which would eventually be led by President Ngo Dinh Diem.³ Over the next several years, the US remained involved minimally in Vietnam until

¹ NSC 5405, “United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia.” The Pentagon Papers: Gravel Edition, Volume 1 Document 20, 16 January 1954, pp. 434-443. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc20.htm>.

² Alan Watt, “The Geneva Agreements 1954 in Relation to Vietnam.” *The Australian Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1967), 12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20634125>.

³ Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, *The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, Episode 1: Déjà Vu*. 2017; Amazon Prime Video.

the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, which led to a greater increase of US involvement in the country.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the US provided significant aid to Afghan resistance fighters struggling against the Soviets. Most notably, the CIA persuaded the US Congress to provide these resistance fighters (known collectively as the “Mujaheddin”) with American-made Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to shoot down Soviet aircraft and to provide US advisers to train the fighters.⁴ This aid to the Afghan Mujaheddin played a successful role in leading to the eventual Soviet withdrawal from the country in 1989. However, new threats in the form of terrorism would begin to emerge from the country in the 1990s. “A decade of conflict in Afghanistan, from 1979 to 1989, gave Islamist extremists a rallying point and training field,” and one such group of extremists tied to Afghanistan in that way was al-Qaeda, which was clearly led by Osama Bin Laden by August 1988.⁵ Throughout the 1990s, Bin Laden facilitated the activities of numerous terrorist organizations across all parts of the world, and al-Qaeda was suspected of several attacks throughout the decade including “the 1993 bombing of the World trade Center, a plot that same year to destroy landmarks in New York, and the 1995 Manila air plot to blow up a dozen U.S. airliners over the Pacific,” as well as the later US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.⁶ After spending several years in Sudan, Bin Laden

⁴ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven and London: I.B. Tauris & Co., Ltd., and Yale University Press, 2010), 129.

⁵ “9-11 Commission Report.” The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as The 9-11 Commission), closed 21 August, 2004. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/index.htm>, 55-56.

⁶ “9-11 Commission Report.” The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as The 9-11 Commission), closed 21 August, 2004. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/index.htm>, 58, 60, 70.

eventually found his way back to Afghanistan in the late 1990s, where he enjoyed a close relationship with Mullah Omar, the founder of the Taliban, and the protection of the Taliban regime leading up to the 9/11 attacks in the US.⁷

Reasons for Entering Into War/Conflict

“The concept of containment of Communist expansion provided the broad parameters in which the Vietnam commitment took shape,” and it was a logical outgrowth of the US Cold War world view.⁸ Historian George Herring’s assessment is directly linked to the two main factors for why the US entered into Vietnam: the first being “domino theory”, and the second being the Gulf of Tonkin incident. “Domino theory,” or the “falling domino principle” as President Eisenhower coined in 1954, refers to a Cold War view held by many Americans and American officials at the time, and described how the spread of Communism could occur in Asia if Vietnam were to succumb to Communism. “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”⁹ Applied to the spread of Communism, this meant that if one country were to fall to it (Vietnam in this case), others would quickly follow behind. With this view, the fall of Vietnam was clearly unacceptable for the US, and must be avoided at all costs in order to slow/stop the spread of Communism.

⁷ “9-11 Commission Report.” The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as the 9-11 Commission), closed 21 August, 2004. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/index.htm>, 66-67.

⁸ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), xii.

⁹ John T Woolley. and Gerhard Peters. “Dwight D. Eisenhower, The President’s News Conference, April 07, 1954.” *The American Presidency Project*, 2022. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-361>.

If “domino theory” was the theoretical impetus for entering Vietnam, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was the practical one. In early August 1964, two US ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam reported being fired upon by North Vietnamese forces. In response to this incident, President Johnson requested permission from Congress “to increase the US military presence in Indochina,” and three days later, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized President Johnson “to take any measures he believed were necessary to retaliate and to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia.”¹⁰ This resolution provided justification for US escalation in Vietnam, and thus began the major buildup and deployments of US forces to the country.

Leading up to the 9/11 terror attacks, Afghanistan was an unknown and unfamiliar country to almost all Americans. However, in their aftermath, Afghanistan became a topic of conversation/debate around the dinner tables of average Americans. Passions and patriotism soared around the country seeing images of the New York skyline filled with smoke, a hole in the Pentagon building, and a downed plane in a rural Pennsylvania field. The attacks also unearthed unfamiliar feelings of vulnerability for many Americans, who now wondered how safe they might really be at home in their own country. In this context, retaliation against the perpetrators of the unprompted attack were demanded, and justified, after the deaths of thousands of American civilians, and American officials seemed to believe so too. On September 18th, 2001, President Bush signed into law a joint resolution “authorizing the use of force against those responsible for attacking the United States on September 11,” and this led to the use of

¹⁰ “U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: The Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964.” The Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/gulf-of-tonkin>.

American military force in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime harboring them in the country.¹¹

“Vietnamization” and “Afghanization”

As the US began to think about withdrawing from Vietnam, President Nixon’s policies revolved around “Vietnamizing” the war, or “withdrawing troops and shifting the burden to the South Vietnamese to carry on the war.”¹² In other words, “Vietnamization” meant getting the Vietnamese government and its forces in a position to be able to defend their country and support themselves on their own. Why should Americans have to get drafted into the military to fight and die in a war between North and South Vietnam? In practice, “Vietnamization” meant beginning US troop withdrawals while at the same time “turning over fighting responsibilities to the South Vietnamese while the United States continued to supply material and financial assistance, including air support.”¹³ The last American ground troops left South Vietnam in August 1972, and though they were able to fend off North Vietnamese attacks for a couple years on their own afterwards, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell on April 30th, 1975 to the North Vietnamese Army.¹⁴

¹¹ “The U.S. War in Afghanistan: 1999-2021.” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

¹² Paul Miller, “VIETNAMIZATION, 1966-1973.” *Withdrawal Deadlines In War: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan*. Atlantic Council, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24664.4>, 4.

¹³ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 173.

¹⁴ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 174.

The term “Afghanization” is directly taken from the idea of “Vietnamization”, but applied to US efforts in Afghanistan. On August 11th, 2003, NATO took the lead for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, whose primary objective was “to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists.”¹⁵ The burden of fighting in Afghanistan was carried by US and coalition forces, but starting in 2011, “responsibility for security was gradually transitioned to Afghan forces, which took the lead for security operations across the country by summer 2013.”¹⁶ In 2014 after almost two years of negotiations, a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) was signed between the US and the new Afghan government of National Unity, and provided the necessary legal framework to carry out two critical, though minimally combat-oriented, missions after 2014: to target remnants of al-Qaeda, and training, advising, and assisting Afghan National Security Forces.¹⁷ With the signing of the BSA, “Afghanization” came into full effect since focus shifted to primarily training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces, but would they be up to the task of supporting and defending the Afghan government and people if coalition forces were to completely withdraw?

The Withdrawal Processes

¹⁵ “ISAF’s Mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014) (Archived).” *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. Last updated 19 August 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm.

¹⁶ “ISAF’s Mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014) (Archived).” *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. Last updated 19 August 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm.

¹⁷ “Statement by the President on the Signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement and NATO Status of Forces Agreement in Afghanistan.” *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*. 30 September 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/30/statement-president-signing-bilateral-security-agreement-and-nato-status>.

The beginning of the end in Vietnam for the US began with the start of the Nixon administration in 1969. In June of that year, President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu on Midway Island to announce the first increment of redeployment, and from that point on, the US troop withdrawal never ceased.¹⁸ By the beginning of 1970, US troop levels had decreased from a high of 542,000 in January 1969 to 473,000 in January 1970, and by July 1972, only 45,600 troops remained in the country.¹⁹ Over these few years of troop drawdowns, President Nixon did not set a public deadline for the withdrawal of troops despite North Vietnamese demand for one. However, “by the spring of 1971, if not earlier, Nixon adopted an implicit or internal deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam, centering on or around November 1972, the date of the US presidential election.”²⁰ Nixon’s desire to coincide a completed withdrawal of all US troops with the November presidential election emphasizes how politics played into the decision-making around Vietnam, and shows how, despite attempted negotiations and political rhetoric, “the United States was committed to a unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam,” with seemingly little care for unintended consequences.²¹ The most significant of unintended consequences appeared to be the ultimate defeat of South Vietnam by the North with the fall of Saigon in 1975, about two years after the US withdrawal was completed.

¹⁸ “Ending the Vietnam War, 1969-1973.” The Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/ending-vietnam>.

¹⁹ John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 173.

²⁰ Paul Miller, “VIETNAMIZATION, 1966-1973.” *Withdrawal Deadlines In War: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan*. Atlantic Council, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24664.4>, 6.

²¹ Paul Miller, “VIETNAMIZATION, 1966-1973.” *Withdrawal Deadlines In War: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan*. Atlantic Council, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24664.4>, 5.

The process of official withdrawal from Afghanistan can be traced to start after the signing of the BSA in 2014. Three months after its signing in December 2014, approximately 16,100 US troops were in Afghanistan, and by July 6th, 2016, this number was about half that amount at 8,400 troops.²² By January 15th 2021, 2,500 US servicemembers remained in Afghanistan.²³ In February 2020, President Trump signed a deal with the Taliban which set the stage to finally end America's new longest war.²⁴ However, with an upcoming presidential election later in the year and a timetable set to extend past it, how much might politics have played a part of decision-making when it comes to Afghanistan, as it did towards Nixon's leadup to reelection in 1972? If it was an attempt to support Trump's reelection, it was an unsuccessful one since Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, but the agreement was already in place and in motion when President Biden took office in January 2021. Despite the deal being made before his time in office, President Biden continued forward with it, and by mid-April 2021, he had set a withdrawal date of September 11th, 2021, the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks.²⁵ Leading up to the complete withdrawal of US forces, there was no way of telling how exactly things might play out afterwards in Afghanistan, but President Biden's top aides said he

²² "A Timeline of U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan Since 2011." *Military Times*, 6 July 2016. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2016/07/06/a-timeline-of-u-s-troop-levels-in-afghanistan-since-2001/>.

²³ Jim Garamone, "U.S. Completes Troop-Level Drawdown in Afghanistan, Iraq." *U.S. Department of Defense*, 15 January 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2473884/us-completes-troop-level-drawdown-in-afghanistan-iraq/>.

²⁴ Mujib Mashal, "Taliban and U.S. Strike Deal to Withdraw American Troops from Afghanistan." *The New York Times*, first published 29 February 2020, updated 23 August 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/asia/us-taliban-deal.html>.

²⁵ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, & Eric Schmitt, "Biden to Withdraw All Combat Troops From Afghanistan by Sept. 11." *The New York Times*, first published 13 April 2021, updated 24 July 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>.

was “keenly aware of the risks of a total security collapse transpiring in Kabul, the Afghan capital, if all Western troops leave, and he has privately described a fall-of-Saigon scenario as haunting.”²⁶ Not long afterward, that haunting thought turned into a haunting reality as Taliban forces swept through provinces and major cities around the country (including the capital of Kabul) after US troops were finally gone, and “in just 10 days, the Taliban had gone from taking their first provincial capital to preparing to declare a new Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.”²⁷ With Kabul’s fall, Americans (many Afghan-Americans) remained in the country with no way of returning, so President Biden authorized 6,000 American troops to return to Kabul to safely and securely rescue these stranded citizens.²⁸ A refugee emergency ensued as Afghans rushed to the US troops who had returned to Kabul, and through incredible efforts by many in the US military, government, and veteran/civilian networks, the US “completed one of the biggest airlifts in history, with more than 120,000 people evacuated to safety.”²⁹

Conclusion – A Realist Take?

When looking at things through a realist perspective, power, interests, and capability are the most important factors to take into consideration for analysis. In an article about disengaging

²⁶ Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, & Eric Schmitt, “Biden to Withdraw All Combat Troops From Afghanistan by Sept. 11.” *The New York Times*, first published 13 April 2021, updated 24 July 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>.

²⁷ Chloe Hadavas, “The Year Kabul Fell Again.” *Foreign Policy*. 21 December 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/21/2021-kabul-fall-afghanistan-withdrawal-taliban-takeover/>.

²⁸ “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan.” *The White House*, 31 August 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

²⁹ “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan.” *The White House*, 31 August 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

in Indochina, retired Army General Matthew Ridgway asks characteristic realist questions regarding these factors such as “What were the basic purposes behind our major policy decisions?”, “What did we seek to accomplish?”, “Were these purposes and objectives clearly in our vital interests?”, and “What courses of action will best serve our interests?”³⁰ Applying Ridgway’s thinking and questions to comparing Vietnam and Afghanistan, it becomes clear why both conflicts are considered failures by many. First, political considerations (particularly concerning withdrawal processes) appear to have been the main drivers for decision-making processes. Though one erroneous decision may not cause catastrophe, an accumulation of erroneous decisions can, and this led to the eventual takeovers of both countries by oppositional forces. Second, though initial reasons for entering into war/conflict can appear justified, reassessments of core national interests at stake in both conflicts never seem to have occurred over time. In future conflicts, periodic reassessments such as these that asks questions similar to or verbatim to the ones Ridgway poses would greatly support guiding well-informed national security decisions, and likely garner support from both sides of the political aisle as well.

³⁰ Matthew B. Ridgway, “Indochina: Disengaging.” *Foreign Affairs* 49, no. 4 (1971). <https://doi.org/10.2307/20037866>, 584.

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