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Patterns of great power intervention in Vietnam and Afghanistan

ABSTRACT

This study identifies and describes a general policy pattern common to French and American interveners in Vietnam as well as Soviet and American interveners in Afghanistan. Each employed political tactics at first and, after their failure, military tactics that also failed. Each intervener then sought a diplomatic solution to its dilemma, a goal that it achieved, but the diplomatic outcome masked the larger failure of each of the interventions.

Key words: France, the United States, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Afghanistan, great power interventions

Vietnam and Afghanistan have each had the misfortune of being invaded twice by great powers in the seventy years since World War II. The invaders, France, the Soviet Union, and America, have each had the misfortune of failing with their interventions, and the Americans failed in both Vietnam and Afghanistan. Thus, we have four cases of great power intervention and subsequent defeat in two small underdeveloped Asian countries: France in Vietnam, America in Vietnam, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and America in Afghanistan.

These four cases share a number of additional similarities in addition to the great power intervention and defeat. Each follows a roughly similar pattern. The intervener first used political strategies, broadly defined, and only resorted to classic military intervention after the political strategies failed. Military tactics also failed and were followed by diplomatic efforts that would allow the intervener to leave with some degree of dignity. While diplomacy enabled the intervener to leave, it generally did

not end their involvement as each continued to support its client for several years. It is not just the broad pattern of intervention that is common across these cases. Within the military and diplomatic phases, interveners were confronted with similar issues, devised similar answers, and experienced similar outcomes.

The common pattern of these interventions is surprising given the differences between the cases. Vietnam and Afghanistan have little in common, save for a history of resistance to foreign rule. There were three different interveners in two different countries and the motives for intervention differed. The Americans sought to strengthen and defend their Vietnamese client much as the Soviets wanted to strengthen and defend their Afghan client. The French hoped to restore national prestige after defeats in World War II by regaining control of their colonies in Indochina. The Americans intervened in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. These interventions also occurred in different eras. The two interventions in Vietnam occurred in the early days of the Cold War, while the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan occurred late in the Cold War, and the American effort in Afghanistan began only after the Cold War had ended.

The primary purpose of this article is to document the similarities of the French, Soviet, and American experiences. Some tentative explanations will be given as to why that pattern exists in the four cases, but that is more appropriately a question for further research. The article is divided into four parts. The first three are devoted to the political, military and diplomatic phases of the great power experience in these countries. Each will begin with a brief summary of the period followed by details from each of the four cases. The conclusion will suggest questions for further research.

PERIOD I: PRELIMINARY POLITICAL EFFORTS

SUMMARY

The first phase of these interventions was a political one in which the interveners used some of the traditional instruments of international politics to realize their goals. These political efforts were of two kinds. In two of the cases, France and Vietnam and the U.S. and Afghanistan, they took the form of negotiations as a means of trying to reach the interveners' goals. In the other two cases, U.S. in Vietnam and Soviets in Afghanistan, there were extensive efforts aimed at strengthening a client against domestic foes. The political phase was often a brief one. French political efforts in Vietnam lasted from the end of World War II until late 1946, while American negotiations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan lasted from roughly August 1998 until the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Soviet efforts to strengthen their Afghan client lasted only from the April 1978 'revolution' there until December 1979. Only the American effort to strengthen its South Vietnamese client was lengthy, lasting from the mid-1950s until the dispatch of the first combat troops in 1965.

All of these efforts failed. Perhaps one reason why is the interveners were too impatient, but the fundamental problem was the likely impossibility of realizing their goals. In the cases of negotiations, the incompatibility of French and Vietnamese goals and American and Afghan goals suggests that there would not be a negotiated solution prior to military efforts. For the French, restoring their Vietnamese colony and regaining their great power status was central to their national identity after defeats in World War II, but it was incompatible with Vietnamese aspirations for independence. The Americans wanted justice for Osama bin Laden following al-Qaeda attacks on its embassies in east Africa, for its attack on the U.S.S. Cole, and, especially, after 9/11, but the Taliban, reflecting traditional Afghan notions of hospitality and knowing the benefits that al-Qaeda's presence in the country provided, were unlikely to turn him over. Similarly, unrealizable goals may be the best explanation for the failure of the American and Soviet interveners to strengthen their clients in Vietnam and Afghanistan respectively. The Americans effectively wanted to create a new South Vietnamese state and nation where none had existed, while the Soviets were supporting a modernizing leftist government in a traditional and conservative Afghan society. The incompatibility of interveners' goals reflects another problem: their failure to learn about much less comprehend the societies where they were intervening.

EARLY NEGOTIATIONS: FRANCE AND VIETNAM

The French had effectively been evicted from a governing role in their Indo-chinese colonies by the Japanese in the early days of World War II. At the end of the war, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence, a reality the French were determined to reverse. While those competing aspirations might suggest that war was inevitable, neither the French nor the Viet Minh wanted or were prepared to fight a war in the fall of 1945. The French had too few troops in the country to launch a serious military effort. The Viet Minh also had too few troops and needed time to increase their political support in the southern portion of the country. Given these considerations, the two sides reasoned it was better to negotiate, and they concluded a deal in March 1946. The Vietnamese would allow 25,000 French troops to return to the north of the country to replace the hated Chinese, sent at the end of World War II to disarm the Japanese, and the French would accept the 'Republic of Vietnam' into the French Union, although there were continuing disagreements about that territory's relationship with Paris.

Both sides understood that this was a preliminary arrangement and that further negotiations were necessary. Ho left for France in early June 1946 for further talks, but events soon undermined the prospects for success. In Vietnam, the French high commissioner in Saigon was doing much to undermine the March agreements, while in France, itself, an election had brought a more conservative government to power. At the Fontainebleau negotiations in the summer of 1946, neither side would make

concessions on the most important issue, the political future of Vietnam. The Viet Minh insisted on independence and a loose relationship with France, the French on a system of guided self-rule in which they would control the major ministries. No agreement was reached and by the fall of 1946, all expected war. The war began in late 1946, first with French shelling of Haiphong in November and then with Viet Minh attacks in Hanoi in December [Logevall 2012: 123–66; Karnow 1997: 165–75].

EARLY NEGOTIATIONS: US AND AFGHANISTAN

America's negotiations talks with the Taliban regime centered around its demand that Osama bin Laden be turned over to the United States for trial. Talks had begun after the August 1998 al-Qaeda bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. For the United States, bin Laden's presence in Afghanistan was 'by far the most important' issue on the U.S.-Afghanistan agenda, but it was not optimistic: an internal State Department cable noted that the 'fact is that the leader of the Taliban appears to be strongly committed to bin Laden. It is questionable whether U.S (...) can influence Omar's decisions'. Still, there were more than twenty meetings between 1998–2001 with participation by many high level State Department officials [*U.S. Taliban Bargained* 2005].

The course of the negotiations would seem to verify American skepticism. The Americans consistently demanded that bin Laden be turned over to the United States, while the Taliban proposed many alternatives, e.g., that he be tried in Afghanistan or another Muslim country. There was, according to Karl Inderfurth, one of the negotiators in the Clinton years, 'a continuing effort to evade, deny and obfuscate, (...) Their only intention was not to hand bin Laden over' [quoted in Ottaway and Stephens 2001]. The American threat in 1999 that Afghanistan would be bombed if there was another al-Qaeda attack did not alter the Taliban's position. Later, during first months of the Bush administration, an Afghan envoy came to Washington to meet with reporters and mid-level State Department officials. While American officials dismissed the visit as just another stalling effort, they did continue to meet with Afghan negotiators. The Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Christine Rocca, met with the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan as late as August 2001 [Ottaway and Stephens 2001; *U.S. Taliban Bargained* 2005].

The Taliban were perhaps more interested in negotiations after 9/11 and the prospect of U.S. military operations against their country. Their second-in-command asserted that 'We would be ready to hand [bin Laden] over to a third country', but also continued what U.S. officials had long characterized as stalling tactics, arguing that bin Laden would be turned over '(...) provided the U.S. gives us evidence and the Taliban are assured that the country is neutral and will not be influenced by the United States'. By this late date, President Bush had no interest, telling reporters 'When I said no negotiations, I meant no negotiations' [quoted in Bumiller 2001].

EFFORTS AT REFORM: US AND VIETNAM

Following the 1954 Geneva Accords that effectively ended the French presence in Vietnam and divided Vietnam, the United States worked extensively to build a South Vietnamese nation and state. Americans provided both money and advice. All told, the U.S. provided \$4 billion toward this effort in the decade after Geneva [Carter 2008: 147]. For the first three years, the primary American aid programs were of a short-term, humanitarian character, because the country had experienced many years of war and several hundred thousand refugees had arrived from North Vietnam. Beginning in 1958, however, there was much greater emphasis on more long-term projects. These included extensive police and public administration training programs, rural electrification, road construction, and efforts to diversify the economy. These programs reflected the mixed purposes of American assistance, i.e., to help develop South Vietnam but also to stave off the collapse of its South Vietnamese client, Ngo Dinh Diem. For instance, there was certainly a need for a police force in the new country, but a strong police force could also help control political opposition. Similarly, the building of major roads facilitated not only the movement of commerce but also the movement of troops to and from the capital. By 1960, the security of the Diem government had become the most important consideration for both Diem and the United States. This despite the fact that per capita income was probably smaller in 1961 than it been in 1954. As a result, the twin aims at the outset of the American aid project in South Vietnam in 1954, economic development and state building, now fell into abeyance, despite the fact that neither had been accomplished [Carter 2008: 84–95, 117–42].

EFFORTS AT REFORM: SOVIET UNION AND AFGHANISTAN

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan in the years prior to their December 1979 invasion is similar to that of the Americans in Vietnam. They became more involved after a dramatic political change in the country, the April 1978 ‘revolution’ that brought the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to power. While the Soviets had long provided aid to Afghanistan, a country on their southern border, the amount now increased dramatically. Numerous agreements were signed in 1979 that expanded economic and technical cooperation, infrastructure development, and educational exchanges. All told, the Soviets promised nearly \$300 million to the Afghans, although the aid took the form of loans, repayable at 3% interest. Emphasis was placed on infrastructure, state-owned industries and extracting natural resources [Robinson and Dixon 2013: 95–96]. Whatever the positive economic or technical impact of these agreements, the policies of the Afghan government alienated large numbers of Afghans, much like the impact of Diem’s policies in South Vietnam, and the new Soviet client was soon facing serious domestic unrest, a situation that eventually led the Soviets to conclude that they had to intervene militarily to protect their client.

PERIOD II: MILITARY ACTION

SUMMARY

The failure of political efforts did not necessitate that these interveners continue their involvement. They did so despite, or perhaps because of, the failure of political efforts. Why? As indicated above, each was pursuing what it considered to be important national goals – restoration of great power status, justice for the victims of 9/11, support for a client defined as important – that it could not abandon easily. Domestic politics also played a role in three of these cases, excepting the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. There was a widespread consensus among the French public in 1945 that the country should assert a leading role in foreign affairs and that colonies were a part of that. American anger and desire for revenge after 9/11 probably made military action against Afghanistan inevitable. With respect to Vietnam, American presidents believed they had to prevent South Vietnam from falling to communism, because of the domestic political consequences of the ‘who lost Vietnam’ debate.

These cases share a number of similarities in this period. Each of the interveners expected a quick military victory, perhaps another reason each chose to pursue military action after their failed political efforts. Their failure to achieve a quick victory and the inability or unwillingness to recognize that any sort of military victory was possible meant that this phase was the longest one. Another characteristic, likely the product of less-than-successful military efforts, was a constant scrambling to find a military strategy that worked. This was reflected in changing commanders, debates about troop levels, and changing strategies. Finally, each intervener came to place reliance on what Americans in Vietnam referred to as ‘counterinsurgency’, i.e., the use of political tactics to supplement military ones in an effort to defeat the enemy. That is, the political efforts of phase one did not end, they just disappeared in the early portions of the military phase. When they did reappear – in a different form – they were typically subordinated to the military effort. Common counterinsurgency tactics included efforts to put a local face on what was essentially a great power intervention and the creation of a local army, both of which aimed to reduce costs and generate local support and support for the great power’s efforts at home. In each case, the intervener was disappointed with the outcome of all of these efforts.

A final similarity, of course, is that these military strategies failed. What can explain that? Vietnam and Afghanistan constituted uniquely difficult situations for the interveners. Populations in both countries had long experience defeating foreign invaders, the terrain of both countries was poorly-suited for the kind of war the interveners wanted to fight, and there was a sanctuary for resistance forces in adjacent territory, one that the intervener could not or would not attack in a meaningful way. The decision by the French, Soviets, and Americans to resort to military action only came belatedly, after the political strategies had failed, hindering chances for military success. There was eventually recognition in each case that political efforts would

have to supplement the military ones if they were to be successful, but military considerations usually trumped the political aspects of counterinsurgency. Finally, the local governments and armies created as part of those counterinsurgency efforts were so weak that the intervener could not take advantage of any hearts and minds successes.

FRANCE IN VIETNAM

The French were confident of military victory in Vietnam, surprising, perhaps, given their defeats in Europe and Asia just several years earlier. This confidence was probably a consequence of lingering colonial or racist attitudes. At the outset, they believed the war would be a ‘cakewalk’ [Morgan 2010: 101]. While the first several years of the war were difficult for the French, they retained their optimism. In 1951, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny promised victory in ‘months, perhaps one or two years’ [quoted in Morgan 2010: 144]. That confidence was belied by regular changes in French commanders and strategies. Generals included Marcel Carpentier, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, Raoul Salan, and Henri Navarre. At times, they sought victory using large-scale units, at others, the aim was to use mobile quick reaction forces.

Also, typical of military commanders in all of these cases, French commanders always wanted more troops. The French chief of staff estimated at the outset of the war that 500,000 troops would be needed. This was a figure that Paris would never agree to; French conscripts could not be used in Vietnam and there were not enough French volunteers or troops from elsewhere in the French Union. To illustrate the problem, by the early 1950s the French had only three combat divisions for offensive action – many French soldiers were protecting fixed points – while the Viet Minh had six such divisions. Of course, the problem for the French and these other interveners was not simply an inadequate number of troops; there was also a political dimension to each of these conflicts. The French had controlled Vietnam with only several thousand troops prior to World War II but now, fighting a politicized and mobilized Vietnamese population, several hundred thousand were insufficient [Logevall 2012: 175, 178].

As their traditional military efforts were coming up short, the French supplemented these with political efforts to garner more support from the Vietnamese and reduce criticism at home. This approach was based on the recognition that military strategies, alone, could not win the war. As French General Philippe Leclerc famously remarked, ‘One does not kill ideas with bullets’ [Logevall 2012: 332–33; Leclerc quoted at p. 119]. One political initiative was to make modest concessions on the issue of independence, something the French reasoned might undermine support for their Viet Minh foes, earn the support of anti-communist nationalists and, equally important, earn the support of the United States. Their solution, the ‘Bao Dai solution’ – named for the former emperor who would become the new head of state – was to grant ‘independence’ to Vietnam and allow it to join the French Union as an Associated State. However, the

country's independence was greatly circumscribed; the French retained control of the area's foreign and defense policies, and its finances, and, while the new 'State of Vietnam' would have its own army, it would be equipped and effectively directed by the French [Logevall 2012: 204–10]. For these reasons, the grant of independence was essentially meaningless. Even Bao Dai recognized this, later remarking that 'What they call a Bao Dai solution turns out to be just a French solution' [quoted in Karnow 1997: 190]. Another French policy aimed both at garnering political support for the Bao Dai regime and easing their manpower shortages was to create an army for the State of Vietnam, a policy initiated in February 1950. The French hoped, according to U.S. observers, that 'Much of the stigma of colonialism can be removed if, where necessary, yellow men will be killed by yellow men rather than by white men alone' [quoted in Logevall 2012: 258]. Yet this army was confronted with many problems from the start and achieved neither France's military nor political objectives. One important problem was the army's composition: its commander, Nguyen Van Xuan, was a French citizen, a French army officer, and married to a French woman. Most of the officers were French: even as late as 1954, when the army had almost 200,000 Vietnamese soldiers, there were only three Vietnamese generals, seven colonels, and eleven lieutenant colonels [Karnow 1997: 202; Miller 2013: 90].

UNITED STATES IN VIETNAM

America's initial optimism about success in Vietnam is illustrated by the fact that the first deployment of combat troops in March 1963 numbered only 3,500. The failure of its military efforts is illustrated by the increasing number of troops over the next five years, to over 500,000 in early 1968 at which time the military requested 200,000 more.

The American commander for much of this period was William Westmoreland. His strategy was to protect fixed points, prevent North Vietnamese incursions, and then launch 'search and destroy' missions in which America's superior mobility and firepower would destroy the enemy. His successor after 1968, Creighton Abrams, had a different approach; he advocated 'clear and hold', i.e., evicting the enemy from certain locales and then protecting the population that remained. Part of Abrams's strategy to hold territory was to provide for the needs of the people, an element of counterinsurgency strategy that had been used in Vietnam in the early 1960s. That is, in this case, counterinsurgency both preceded and followed more traditional military action rather than just following it as was true in the other cases. The ground mission was supplemented by massive bombing of North Vietnam as well as Cambodia and Laos, but this, too, changed over time as there were bombing halts and expansions to try to signal the North Vietnamese about America's intentions [Bowman 2008; Karnow 1997: 451].

The continuing calls for more troops indicate that the military did not believe the U.S. had enough troops on the ground. After the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Tet

Offensive in early 1968, the Nixon administration worked to enlarge and strengthen the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), in part to deal with this problem. In practice, the ARVN was not up to the challenge. The first major test of this 'Vietnamization' policy was an invasion of Laos in February 1971, and it turned into a disaster. South Vietnamese forces halted before capturing their objective and then fell back in a rout. In Stanley Karnow's summary, the effort 'exposed the South Vietnamese army's deficiencies. The government's top officers had been tutored by Americans for ten or fifteen years, many at training schools in the United States, yet they had learned little'. More importantly, 'they represented a regime that rewarded fidelity more than competence. [President] Thieu (...) wanted loyalty above all else and his military subordinates conformed, realizing that promotions were won in Saigon, not in battle' [Karnow 1997: 644–45]. This is hardly a way to promote the counterinsurgency aim of winning legitimacy and popular support for the government. Nor was the behavior of ordinary ARVN soldiers: according to U.S. field reports, 'many people find it difficult to consider the soldiers as their protectors', because 'the army steals, rapes, and generally treats the population in a very callous fashion' [Orme 1989: 9–30, quoted at p. 30].

SOVIET UNION IN AFGHANISTAN

The Soviet Union expected a quick win in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Gromyko predicted at the time of the invasion that 'we'll do everything we need to in a month and then get out' [quoted in Braithwaite 2011: 24]. Indicative of the leadership's confidence, it did not provide nearly the number of troops for the invasion that the military wanted. The political leadership believed that only 35–40,000 troops would be needed, but the generals argued for far more. They noted that 500,000 troops had been used in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and that that had been a far easier mission, because of the nature of the country's terrain, the absence of a tradition of opposition to foreign rule, and the absence of an ongoing civil war. In the end, roughly 80,000 Soviet troops took part in the invasion. The number did increase to 130,000 in 1982, a figure that basically remained constant until 1988, although another 40,000 troops periodically staged missions into Afghanistan. Still, the Soviets never had enough troops in the country to gain control, much less to initiate offensive missions. Forty percent of Soviet forces were needed to guard fixed points and another 35% were needed to protect convoys [Tomsen 2011: 215, 225; Braithwaite 2011: 83–84].

Soviet military efforts went through four stages, with different military tactics in each stage. Immediately after the invasion, until February 1980, Soviet soldiers were only to return fire if attacked or to rescue Soviet personnel captured by the enemy. Beginning in February 1980, after continuing military efforts by the armed opposition and major protests in Afghan cities, the Soviet military initiated more aggressive tactics. The tactics employed were similar to those used during World

War II and included major aerial and tank attacks on Afghan cities and a scorched earth policy in more remote areas. This second period lasted until the spring of 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev began to re-think the approach to Afghanistan. Some troops were withdrawn at that time, and there was a deliberate effort to reduce casualties. Finally, after the November 1986 decision to negotiate a way out of Afghanistan, the Soviets adopted tactics aiming to further reduce their casualties [Braithwaite 2011: 83–84; Tomsen 2011: 213–15].

Concurrent with the decision to leave the country was a new, more political approach. Politburo member Yegor Ligachev expressed a sentiment that could have applied to each of these cases: ‘We cannot bring them freedom by military means. We have already lost by trying to do that’ [quoted in Robinson 2010: 7]. The new approach, the ‘Policy of National Reconciliation,’ sought to strengthen the Afghan government so that it could survive the departure of Soviet troops. Among its elements, the much-despised regime of Babrak Karmal was replaced with one headed by Muhammad Najibullah. There were efforts to increase the social base of the regime, to abandon the leftist direction in economic policy, and to improve living conditions in rural areas. As for the fighting, an amnesty was declared as were calls to implement local cease-fires. Soviet aid to the country increased after 1986. In 1987, it provided more aid to Afghanistan than they had to any single country [Robinson 2010: 15; Kalinovsky 2011: 100–7].

The Soviets also tried to strengthen the Afghan army, an effort that accelerated – just as in other cases – once they had made the decision to withdraw. The Soviet-created Afghan army looked much better on paper than in reality and it never provided much assistance to the Soviet military effort. Many units were below strength. Soldiers often left the military after training ended. General Sergei Sokolov, commander of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, described Afghan soldiers as ‘illiterate, ill-trained, unready for combat, and without military training or discipline’ [quoted in Tomsen 2011: 215]. There were also doubts about their loyalty: some officers defected to the *mujahedeen* and by the mid-1980s, there were nearly 30,000 desertions a year [Braithwaite 2011: 136–38; Tomsen 2011: 223].

UNITED STATES IN AFGHANISTAN

As in Vietnam, American optimism was reflected in use of few troops at the outset of its war in Afghanistan. There were only 10,000 U.S. and 5,000 foreign troops in the country in early 2002. The U.S. was able to achieve its victory at such modest cost due to the disorganization of the Taliban and reliance on local warlords to do most of the fighting. Troop numbers remained low throughout the Bush years. This is a good thing in terms of not putting American soldiers at risk, of course, but it restricted the ability to build a stronger Afghan regime. For instance, the widely-regarded first necessity of post-civil war nation-building is to provide security; to do so in Afghanistan, the U.S. relied on local warlords rather than trying to build up

government military and police forces. Even as late as 2008, there was no systematic effort to build the country's army or police [Jones 2009: 109–33; Tierney 2010: 231].

There were modest counterinsurgency efforts in the Bush years, e.g., the U.S. did engineer the selection of Hamid Karzai as President, but its limited troop levels and modest economic assistance to Afghanistan 'translated into one of the lowest levels of troops, police, and financial assistance in any stabilization effort since the end of World War II'. Economic aid to the country in fiscal year 2003 – which began on October 1, 2002, i.e., ten months after the Taliban had been defeated – was actually \$35 billion less than in fiscal year 2002, the Taliban's last year in power. The failures to provide security and enhance the economy help explain the resurgence of the Taliban with within five years of their overthrow [Sanger 2010; Jones, 2009: 109–33, 203–22].

The Obama administration came to office committed to do better. There was to be much more assistance to the country: in the Bush years (FY 2001–FY 2009), the Congress had appropriated \$232.7 billion total for Afghanistan, while in the four years that followed, a total of \$422.3 billion was allocated. The number of troops was to increase, from 40,000 to 60,000 in February 2009 and then to 90,000 in December of that year. Somewhat contradictorily, the President also promised that troop withdrawals begin in mid-2011, so by November 2013, there were about 47,000 U.S. troops remaining in the country [Livingston and O'Hanlon 2013: 4, 15].

Another part of the Obama strategy, not unlike the counterinsurgency strategies of the other interveners, was to increase the size and capabilities of the Afghan security forces. The size of the army increased from 162,000 in March 2009 to nearly 270,000 by early 2011 to 338,000 by March 2014 [Livingston and O'Hanlon 2015: 6]. It took control in a number of Afghan provinces and has fought well at times, but problems remained. The army has limited capabilities; half of the soldiers NATO trained cannot read and lacked the skills to complete simple missions [Chandrasekaran 2012: 141–42; Kassel 2014]. The economic and political aspects of the new policy also failed to deliver. It was difficult to recruit American civilians to go to a war zone, it could take a year for security agencies to vet them, and once in Afghanistan, they were often restricted to bases to insure their security. The new approach further heightened Afghan dependence, because as much as 80% of American assistance did not flow through the government. Much of the money appropriated for programs in Afghanistan did not go to programs in Afghanistan; according to a USAID study, as much as 70% of the contracts given to private contractors went to security, overhead, and management [Tomsen 2011: 658–61; Chandrasekaran 2012: 190–204].

The U.S. modified its approach yet again in the summer of 2010, committing less attention and fewer resources to the country, due to frustration with counterinsurgency, the planned reductions in the number of U.S. troops, and the decreased importance of stability in Afghanistan for America's anti-terrorism efforts. Also relevant was the change in military command from General Stanley McChrystal, who had been a strong advocate of counterinsurgency, to General David Petraeus. By

September 2010, Petraeus changed McChrystal's approach from one concentrating on the counterinsurgency goal of protecting the population to a more traditional military approach that concentrated on capturing and killing terrorists and included increased infantry, special forces, and fewer restrictions on the use of firepower [Tomsen 2011: 681–82].

PERIOD III: DIPLOMACY TO GET OUT

SUMMARY

Eventually, all of these interveners came to recognize that they could not win a military or political victory and/or that the costs of doing so were too great. Having made that decision, however, none of them did what Senator George Aiken proposed the U.S. do in Vietnam, i.e., 'Declare victory and leave' [quoted in Fein 2012]. Rather, all sought a diplomatic exit even as their costs continued to add up. Why did they make this decision? To preserve their credibility with friends and foes, to honor a commitment they had made to the people of the target country, to secure any gains that had been made, and to allow time for measures designed to strengthen the client to have an impact. There was also the typical unwillingness of political leaders to admit failure and the unwillingness to back away from an enterprise to which they had already devoted serious effort and suffered extensive costs [Walt 2010].

There were a number of similarities in the diplomatic phase. First, as suggested above, diplomacy only began when the intervener realized that it could not achieve its goals militarily or that the costs of doing so were too high. Once negotiations began, the intervener often had to negotiate as much with its client as with its foe. While the intervener was looking to successful negotiations as a way to get out of its dilemma, the client often wanted failed negotiations in order to keep the client in. This is one reason why these negotiations were usually lengthy, but there were others. The intervener wanted to strengthen the client and enhance the chances of its survival, while the opposition, already winning and seeing the departure of the intervener's troops, had less reason to want to negotiate. The outcome of the negotiations generally reflected the situation on the ground: the great power intervener, having been unable to realize its interests militarily or politically, was also unable to realize them diplomatically. Nonetheless, the interveners might conclude that the outcome of the negotiations was something of a success, even if it masked the ultimate defeat for their intervention. They were all able to get their troops out of the country and the regime they established survived for some period of time. The peoples of Vietnam and Afghanistan and the client regimes supported by the intervener would likely have a different evaluation. The wars continued, just without the active participation of the intervener, and the client regimes did fall – or in the case of the current Afghan government, likely will fall – within several years of the intervener's

departure. France and Vietnam will be the last case examined here, because not all of these generalizations apply to it.

U.S. AND VIETNAM

The North Vietnamese/Viet Cong Tet Offensive of January 1968 convinced the Americans that winning in Vietnam would be a much more difficult proposition than many of them had thought. The war was already imposing significant costs on the United States, and by the time it left Vietnam in 1973, the U.S. had spent more than \$120 billion on the war effort alone, to say nothing of the money spent in Vietnam before the arrival of the first American troops. There were also significant costs to the American army. It lost more than 58,000 soldiers. Military morale and discipline declined over time: there were more than 200 'fragging' incidents in 1970, alone, and an official report in 1971 estimated that perhaps one-third of the troops in Vietnam were addicted to drugs. The public was also becoming more critical of the war: the percentage of non-blacks saying the war in Vietnam was a 'mistake' was 40% in 1964 but had increased to 60% by 1968 and remained at that level for the duration of the war. Opposition among blacks was even stronger [Karnow 1997: 646–47; Berinsky 2001: 39].

Despite these costs and the stalemated military situation, the Nixon administration did not simply pick up and leave Vietnam. Why? According to Henry Kissinger, Nixon's primary foreign policy adviser, 'commitment of 500,000 Americans ha[d] settled the issue of the importance of Viet Nam. For what is now involved is confidence in American promises. (...) [O]ther nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadiness. (...) Unilateral withdrawal (...) could therefore lead to erosion of restraints and to an even more dangerous international situation' [quoted in Rose 2010: 184, 186]. Therefore, the United States would try to negotiate an exit from Vietnam even as it reduced its military presence there. While talks with the North Vietnamese had begun soon after Tet, there was little movement until the summer of 1972. From 1968–1970, the Americans and North Vietnamese had advanced incompatible positions, the Americans insisting on mutual troop withdrawal from South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese insisting that the Thieu government in South Vietnam be removed as part of any peace agreement. The Americans began to shift their position in 1970 with an offer of a cease-fire in place, i.e., that North Vietnamese combat troops could remain in the South even as the Americans left, but the North Vietnamese still insisted on the removal of the Thieu regime. Only in the summer of 1972, did they back away from that position, concluding that Thieu would not survive the withdrawal of U.S. troops and concentrating on negotiating an American withdrawal. With these late concessions, the U.S. and North Vietnamese reached a tentative agreement in October 1972 [Karnow 1997: 639–41, 663–69].

Knowing that Thieu would disapprove of its negotiating strategy and concessions, the U.S. deliberately kept the details of the negotiations secret, briefing him

in only a general way. When informed about the details of the tentative agreement, Thieu reacted angrily. He disapproved of its main provisions, i.e., that the Americans would withdraw from South Vietnam while the North Vietnamese would not and that he would have to work with communist forces on his country's future. The South Vietnamese president denounced the draft publicly and demanded 69 changes that would have had the effect of changing its very nature. Thieu was so angry at the draft accord that he later wrote that he wanted to punch Kissinger in the mouth. Kissinger, too, was furious, describing Thieu's proposed changes as 'preposterous' [Karnow 1997: 664–66, Kissinger quoted at p. 666].

Despite their fury at the South Vietnamese leader, the Americans agreed to return to the negotiations and present his objections, an effort that went nowhere. At the same time, they sought to both pressure and reassure Thieu. Nixon threatened to cut off American aid, yet also promised to take action against North Vietnam if it violated the agreement. Those rhetorical efforts were reinforced with actions as the United States launched a major bombing campaign against North Vietnam in late 1972 and increased American aid. The U.S. and North Vietnamese resumed talks in January 1973 and reached essentially the same agreement as they had the previous October. Nixon then sent Thieu an ultimatum, telling him, 'You must decide now whether you desire to continue our alliance or whether you want me to seek a settlement with the enemy which serves U.S. interests alone'. Seeing he had no choice, Thieu reluctantly agreed [Nguyen 2012: 279–98; Karnow 1997: 665–69, Nixon quoted at p. 669].

How to evaluate this agreement? The Americans achieved their primary goals, withdrawal of combat troops and the return of American prisoners of war. Despite receiving large amounts of American assistance at the time of the agreement, Thieu would remain in office for little more than two years; his government was defeated in the spring of 1975 and he fled the country. Crucial to Nixon and Kissinger, that defeat came several years after the American troop withdrawal and could be attributed to South Vietnamese incompetence and congressional opposition to continued funding rather than the American withdrawal. Thieu's demise was not an unexpected outcome for American decision-makers. Nixon speculated in August 1972, even before the conclusion of the Paris Peace Accords, that 'I look at the tide of history out there, South Vietnam is probably never gonna survive anyway' [quoted in Rose 2010: 191–92].

SOVIET UNION AND AFGHANISTAN

The Soviets had begun to reassess their adventure in Afghanistan as early as 1981–82, but it was only when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985 that they made a serious effort to withdraw. Gorbachev believed the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was a 'bleeding wound' that was harming its international prestige. It was also costing too much. By the mid-1980s, the USSR was spending more than \$5 billion annually in Afghanistan, money Gorbachev believed could be better spent on

domestic reform. The war was also having an adverse impact on the Soviet military: according to official figures, nearly 14,000 soldiers were killed and another 50,000 wounded in Afghanistan, meaning that one of every eight Soviet soldiers who served there was either killed or wounded. These costs shaped public opinion. By 1985, only about 25% of the urban adult population supported Soviet policies in Afghanistan or expressed confidence that the Soviets would succeed there [Maley 1989: 15–17; Dibb 2010: 496–98]. The situation on the ground confirmed those opinions. Not only were the Soviets paying significant costs, but their efforts were not bearing fruit. By 1986–87, Soviet leaders were speaking openly in the Politburo about their failures in Afghanistan. The Chief of the General Staff, Sergei Akhromeyev, argued that ‘In the past seven years Soviet soldiers have had their boots on the ground in every square kilometer of the country. But as soon as they left, the enemy returned and restored everything the way it was before. We have lost this war’ [quoted in Braithwaite 2011: 278]. Those sentiments did not lead the Soviet leaders to ‘declare victory and leave.’ Rather, they sought to end the war diplomatically, even though negotiating would take time and impose continuing costs. An important reason they chose to do so was to preserve their credibility. Gorbachev argued at an April 1986 Politburo meeting that ‘we must under no circumstances just clear out of Afghanistan or we will damage our relations with a large number of foreign friends’ [quoted in Kalinovsky 2011: 89].

The Geneva talks on Afghanistan involved primarily the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the U.S. and Soviet Union as guarantors. For much of the period before the final settlement, the Pakistanis and their American and Saudi backers did not want an agreement. Many Americans were more interested in seeing the Soviets bleed in Afghanistan than in seeing them leave, especially after 1986 when President Ronald Reagan signed a directive seeking victory ‘by all means possible’. Pakistan also opposed a diplomatic settlement, wanting a military victory by the conservative Islamist forces it backed rather than any sort of moderate coalition government that might emerge from the talks. By 1988, the situation had changed. Pakistan’s Muhammad Zia al-Haq had agreed to separate the military and political issues, allowing Najibullah to remain in power. The Americans became more interested in Soviet withdrawal, having more confidence in Gorbachev and his sincerity in wanting to leave [Cordovez and Harrison 1995: 253–60; Tomsen 2011: 223–29].

The Soviet-backed Najibullah government remained an obstacle to a diplomatic settlement, however. The Afghan leader gave lip service to the idea of the Geneva negotiations, but in practice he did all he could to undermine the talks. He did not broaden his government in a meaningful way to reduce the pressure posed by opposition forces and he resisted Soviet efforts to make decisions that might have expedited the negotiations. Najibullah never believed that the Soviets would withdraw, even after they pushed him to make concessions. To persuade Najibullah to go along with the agreement and to soften the impact of their withdrawal, the Soviets provided more aid as well as advice about economic and military strategies

to survive [Cordovez and Harrison 1995: 247–52]. These obstacles were eventually overcome and the Geneva Accords were concluded on April 14, 1988. Gorbachev had stated in February 1988, i.e., even before the negotiations had ended, that all Soviet troops would be out of Afghanistan within ten months of May 15, 1988. Once the agreement was signed, withdrawals began in earnest, with about half of the Soviet military forces being withdrawn by July 1988 [Cordovez and Harrison 1995: 266–68; Tomsen 2011: 230–31].

What did the Soviets achieve in the agreement? They were able to withdraw their troops but achieved little else. Peter Tomsen compares this Geneva agreement with another from thirty years previously: ‘Like the 1954 Geneva Agreement ending France’s failure to reestablish its Indochina Empire, the Geneva treaty merely certified the military realities on the ground and provided a face-saving cover for Great Power retreat’ [Tomsen, 2011: 228–29]. A Russian observer, Artemy Kalinovsky, agrees, arguing that this was ‘a much weaker document than many in the Soviet government and PDPA had sought’, because it did not deal with the question of arms supplies for Najibullah’s opponents, did not guarantee a political role for the PDPA, and had weak enforcement mechanisms [Kalinovsky 2011: 143]. Still, Najibullah survived longer in Kabul than Gorbachev did in Moscow, although this is likely due as much to infighting among his opponents as to his regime’s strengths. It was only after Russia ended aid in 1992 that Najibullah was overthrown.

U.S. AND AFGHANISTAN

Americans in Afghanistan, much like the Soviets in the 1980s, came to realize that the costs of staying in the country were not worth the continued effort to win what was a difficult war. The U.S. had lost more than 2,300 soldiers by September 2014 and had spent nearly \$715 billion in the country between 2001–2014. While Obama had endorsed a policy in 2009 that heightened the American commitment to the country, he soon came to realize that the cost of that counterinsurgency policy over the next decade would be over \$1 trillion. Obama concluded that Afghanistan was not worth such expenditures in the face of domestic needs and other foreign policy challenges [Livingston and O’Hanlon 2015; Chandrasekaran 2012: 324]. Reinforcing that assessment, the CIA had concluded in October 2010 that the military situation was ‘trending to stalemate’ [quoted in Chandrasekaran 2012: 327]. If anything, the military situation was worse in 2012 than it had been several years earlier: there were twice as many insurgent attacks in 2012 as in 2008. The public, too, was frustrated. Asked periodically by ABC News/“Washington Post” whether they believed the war in Afghanistan had been worth fighting, the percentage responding ‘no’ increased from 41% in February 2007 to 52% in November 2009, to 64% in March 2011, and to 66% in December 2013 [*Afghanistan*; Waldman 2013].

Facing these realities, the Obama administration began to contemplate negotiations, with the Taliban. There were a few contacts in 2011–12, but these were very

difficult and halting. In addition to the typical obstacles to negotiations with military foes in time of war, there was also the legacy of the failed and frustrating negotiations that the Americans had had with the Taliban prior to 9/11. Moreover, any negotiations would be incredibly complex. Richard Holbrooke, primary negotiator of the 1995 Dayton Accords ending the Bosnian war and Obama's point man on Afghanistan, argued shortly before his death that, 'This will be far, far harder than the Balkans,' because '[a]t least in the Balkans I knew which thugs to talk to', while in Afghanistan the list of foes or thugs was much longer and had more diverse interests [quoted in Sanger 2012: 114–15]. To even begin the talks, the U.S. had to modify what had been its three preconditions, i.e., that the Taliban renounce violence, that they sever ties with al-Qaeda, and that they become part of the Afghan political process. At the beginning of 2012, the only precondition remaining was that they sever ties with international terrorists; the other preconditions were now merely desired 'outcomes'. Still later, in early 2013, the U.S. had also dropped the third precondition, that the Taliban publicly disavow al-Qaeda [Sanger 2012: 127; Waldman 2013]. The contacts, themselves, were all exploratory and aimed at developing mutual confidence. The initial discussions centered on prisoner exchanges and the opening of a Taliban office in Qatar. The Taliban wanted five of their members released from the Guantanamo prison in Cuba, while the Americans sought the return of a soldier captured by the Taliban. Obama was forced to abandon this proposal in the face of widespread domestic opposition. As a result, and because the American role in Afghanistan was coming to an end, American hopes for meaningful talks with the Taliban ended [Sanger 2012: 123–28; Rosenberg and Nordland 2013].

The withdrawal of most American troops in the absence of a peace agreement heightened the importance of negotiations with the Afghan government about future relations between the two countries. Those negotiations were extremely difficult. The most important issue was a Bilateral Security Agreement, which would govern the number of U.S. troops remaining in the country after 2014, their roles, and their immunity from local prosecution for any crimes committed. After a year-long negotiation, President Karzai submitted a draft agreement to a council of elders, a *loyajirga*, in late November 2013. That group approved the agreement, but Karzai then added conditions that had to be met before he would sign. These included that President Obama apologize for errors by the U.S. military, that 17 prisoners be released from Guantanamo, and that the remaining U.S. forces not conduct raids in Afghan homes. He has also argued that the agreement should be signed by his successor, who would only take office in 2014 [Craig and De Young 2013].

To deal with these demands, the United States employed persuasion and threats, much as it had in its relations with South Vietnamese President Thieu. While President Obama would not apologize for American military actions, he did send a letter to President Karzai in November 2013 that noted that 'Over time, and especially in the recent past, we have redoubled our efforts to ensure that Afghan homes are respected by our forces and that our operations are conducted consistent with your

law. We will continue to make every effort to respect the sanctity and dignity of Afghans in their homes and in their daily lives, just as we do for our own citizens'. The letter also promised that U.S. forces would not enter Afghan homes except under 'extraordinary circumstances' [Gerstein 2013]. There were also threats. Karzai was told that the agreement had to be signed by the end of 2013 or the U.S. would begin preparations for the withdrawal of all its forces and that failure to sign the agreement could call into question much of the American aid that had been promised previously [Shanker and Ahmed 2013; Craig and De Young 2013]. Neither inducements nor threats worked with Karzai, and the BSA was not signed until September 2014, when there was a new government in power, one headed by Ashraf Ghani. Under the terms of the agreement, 9,800 American troops and 3,000 other NATO troops remained in the country after the withdrawal of most American and NATO troops in December 2014. They are to engage in training missions for Afghan forces and engage in counter-terrorism activities [*New Afghan government signs US troop deal* 2014].

The conclusion of the BSA and the departure of most American troops enabled the United States to realize its immediate objectives. However, achieving its long-term objective, the creation of a stable Afghanistan that does not serve as a haven for terrorists, is uncertain. One observer summarized the problems in October 2014, near the end of the American combat role in the country: 'Insurgent attacks have reached the highest levels since 2011, the Afghan army has sustained heavy combat losses and is experiencing high attrition rates, and opium poppy cultivation has more than doubled from its pre-1999 levels when the Taliban ruled the country, potentially undermining the Afghan state's legitimacy' [Ratnam 2014].

FRANCE IN VIETNAM

Like the other interveners, France wanted to find a diplomatic route out of its Indochina problem. However, the process of the negotiations was different and the outcome was better for France than was the outcome for the other interveners. The French had recognized as early as 1950 that staying in Vietnam was not worth the price. Vietnam was a wasting asset, because its exports were no longer essential to the French economy and the value of French exports to Indochina did not pay for the costs of a war that, by 1950, accounted for almost 50% of the defense budget. At the same time, France wanted to rearm and strengthen its defense position in Europe, forcing it to decide between Europe and Asia. It chose Europe, meaning a way had to be found to leave Vietnam, or, minimally to reduce expenditures there. There were also the human costs. While French conscripts were forbidden from serving in Vietnam, volunteers could serve and more than 233,000 did. By 1953, more than 100,000 soldiers sent to Vietnam were dead or presumed dead, including close to 10,000 French nationals. Such failures had an impact on French opinion; supportive at the outset of the war, the public became increasingly skeptical over time: by May 1953, 65% of the public wanted either a unilateral withdrawal or

a negotiated settlement, while only 19% wanted a more aggressive military posture [Cesari 2007: 176–80; Logevall 2012: 349, 354, 607].

Negotiations finally began in May 1954, and they were concluded little more than ten weeks later, on July 20, 1954. Such rapid progress distinguishes this case from the others considered here. That progress was due to the intervener's desire for a rapid rather than a gradual withdrawal, especially after Pierre Mendès-France came to power in Paris in mid-June. Mendès-France had long criticized the French role in Indochina and promised to resign in thirty days if he did not conclude an agreement in Geneva. Yet another difference in this case was that the negotiations were multilateral, with all of the great powers present in addition to the parties in the war, itself, and most of those parties also wanted a settlement. Mendès-France's deadline put pressure on everyone, and the parties directly involved in the conflict agreed to a deal that included a French-Viet Minh cease-fire; French withdrawal from Cambodia and Laos; and a temporary partition of Vietnam that would end in two years after elections to unify the country.

The negotiations between these foes were certainly more involved than described here, but the primary obstacles for the French were their friends, the Bao Dai government in Vietnam and the Americans. When parties to the conference began to consider the partition of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, the prime minister in Bao Dai's government, was adamant in his opposition and urged the French not to agree. Perhaps that is one reason why the French, not unlike the Americans would do later, consulted little with their Vietnamese allies in the final days of the negotiations. The final agreement was denounced by Diem, who asserted that 'We cannot recognize the seizure by Soviet China [sic] (...) of over half of our national territory. We can neither concur in the brutal enslavement of millions of compatriots' [quoted in Jacobs 2006: 42]. France's American allies also did not want a settlement. They were, by 1954, more supportive of the French military effort in Indochina than the French were, providing most of the funds and trying to arrange for some sort of western 'united action' to help the French prevail. Why did the Americans oppose a negotiated settlement? Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Mendès-France that 'What you sign in Geneva will be bad. We do not want (...) to encourage a new Yalta' [quoted in Logevall 2012: 600]. Given their opposition to any agreement with communists, it is not surprising that the United States did not sign the Geneva Accords; it merely 'took note' of them and promised to 'refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb them' in the words of the American representative at the conference [quoted in Logevall 2012: 606].

In yet another difference with other interveners, the French achieved a very good deal in Geneva. Mendès-France 'had won more for France at the conference table than its generals had won on the battlefield' [Karnow 1997: 220]. Soon after Geneva, however, the Americans replaced the French and their client, Diem, arranged for the removal of Bao Dai, who had been appointed by the French. Over the longer term, '(...) the Geneva Conference produced no durable solution to the Indochina

conflict, only a military truce that awaited a political settlement, which never really happened' [Karnow 1997: 215]. That is, in this case as in the others, the conflict between the Vietnamese parties continued after the great power intervener had left.

CONCLUSIONS

The obvious conclusions of this study are that these interveners followed broadly similar policies in a similar sequence and that none were able to realize their goals. This article has identified the pattern. French, Soviet, and American interveners first tried to reach their goals using a variety of political techniques. The predictable failure of political means, for a variety of reasons, was followed by an initial application of military force. That, too, failed, so the interveners expanded their military involvement and altered their tactics, sometimes repeatedly. Military efforts, too, failed and the interveners eventually sought a diplomatic exit from their dilemma. This diplomatic period was usually a lengthy one, because the parties to the conflicts often had reasons to extend it, but a settlement was eventually reached and the interveners left without realizing their goals but with some degree of dignity. To these three periods, one might add a fourth, i.e., French, Soviet, and American policies after the conclusion of the diplomatic period. In three of these cases, the intervener continued to provide diplomatic, military, and economic support to its client (less true in the case of France and Vietnam, because the Americans soon replaced the French and provided their own economic and military support), yet their client regime would lose power within two or three years, or, in the case of contemporary Afghanistan, might well lose power in two or three years [Yousafzai 2015].

The identification of this pattern of intervention suggests a number of topics for future research. Why did the general pattern and similar behaviors in the political, military, and diplomatic periods exist? Can a similar pattern be identified in other cases of Western intervention in non-Western countries? As for policy implications, one might investigate whether chances of success would have been greater if a different pattern had been followed. For instance, if the failure of initial political efforts was predictable, why not simply resort to military actions from the outset? Would military success have been more likely if the country providing sanctuary for the Vietnamese and Afghan insurgents had been invaded? A question for Americans is why they intervened in the first place. Their intervention in Vietnam immediately followed that of the French, who had lost despite significant American assistance, and intervention in Afghanistan occurred barely a decade after the Soviet departure, something the U.S. had contributed to greatly. Why did the U.S. presume that it could do better than either of those other great power interveners had just a few years before?

The author plans to consider some of these questions in future research. Moreover, recent events, e.g., American intervention in Iraq after 2003, British, French, and American intervention in Libya in 2011, and Russian and American intervention

in Syria in 2015, create a number of opportunities to apply this study's conclusions to other cases.

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