

Afghanistan, America, and the “Vietnam” Syndrome

By [Sunil Ram](#)

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Some years ago, I wrote in an article for the Royal Canadian Military Institute that surmised it was “too easy for those who do not follow history to make glib and simple comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam.” I further noted that “at best, most of these and other comparisons are misleading and at worse they are simply wrong.” Thus, I am loath to make such comparisons with Afghanistan, yet, after some eight years of war, the similarities are more and more striking.

It seems America has forgotten both the lessons of Vietnam and the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, and has fallen back on stupid and arrogant ideas that are simply a rehash of failed tactics and strategies of yesteryear.

It is stunning to hear the same mindless rhetoric of 30, 40 and 50 years ago from current day military leaders in London, Ottawa or Washington. It has not helped that the sycophantic academics, media pundits, and so-called military experts, who all have a vested interest in perpetuating these foolish ideas, propagate them to the ignorant public, government leaders and bureaucrats.

Clearly, Afghanistan is not Vietnam (for obvious reasons revolving around time and space). The Vietnam War was an extension of the decolonization process in post World War II Asia. It was also part of the larger global Cold War struggle between the Soviets and the Americans, and was fought along political and ideological lines. That said, there remain many strategic parallels between Afghanistan and Vietnam for the United States.

Although the terrains are fundamentally different, both Afghanistan and Vietnam have incredibly harsh and impassable landscapes with mountains, many riverine valleys, and few all-weather roads. Also, both are on the Asian continent, making mobility and logistics clear issues.

The obvious strategic disadvantage of harsh terrain with few roads is that this lack of ground mobility limits the superiority of modern motorized or mechanized forces. The Soviets learned this the hard way, losing 1,314 IFV/APCs, 1,369 trucks and fuel tankers, and 147 main battle tanks during their Afghan adventure. Like the Americans in Vietnam, the terrain forced the Soviets in Afghanistan to rely on indirect firepower from artillery, airpower for direct fire support, the movement of troops, and above all logistics.

Logistics here are far worse than in Vietnam since Afghanistan is both landlocked and a much larger territory. Without nearby port facilities, the U.S. has a logistics bottleneck through Pakistan. On numerous occasions, NATO and American supply convoys have been attacked enroute through Pakistan. The Pakistani port of Karachi has become the main sea supply point for NATO and the United States. The *Pakistan Times* observed in February

2009, that “most supplies for U.S. and NATO troops must first pass through Karachi, a treacherous route sometimes closed due to attacks by Islamist militants.”

A key logistics issue is fuel. Depending on the year, up to 80% of refined fuel comes from refineries in Pakistan and the balance from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. One of the ugly realities is that, for the U.S. to maintain its forces, it has for years been paying off the Taliban to not attack re-supply convoys. As the *Guardian* paper reported in November 2009, “US military officials in Kabul estimate that a minimum of 10% of the Pentagon’s logistics contracts – hundreds of millions of dollars – consists of payments to insurgents.”

This situation has arisen as logistics for the Afghan war has been contracted out to private civilian entities. As one American manager pointed out to the *Guardian*, “we are ... paying warlords associated with the Taliban, because none of our security elements [are] able to deal with the threat.” Logistically speaking, Afghanistan is far worse than what the U.S. experienced in Vietnam, a situation that will be exacerbated by the impending surge.

Other strategic parallels to the American experience in Vietnam are the surrounding regions. In Afghanistan, the various insurgent groups have safe havens inside bordering states (Pakistan being the primary one) along a long, harsh and indefensible border where, in many cases, the insurgents wield local political power. Moreover, like Vietnam, conventional U.S. military operations are not allowed in these areas (however, covert operations similarly occur all the time).

Like Vietnam, the majority of the population in Afghanistan lives in the countryside, the insurgency is rurally based, the country has been invaded numerous times, and its population has become hardened to war, creating generations of skilled and battle-hardened fighters.

Cambodia’s role as the fickle Asian ally of the U.S. is being played out by Pakistan today – we can see Lon Nol in the form of General Musharraf. Other parallels include U.S. cross border incursions, covert bombing missions, and the growing civil war represented today by the burgeoning conflict between Pakistan and the Taliban.

The current war, like Vietnam, is primarily being fought by the U.S. military and has degenerated into a protracted insurgency using conventional kinetic warfare against a well-equipped and trained enemy – the Taliban being the parallel to the Viet Cong, albeit the Taliban cannot be considered homogeneous by any means.

In this context, Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine has reemerged from the Pentagon’s Vietnam War archives in a new shiny form propogated by General’s Petraeus and McChrystal. By reinventing the war as a COIN-style strategic fight, the lads at the Pentagon have been able to reinvigorate the “forgotton war.” Though modernized, the language is almost identical – military-led “nation building” is now being defined as “good governance.” Today, U.S. soldiers are defined in almost-politically-correct terms, such as “nation-builders as well as warriors,” and the war is now about “population-centric” operations – think “hearts and minds.” In short, it is nothing new.

By creating a COIN-based strategy, strategic options become limited – as they did in Vietnam. Malaya/Borneo has been the ONLY successful COIN war since WW2 and this took the British some 20-plus years to accomplish.

In Vietnam, the U.S. propped up a number of corrupt South Vietnamese regimes over the period of the war. Technology was used as a force multiplier; such as the first use of air cavalry tactics, smart weapons and advanced firearms like the M-16. Also use of Special Forces (SFs) and covert operations became a staple of the war. Key allies like Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Korea provided token combat and support forces, while the Army of the Republic of Vietnam occasionally fought alongside (with questionable leadership, capabilities, and morale).

The parallels to today are obvious: NATO as the token force; a preponderance of SFs and CIA assets of various kinds; advanced smart weapons (first introduced during the Vietnam War); new types of weapons systems (think UAVs and UCAVs); and the limited presence of the Western trained and equipped Afghan National Army (ANA) which has a questionable fighting capability. This also clearly echoes the Soviet experience with its allied Afghan forces.

Delaying the Surge

President Obama had shown some real backbone in delaying the “surge” in Afghanistan. General McChrystal’s request for 40,000 additional troops is more than reminiscent of the slow escalation we saw in the 1960s in Vietnam. Let us not forget that the Pentagon actually wanted 100,000 troops and that the 40,000 is the mid-range compromise. However, this did not last long, as in early December 2009, Obama agreed to the Generals’ requests for an additional 30,000 troops. It is here that we see another obvious comparison to Vietnam – the growing escalation in troops numbers. <!--[endif]-->

The “surge” will bring fresh troops into the Afghan theatre of war by the summer of 2010. Many do not realize how rapid this scale of escalation is. Only a year ago, Afghanistan was still being called the “forgotten” war in the United States. In the late summer of 2008, U.S. forces only amounted to some 28,000 troops. By the summer of 2010, these numbers will have risen to over 100,000 troops. This is akin to almost the same escalation rates seen in Vietnam in the late 1960s. When we throw in the 38,000 plus NATO forces already in theater plus the potential addition of some 5,000 or more NATO troops announced in early December 2009, we are now well past the estimated 115,000-120,000 soldiers committed by the Soviets. But we cannot forget the ever-growing numbers of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) in the troop number count.

The draft has not been implemented in the U.S., nor is it likely to be. Instead we have seen the bloating of the use of PMCs to fill every imaginable position from cook to infantryman in the widening war. The *Wall Street Journal* (August 2009) estimated there were some 74,000 private contractors compared to some 58,000 US troops operating in Afghanistan. Given the current reliance on contracted personnel by Western militaries in context of the planned escalation of troop numbers, PMC numbers will continue to rise. Retired U.S. Army LGen Steven Arnold (a retired executive at logistics specialists Ecolog USA and KBR Inc., which was part of Halliburton Co.) told the *Wall Street Journal*, “For a sustained fight like our current commitments, the U.S. military can’t go to war without contractors on the battlefield ... For that matter, neither can NATO.” In short, NATO and the U.S. can no longer fight in Afghanistan without the direct support and growth of PMCs. In theory, growing troop levels should have had some impact on the larger development picture in Afghanistan, but again, we find the opposite happening.

At the core of current efforts to bring aid and development to the Afghan people, we hear of

Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) or Civil Military Affairs (CMA) – what amounts to the old Vietnam era “hearts and minds” campaign. In the context of CIMIC/CMA, the mindless rhetoric of war is now calling the war “population-centric,” not “enemy-centric.”

In Canada, for instance, you hear the military leadership droning on about how women can walk the streets and little girls can go to school, and similar ‘prop-agenda’ that is designed specifically to play to the sensibilities of Western mindsets and ethnocentric views, rather than the social and cultural realities of Afghan tribal society.

What is clear, is that development and aid has not really reached ordinary Afghans, but instead been usurped by the cronies of the corrupt Karzai regime. According to the 2009 Failed State Index, Afghanistan rates as 7th on the list. In 2006 it rated 10th – the situation for Afghans has in fact become much worse since 2001.

According to the CIA and various aid organizations, the unemployment rate in Afghanistan was approximately 40% at the end of 2008. This is after some US\$35B in reconstruction money from the international community has been poured into the country since 2001. Furthermore, the World Food Program’s 2007-2008 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) indicated that almost a third of the Afghan population (some 7.4 million people) were unable to get enough food to live active, healthy lives, while more than half the population (some 20 million people) were living below the poverty line.

Failure of Aid and Development

At the end of November 2006, the ISAF Afghan Country Stability Picture (ACSP) of the National Priority Programmes (NPP) indicated that some programs were stalled or ineffective; the security situation was such that “contractors and NGOs were unable or unwilling to work”; there was a “lack of Afghan planning and implementing capacity”; overall governance at the Provincial and district levels were “tainted by association with crime & corruption”; and overall development was weak in terms of “coordination at [the] provincial level.” This situation has further deteriorated today.

In short, after 8 years of war and hundreds of billions of dollars expended on development, aid, and the costs of war the majority of Afghans still have little access to clean water, employment, regular income, or personal security. As the U.S. Government’s General Accountability Office observed in its 5 November 2009 report, “Afghanistan’s security situation has deteriorated significantly since 2005, affecting all aspects of U.S. and allied reconstruction operations.”

Thus, it is tiresome to hear the endless prop-agenda spewed by NATO allies like Canada about all the GOOD that is being done, when, empirically from a strategic perspective, there is limited evidence of such good. There are obviously individual cases to contradict this, but the overall picture is negative. Failure of aid and development is similar to the U.S. experience in Vietnam as is the type of propaganda used to argue that there is a positive effect.

Failure to ‘Afghanize’

Under the current scenario, the imagined Afghan withdrawal strategy is akin to the process of ‘Vietnamization’ of the Vietnam War, which was turning the war over to the South Vietnamese and allowing for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from SE Asia. ‘Vietnamization’ is

being compared to the development of the new Afghan army and security services in conjunction with the handover of power to the corrupt regime of Hammid Kharzai (think Nguyen Cao Ky). As Nancy Pelosi, the Democrat Speaker of the House said to National Public Radio, "How can we ask the American people to pay a big price in lives and limbs, and also in dollars, if we don't have a connection to a reliable partner?" The Soviets also tried to "Afghanize" the war in the mid-1980s; it was an abject failure.

The Afghan security services have, in the current economic context, become an employer of last resort for unemployed and socially outcast Afghans. In the case of the Afghan National Army (ANA), the majority of recruits come from the lowest stratas of Afghan society. This is reflected by the fact that illiteracy among the ANA was 60% in 2002, some 80% by the end of 2005, and CBS News reported that this had risen to 90% by September of 2009. Overall, the ANA as a whole is poorly equipped, poorly led, ill-disciplined, has serious problems with drug usage among the troops, lacks heavy weapons, has no real air force capability (as of September 2009, the ANA Air Corps had 8 fixed-wing aircraft and 32 rotary-wing that worked), and soldiers are paid less than Taliban fighters. A soldier's wages have risen to \$180/month vice the Taliban reportedly pays \$280. There are obviously performance exceptions with individual units - these are the ones always used by western prop-agenda to prove that the ANA is viable. Reality is simply the opposite.

Both the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP) are essentially useless as a security force, and rife with corruption. Numerous cases document direct fighting between the ANA and ANP, resulting in death and injury on both sides. In December 2009, *Stars and Stripes* observed that "given the unbridled corruption that infests the ranks of the Afghan National Army and national police, as well as a the severe shortage of quality recruits and a gaping void in the Afghan leadership and command structure, many outside experts - and some U.S. trainers on the ground - doubt that the Afghan forces will be able to stand on their own any time soon."

Corruption of the ANP is well documented and, as noted in a 9 April NY Times article, the U.S. military said "it was hard to determine which was their more daunting opponent - the few thousand Taliban who ruled villages through a shadow government of mullahs, or corruption so rife that it had deeply undercut efforts to improve the police and had destroyed many Afghans' faith in government." A US Marine Corps Tactical Trainer, embedded with the ANA, soberly observed in a *Guardian* documentary "if they introduced drug testing to the Afghan Army we would lose probably three quarters to 80 percent of the Army."

The empirical proof of the failure to 'Afghanize' the war is reflected in the attrition rate of ANA troops who desert, quit, or go AWOL - as of late September 2009, the figure stands at 1 in 4. U.S. DOD Official communications have tried to hide this fact by shifting the benchmarks for soldier loss rates in the ANA. The new figures now include recruits in training, high school cadets, and those not assigned to any unit. "That deceptive accounting change," observed the *Asia Times*, "obscured the fact that the total number of personnel assigned to ANA units in September 2009 was actually 82,000 rather than the 94,000 shown, and that the increase in ANA personnel over the year was only 16,000 rather than 28,000." It is irresponsible to think that somehow the ANA and ANP will be able to defend Afghanistan anytime in the foreseeable future.

The Drug Elephant

Underlying the corruption is the massive drug trade, now estimated in 2009 by the UN to be at over 6,000 MT (this could be as high as 9,000 MT), which is still 90% of global production – keep in mind it was only about 180 MT under Taliban rule.

Afghanistan, under the current U.S.-backed Karzai regime, has clearly become a narco-criminal enterprise.

As UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa noted on the findings of the 2009 Afghan Opium Survey, “controlling drugs in Afghanistan will not solve all of the country’s problems, but the country’s problems cannot be solved without controlling drugs.”

UNDOC estimated some \$3.4 billion was generated from narcotics (mainly opium) in Afghanistan in 2009 (GDP was estimated at \$10.17 billion for that year). UNODC indicated the Taliban got only 4% of this sum, while farmers received 21%. The lion’s share (some 75%) went to corrupt government officials, police, local and regional power brokers and traffickers, many of whom are supported by the United States and NATO. The *New York Times* recently revealed that President Karzai’s brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, has long been on the CIA’s payroll and has been linked to the narcotics trade. In 2008, when Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier called for the removal of the corrupt governor of Kandahar Province, he was advised not to interfere in Afghan internal affairs.

Most analysts believe that, as in Vietnam and the Golden triangle, the CIA has been intimately involved in the Afghan drug trade, helping to build it up in the 1980s to fund the anti-Soviet war. This process then involved the ISI of Pakistan – a CIA-trained entity that helped create the Taliban and which has continued to support the Taliban to the present.

One has to wonder at the coincidence of the rise of opium production after the CIA-led invasion (the U.S. used the CIA invasion plan, rather than the Pentagon’s) of Afghanistan right through to opium smuggling into Europe, via the Balkan Route that runs through the newly liberated region of Kosovo which is run by the “former” criminal enterprise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (something I wrote about in 2000).

We saw the same pattern of events in South East Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, and in Central and South America in the 1970s and 80s. In a November 2009 *Associated Press* interview, E. Anthony Wayne, development director at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, noted that “the narcotics trade also feeds corruption, hindering Afghanistan’s ability to build strong, democratic institutions and good governance. Narcotics also fuels the insurgency.” This has also resulted in Afghanistan having the highest rates of opium addiction in the world. Without a doubt, opium is the elephant in the room; nothing can save Afghanistan until this issue is dealt with.

Like Vietnam, the impact has been a dramatic rise in the use of drugs by Western military forces. In May 2009, U.S. drug czar, retired General Barry McCaffrey (who served under President Clinton), noted at the National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers Conference that illicit drug abuse among soldiers has doubled over the last four years. He predicted that heroin abuse will increase as the U.S. focuses on Afghanistan. This is compounding the existing problem of prescription drug abuse by U.S. soldiers – USA Today noted in December 2009 that “about one in four soldiers admit abusing prescription drugs, most of them pain relievers, in a one-year period, according to a Pentagon health survey.” After a Freedom of Information request, it was revealed by the Australian Defense Force (ADF) that there is a growing drug problem among its troops deployed in Afghanistan. “ADF

personnel are understood to be turning to illicit substances, such as marijuana and cocaine, to medicate themselves for psychological problems that they developed overseas." A similar rise has been found in the British military, while the Canadian Forces observed that "easy access to heroin, hashish, cannabis presents a temptation for (Canadian) troops in the form of personal use and in the form of importation for the purpose of trafficking." There are no reliable figures for PMCs. In Afghanistan, we are only now seeing the head of the drug hydra that devastated the U.S. military in Vietnam. And like Vietnam, this issue underlies the growing problem of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Traumatic Stress

This brings us to yet another troubling parallel between Afghanistan and Vietnam: the growing data that the combat/service stress of Afghanistan has affected US troops like it did in Vietnam.

In addition to PTSD, we also have the scourge of traumatic brain injury (TBI) due to the preponderance of IED attacks. I broke this story in Canada with the *CBC* and the *Toronto Star* several years ago, when it became apparent that the U.S., the UK and Canada were seriously under estimating these numbers. In fact, the U.S. suppressed these figures for the first few years of the Iraq and Afghan wars.

The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) estimated 15.2% of male and 8.5% of female Vietnam theater veterans met the criteria for current PTSD. Those with high levels of war-zone exposure had rates of 35.8% of men and 17.5% for women. Overall, the NVVRS found that some 830,000 male and female Vietnam theater veterans (26%) had some form of PTSD (non-visual TBI was not considered at that time).

At the time of writing, there were limited open sources breaking out Afghanistan figures from Iraqi numbers, but using a recent study conducted by Stanford University (*A Dynamic Model for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Among U.S. Troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom*) it was found that rates of PTSD among service members deployed in Iraq could be as high as 35%. As the type of combat in Afghanistan has evolved into a similar insurgency experience of US troops in Iraq, we can reasonably estimate that the rates are the same or greater, given the expansion of the war in 2009. Again there are no reliable figures for PMCs, though from numerous news reports and a 2009 Congressional hearing, it is clear that former PMCs in the U.S. are the least likely to receive medical treatment. In context of the Vietnam experience, we can expect the combined Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts to create over 700,000 cases of PTSD and over 300,000 TBI cases by early 2010.

Civilian Deaths

The rising civilian casualty rate caused by Afghan, NATO and U.S. forces and their associated PMCs is similar to the pattern of civilian casualties during the Vietnam War.

As far as we know, there has not been a *My Lia* massacre in Afghanistan, but there have been plenty of incidents where Afghan, U.S. or NATO forces have killed innocent civilians. The figures are hard to verify, but in early July 2007, Adrian Edwards, spokesperson for the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and UN agencies in Afghanistan, commented that the overall number of deaths attributed to pro-government forces, which include the ANA, ANP, NDS and international military forces, marginally exceeded those caused by anti-government forces. In July 2009 CNN reported that "Western military

airstrikes” were responsible for 30.5% of all civilians killed in Afghanistan during the first half of 2009. Moreover, the UN reported in the first half of 2009 that “operations carried out by PGF [Pro-Government Forces] have resulted in a growing number of civilian casualties since 2007.”

Differences

One can go on into the minutia of many similarities between the Vietnam and Afghan conflicts, but this goes beyond the strategic scope of this article. Yet it would be remiss to not observe that there are also obvious differences. And it is here that Afghanistan becomes much worse in the sense that it is neither a power struggle between super powers nor a war of conflicting political ideologies. At its core, this war has become one of religious ideology and cultural values expressed as a fanaticism that is fueled by the illicit drug trade.

The West will lose in the end (an end that could come as early as 2012), and like Vietnam experience, we do not have the money, willingness or political stamina for such conflicts.

*An internationally known Strategic Military Advisor, **Sunil Ram** teaches at the School of Security and Global Studies at American Military University (specializing in the Middle East and Peacekeeping) and at the Peace Ops Training Institute. A veteran of several wars, he has also served in the CF.*

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