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Negotiating with the Taliban:

Lessons from Vietnam

by Franz-Stefan Gady

Despite many critical voices of the overuse of the Vietnam War metaphor when talking about the war in Afghanistan there are many striking similarities between the last years of the Vietnam War and the Obama administrations attempt to extract US combat forces from Afghanistan. I therefore think it is important, given the upcoming NATO Summit in Lisbon in November and the looming withdrawal of NATO forces from the region, to examine the Nixon administration's effort to win the Vietnam War on the negotiation table and to have in Nixon's words "Peace with Honor".

Just like President Obama in 2009, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon came into the White House in 1969 to end the War which at that point already was a "bone to the nations throat", to quote a former White House speech writer. Talks with the North Vietnamese had already started under the Johnson administration in Paris but come to no satisfactory conclusion. The main objectives of the United States on the negotiation table were the territorial integrity and independence of South Vietnam, a withdrawal of all US combat troops from South East Asia and a withdrawal of Vietcong insurgents in South Vietnam.

Similar to today's situation in Afghanistan the Nixon administration had to deal with a largely unpopular leader, Nguyen Van Thieu, who was reelected in 1969 after winning a fraudulent election and whose regime was infamous for its corruption. North Vietnam's strategy in a nutshell, again similar to insurgents in Afghanistan, was to outlast the Americans, get rid of the Thieu regime and to take over the country once the United States withdrew.

Comparable to President Obama's surge strategy, Nixon decided to increase military pressure on Vietnam. Henry Kissinger insisted that, "A fourth rate power like North Vietnam must have a breaking point." Upon taking office in 1969 Nixon secretly conveyed to the North Vietnamese that he was seeking peace and willing to negotiate, but that the United States was willing to escalate the conflict should its demands not be met. Over a period of 15 months, the United States Air Force dropped more than 100,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. Nixon's first attempt to gain concessions from the Vietnamese on the negotiating table failed. The major stumbling blocks, the integrity of South Vietnam and the preservation of the Thieu regime, were to stall negotiations for the next three years.

Despite what current proponents of escalating US engagement in Afghanistan claim, North Vietnam in 1969 shifted from an offensive to a defensive strategy. They did this by limiting offensive operations in the South and even withdrawing troops across the demilitarized zone, not due to military setbacks, but to wait Nixon out until public opinion at home forced the US to withdraw combat troops, something sources in Kabul claim is precisely the Taliban's strategy.

Frustrated by North Vietnam's unwillingness to make any substantial concessions at the secret negotiations in Paris, Nixon ordered the formation of a secret National Security Council Study Group to come up with "savage punishing blows" for the North Vietnamese. However, the conclusion of the Study Group, chaired by Henry Kissinger, showed that increased military pressure would not yield additional concessions from Hanoi.

The insurgents in Afghanistan, despite being battle weary, will certainly also not be willing to make any major concessions with US troop withdrawal a few months away. This is happening in spite of an increase in drone strikes and special forces operations activities throughout the country. The North Vietnamese, by cleverly manipulating US negotiators, essentially bought time by making vague proposals that amounted to little substance and complaining about procedural matters such as the size and set up of tables at the negotiations in Paris. Their real goal until 1972 was to buy time for North Vietnamese Forces to get resupplied and strengthened for the final military blow against the Thieu regime. The insurgents in Afghanistan, although in no way comparable in size, equipment and capabilities to the Vietcong and the regular North Vietnamese Army, will probably employ similar delaying tactics until the withdrawal of US led coalition forces. Any initial "willingness" by Taliban leaders to talk has to be seen in this critical light.

The famous Vietnamization policy was a direct consequence of the United States failed attempt to break the deadlock at the negotiating table with military force and domestic pressure to start withdrawing US combat troops. Without consulting his South Vietnamese ally Nixon unilaterally announced this policy frustrated by the lack of military progress and mounting US casualties. Within months the South Vietnamese Military became one of the largest and best equipped Armies in the World (by 1974 South Vietnam's Air Force was the fourth largest in the world). At the same time the United States stepped up its Phoenix program headed by the CIA, and just like its modern successor, the Drone strike campaign, aimed at decapitating the leadership of the Vietcong and destroying Vietcong strongholds in the South. The United States claimed big successes and the elimination of over 20,000 Vietcong targets in South Vietnam. However, the Vietcong's command structure and ability to conduct operations remained intact. So far the same is true for Taliban safe heavens in Pakistan which have been targets of drone strikes.

Indeed, there are also striking similarities between Obama's decision to step up the drone strikes into Pakistan and Nixon's controversial decision to invade and bomb Cambodia to buy time for Vietnamization, and destroy North Vietnamese safe havens. At the end despite having claimed to have killed 2000 insurgents and substantially disrupted North Vietnamese supply bases and "treasure troves" of intelligence (according to Henry Kissinger) it did not alter the outcome of the conflict, but led to the massive destabilization of Cambodia. Events in Pakistan today illustrate the danger of undermining a government's authority on their own territory. The strategic military impact of recent drone strikes remains to be seen but so far have not influenced the Taliban's offensive capabilities substantially.

In October of 1970 Nixon launched a "major new initiative for peace" which was promptly rejected by Hanoi. More US troops were withdrawn and the process of Vietnamization sped up. Nixon also expanded the war into Laos in 1971 to disrupt enemy supply line and to force a military decision. Talks failed over the same fundamental issue: the future of the South Vietnamese government under Thieu.

Later in 1971 Kissinger made yet another secret proposal to the North Vietnamese: Complete US withdrawal in exchange for US POWs held in Hanoi. Again North Vietnam rejected the offer. POWs were one of the few bargaining chips they had when negotiating with the United States and only would give it up last. North Vietnam again insisted on the removal of the Thieu regime which the US dismissed. North Vietnam proposed open elections in September 1971, on the condition that the United States withdraw support for Thieu. Kissinger and Nixon refused.

In March 1972 North Vietnam launched a large scale invasion of South Vietnam with conventional forces, having carefully prepared its offensive capabilities the previous two years and stalled negotiations in Paris. Despite some initial progress North Vietnam was beaten back by massive US air raids in the demilitarized zone on Hanoi and Haiphong. Kissinger for the first time made secret concessions to North Vietnam that it would allow North Vietnamese Forces in South Vietnam after a cease fire, undermining the sovereignty of South Vietnam, but still insisting on the future existence of the Thieu regime. North Vietnam rejected and Nixon even further escalated the air war, and mining Haiphong harbor. In June 1972 alone the US dropped 112,000 tons of bombs.

North Vietnam estimated that it would need three years to recover from the losses incurred during the Easter Offensive (which proved correct) and agreed to shift their war strategy to a “strategy of peace” to buy time and to guarantee the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam. A Tripartite electoral commission comprising the Thieu regime, the Vietcong (Provisionary Revolutionary Government), and neutralists such as the Buddhists was to come up with a political solution to the conflict after the US withdrawal. Nixon ordered additional bombing raids over North Vietnam over Christmas 1972 to force the Vietnamese to agree to a settlement and to save face vis-à-vis Thieu and the American people. Despite massive air raids it did not set back North Vietnam’s capacity to conduct war in the South. When the United States and North Vietnam finally came to an agreement in Paris in January and February 1973, Thieu who had the least interest in an agreement and withdrawal of US troops did not sign the treaty. The Paris agreement was a compromise agreement securing the return of the majority of US POWs, guaranteeing the US troop withdrawal from South Vietnam and leaving the Thieu regime in power. North Vietnam still had forces in the South and the large question of the political future of Vietnam was unresolved.

Describing the Nixon administration’s year long struggle to extract the United States from Vietnam holds some valuable lessons for the Obama Administration. First and foremost, it shows that there can be no solution to the conflict if the underlying fundamentals causing the insurgency are not addressed. North Vietnam could not accept the Thieu regime. The Taliban will not accept the Karzai regime especially not with the looming withdrawal of NATO led forces. The only answer will be unconditional Afghan led talks between the warring factions should any agreement ever be reached.

Second, Military escalation of the conflict will not fundamentally influence the negotiation process; it will only prolong the fighting. Temporary military setbacks by either side may delay talks but the essential issues will remain unchanged: How can the United States extract itself with protecting its core security interests and how can Afghanistan be stabilized?

Third, one of the reasons why Thieu proved a very difficult partner in negotiations was because Nixon and Kissinger never consulted him on major changes in US foreign policy such as

Vietnamization. President Karzai was also presented with a *fait accompli* with the July 2011 withdrawal deadline and voiced his deep concern that it will empower the Taliban in the long term. An increasingly insular perception of the White House is gaining a foothold in Kabul and among NATO allies. Whether true or untrue when it comes to making peace allies and partners need to be informed of every aspects US strategy since any reconciliation of warring factions has to be based on consensus.

Fourth, the United States in any negotiation should stick to its core national security interests in Afghanistan. The United States made the critical mistake of equating the preservation of the Thieu regime with rolling back communism in South East Asia because it lacked a clear perception of its core national security interest in the region. Supporting Karzai may or may not guarantee the dismantling of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but the United States have to insist that a future government, which may include insurgent/Taliban representation, disassociate itself completely from Al Qaeda. Destroying Al Qaeda is the core national security interest of the United States in Afghanistan. Reconciliation on the other hand should be entirely left to the Afghans.

Last, and most important: Afghans on both sides, the government and the Taliban, know that Western Forces will eventually leave. This alone undermines any military credibility sought for the purpose of having a strong negotiating position vis-à-vis the Taliban and guarantees that the United States and its allies may win every battle but at the end lose the war. Vietnamization had its limits as the United States painfully learned with the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the defeat of the South Vietnamese Army. The current capabilities of the Afghan National Army leave little doubt how the tide will turn once US forces have left Afghanistan.

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