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Revised: January 17, 2018

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Revised 17.1.19

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Senator George Aiken is famously misquoted as recommending that the United States “declare victory and get out” as a way of ending the war in Vietnam. In practice, the United States did something very different. It bombed North Vietnam into agreeing to a peace settlement, claimed that a rushed “Vietnamization” campaign gave South Vietnam a government and military forces capable of securing the country, and then pulled United States forces out of South Vietnam.

Any summary of what happened next has to be grossly oversimplified, but even a brief summary still sounds important warnings about the current United States policies in Afghanistan. The U.S left South Vietnam with a hollow, unstable and corrupt “democratic” government in charge. It left a country with serious economic problems the moment United States military spending and high aid levels were cut, and it left a country torn apart by deep divisions between its ruling class and its Buddhist clergy.

It also left a half-formed Army of the Republic of Vietnam Forces (ARVN) behind. These forces were trained and equipped to fight as if they had United States resources and backing. Some units were truly effective as long as they had the proper resources and leadership, but the ARVN as a whole was corrupt, had growing desertion problems, and was dependent on massive outside aid to support its United States-style force structure. Aid cuts after the United States left further crippled the ARVN, North Vietnam skillfully built up a mix of new conventional and covert threats, and the United States did not begin to react effectively when North Vietnam triggered a massive new invasion.

Afghanistan is not Vietnam, and history never really repeats itself – particularly when the countries involved have such radically different political, economic, cultural, and security conditions. *But*, there are enough parallels between Afghanistan and South Vietnam to sound a warning. If anything, Afghanistan has deeper political divisions both within its central government and on a national basis. The World Bank rates it as having some of the worst governance ratings in the world, and Transparency International rates it as the fourth most corrupt country in the world in spite of a long series of ongoing anti-corruption efforts.

Failed Politics and Failed Governance

The parallels between Vietnamese and Afghan vulnerabilities to United States withdrawal become all too clear once one strips away the “follies” of reporting by official government spokespersons and public affairs officers. There are many highly competent Afghans and Afghan officials and officers, but the basic structure of Afghan politics and governance can defeat their efforts at every level of government activity and implementation of the rule of law.

Afghanistan’s current government is a fractured, ineffective mess. It is deeply divided between a mutually hostile President and CEO, and many of their key rivals. It lags years behind in holding a new election, and its latest government reorganization may strengthen its security efforts but has brought even more rivals into the government.

The Afghan legislature has little real control over how money is actually spent, and has its own corruption problems in both its elections and in every action it takes when in session. There are

deep ethnic, sectarian, tribal and regional divisions in both Afghan politics and governance from the local to the national level that undermine its unity and effectiveness, and sometimes lead to violence that affect its politics. Much of the country is controlled by mixes of power brokers that include warlords and narcotraffickers, and severely limit the central government's role and influence outside "Kabulstan."

The United States has talked about pushing more actively for reform, effective policies, and integrity by making United States aid and military support conditional but the few such efforts are the small exception rather than the rule. Worse, recent United States-led peace talks, announcements of a 50% cut in United States forces, and further delays in a new election have sharply hurt President Ghani's – and any other candidate's – chances of creating a unified and effective new government.

A Failed Economy and Effort to Meet Human Needs

There have been many claims about civil progress in the Afghan economy and in Afghan human development, but far too many claims have been false or exaggerated by political spin. Afghanistan has one of the poorest economies in the world. The *CIA World Factbook* indicates that the Agency estimates the poverty level at 23% but cannot estimate just how low its GDP per capita is or how high its real and disguised unemployment is. It summarizes Afghanistan's current economic situation as follows,

Afghanistan is extremely poor, landlocked, and highly dependent on foreign aid, agriculture, and trade with neighboring countries. Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs. Criminality, insecurity, and the Afghan Government's inability to extend rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth. It will probably take the remainder of the decade and continuing donor aid and attention to significantly raise Afghanistan's living standards from its current level, among the lowest in the world. While the international community remains committed to Afghanistan's development, pledging over \$24 billion at three donors' conferences since 2002, Kabul will need to overcome a number of challenges. Expanding poppy cultivation and a growing opium trade generate roughly \$4 billion in illicit economic activity and looms as one of Kabul's most serious policy concerns. Other long-term challenges include: budget sustainability, job creation, corruption, government capacity, and rebuilding war torn infrastructure.

The real Afghan economy now relies on three main forces: outside aid – most of it military which generally benefits a relatively small elite and the Afghan military, civil servants, and contractors; narcotics sales which provide limited benefit to the grower but high incomes to power brokers, narcotraffickers, and the Taliban; and a subsistence economy that is primarily agricultural but has a growing element of urban poor. This subsistence often means poverty to the point of malnutrition at the rural level. Afghan cities are packed with displaced persons from an increasingly insecure countryside.

Afghanistan does get substantial economic aid from other countries, but partly because of United States involvement. The Lead Inspector General-Overseas Contingency Operations (LIG-OCO) estimated in October 2018 that United States economic and civil aid would be \$1.6 billion in FY2019, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) put the total cost of civil and economic aid at \$45.5 billion. Much of the impact of aid, however, comes from the military support and aid the United States spends in country

No one has accurate quantitative data on Afghanistan's current economic plight. However, the infographics in an actual on-the-scene World Bank analysis by Ismail Rahimi, *Afghanistan poverty status update: progress at risk (Vol. 2): May 2, 2017*, seem all too valid in warning that the real

poverty rate climbed from 36% in 2011-12 to 39% in 2013-2014 as United States and allied forces withdrew and civil aid was cut. Male unemployment tripled. Rural poverty rose by 14% to a 44% level, and 76% of the jobs created in the rural service sector during 2007-2008 were lost. The majority of rural areas still had no education, while the number of poor Afghans that were being educated dropped by 6%. One in two young Afghans were left unemployed. (And, all of these estimates must be considered in the context that Rahimi's analysis did not fully measure the impact of the loss of aid workers and efforts and the rising impact of dependence on narcotics exports)

US. Support for a Half-Formed Military

As for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Forces (ARVN), it remains dependent on United States and other outside allied aid in dollar terms, in airpower, and on "train and assist support" from some 21,522 United States and allied uniformed personnel in the NATO Resolute Support Mission and other roles as of June 2018.

The United States publicly reported the it deployed a nominal total of 14,000 uniformed personnel before the President indicated in December 2018 that they might be cut by 50% in December. This 14,000 total, however, did include the large numbers of supporting troops outside Afghanistan necessary to support the 14,000 actually in country, and does not seem to have included significant numbers who were deployed on temporary duty assignments. It also made no mention of the fact that the United States alone depended on 26,922 additional contractors inside Afghanistan country, 10,128 of which were American citizens and 10,527 more were not Afghan nationals and most of which would leave the country if United States forces withdrew.

The LIG-OCO estimated in October 2018 that the United States alone was providing \$5.2 billion in FY2019 in direct aid to the Afghan security forces, and a total of \$46.3 billion in military aid for counterterrorism operations and the mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan security forces – although the United States has never reported the actual war costs for Afghanistan alone. This \$46.3 billion also supports operations across the Middle East in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates that are not specific to Afghanistan. Some of this money also goes to stability and counter-terrorism operations in the Horn of Africa and the Philippines, and detainee operations at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

It is hard to put the problems in Afghan forces in any form of quantitative perspective. The United States Departments of State and Defense have steadily cut back on the content of their public official reporting on every aspect of Afghanistan and the War, including on every part of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

Defense still does, however, issue a semi-annual report and both the LIG-OCO and SIGAR provide more detailed coverage of the ANSF in spite of growing over-classification and non-reporting by the Departments of State and Defense. SIGAR stated in its October 30, 2018 report to Congress that,

Other unclassified data show the ANDSF made minimal or no progress in pressuring the Taliban over the quarter. RS-provided data showed that the ANDSF failed to gain greater control or influence over districts, population, and territory this quarter. While the districts, territory, and population under insurgent control or influence also decreased slightly, the districts, territory, and population "contested"—meaning under neither Afghan government nor insurgent control or influence—increased. Notably, Afghan government control or influence of its districts reached the lowest level (55.5%) since SIGAR began tracking district control in November 2015. The Afghan government controls or influences districts in which about 65% of the population lives, unchanged since October 2017

It is clear from United Nations, SIGAR, LIG-OCO, media sources and other reporting that the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and ISIS are making serious gains in challenging government forces in the countryside and in some provincial capitals. It is also clear that the ANSF have not made serious gains anywhere. Further, the Taliban has sharply increased its control of the narcotics industry that now virtually dominates the hard currency earning sector in the Afghan civil economy.

As a result, official reporting on the course of the fighting has tended to make more and more efforts to “spin” the fighting into success. More honest command briefings, however, have made it clear that the overall balance seems to be tilting in favor of insurgents and extremists in spite of limited increases in the size and role of the United States train and assist mission after President Trump took office. So, has virtually all media reporting – such as the excellent reporting in the *Long War Journal*. More and more districts are coming under Taliban control or see insurgents actively challenging the government.

The ANSF does not have conscription as Vietnam did. It does, however, recruit largely because young Afghan men have no other sources of jobs and income. SIGAR reports also make it clear that the ANSF has serious retention problems that mirror image the “desertion” problems that official United States Army histories of the war show crippled the ARVN before the collapse of Vietnam. SIGAR stated in its Quarterly Report for October 30, 2018 that,

The ANDSF also struggled to maintain its personnel strength this quarter. The ANDSF’s July 2018 strength of 312,328 personnel—comprising 194,017 in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and 118,311 in the Afghan National Police (ANP)—was the lowest strength reported for comparable periods since 2012. ANDSF strength decreased by 1,914 personnel since last quarter and by 8,827 personnel since the same period last year. This puts the ANDSF at roughly... 11%, below their target strength of 352,000. According to DOD, ANDSF attrition is due to a number of factors, including personnel being killed in action, going absent without leave, or declining to reenlist... When SIGAR asked RS to comment on the issue, they responded, “From the period of May 1 to the most current data as of October 1, 2018, the average number of casualties the ANDSF suffered is the greatest it has ever been during like periods.

..this puts the ANDSF at only 88.7% of its authorized strength, down from 91.2% during the same period in 2017... This quarter, USFOR-A classified all ANA attrition information; last quarter it provided limited attrition information.

Afghan force levels are driven in part by pay problems, ethnic and sectarian divisions, and steadily higher casualty rates. These data are classified by the Afghan government, but press estimates put the total at more than 25,000 Afghan soldiers and police killed toward the end of December 2018, Casualty estimates showed a sharp rise during 2018.

Afghanistan has no direct equivalent to “Rolling Thunder” and the bombing campaigns in Vietnam. However, in practice, Afghan forces have only held together because of the U.S. and NATO train and assist mission, the high levels of military aid funds, critical combat support of the best Afghan units from key cadres of United States counterinsurgency forces, and a more than 58% increase in year-long combat air support from the United States between 2017 and 2018.

The Public Affairs Office of the United States Air Force Central Command (AFCENT) reports that the United States flew 4,603 manned strike sorties in all of 2017, and 7,291 in the first 11 months of 2018. The total number of munitions dropped by manned and unmanned aircraft rose by more the 56% from 4,361 in all of 2107 to 6,823 in the first 11 months of 2018.

The small Afghan Air Force is making progress, and beginning to acquire fully mission capable light attack aircraft. It has no plans, however, to acquire anything like the United States air

capabilities it now depends upon. Moreover, like Afghan ground forces, it is at least half a decade away from being a force capable of replacing United States and NATO allied forces. There is no predictable time in the next decade where it will not be dependent on major transfers of both military and civil aid. It is currently locked into a war of attrition with the Taliban and other enemies where they still have near sanctuary in Pakistan and now seem to be getting significant Russian and Iranian aid.

Vietnam Redux: Peace as an Extension of War by Other Means

It would be unfair to accuse any element of the US. government as having had the wrong strategy for Afghanistan. The real accusation should be that it has had so many partially conflicting strategies that it never properly resourced or implemented overtime, or actively reversed, that it has had no real strategy at all. The United States has been remarkably inconsistent and ineffective in both its military civil programs in Afghanistan since its first great successes in aiding Afghan forces to drive out the Taliban in 2000-2001.

United States attempts at strategy have varied by year. Many new strategies have been false starts that have never been seriously implemented, and they often had wild swings in funding from year-to-year. The United States delayed funding and supporting the build-up of effective Afghan forces for half a decade because of the priority it gave to Iraq and intelligence assessments that sharply understated the resurgence of the Taliban. It then reversed this position and "surged" more United States troop into Afghanistan, only to suddenly begin a major effort to rush into a full-scale military withdrawal beginning in 2014.

This withdrawal effort has since been partly reversed, but only in partial and poorly defined ways. The United States has not provided the military personnel to implement the kind of train and assist program the ANSF need, and has pulled back from efforts to create effective civil and civil military programs. As noted earlier, it has talked about making aid "conditional," but largely just talked. Ironically, as Congressional Budget Office (CBO) studies have shown, it also has had to keep a massive support effort going for fewer and fewer troops, getting only marginal savings for providing too few personnel.

For all the faults of the various Afghan forces involved in limiting or ending Afghan progress, the lack of consistent, effective United States efforts is probably as much to blame. The United States will also be primarily to blame if it repeats any aspect of the United States "strategy" in leaving Vietnam. It should have already learned that cutting United States support for half-ready Afghan security forces does not magically make them effective, any more than "Vietnamization" could suddenly and magically transform the ARVN.

Suddenly announcing a potential 50% cut in the 14,000 United States troops in Afghanistan without any prior consultation of the Afghan government and our allies is a mistake. Doing this while holding something approaching unilateral peace talks with a Taliban that refuses to even talk to the Afghan government has done more than provide a twisted mirror image of United States actions in Vietnam. It not only has discredited the United States as an ally, but it has given the Taliban a great incentive to keep fighting while rejecting any serious compromise with the Afghan government.

Worse, the Afghan “peace talks” to date seem to be based on the fantasy that the Taliban will shift its positions so radically that it both recognizes the legitimacy of the current Afghan government and accept a limited and non-violent role in that government – *and* that the end result will be better than the peace between North and South Vietnam. In practice, the Taliban has already turned United States peace efforts into an extension of war by other means. It is clearly seeking either military victory or a decisive edge at the negotiating table. It may well conclude that any peace that pushes the United States out will leave Afghanistan so fragile and divided that it can violate the peace settlement just as North Vietnam did. One has only to look at Cambodia, Nepal, the Balkans, and Nicaragua for examples of rebels and factions who used “peace” talks and negotiations to win.

This mix of United States force cut announcements and peace efforts in December and January has also undermined the already faltering United States effort to get Pakistan to stop tolerating and support the Taliban. It has shown the limits to Ghani’s influence to his people, and undermined any Afghan effort to create enough unity to keep United States support. Inevitably, it will affect ANSF morale and desertion rates at every level, act as more reason for Russia and Iran to play the Taliban off against the United States, and further undermine United States leverage and any real United States efforts to make aid conditional.

Is there a case for a thorough review of United States options in Afghanistan? Yes, the preceding analysis shows there clearly is! However, a long and agonizing United States failure in Afghanistan is clearly worse than a short one. The options are either to provide the time, resources, and conditionality that have a credible chance of ending the war with some form of victory, or to conclude that the United States take the risk of actually leaving and develop a strategy based on an honest assessment of the risks and costs to U.S. security and the Afghan people. Blundering into repeating Vietnam redux, and relying on the “fog of peace” to replace the “fog of war” is not the answer.

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