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The Tet Offensive's parallels to Afghanistan

The United States should learn from mistakes it made during the Vietnam War and withdraw from Afghanistan.

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On January 31, 1968, the combined forces of North Vietnam (DRV or Democratic Force of Vietnam) and the NLF (National Liberation Front) launched a spectacular series of attacks throughout the contested territory of South Vietnam. As many as 100 Vietnamese cities and towns were simultaneously attacked, 36 of 44 provincial capitals were captured, and the once impregnable US embassy complex in Saigon was penetrated and several guards killed.

These attacks were all repelled in a few days, with the Vietnamese taking huge losses - 37,500 estimated deaths - which came on top of 90,000 soldiers lost in the preceding months. The US commander, General Westmoreland, had confidently predicted prior to the Tet Offensive that the NLF would never be able to replace such losses, and that victory for the United States in the Vietnam War was near at hand.

During the Tet Offensive the US losses were announced as 2,500. This ratio of comparative deaths, and the fact that the DRV/NLF could not maintain their presence in any of the urban areas that they briefly controlled, led Westmoreland and counterinsurgency experts to claim a military victory for the American side.

Add to this the evidence that the Vietnamese objective of these coordinated attacks on the points of Saigon's governmental control in Vietnam was not primarily to kill or even to seize control of the country but to inspire popular uprisings by the people of Vietnam, and these hopes of Hanoi never materialised anywhere in the country. This "defeat" was acknowledged by the DRV commander General Tran Do, who confirmed that the purpose of the Tet Offensive had been to stimulate a spontaneous uprising among the Vietnamese population against the continuing US military occupation of their country.

This convergent perception of the Tet Offensive by both sides seemed authoritative, and yet, and this is my point, it proved to be politically *irrelevant*. General Do's words uttered after the fact emphasise the secondary objective of the Tet Offensive: "In all honesty, we didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the South. Still, we inflicted heavy casualties on the Americans, and their puppets, and this was a big gain for us."

But what made these US casualties so important was not the loss of life. What made these death so deeply disturbing was their unsettling impact on both backers and opponents of the war in Washington, the backers because their belief that victory was at hand was shattered and the critics because the lies emanating from Washington had been finally exposed.

If General Westmoreland was not deceived or lying, the American casualties sustained during the Tet Offensive could not have happened given the supposed decimation of the Vietnamese enemy. If these expectations of an imminent victory had not been discredited by the Tet Offensive, the dramatic event would have been coolly diagnosed as a desperate lost gamble by the Vietnamese, and rather than turning attention to an exit strategy would have led to an intensified effort to achieve total victory on behalf of the Vietnamese regime in Saigon that had welcomed the American intervention.

Military loss, psychological victory

It was this shock effect on the American mood about the war that transformed the Tet Offensive into a victory for the Vietnamese, regardless of what their intentions for the mission had been or the unacceptable level of losses sustained. The scale, scope, and surprise of the Tet Offensive had an immediate traumatic impact on US public opinion and congressional support for continuing the Vietnam War.

The Vietnamese military leadership was also slow to appreciate the real importance of Tet. As General Do put it: "As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention - but it turned out to be a fortunate result." The Tet Offensive was interpreted by all sectors of opinion on the war as opening a "credibility gap" between the government and the citizenry. This gap consisted of the space separating the excessively optimistic assessments relied upon by the White House to quiet opposition to a growingly unpopular war from the reassurances being given to the increasingly restive backers of the war.

The Tet Offensive conclusively demonstrated to the vast majority of the American people that the prior claim by Washington that the Vietnamese adversary was abjectly knocking on the door of defeat, on the verge of surrender or collapse, was far removed from the truth. The Tet

Offensive had such an unsettling effect on the US body politic that the incumbent president and assumed candidate for reelection in 1968, Lyndon Johnson, acknowledging his failure to achieve victory in the Vietnam War abruptly withdrew from the presidential race. Johnson also declared a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam - allegedly to give diplomacy a chance to end the war through negotiations - and firmly rejected a request from US commanders in Vietnam for a troop surge.

It is true that the war dragged on for several more years with heavy casualties on both sides, but the Tet Offensive radically altered the US goal from "victory" to "peace with honour", that is, "defeat in disguise" - hoping for "a decent interval" between withdrawal and the collapse of the client regime in Saigon. The subsequent Christmas bombing of Hanoi and the disastrous air attacks on the Cambodian countryside (that led directly to the Khmer Rouge's genocidal takeover of the country) were part of the futile effort by the Nixon/Kissinger presidency to produce the token victory that they called "honour".

Actually, when the war finally came to an end in 1975, the dominant image was of Vietnamese collaborators with the American intervention desperately seeking to escape from Vietnam by clambering aboard a helicopter taking off from the roof of the US embassy. Not honour but humiliation, chaos, and defeat became the end game for the United States in Vietnam. Put another way, the price paid to avoid wounding American pride - thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and American lives - was all in vain.

Learning the wrong lessons from Vietnam

To this day, counterinsurgency professionals in Washington think tanks and the Pentagon contend that the United States snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. This distorted reading of history partly explains why US policymakers have failed (and refused) to learn the defining lesson of the Vietnam War: the virtual impossibility in the early 21st century of turning *military* superiority on the battlefield enjoyed by an intervening party into a favourable *political* outcome against an adversary that effectively occupies the commanding heights of national self-determination. That is, in this century, the symbols of legitimacy count in the end for more than drone technology and the weaponry of destruction.

This US and NATO learning disability has led directly to subsequent failed interventions, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Military superiority succumbs over time to the strong historical tides of the past seven decades favouring the forces aligned with the politics of self-determination. Among other explanations for this conclusion that cuts against the grain of political realism is this: the intervening side gets tired of an unresolved struggle long before fatigue sets in for the side defending national territory. An Afghan aphorism expresses this insight: "You've got the watches, we've got the time." Since 1945, nationalist endurance consistently outlasts and outwits geopolitical endurance, and by so doing eventually offsets the asymmetries of military capabilities.

But my reason for recalling the Tet Offensive is less about this primary feature of conflict in our time, especially in the setting of what Mary Kaldor has usefully called "new wars", than it is to comment upon contradictory perceptions of victory and defeat. These conflicts tend to be

resolved on *political* battlefields far from sites of military violence, although each struggle has its own story to narrate.

What seems to count most in the end is a decisive shift in political perceptions on the home front of the intervening side. Neither the successful response to the attacks in terms of casualties or restored control of the cities in South Vietnam, nor the failure of the attacks to be followed by popular uprisings by the Vietnamese people mattered so far as the historical significance of the Tet Offensive is concerned. It was also not relevant that the military appraisal made by both sides was wrong, although the Vietnamese side was less wrong - as the spike in US casualties caused political reassessments of the conflict by the White House and caused widespread consternation among the American people, which increased pressure to withdraw from the war.

This recollection of the Tet Offensive is not meant to be an exercise in historical memory or even in the differences between how the military thinks and how the political process in a liberal democracy works. It is rather a frustrated commentary on the increasingly absurd refusal of the Obama administration to acknowledge the US failure to defeat the Taliban and put the governmental structure in Kabul under pro-Western secular custody, the role confidently assigned years ago to Hamid Karzai.

A new 'credibility gap'

As with Vietnam, the US public is continually being told by the military commanders and political leaders about how well things are going, and even when unexpected setbacks do take place, these are quickly dismissed as "one-off" incidents that should not become occasions for reappraisal. There was a recent disappointment in some liberal establishment circles within the United States that were growing sceptical about continuing the intervention in Afghanistan when the execution of Osama bin Laden in May was not followed by a credible and liberating claim from Washington of "mission accomplished", which would have positively reclaimed the notorious miscalculation by George W Bush in the early months of the Iraq War.

Such a claim would have played well throughout the American heartland, and probably given Obama a clear path to an electoral victory in 2012. Public opinion, according to recent polls, would applaud an accelerated withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan: 59 per cent of Americans would like to see all US troops taken out of Afghanistan immediately or within a year, while only 22 per cent believe that the United States has sufficiently defined goals to make the war worthy of American military engagement.

Americans have become generally opposed to foreign military intervention, although this attitude could quickly be reversed in the event that foreign extremists were able to inflict major damage on perceived US interests. According to Newsmax, on August 11, 2011, only 24 per cent of Americans supported the US military role in Libya, and 75 per cent believe that the United States should not engage in overseas military action "unless the cause is vital to our national security". It is obvious that for most Americans that Libya does not qualify as "vital", and the justification relied upon by the White House did not even pretend that "security" was the rationale for military intervention, but invoked "humanitarism", which never qualifies as a cause worth dying for.

Of course, leaders will always argue that an intervention undertaken is vital, and could hardly do less, considering that lives of their citizens are put at risk. But what these poll results show is the common sense currently displayed by US public opinion: reject humanitarianism as an adequate basis for war-making, along with distrust of the *post-facto* security arguments put forth by elected leaders; healthy doubts about the self-serving claims of the military to be closing in on victory, if only the public is patient and the leaders dispatch more troops.

But such wars go on and on, however dysfunctional, the bodies pile up, and the political opposition is disregarded, and this despite what one would have hoped was the cautionary influence exerted by the realisation that the American empire teeters on the edge of financial disaster.

Several observations follow. During the Vietnam era, public opinion counted for more when the government was making its political calculations about continuing an unpopular war. Unquestionably, there has been a decline in democratic accountability in the United States with respect to matters of war and peace. In part, this reflected the presence of a robust peace movement during the Vietnam War, which in turn arose as an angry response to the military draft that threatened the wellbeing of middle class America.

Now there is no draft, and the war is fought with professional soldiers, drones, and private contracting firms. Furthermore, the weaponry and tactics are designed to minimise US casualties relative to the destruction inflicted. Unfortunately, the lessons learned from a decade of warfare in Vietnam were not about *whether* to intervene in new wars but *how*.

Austerity in Afghanistan?

It may be that in place of international law and political prudence, both of which should rationally discourage interventions at odds with the logic of self-determination, the new source of restraint will derive from fiscal pressures to reduce defence spending. So far, the militarist consensus in Washington has largely exempted the bloated US defence budget from the knives of the cost cutters, who openly advocate socially regressive cost-cutting while calling for increases in defence spending. Even the more socially sensitive Obama democrats have largely continued to acquiesce in this willingness to treat the defence budget as non-discretionary, as well as proudly claiming to have increased military assistance to Israel.

When an American helicopter was shot down on August 6, the 66th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, and all 30 persons aboard were killed, including 22 members of the Navy Seals Elite Unit, I hoped that this would administer a Tet-like shock. The Obama administration could have used the occasion to say that it was time to bring troops home and end involvement in the struggle over the political future of Afghanistan.

It is common knowledge by now that the Afghanistan war is being fought against the nationalist Taliban and on behalf of a corrupted and incompetent Kabul regime for political control of the country. This is a clear instance of the sort of "new war" that will not be decided once and for all on the battlefield by soldiers and weapons - or through the anachronistic agency of foreign intervention. The strategic justifications advanced to justify the war - preventing a future

sanctuary for a reconstituted al-Qaeda and avoiding the takeover of Pakistan by extremists - seem highly questionable. It is more plausible to promote such security goals by closing out a military intervention that fans the flames of anti-Americanism, gives extremism a good name in Pakistan, and exhibits once again the impotence of US-imposed military solutions.

Such an analysis yields a single moral, legal and prudential imperative: when foreign intervention is losing out to determined national resistance, leave the country quickly, stop the killing immediately, and declare victory with pomp and circumstance. At this stage of the conflict in Afghanistan, this is the only "victory" within reach for the United States. Attaining it might also help avoid such misadventures in the future. This would require replacing the palace guard that has been calling the shots in US foreign policy in recent years. But I admit that a Beltway realist reading such musings might simply respond: "Dream on!"