US Strategy in Afghanistan: Learning From the Past

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Abstract

Vietnam and Afghanistan are conflicts sharing a number of characteristics, while differing on other counts. US forces in Central Asia tried to apply some of the “lessons learned” in Indochina, in an exercise of interest not only for the scholar of counterinsurgency but also for students of how organizations learn and develop their professional culture. After the initial light footprint intervention gave rise to nation building, they stressed a “Clear, hold, rebuild, and engage” approach, as opposed to “search and destroy”, drawing on the lessons of the second half of combat operations in Vietnam. On the other hand, they did not develop the close village-level partnerships seen in the US Marine Corps' Combat Action Program, while having to deal with greater diversity among local civilians and members of the military. In both conflicts, the existence of a sanctuary posed a major obstacle to success.

Key Words
Vietnam, Afghanistan, Counterinsurgency, Learning, Military, War

Introduction

Any war is a learning experience by all forces involved, this takes place both during the conflict\(^1\), as units and leaders\(^2\) try to adapt and find the most appropriate tactics and tools to win, and once the guns fall silent, when the time comes to record the lessons for employment in future operations. Five dangers arise in this difficult yet vital task: to

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apply the lessons of a past war to a very different later conflict\(^3\), to draw the wrong lessons, to forget them\(^4\), to resist them\(^5\), or to disregard them on account of alleged technical or other changes\(^6\). To them must be added the possibility that different observers will draw disparate conclusions from the same events, as well as the natural reluctance of any organisation to embark on radical change\(^7\).

Apart from the obvious need to draw the appropriate lessons from a war in order to sharpen the fighting skills of an army, it is also necessary for wider, political, purposes. A war is not finished when soldiers go home, the last battle in any war is that of writing it\(^8\). In this sense one can argue the Vietnam War has not concluded, since a consensus has still not been reached about the lessons to be derived from it. The Indochina conflict drags on, the word processor having taken the place of the rifle, and the outcome of this last phase of the war will be instrumental in determining the future course of history, and above all the response of the maritime democracies to acts of aggression. We are all prisoners of history.

In the case of Vietnam, we find three major schools of thought\(^9\):

\(^3\) The classical example being the impact of WWI’s static warfare in the Western Front on the doctrinal development of the tank in the inter-war years.

\(^4\) "We did a lot of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, but somewhere in the 1980s we threw all those lessons away,' Petraeus tells me", Charles M. Sennott, “General David H. Petraeus: The general’s knowledge”, The Sunday Times, 29 June 2008, available at www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article4212055.ece

\(^5\) Of course, resisting a lesson usually comes hand in hand with trying to apply a past one, whatever its inadequacies. "The United States Army resisted any true attempt to learn how to fight an insurgency during the course of the Vietnam War, preferring to treat the war as a conventional conflict in the tradition of the Korean War and World War II. The British Army, because of its traditional role as a colonial police force and the organizational culture that its history and the national culture created, was better able to learn quickly and apply the lessons of counterinsurgency during the course of the Malayan Emergency", John A. Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xxii-xxiii

\(^6\) Technical progress, while obviously important, shouldn’t distract us from the fundamental nature of war, which is unchanged through the ages.

\(^7\) Which goes a long way towards explaining the difficulties of proponents of mechanised warfare in avoiding the concept of the tank as an infantry-support weapon, employing it on its own. F.W. Von Mellenthin, Panzer Battles, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), pp. xiv-xvi

\(^8\) Let’s not forget a famous quotation from Winston S. Churchill, "History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.", cited by Dave Ryan, “Churchill a Man of Valour”, The Calgary Sun, 27 November 2002, available at http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=832

\(^9\) "The lessons he deduced differed sharply from those of the military brass nearest to President Bush during the Iraq invasion. The administration’s ideas ranged from the former secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld’s 'fast and light' military, which could strike surgically to neutralise a threat without committing large numbers of personnel and material, to the Powell doctrine, named after Colin Powell, which called for overwhelming fire power and focusing on immediate, attainable objectives in popular, winnable wars. Petraeus, in contrast, perceived that the post-9/11 world would afford no such clarity of
A.- The “Powell Doctrine”: use of overwhelming force in small-scale conflicts with clear and attainable objectives\textsuperscript{10}.

B.- The “Rumsfeld Doctrine”: reliance on technology to cut the number of troops on the ground and therefore the likely number of casualties.

C.- The “Petraeus Approach”\textsuperscript{11}: combination of hard and soft power by a flexible and learning organisation.

Plus appeasement\textsuperscript{12}, which will not be discussed here.

The intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 can clearly not be termed appeasement\textsuperscript{13}, and neither does it fall within the Powell Doctrine. Instead it was carried out with a limited number of troops on the ground, heavily relying on advanced technology and existing local actors supported by special forces, and is therefore an example of the Rumsfeld Doctrine\textsuperscript{14} at work, however, the failure to completely defeat the enemy tactics and cut-and-dried goals, and that the guerrilla warfare of Vietnam represented the kind of complex struggle for which the US forces needed to prepare. Defeating terrorists, he contended, required a fresh approach to counterinsurgency, the judicious application of “hard power” (killing the enemy) and “soft power” (getting the lights back on), far more than just the ‘shock and awe’ of the initial US-led invasion that began on March 19, 2003. “”, Charles M. Sennott, “General David H. Petraeus: The general’s knowledge”, The Sunday Times, 29 June 2008, available at www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article4212055.ece

\textsuperscript{10} “The Powell Doctrine (also referred to as the Schwarzkopf Doctrine) was used, although not really until the end of the war (Linebacker I & II). It could have been a winning strategy, but the micromanaging (almost the most destructive and demoralizing thing an Army faces) and ‘political realities’ were too strong. The Rumsfeld Doctrine (which rarely works in actuality) was why we thought we could win in Vietnam. They were farmers with little modern weaponry and how could they possibly defeat a superpower? We were wrong. The Petraeus Approach, simply put, did not exist on nearly any scale. Oh, lower commanders pushed for it, but when met with as stern a resistance by their own superiors as they did it didn't stand a chance.”, private interview of the author with Max Hendricks on 24 August 2008.


\textsuperscript{13} Whether the term might apply to some extent to Pakistan is an entirely different matter.

\textsuperscript{14} Accused of having disregarded age-old maxims of war. “Infantry needs to hold the ground, even if only temporarily. The advantage in mountainous terrain lies in the defender and overwhelming force needs to be brought to bear on the enemy’s weak points or centers of gravity.”, Mir Bahmanyar, Afghanistan Cave Complexes 1979-2004: Mountain strongholds of the Mujahideen, Taliban & Al Qaeda, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004), p. 24
attracted a barrage of criticism\textsuperscript{15} and its questioning in strong terms\textsuperscript{16}, and after the success of The Surge in Iraq\textsuperscript{17} there was increasing talk of the possibility of employing similar tactics in the country, among them a noticeable increase in the number of US troops deployed\textsuperscript{18}, and some areas like Helmand were reinforced\textsuperscript{19} followed by the country's own limited version of a surge.

The purpose of this paper is to underline how:

1.- The lessons learnt in the second half of the Vietnam War\textsuperscript{20}, under the command of General Abrams, came to be applied in Afghanistan.

2.- As well as in Korea and Vietnam, an enemy “sanctuary” constituted a major obstacle to allied operations.

\textsuperscript{15} “Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney are both long-term advocates of technology-driven wars fought with few ‘boots on the ground’. Much to the consternation of senior military officers, this strategy ultimately cost the Coalition their deepest desire: Osama Bin Laden. As the war on Al Qaeda started, the aerial campaign should have incorporated a massive ground assault by Coalition and Pakistani forces in the Tora Bora region where Bin Laden and hundreds of his devoted followers had retreated in order to fight from their well-constructed caves. … The U.S.-led Coalition, by its misguided emphasis on waging primarily a technology-driven campaign is directly to blame for the dispersal of key TAQ individuals”, Mir Bahmanyar, *Afghanistan Cave Complexes 1979-2004: Mountain strongholds of the Mujahideen, Taliban & Al Qaeda*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004), pp. 16-17


\textsuperscript{17} Alex Calvo, “The US and Pakistan: Some historical background to a liaison dangereuse”, *Global Affairs*, Issue 9, June-July 2008, available at \url{http://www.globalaffairs.es/Noticia-342.html}

\textsuperscript{18} “The American Enterprise Institute, the think tank that came up with the ‘surge’ strategy for Iraq, has just completed a re-evaluation of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan and concluded that another surge of U.S. forces is required, this time into southern Afghanistan.”, Sean D. Naylor, “Think Tank: Surge now needed in Afghanistan”, *Army Times*, 1 February 2008, available at \url{http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/01/army_afghanpolicy_080129w/}

\textsuperscript{19} Richard Beeston, “US marines to ‘stir things up’ in Helmand”, *The Times Online*, 29 April 2008, available at \url{http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article3835580.ece}

Can we compare Vietnam and Afghanistan?

Before we embark on our comparative study we must turn our attention to a basic question: are both conflicts similar enough for our purpose? There are of course a number of major differences between the enemy in Indochina\textsuperscript{21} and that in Afghanistan:

- The terrain\textsuperscript{22} and other characteristics of the country differ considerably.
- Indochinese communists were sponsored by two major states\textsuperscript{23}.
- They did not operate (except for propaganda and psychological warfare purposes) on allied soil.\textsuperscript{24}
- In Vietnam the enemy consisted of irregular (Vietcong) and conventional (The North Vietnamese Army, or NVA)\textsuperscript{25} forces, whereas TAQ do not have conventional units at their disposal\textsuperscript{26}.
- The degree of ethnic and linguistic diversity in Afghanistan is greater than that in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{27}

However, fundamental similarities can also be found\textsuperscript{28}:

- A mixture of local nationalism and world-wide ideology\textsuperscript{29} fuels the insurgency.

\textsuperscript{21} A more accurate term than “Vietnam” since Laos and Cambodia were major bases and transit points for communist forces.
\textsuperscript{22} For an overview of the physical geography and climate of Vietnam see G. Rottman, *VietCong and NVA Tunnels and Fortifications of the Vietnam War*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), pp. 7-9
\textsuperscript{23} However it should be noted that a number of observers have accused a wide range of governments of having supported, at least to some extent, the Taliban.
\textsuperscript{24} We should note, however, that we cannot simply equate the Taliban with Al Qaeda. Furthermore, just like in the case of Indochina it was (and still is) hotly debated to what extent the Vietminh was a nationalist movement, as opposed to a Communist force, in Afghanistan the question arose whether the Taliban were mainly motivated by Pashtun nationalism or a wider Islamist ideology.
\textsuperscript{25} It is important not to forget that after the Tet Offensive of 1968 the Vietcong were decimated, and after the US withdrawal from the war it was conventional forces which defeated and occupied South Vietnam. Despite propaganda to the contrary, guerrillas did not defeat Saigon. For an overview of the period between the Battle of An Loc and the fall of Saigon see James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 150-177
\textsuperscript{26} This assertion should of course be qualified if looked at through Indian eyes. Vanni Cappelli, “Containing Pakistan: Engaging the Raja-Mandala in South-Central Asia”, *ORBIS*, the Foreign Policy Research Institute's quarterly journal of world affairs, Winter 2007, Volume 51, Number 1, available at http://www.fpri.org/orbis/5101/cappelli.containingpakistan.pdf
\textsuperscript{27} Although we should not forget the Buddhist – Catholic cleavage, and the presence of minorities in mountain areas of Afghanistan, the “Montagnards”.
\textsuperscript{29} The relative importance of each factor has been a matter of academic and political debate since the early days of the colonial revolt against French rule. In the case of Afghanistan some voices suggested that local Pashtuns could be accommodated in exchange for their expelling foreign insurgents, and this is
Caves and fortifications are liberally used\(^\text{30}\).
- The enemy concentrates on combating the ability of local and allied forces to provide security to the population.
- Schools are a major objective\(^\text{31}\).
- Insurgents take advantage of a sanctuary\(^\text{32}\).
- Significant domestic constituencies call for the withdrawal of allied forces from the country.

Therefore the necessary basis can be said to exist between the two wars to justify our search for lessons derived from the former being applied to the latter\(^\text{33}\).

supposed to have been agreed to by Islamabad and a number of tribes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas but the deals did not seem to have been very successful. “Since 9/11, Musharraf has been trying to control militancy in the tribal areas through various peace agreements. But so far, these deals have brought negligible success.”, Karin Zissis and Jayshree Bajoria, *Pakistan’s Tribal Areas*, Council on Foreign Relations, 26 October 2007, available at [http://www.cfr.org/publication/11973/pakistans_tribal_areas.html?breadcrumb=%2Fissue%2F458%2Fstate_sponsors_of_terrorism](http://www.cfr.org/publication/11973/pakistans_tribal_areas.html?breadcrumb=%2Fissue%2F458%2Fstate_sponsors_of_terrorism). The history of the region, however, does not suggest it would be easy to duplicate the success of Operation Awakening in Iraq. Graham Stewart, “A history of trouble in the NW Frontier”, *The Times Online*, 2 October 2007, available at [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/graham_stewart/article2697771.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/graham_stewart/article2697771.ece)


\(^{31}\) “On two later occasions the local Cong unit booby-trapped schools in my district. There was no question but that it was done intentionally. The Cong had purposely elected to attack and kill children”, David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), p. 179. “As a United Nations child protection officer noted, children in Afghanistan are especially vulnerable. Overwhelmingly, however, they are the victims of violence by al-Qaeda and the Taliban: a suicide bombing on Friday killed five children aged about 12, and in a particularly brutal incident two schoolgirls were killed earlier this month in a drive-by shooting by extremists attempting to terrorise Afghans brave enough to send their daughters to school”, “Hope in Afghanistan: Two tragedies should not prompt exaggerated fears about the insurgents”, *The Times Online*, 19 June 2007, available at [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article1951159.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article1951159.ece)

\(^{32}\) The difference is that Pakistan is supposed to be an ally. Alex Calvo, “The US and Pakistan: Some historical background to a liaison dangereuse”, *Global Affairs*, Issue 9, June-July 2008, available at [http://www.globalaffairs.es/Noticia-342.html](http://www.globalaffairs.es/Noticia-342.html)

\(^{33}\) Some other similarities can also be found but will not be discussed, for example the use of old weapons platforms with added technology, in a role differing from their original one for which they were procured. Robert H. Scales, *Yellow Smoke: The Future of Land Warfare for America’s Military*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006), pp. 26-28.
Lessons from the second half of the Vietnam War, and their role in Afghanistan

The following are among the most relevant lessons from the Abram era in Vietnam which to a lesser or greater extent can be said to have been taken into account in US and Coalition operations in Afghanistan:

The importance of the Home Front and the role of intellectual elites.

War is a clash of wills, and that side which strives the harder and longer for victory succeeds. No matter how advanced an army’s weaponry might be, it is the moral fortitude of those manning it which presents the key to success, and this rests on a clear understanding of why one is fighting. The reason why civilization prevailed in World War II and failed in Korea is the different attitude towards victory, while it constituted Winston S. Churchill’s single aim. Harry Truman was more concerned with avoiding a widening of the conflict than with defeating communism. Vietnam was similarly fought with a view to not provoking the Russians and Chinese, it was played to tie, not

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35 “victory belongs to those who believe in it the most, believe in it the longest, we're gonna believe, we're gonna make America believe!”, James H. Doolittle, quoted in Michael Bay, *Pearl Harbor*, 2001.


37 A good narrative of the conflict can be found in T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: 50th anniversary edition*, (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2000).

38 Who was elevated to the post of Prime Minister precisely because of his indomitable will to win. “For eight months Britain had been at war with Germany, a war that Chamberlain and his government clearly had no interest in fighting, a war being waged, as one Tory rebel said ‘without arms, without faith, and without heart’”, Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men: The Rebels who wrought Churchill to Power and helped save England*, (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2008), p. 3

39 “I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: ‘I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.’ We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us: to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.”, Winston S. Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, 13 of May 1940, *The Official Report, House of Commons (5th Series), 13 May 1940, vol. 360, c. 1502

40 “This message seemed to indicate a loss of the ‘will to win’ in Korea. President Truman’s resolute determination to free and unite that threatened land had now deteriorated almost into defeatism”, Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 378
to win. Johnson’s words were clear: “We intend to convince the communists that we cannot be defeated by force of arms”\(^{41}\), and of course not being defeated does not equal being victorious, whereas the contrary applies to the enemy\(^{42}\).

The determination to win must be of course held by political leaders, but it can only flow from popular support for the objective and the sacrifices required to achieve it, and such support is to a great extend dependent on the view of the conflict\(^{43}\) portrayed by the mass media.

While US public opinion was clearly behind its armed forces in both World War Two\(^{44}\) and Korea\(^{45}\), and the media was mainly supportive, Vietnam was met with a very different attitude, with a significant proportion of the population aloof at best from the war effort or clearly against it, and the remainder often coerced into silence. Lack of leadership at the highest levels, failure to state clear objectives, an attempt to preserve “normalcy”\(^{46}\) in the country by, for example, not calling up the reserves, and a well-oiled Communist propaganda machine, are among the many factors which fuelled such a change.

Those who can be termed the intellectual elite of the country, university professors, intellectuals, journalists, stood out in their opposition to the defence of South Vietnam, thus depriving what was at first a silent majority of their visible and thinking head.

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\(^{43}\) Its narrative.

\(^{44}\) Despite powerful isolationist lobbies prior to Pearl Harbor.

\(^{45}\) General MacArthur’s dismissal led to a barrage of letters, telegrams, and other public protests against the White House. The Japanese public was also shocked by the news. MANCHESTER William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), pp. 775-784

\(^{46}\) It could be argued that it is war which is normal, until all countries of the world become democracies, since democracies, history teaches us, do not fight each other. “War is as natural as the rains. There are years when there is no war and there are seasons without rain. But always war and rain return. There is no difference. It is the nature of things”, James Webb, *Fields of Fire*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2001), p. 193.
Hedonism and irresponsibility\textsuperscript{47} were prevalent in university campuses, and troops were often treated with contempt and disrespect\textsuperscript{48}.

Once US troops were out of Indochina, the many scholars and officers who embarked on a search for the ultimate causes of the defeat quickly identified this as a most significant factor, and one to be taken into account in any subsequent conflict. The lack of massive public support, the failure of intellectuals to provide a credible discourse to resistance against aggression, and the distorting role of mass media, chief among them TV\textsuperscript{49}, were quickly identified as major factors in the failure to translate technological superiority into a clear victory in the field of battle.

Has anything changed since then? Has the lesson been learned? To some extent it has. There was still a significant proportion of the public who did not support efforts in Afghanistan, and many opinion makers who ceaselessly claimed the war was unwinnable, a mantra which, some of them may have secretly or subconsciously hoped, would become a self-fulfilling prophecy if repeated often enough, but those holding a different view did no longer let their voices be drawn in a sea of defeatism and appeasement.

Afghanistan, together with Iraq, led to a massive show of support to the troops: letter-writing campaigns, Facebook and other social sites groups, sending of care packages, … of course not everybody took part, but those who did were acting in daylight and trumpeting their deeds. Wherever one went, support for troops was visible\textsuperscript{50}. In addition, modern technology, specially the Internet, allowed the majority behind the troops to transmit their message directly, without the need to go through often defeatist or aloof mass media outlets. The funeral service of a fallen soldier in his small native village of Texas, with the whole community thanking him for paying the

\textsuperscript{47} “You know what we’ve lost, William? We’ve lost a sense of responsibility, at least on the individual level. We have too many people like Mark who believe that the government owes them total, undisciplined freedom. If everyone thought that way there would be no society”, James Webb, \textit{Fields of Fire}, (New York: Bantam Books, 2001), p. 442

\textsuperscript{48} “Now I wear my uniform back home and they look at me like I’m an animal.”, James Webb, \textit{Fields of Fire}, (New York, Bantam Books, 2001), p. 231

\textsuperscript{49} For a discussion of the distortion of facts during the 1968 Tet Offensive and the terrorist attack against the US Embassy in Saigon see \textit{Vietnam War – The Impact of Media}, Accuracy in Media Inc, available at \url{http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=XqayiS3NnuY}

\textsuperscript{50} “the need to support the troops in the war is a clear and constant message throughout the states”, Tara Shain, private communication to the author, dated 9 June 2008.
ultimate price in the defence of freedom, might not make it to the evening news, but can now be broadcast to the whole world on Youtube\textsuperscript{51}.

The silent majority decided it would never again be gagged, and this had two major effects on operations in Afghanistan:

- More visible support for political decisions aimed at bringing the conflict to a successful end.
- Moral boost to troops serving in the country, who felt their work was being recognised and valued by those at home.

It’s important, when discussing popular attitudes to the employment of military force, to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, as has already been discussed, care must be taken not to fall into the trap of self-fulfilling prophecies by defeatist media, who insist on ignoring success while magnifying setbacks, while on the other hand some realism is called for when assessing the degree to which modern nation-states are able to mobilize resources to conduct warfare \textsuperscript{52}. When planning the deployment of troops abroad, the limited tolerance of democratic public opinions for prolonged warfare must be taken into account as a major constraint, without of course going to the extreme of ruling out or severely impeding this eventuality, which would only feed the appetite of all sort of aggressors.

As has already been mentioned, a lack of clarity of purpose was one of the factors fuelling public apathy about Indochina. The need to provide a clear narrative of military actions however does not only arise in connection with the Home Front, but also with regard to the local population\textsuperscript{53}, and even enemy forces. Propaganda should not be taken as a dirty word, and even though useless and even damaging when based on

\textsuperscript{51} “Texas Funeral – a special tribute to a fallen soldier”, Youtube, available at \url{http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=dTd1vRZiZ04}

\textsuperscript{52} “Limited in forces, capacity for independent action, and public support, nation-state governments will not be able to assemble the vast armies and demand the deep sacrifices that annihilatory war entails. Furthermore, even a fully mobilized nation-state cannot always force its opponents into annihilatory battle, especially when confronting the non-state and sub-state forces empowered by the social and technological characteristics of the age. If al-Qaeda concentrated on the desert steppes of central Asia, American and NATO forces could annihilate them in half a day’s work. The enemy has a vote, however, and most adversaries will never accept annihilatory battle with Western forces. Thus, military and political leaders must study and accept the old lessons of attrition warfare, and adjust their strategic ways and ends accordingly.”, Peter Munson, “The Return to Attrition: Warfare in the Late Nation-State Era”, Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 6 (December 2007), available at \url{http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2007/Dec/munsonDec07.asp}

\textsuperscript{53} Whose hearts and minds are the goal in any counterinsurgency campaign.
fabrications, it is a crucial weapon to be deployed\textsuperscript{54} when built on facts. It is not enough to do, one must be seen to be doing, the purpose of one's actions must not only be clear but must be clearly communicated.

War being a test of wills, anything aimed at reinforcing one's and destroying that of the enemy is as much a weapon as any designed to hit the latter's fighters or equipment. Communists in Vietnam were aware that they would never be able to defeat Free World forces in the field of battle\textsuperscript{55}, what they sought, and ultimately achieved, was to slowly erode the support of the American public and elites for the war effort. We find a major difference with Al-Qaeda here, while Communists were careful not to alienate US public opinion by attacking the mainland, in an attempt to present the war in Indochina as a remote conflict, Al Qaeda chose to strike at the heart of America. This strategic decision was bitterly criticized by some who, while fully sharing Bin Laden's ideals, believed they would more easily be achieved by warfare far away from US shores covered up with slow and careful diplomacy which they saw some Saudi figures as following\textsuperscript{56}. Their strategy was to some extent akin to that of Vietnamese communists\textsuperscript{57}, which explains why 11-S led to strong recriminations by those who were afraid to be exposed in the open in a premature naked war\textsuperscript{58}. In this regard, it seems that Bin Laden may have been the one who failed to learn the lessons from Vietnam. Concerning the Taliban, on the other hand, as already mentioned they are rather a local actor, prompting some voices to lament a stronger emphasis on splitting them from Al Qaeda. Former

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\textsuperscript{55} “Our enemy in Vietnam hoped to win his war with propaganda. It was his main weapon. Our captors told us they never expected to defeat us on the battlefield, bud did believe they could defeat us on the propaganda front.”, James B. Stockdale, Ten Years of Reflection: a Vietnam Experience, (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1984), p. 7

\textsuperscript{56} “A second track of Wahabi international strategy was to use its own natural and financial resources to influence the West, build alliances and diplomatic support for its regime, and shield Islamic fundamentalism under the protection of the ‘infidels’”, Walid Phares, Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies against America, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan), 2005, p. 103

\textsuperscript{57} Another major difference between Vietnamese communists and Al-Qaeda are their use of allied prisoners. “For the North Vietnamese, every captive U.S. service member added to the leverage they could exert in negotiations with the American government … North Vietnamese field commanders had standing orders to go to great lengths to capture downed pilots and casualties didn’t seem to matter. Even if it cost 100, or 1,000, North Vietnamese lives to face down the air strikes, a single pilot was the equivalent of strategic military terrain and worth quite a fight”, Rick Newman and Don Shepperd, Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, (New York: Presidio Press, 2007), pp. 103-4

British Ambassador to Afghanistan Sherard Cowper-Coles explains how “Plenty of contemporary accounts record the surprise and horror with which the Taliban and many Afghans greeted the news” of 9/11, adding that according to an Afghan source it may have been possible to convince the regime to expel Al Qaeda, with the tide running in that direction in fora such as some Kandahar shuras when the deadline from Washington expired, on the grounds both of political expedience (regime survival) and justice (abuse of the precept of melmastia; hospitality).^59

Sanctuaries, from the Yalu to the Durand Line.

A precondition for the success of any insurgency is a territory where the forces opposed to it cannot operate due to a decision by political leaders to impose such limit^60. A sanctuary can be employed to gain the initiative, supply combat units, transfer them from target to target, and prevent their destruction by superior firepower. This way the conflict can be prolonged, with conventional forces unable to achieve a clear and lasting victory, until public opinion ends up forcing a political compromise and military withdrawal^61.

When confronted with such sanctuaries, it is a fallacy to think war is an instrument which can simply be limited^62 in order to avoid “escalation” or gain the sympathy of the public or that of soft allies^63. A democracy can choose whether to resort or not to force,

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^60 In the case of Korea, the words of the head of Far East Bomber Command, Major General Emmett (Rosey) O’Donnell, are illustrative: “We were not allowed to violate Manchurian territory, and by violation of the territory I mean we were not allowed to fly over an inch of it. For instance, like most rivers, the Yalu has several pronounced bends before getting to the town of Antung, and the main bridges at Antung we had to attack in only one manner – in order not to violate Manchurian territory, and that was a course tangential to the southernmost bend of the river. As you draw a line from the southernmost bend of the river to the bridge, that is your course. These people on the other side of the river knew that and put up their batteries right along the line, and they peppered us right down the line all the way. We had to take it, of course, and couldn’t fight back” Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), p. 369
^61 “Our enemy in Vietnam hoped to win his war with propaganda. It was his main weapon. Our captors told us they never expected to defeat us on the battlefield, but did believe they could defeat us on the propaganda front.”, James B. Stockdale, *Ten Years of Reflection: a Vietnam Experience*, (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1984), p. 7
^62 “MacArthur had told a congressional committee that ‘the objective of any warring nation is victory immediate and complete’ Twenty years later, testifying before another committee, he rejected the idea that ‘when you use force, you can limit that force’”. William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880–1964*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), p. 751
^63 It must be noted however that historically most conflicts are limited, total war being the exception. Private communication to the author by Carles Miñarro, 11 November 2007.
but once it has decided to, it cannot simply curtail the tools at the disposal of its forces. If it does, as was the case in both Korea and Vietnam, it risks prolonging indecisively the conflict. Two options are open. It can either clearly state that the objective cannot be any other than victory, not a stalemate and employ massive force to defeat the enemy's will in a relatively short period of time, or it can embark on a longer, more indirect approach, along the counterinsurgency route. Unless a clear choice is made, and followed through on the ground, asymmetrical conflicts run the risk of becoming unwinnable.

Was there a sanctuary at the disposal of TAQ units in Afghanistan? If so, had the lesson been learnt that unless it was destroyed it would not be possible to prevail? These are the two questions we may ask ourselves.

The answer to the first one is an emphatic yes. The sanctuary did exist and its name was Pakistan. The country, whose history is marked by a strong feeling of insecurity, which reaches its zenith after the independence of Bangladesh, has always seen

64 “First I was forbidden ‘hot’ pursuit of enemy planes that attacked our own. Manchuria and Siberia were sanctuaries of inviolate protection for all enemy forces and for all enemy purposes, no matter what depredations or assaults might come from there. Then I was denied the right to bomb the hydroelectric plants along the Yalu. The order was broadened to include every power plant in North Korea which was capable of furnishing electric power to Manchuria and Siberia. Most incomprehensible of all was the refusal to let me bomb the important supply center at Racin, which was not in Manchuria or Siberia, but many miles from the border, in northeast Korea. Racin was a depot to which the Soviet Union forwarded supplies from Vladivostok for the North Korean Army. I felt that step-by-step my weapons were being taken away from me.” Douglas MacArthur, Reminiscences, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2001, p. 365.

65 “‘I think it’s criminal to let these enemy outfits park over here, fatten up, reindoctrinate, get their supplies, and so on’ Abrams complained. ‘Also we’re giving them a cheap way of bringing it in,’ a reference to the port of Sihanoukville, long known to MACV as a major point of entry for enemy supplies that were then distributed throughout Cambodia and across the border into South Vietnam.” Lewis Sorley, A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam, (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1999), p. 56

66 “‘Once war is forced upon us, there is no alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War’s very object is victory – not prolonged indecision.’ And, once again: ‘In war, indeed, there can be no substitute for victory’”, George C. Kenney, introduction, Douglas MacArthur, “An Old Soldier Fades Away into New Glory”, Life, 30 April 1951, apud Vorin E. Whan, ed., A Soldier Speaks: Public Papers and Speeches of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), p. 789


Afghanistan as the gateway towards strategic depth in its confrontation with India, and managed to promote a friendly regime in Kabul in the form of the Taliban. After 9/11 Pakistan apparently changed its policy and became an ally in the War on Terror, however:

- The border with Afghanistan remained porous, allowing TAQ to cross it at will.
- It is an artificial line, populated on both sides by the same ethnic group, the Pashtuns, which make up the majority of Taliban.
- The Pashtuns have long desired a state of their own, and, together with other ethnic groups in what used to be the North West Frontier are neither in good terms with Islamabad nor under its effective control.
- The region, compared with the rest of British India, did not benefit to the same extent from the liberal influence of British Rule, due to the buffer character of the area.

Concerning the second question, many observers pointed at this factor as a major obstacle towards allied success, and we can therefore say that the lesson was clear in their minds, however the long shadow of the tilt was still prevalent and Washington was still trying to keep Pakistan within the Western camp, balancing its relationship with...

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71 An unfortunate expression, since the target is Jihadism, with terror just a strategy.

72 An episode illustrating the porous nature of the border is described in Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of Al Qaeda*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), p. 21


75 “Many historians, most prominent among them Ian Talbot, have emphasized that as the last areas to be acquired by British India—for strategic rather than economic reasons—the lands that became Pakistan had a fundamentally different character from the rest of the Raj. Administered as a security obsessed garrison state that relied heavily on martial law, they did not experience the development and more liberal governance enjoyed elsewhere on the subcontinent. These 'frontier' lands close to the Indus River were characterized by a heavy military presence, the strong alliance between the colonial rulers and local feudal lords, the presence of unruly tribal peoples on their periphery, and paranoia about foreign invasion. It was secular considerations, not its Muslim majority population, that gave this part of India its especially set-apart quality.”, Vanni Cappelli, “Containing Pakistan: Engaging the Raja-Mandala in South-Central Asia”, *Orbis*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Winter 2007, p. 57, available at [http://www.fpri.org/orbis/5101/cappelli.containingpakistan.pdf](http://www.fpri.org/orbis/5101/cappelli.containingpakistan.pdf)
Islamabad with that with New Delhi, without a clear policy designed to bring about the democratization of the country and the end of its terrorist campaign against India, a “deniable” low intensity warfare which takes place in a number of fronts, mainly India herself and Afghanistan. This campaign is intended to bring to an end the growing Indian presence in Afghanistan and prevent the emergence of a strong and democratic Afghanistan. It has also targeted other regional actors, an example being the kidnapping and assassination of Japanese aid worker Kazuya Ito, and was conducted while Islamabad pretended to be an ally, and exploited its position to extract sizeable aid packages from the United States and other countries. Pakistan is also a sanctuary in another sense of the word, its religious schools, the madrassas, ensure a constant supply of future terrorists, and contribute to the radicalisation of second-generation migrants resident in Europe, some of whom are sent to the country of their ancestors to make sure they remain faithful to traditional values and fundamentalist interpretations of the Kuran, in a bid to prevent a perceived excessive degree of integration into Western society.

One of the consequences of the Taliban’s ability to freely roam the FATA was their frequent attacks on NATO supply routes from Pakistan, in a repeat of tactics successfully employed against Soviet forces after 1979. An agreement was reached with Russia to open a second, alternative, route through the country. The importance of supply problems should not be be overestimated. Vietnam could perfectly be supplied by sea, being a coastal state, and Laos and Cambodia never prevented it, however they provided venues for Communists to logistically feed their units. In the same way, the trouble with the Pakistani sanctuary was not that it might prevent supplies from reaching NATO forces in Afghanistan, but that as long as it existed complete victory was beyond the allies' grasp.

If Pakistan had been a reliable and able ally in the fight against TAQ in Afghanistan, the enemy would have found itself fighting a two-front war with unreliable lines of

communication and major logistic difficulties. Unfortunately, Pakistan, while a partner on paper, was a sanctuary where TAQ finds refuge and is able to rest, organise, and equip its units. The agreements concluded by Islamabad and tribal leaders in the NWF were supposed to lead to the expulsion of foreign jihadists in exchange for the withdrawal of army units but they have been ineffective79.

Some observers have warned that, unless Pakistan irrevocably moves towards democracy it can collapse, leading to takeover by Jihadist elements, who might end up capitalizing on the lack of legitimacy of the present regime, which has proven unable along the years to provide the basis for widespread and stable economic growth, and whose ideological raison d’être was dealt a mortal blow by Bangladesh’s independence, putting to rest the assumption that Muslims in the Subcontinent should live in a single homeland. There are more Muslims today in India than in Pakistan. The country’s democratic weakness also diminishes its weight and usefulness as an ally80 since it prevents it from being an example of the compatibility between Islam and democracy. Another consequence of Pakistan’s structural deficiencies81 is the high number of occasions where details about future allied operations have been leaked to TAQ forces82. This is a major difference with the cases of Laos and Cambodia, sanctuaries during the Vietnam War with whom intelligence in similar operations was not shared. This sensitive information sharing is turning out to be a major weak point in the allied strategy in Afghanistan. The ultimate reason why Pakistan is not a reliable partner is the fact it hasn’t ceased viewing Afghanistan as its strategic rear in its conflict with India83, and therefore in spite of her government’s cooperation in the latter, her Intelligence Services have never cut off their links to the Taliban, and the resulting tension with

80 Allies don’t always share the same objectives or have the ideal capabilities. “In time of war you have to take your allies as you find them.”, Joseph W. Stilwell, The Stilwell Papers, (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1948), p. 320
Kabul has been a constant in recent years. Some voices therefore called for a radical departure from post-2001 policies, with the aim of bringing to an end to Pakistani duplicity, but others stressed the maintenance of “stability” as the main goal of policy towards Islamabad. It could be argued, however, that stability without democracy in Pakistan is a doubtful proposition in the long term.

Another doubtful proposition, for the reasons already stated, was the belief that TAQ’s Pakistani sanctuary could be ended without either:

A) Political engagement with Pakistan and India leading to an end to their secular conflict, so that Afghanistan was no longer needed by Pakistan as her strategic rear in her confrontation with New Delhi, and there was therefore no incentive for Islamabad to give support to extremists viewed as friendly.

B) Ending the restrictions on Allied forces operating in Afghanistan and extending their area of operations to any point employed by TAQ forces or needed by them to conduct their terrorist campaign. This would have been in accordance with

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84 “Pakistan made a strategic about-face over the Taliban, when her decade old 'forward policy' in Afghanistan became counterproductive to her own national security. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan have since returned to the mainstream of the international system. But skepticism and fear of renewed tension between them remains and both countries revitalize bilateral relations with cautious optimism. Of particular concern has been the establishment of a pro-Taliban elected government in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan”, Feroz Hassan Khan, “Rough Neighbors: Afghanistan and Pakistan”, Strategic Insights, Volume II, Issue 1 (January 2003), available at http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/jan03/southAsia.pdf

85 “By denying further military and economic aid to Pakistan and working with its neighbors to contain it, America can hasten the same internal collapse of a dictatorial state that occurred when the Soviet Union’s weak economy was unable to bear the weight of its military superstructure. This would eliminate a state sponsor of terror and give the country’s democratic forces their first real opportunity to transform their troubled land.” Vanni Cappelli, “Containing Pakistan: Engaging the Raja-Mandala in South-Central Asia”, ORBIS, the Foreign Policy Research Institute’s quarterly journal of world affairs, Winter 2007, Volume 51, Number 1, available at http://www.fpri.org/orbis/5101/cappelli.containingpakistan.pdf

86 “Critics of Musharraf argue that the United States should cease relations with him and put into action efforts to find pro-democratic forces to take power in Islamabad. The problem with this criticism, however, is that maintaining stability in Pakistan -- even if that stability is retained through an authoritarian government -- is a critical interest of the United States as long as its operations in Afghanistan continue”, Intelligence Brief: Despite Shortcomings, Musharraf Remains a Key U.S. Ally, Power and Interest News Report (PINR), 30 March 2007, available at http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=634&language_id=1


89 “The U.S. is growing tired of playing games and is sending troops into Pakistani territory in brief cross-border raids. The Pakistanis are mad, but they always are angry at something. The ISI is a
International Law, which recognizes the principles of hot pursuit and preemptive self-defence, however the experience of limited incursions in Laos and Cambodia pointed towards the need for a full-fledged invasion and reconstruction of the areas involved, rather than punitive or otherwise limited actions.

We can therefore say that the Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam experiences have led to a growing recognition of the crucial role of sanctuaries in the conduct of insurgent or terrorist campaigns, but the political lesson that Pakistan could not be allowed to continue her duplicitous policy towards Afghanistan still not led to its logical conclusion.

**Use of sea-based air power, the widening concept of littoral state.**

Vietnam was witness to a major deployment of carrier-based naval aircraft, which were responsible for a sizeable proportion of sorties. While suffering from the same limitations as their land-based counterparts, for example the temporary Tet and Christmas truces which were used by the enemy to resupply until an end was put to such self-inflicted damage, they benefited from some clear advantages:

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90 “Under international legal norms on state responsibility, and UN Security Council Resolution 1373, passed shortly after the events of 9/11, state sovereignty implies a duty to control one’s territory. That is, a government has an obligation not to allow its territory to be used by non-state actors—or terrorist organizations—to carry out armed attacks against its neighbors”, Lionel Beehner, “Can States invoke hot pursuit to hunt rebels?”, *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Relations, 7 June 2007, available at [http://www.cfr.org/publication/13440/](http://www.cfr.org/publication/13440/).


93 “In Washington, incoming defense secretary Clark Clifford declared an end to one-sided truces and cease-fires: ‘We have been suckers and we are going to quit being suckers’”, Rick Newman and Don Shepperd, *Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, (New York: Presidio Press, 2007), p. 229
- Inability of enemy intelligence to report take-off times and formations. Whereas agents could operate near land bases, the sea provided cover and concealment.

- Flexibility to transfer forces from one sector to another, by simply redeploying carriers.

- No need to reach basing agreements with foreign governments in order to project air-power. Even though this didn’t turn out to be a major problem in Indochina, future conflicts might involve greater difficulties.

Before we ask ourselves whether these lessons are being applied in Afghanistan, the question of whether Afghanistan being a landlocked country should be seen as precluding them can be legitimately posed. The fact is that technological developments in the intervening years have allowed sea-based aircraft to operate over Afghanistan, and that the proximity of the country to the Indian Ocean made it imperative to prevent the free movement of terrorists on its waters. We can therefore say that the concept of littoral state has been considerably widened\textsuperscript{94}, so that it now includes not only those countries actually being partly or wholly surrounded by sea, but those which can be reached by sea-based air power. A desirable by-product of this widening concept of littoral state was bringing Japan onboard as a partner, whose role providing logistical support to allied vessels in the Indian Ocean enabled Pakistani warships to operate beyond their shores\textsuperscript{95} and substantially contributed to the ongoing debate on the reinterpretation of Art. 9 of her Constitution\textsuperscript{96}. Japan found it easier to develop her military capacities in the Indian Ocean than in areas nearer to the Home Islands, where

\textsuperscript{94} Lawrence W Prabkahar, Joshua H Ho, and Sam Bateman (Editors), The Evolving Maritime Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific. Maritime Doctrines and Nuclear Weapons at Sea, (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 23

\textsuperscript{95} “Without such support, Pakistan would find it difficult to continue participating in the antiterrorist operations in Afghanistan”, Reiji Yoshida, “MSDF Indian Ocean exit not an option: Komura”, The Japan Times, 5 September 2007, available at http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070905a4.html

friction with neighbouring countries might have resulted\(^\text{97}\), and became a major contributor to the reconstruction of Afghanistan\(^\text{98}\).

Blue water maritime interdiction operations, like those conducted in the Indian Ocean, were not a feature in Vietnam. However, an analogy can be made with riverine warfare\(^\text{99}\), which was of the greatest importance in Indochina, the objective being in both cases to deny the enemy the ability to freely move around.

We can therefore say that sea-based air power is playing the same key role it played in Vietnam, while riverine combat has given way to maritime interdiction.

“Clear, hold, rebuild, and engage” versus “search and destroy”

The first years of US operations in Vietnam, under General Westmoreland, were characterized by, among others, an emphasis on killing as many enemies as possible, operations by big units, and retreat after clearing an area. The advent of General Abe saw a change, best summarized by the expression “Clear, hold, rebuild and engage”, whereby once an area had been secured, it was meant to be kept, while economic and social reconstruction took place and the local population was politically engaged. The


result was an improved situation in South Vietnam\textsuperscript{100}, and the incorporation of such tactics into standard counterinsurgency doctrine ever since\textsuperscript{101}.

The final aim of COIN operations is the political destruction of the enemy as a credible alternative to the local authorities, not the setting of any record in enemy casualties or other statistics. There is no point in simply killing more enemies than casualties are incurred, because as long as a sanctuary is in place and its will to fight is intact this will only result in protracted warfare, where conventional forces are not able to put into maximum effect their superior firepower and are subject to the political pressures from an impatient public opinion and body politic. The question whether this lesson was applied in Afghanistan does not lend itself to a clear unequivocal answer. On the one hand the level of troops necessary to fully hold the contested regions, so that economic and infrastructure reconstruction could be carried out while Afghan government authorities were aided to establish their authority, was never deployed, for a variety of reasons among which three stand out:

- At first, the belief in a technology-based campaign with few “boots on the ground”, that is the Rumsfeld doctrine.
- Later, the need to fight in other theatres.
- The reluctance of some “allies” to commit themselves unequivocally to the defeat of TAQ forces. Propelled by a mixture of fear of casualties, lack of statesmanship, and feeble military and logistical capabilities, some NATO members limited their role to the presence of very small contingents, in the safer Northern regions of the country, and under extremely restrictive ROEs, while leaving the bulk of the fighting to a few countries\textsuperscript{102}.

\textsuperscript{100} “Said Bunker of ‘clear and hold’ as a tactical approach, ‘it proved to be a better policy than the policy of attrition. The policy of attrition simply meant under those circumstances a very prolonged type of warfare, whereas if you can clear and hold and keep an area secure and keep the enemy out, psychologically as well as from a military point of view you have got a better situation. In effect, you shifted the initiative from the enemy to you’”, Ellsberg Bunker et al, \textit{Oral History}, non-published transcription of interviews by Stephen Young, p. 45, opus Lewis Sorley, \textit{A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam}, (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1999), pp. 29-30


\textsuperscript{102} In Vietnam ROK troops were particularly effective, in Afghanistan British and Canadian troops bore a heavy load. Rick Newman and Don Shepperd, \textit{Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail}, (New York: Presidio Press, 2007), p. 211
As already mentioned, an important lesson in counterinsurgency from the second half of the Vietnam War is the need to employ forces in small units, rather than divisional-size ones, and embed them with local troops\textsuperscript{103}, but the need to follow this approach was hampered, among others, by the restrictive ROEs under which many NATO countries\textsuperscript{104} contributed troops and some notable hardware deficiencies\textsuperscript{105} resulting from inadequate levels of military spending in previous years\textsuperscript{106}. Another factor was that many “local” troops were not actually local, being Tajik speakers from the North deployed in Pashtun areas in the South and East.

\textit{The key role of local forces and their training}

Training local forces is clearly difficult, expensive, and time-consuming, however a comparison between the British approach to the Malayan Emergency and that of the US to Vietnam makes it clear it is a vital component of successful counterinsurgency operations\textsuperscript{107}. Whereas the first half of the Vietnam War saw local forces being brushed aside\textsuperscript{108}, this has clearly not been the case in Afghanistan, where soon a policy was

\textsuperscript{103} The success, at a high price, of a squad of marines in the Vietnamese village of Binh Nghia, fighting alongside local forces for two years, is narrated in Bing West, \textit{The Village}, (New York: Pocket Books, 2003). \textit{The Village} is a description, as best as I could relate as a participant, of what war is like when you fight guerrillas, and of how Americans behaved when the volunteered to fight among the people. It was a bloody and intensely personal war. The Marines fought well while they were there; the village remained intact, out of bonds both to American air and artillery strikes and to North Vietnamese force and rule.

\textsuperscript{104} This attitude is referred to as that of a “free rider” in economic theory, “security consumer” in NATO jargon, and of course in some other ways in ordinary speech.

\textsuperscript{105} For example the trouble suffered by RAF Nimrod airplanes. Michael Smith, “RAF Nimrod in fuel leak scare could not send out mayday call”, \textit{The London Times}, 9 November 2007, available at \url{http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article2839484.ece}

\textsuperscript{106} “Defence of the Realm: Spending for frontline troops must be increased”, \textit{The London Times}, 9 November 2007, available at \url{http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article2836016.ece}

\textsuperscript{107} “The effort to raise, train, and equip these forces is likely to take much time and energy, but it could not be more important. The British forces in Malaya had earlier and better success with this process than did the Americans in Vietnam, with the possible exception of the Marines’ Combined Action Platoon program in I Corps. Some of the lessons of the British and Marine experiences may be of use today as the United States increasingly turns its attention to the task of creating Iraqi security forces that can defend Iraq against both internal and external threats. Their success is the key to unlocking victory in Iraq – victory for, and by, the Iraqis.”, John A. Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam}, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xiv-xv

\textsuperscript{108} “And, in his enthusiasm for taking over the Main Force war, Westmoreland in effect pushed the South Vietnamese out of the way, thus also abdicating his assigned role as the senior advisor to those forces and essentially stunting their development for a crucial four years”. Lewis Sorley, \textit{A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam}, (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1999), p. 5. On the contrary, such a task was given priority by General Stilwell en China, in spite of
launched to train and arm a national army, together with a police force. This is not to say that the process was free of difficulties or frictions, or that such forces are ready to take over responsibility for the security of the country, many believe they are not, but the lesson from Vietnam can be said to have been learnt, although still not applied to the full.

It would be a mistake to see responsibility for Afghan security as resting only or even mainly on International forces’ shoulders, and in fact one of the most important missions these forces had was to train the Afghan army, which did not exist as such during the Taliban years. A number of allies assumed this key responsibility, which in the case of the US was assigned to Joint Task Force Phoenix VI, whose commander, General Robert E. Livingston Jr., listed his main objectives in 2006:

- Continue the training of Afghan army and police units.
- Reform police pay scales, bringing them nearer to those of the army.
- Identify and expel corrupt members of both institutions.

and provided his vision of the situation at that moment in time, saying:

- The police are repelling Taliban attacks, defending their stations in most occasions when under attack and suffering less casualties than in the past.
- Police agents are being paid on time and they are developing pride in their service.
- The police and the army are learning to cooperate, something they failed to do so in the past, having already taken part in a number of joint operations.
- The police force numbers 57,000, the target being 82,000 officers.
- According to opinion polls, the police’s prestige has improved and started to approach that of the army, the most valued public institution.

the little help received from Chiang Kai-Shek, afraid that the newly created units might not be loyal to him, and the need to personally direct operations in Northern Burma for half a year despite his rank. Joseph W. Stilwell, The Stilwell Papers, (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1948).

112 They had even clashed on a number of occasions.
The army has reached 50,000 officers and men, the target being 70,000 by the end of 2008\textsuperscript{114}.

It is necessary to point out that the planned size of the Afghan army was clearly insufficient\textsuperscript{115} on account of the extension of the country as well as her population and threats to her national security, and it will probably have to be revised at some point in the future. Its expansion and development into an efficient combat force were made more difficult by a very high desertion rate, partly due to Afghan reluctance to serve away from family and clan\textsuperscript{116}. This problem was also faced in Vietnam, and a solution was found in the territorial forces, whose members could serve close to home and which fought with distinction in the last phases of the conflict. This approach was not followed in Afghanistan, probably due to fear of giving rise to “private armies” and regional schisms, but could provide a powerful contribution to the combat effectiveness of the Afghan army.

Other factors at play were the need to guarantee an ethnic balance within the institution\textsuperscript{117}, which led to the imposition of a provincial quota system\textsuperscript{118}, the country’s literacy rate, low salaries, and the poor knowledge of Dari\textsuperscript{119} by a high proportion of candidates\textsuperscript{120}.

\textsuperscript{114} The original deadline to reach this size was 2006. Global Security, \textit{Afghanistan: Army}, available at \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/army.htm}

\textsuperscript{115} Global Security, \textit{Afghanistan: Army}, available at \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/army.htm}

\textsuperscript{116} “The General Mobilization Law of June 1968 included an important provision favoring those territorial forces, the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces. Men thirty-one to thirty-eight years old could volunteer to serve in the RF or PF rather than be inducted in the regular armed forces. The incentive remaining close to home motivated many to do so, allowing the greatly expanded RF and PF authorizations to be met”, Ngo Quang Truong, \textit{Territorial Forces}, p. 49-50, opus Lewis Sorley, \textit{A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam}, (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1999), p. 15

\textsuperscript{117} The proportion of Tajik was disproportionately high at first. Global Security, \textit{Afghanistan: Army}, available at \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/army.htm}

\textsuperscript{118} Global Security, \textit{Afghanistan: Army}, available at \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/army.htm}

\textsuperscript{119} Afghan variety of Persian. It has traditionally played the role of language of culture and inter-ethnic communication in Afghanistan.

\textsuperscript{120} “More than 500 showed up during the initial recruiting drive for the 1st Battalion, but nearly half of them dropped out due to misunderstandings, among which the pay rate, and the belief that trainees would be taken to the US for training, be taught to speak English, and to read and write. Soldiers in the new Army initially received $30/month during training and $50 after graduation, although pay for trained soldiers rose to $70. Some of the recruits were under 18 years of age and most were illiterate. Recruits who only spoke Pashto had difficulties because instructions were given through interpreters who spoke Dari.”, Global Security, \textit{Afghanistan: Army}, available at \url{http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/army.htm}
Faced with an insurgency, local forces enjoy a number of advantages in comparison with international troops:\(^{121}\):

- The possibility to gain intelligence through the public support that naturally adheres to a nation’s own armed forces\(^ {122}\).
- No need for interpreters\(^ {123}\).
- Understanding of tribal loyalties and family relationships.
- Knowledge of local patterns of behaviour.

To which must be added the fact that local public opinion is usually more tolerant towards casualties, this regrettably being a factor not to be overlooked\(^ {124}\).

We can say that this lesson of Vietnam was therefore being applied in Afghanistan, and that it was widely understood to constitute a major contributor to the ultimate goal of a stable Afghanistan. On the other hand, a widespread criticism of American policy in Afghanistan was the reliance on a number of warlords, which in spite of providing a relatively easy way to control wide regions of this vast land cannot provide a long-term alternative to a stable national government in Kabul enjoying actual control of the whole country\(^ {125}\), together with democratically elected regional authorities. Some of these militias were later reconverted to private security contractors\(^ {126}\), and in some occasions fought among themselves\(^ {127}\). Concerning mixed units, which fought with distinction during the first Indochina War\(^ {128}\), they have been employed in Afghanistan but not to the maximum possible extent. Their effectiveness, due to a combination of


\(^{122}\) In multi-ethnic countries, such as Afghanistan, this has to be qualified, in the sense that they must be seen as representative of the whole population, and not only a certain group or region.

\(^{123}\) This must also be qualified where a number of different languages are spoken in a country.


\(^{125}\) On the other hand one cannot forget that ideal allies are not always on demand. “In time of war you have to take your allies as you find them.”, Joseph W.Stilwell, *The Stilwell Papers*, (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1948), p. 320


the advantages of local and Western troops, is a lesson forgotten by US forces in Vietnam and slowly being rediscovered.

*The “One War” concept*

A major difference between conventional campaigns and counterinsurgency warfare is that the former can be over relatively quickly, and usually are when one side is technologically and numerically much stronger than the other, whereas fighting an insurgency is, by its very nature, a slow affair. This means among other things that whereas in conventional warfare commanders in the field can leave post-war reconstruction or wider nation-building issues to political leaders to decide once the guns are silent, such luxury cannot be afforded by the officer facing an asymmetrical enemy. Vietnam shows the need to integrate into what has been called a “One War” combat, training and mentoring of local forces, economic and social reconstruction, and political engagement, with population security being the most important goal. The factors to be integrated have already been discussed in other sections of this paper and won’t therefore be again examined, but the question whether this integrated approach to counterinsurgency, learnt in Vietnam, was followed in Afghanistan must be posed. We can say it was, however this does not mean that reconstruction, for example, was as quick or comprehensive as desirable, this was clearly not so. It is also necessary to bear in mind that no matter how well integrated the mentioned factors were, they could not lead to victory unless the enemy was deprived of its sanctuary and a comprehensive political settlement was reached.

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130 “Whatever the mood of the country, for those in Vietnam the war still had to be fought, and the new leadership went about doing that with energy and insight. Shaped by Abrams’s understanding of the complex nature of the conflict, the tactical approach underwent immediate and radical revision when he took command. Previously fragmented approaches to combat operations, pacification, and mentoring the South Vietnamese armed forces now became ‘one war’ with a single clear-cut objective – security for the people in South Vietnam’s villages and hamlets. And under a program awkwardly titled ‘Vietnamization’, responsibility for conduct of the war, largely taken over by the Americans in the earlier period, was progressively turned back to the South Vietnamese.”, Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam*, (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1999), pp. xiii and 8
The dangers of over-reliance on air power

The effectiveness of air power has, since the invention of the airplane, been a contentious subject, and the results achieved by strategic bombing during the Second World War, just to mention an example, have been the subject of many books and articles. Whereas the consensus view is that it is very effective against conventional forces\textsuperscript{131}, its record against insurgents is rather mixed\textsuperscript{132}. Two problems are evident, and could be witnessed in Vietnam:

- Insurgents, thanks to their ability to quickly assemble and disperse, seldom provide the lucrative targets aviation looks for. On the other hand, if a fixed base can be kept and insurgents are lured into attacking it, they can lose their manoeuvre advantage and suffer heavily, it must be kept in mind though that they can make up for the lost mobility by extensive use of camouflage\textsuperscript{133} and that very high concentrations of bombers are therefore needed, like the ones employed in Korea but missing at Dien Bien Phu\textsuperscript{134}.

- By mixing with the population, and due to the inevitable confusion and mistakes which prevail in the battlefield, civilian casualties can be accidentally inflicted, and are in fact actively sought by insurgents in order to damage government support among the population.

To this must be added the fact that a natural reaction by infantry units is to ask for air-support whenever contact with the enemy takes place. Although understandable, and promoted by the fear of casualties prevalent in many NATO capitals, this can become a dangerous trap, where insurgents group to attack a patrol, and quickly disperse before air support can come into play, with the risk that late strikes will not only fail to destroy the attackers but endanger nearby civilians. On the other hand, technological advances

\textsuperscript{131} For an example of decisive employment of air-based firepower to prevail against a numerically superior enemy see James H. Willbanks, The Battle of An Loc, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005).


\textsuperscript{133} That was the case in Dien Bien Phu, whereas in An Loc they suffered a crushing defeat. For an overview of the former battle see Bernard B. Fall, Hell in a very small place: the siege of Dien Bien Phu, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1966).

\textsuperscript{134} “Guiillain, who had been to Korea, correctly stated that similar situations had existed there, but that fantastically dense American air strikes usually overcame the obstacle and neutralized such positions. And he likewise identified – one month before the battle began and four before it was lost – the key French weakness: airborne fire power”, Ibidem, p. 104
in the last decades have made it easier for air units (which now include drones\textsuperscript{135}) to provide close air support to infantry on the ground, and increased precision means less artillery tubes and munitions are needed to provide equivalent levels of fire-power\textsuperscript{136}. Restrictive ROEs, which in Vietnam prevented the employment of artillery and air strikes near built-up areas, were also in force in Afghanistan, and became even more stringent after some well-publicised incidents.

We can thus say that the same basic dilemma (avoidance of collateral damage versus the need to provide fire support to small units) was at play. Another similarity was the debate on whether to strike beyond borders providing sanctuary to insurgents. In Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were officially off-limits for most of the duration of the conflict, but clandestine operations, albeit limited and often ineffective, often took place, and brief incursions were finally approved. Afghanistan saw the sporadic bombing of targets inside Pakistan, a strategy which seemed to be gaining currency at some stages as the need to put an end to the sanctuary enjoyed by TAQ forces became clear. A problem encountered in Vietnam and fuelled by the lack of clarity of purpose, flying at excessive altitude to avoid casualties\textsuperscript{137} has not recurred in Afghanistan. The use of helicopters is another area where clear continuities can be observed between Vietnam and Afghanistan. No other vehicle can provide the combination of mobility and firepower which is often decisive in close encounters in rugged terrain\textsuperscript{138}, countering many of the advantages which accrue to insurgents.

\textbf{Conclusions}

Differences in terrain, local culture, international circumstances, technology\textsuperscript{139}, and political climate in the US, stand, among other factors, between the conflicts in Vietnam

\textsuperscript{135} For some images of an airdrone attack on TAQ forces see “Anti-Taliban strike June 10”, Youtube, available at \url{http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=qbYdHVYnSNK}


and Afghanistan. Bearing this in mind and being careful not to overdo any analogy, it is nevertheless clear that both wars share in common a number of classical insurgency tactics employed by the enemy, as well as some strategic characteristics such as a sanctuary. The lessons of Vietnam were not forgotten, becoming part of allied forces’ institutional culture in Afghanistan. However, this does not mean they were applied in full from the start, and some, such as the deployment of squads in villages in partnership with local forces never were. Among the differences we may cite the lack of enemy conventional forces, a very different attitude to troops in America's Home Front, and the chances offered by social media to the public to show such support, bypassing traditional media outlets.

War is a learning enterprise\textsuperscript{140}, where the side which adapts faster prevails, and this includes among others the ability to look at past conflicts, draw the right conclusions, and make sure they are applied. No war truly ends until a consensus among historians and practitioners has been achieved, with learned lessons ready to be applied to other conflicts. However, there are limits to such lessons, since no two wars are exactly the same, and there is always the danger of ending up fighting the previous one in different circumstances. We can conclude that the ultimate reasons why North Vietnam prevailed are not yet the object of a consensus among US and other scholars, but that this has not prevented extensive work on some of the lessons learned, many of which were implemented at least to some degree in Afghanistan, or at least an attempt was made to do so.

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