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## BRIEF

### **Exit by Afghanisation**

Vietnam and Afghanistan: A comparative analysis of military transition as a political objective in US strategy

By Hasse Holmberg, Stud.mag., University of Copenhagen  
Edited by David Vestenskov, Centre for Military History

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## Introduction

The US enterprise in Afghanistan is drawing to a close alongside that of its ISAF partners. Disengagement from Afghanistan has presented itself in the shape of *transition* to Afghan responsibility. This disengagement could of course be described simply as a natural progression towards Afghan self-determination, and the transition to Afghan responsibility could be viewed as a strategically sound continuation of the overall COIN-strategy. This brief, however, takes a more critical approach.

It will be argued that two key concerns may have guided the US strategy of disengagement via transition: (1) the increasingly popular *demand for disengagement*, as expressed by the US public; and (2) the concern of how best to manage such disengagement in respect to *protecting US reputation*. These two concerns are comparable to what the Nixon-administration was faced with some 40 years earlier when US forces were engaged in Vietnam, and the courses of action taken by the two administrations are not without similarities. In both cases, the administrations responded to the two abovementioned concerns by placing the internationally recognised principle of national self-determination at the very centre of strategy. In the case of Vietnam, this was achieved by the policy of *Vietnamisation*. For obvious reasons, the Obama administration has not taken to heart any such phrase reminiscent of the historical trauma that the Vietnam War embodies in US military history, but, as comparison will show, the US strategy of transition to Afghan responsibility may indeed have much in common with the historical case of Vietnam.

Formulating strategy around the principle of national self-determination (be that Afghan or South Vietnamese) introduces a mechanism that maintains momentum in the disengagement process. This is highly effective with respect to the objective of disengagement, and particularly so as it also takes into account the legitimacy of any such disengagement and the issue of US reputation. However, as the process of disengagement is propelled by the powerful argument of self-determination, military actuality is rendered a secondary concern and stands the risk of falling hostage to the strategy's own rationale. In the case of Vietnam, this mechanism was acknowledged but ignored as the objective of effective disengagement easily overruled the prospects of victory in military terms. Vietnamisation was a strategy for reputable withdrawal in the face of defeat. In the case of Afghanistan, the similar course of what might be called *Afghanisation* could be viewed as either a risky political strategy of speeded and coerced withdrawal or, perhaps worse, a sign of resignation.

## Vietnamisation: Addressing two political concerns when military victory is not an option

The policy of Vietnamisation was first introduced in 1969 with the official objective of building South Vietnamese military capacities to the extent that Saigon would be able to independently combat the communist forces of North Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> This policy

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(1) Record, Jeffrey (2010), "Leaving Vietnam: Insights for Iraq?" *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, Issue 3, p. 570.

was the centrepiece of the Nixon-administration's overall strategy for US disengagement from Vietnam, which also included peace negotiations and unilateral withdrawals of combat forces. During President Richard Nixon's first term, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) underwent not only a process of modernisation but was also expanded in size from a total of 820,000 to 1,048,000 personnel<sup>2</sup> – all as part of the programme for Vietnamisation. This was coupled with the authorisation of fourteen consecutive troop withdrawals from 1969 to late 1972, culminating in the eventual departure of all US combat forces.<sup>3</sup> The idea was to gradually withdraw along with the progression of training a sound and capable South Vietnamese army. In reality, US forces were retracted excessively and Saigon was unable to keep up. Nixon and his advisors knew this, but the public demand for withdrawals overruled the slim prospect of military victory against North Vietnam. In order to avoid associations of retreat (or worse defeat), the Nixon-administration also followed a parallel track of negotiations. This was to meet the two objectives of bringing back US prisoners of war and purchasing a so-called "decent interval"<sup>4</sup> of relative peace, thus allowing for the United States to proclaim an end to the war in Vietnam.

Today, recorded conversations show that both President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, unofficially held the belief that South Vietnam would not be able to effectively defend itself against the North after the termination of US military presence in the country.<sup>5</sup> The dual approach of Vietnamisation and negotiations should therefore not be viewed as a way of actually preventing a Communist take-over of the South, but rather as a way of legitimising US withdrawal. The policy of Vietnamisation was agreed upon because it addressed two key political concerns: (1) the domestic concern, where lack of public support for the war ultimately resulted in public demand for disengagement; (2) the subsequent concern of managing this disengagement with regard to US reputation internationally. These two political concerns have been echoed in the case of Afghanistan, and comparison will lend support to the notion that a similar strategic mechanism has been put in place here. However, the two cases diverge along historical nuances, and the following analysis will therefore begin on the level of comparing the two political concerns in their respective historical contexts.

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(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid., p. 569.

(4) Hughes, Ken (2010), "Fatal Politics: Nixon's Political Timetable for Withdrawing from Vietnam", *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, Issue 3, p. 499.

(5) This is evident from countless recorded conversations. See e.g. Hughes, Ken (2010) for a revealing look into the private correspondence between the two. See also *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (1979), Arrow Books, London, p. 349: here Nixon states that "victory was no longer possible" on military terms.

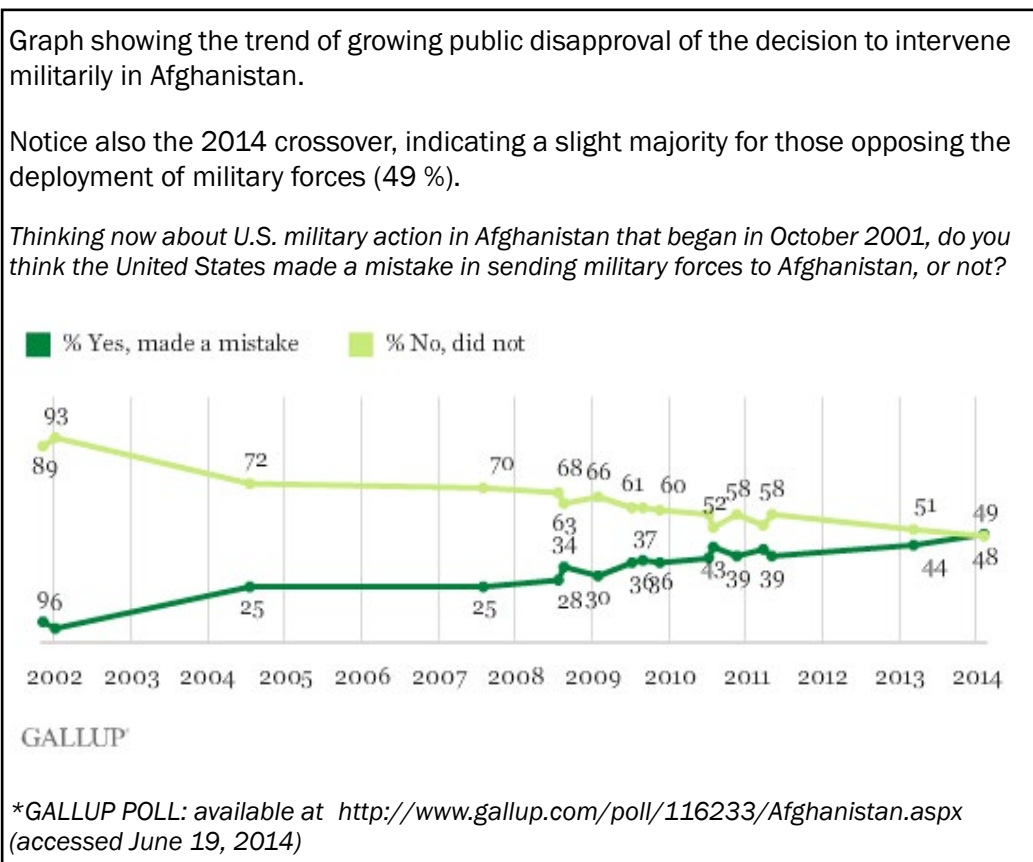
## First concern: Public demand for disengagement

- From active opposition to debilitating war-fatigue

Both cases show how prolonged war can foster an acute sense of public disapproval. The case of Vietnam is exemplary in this sense. The opposition to the Vietnam War was comprehensive in scope and largely expressed through the form of active protest. A steady decline in public support of the war, disenchantment with the original objectives, and a desperate resistance to the institution of conscription all led to fierce public opposition.

In the case of Afghanistan, public opinion of American military involvement on the ground has also gradually declined over the years. Figure 1 shows that in February 2014 49 % of Americans believed that the United States made a mistake when deploying military forces in Afghanistan – the highest number since the start of the war in 2001, when 89 % of Americans favoured military action and only 9 % opposed it (40 percentage points lower than today).

**FIGURE 1: Military intervention in Afghanistan**



As shown in Figure 2, the American public's "overall opinion" of Afghanistan has also deteriorated to an all-time low, and a considerable majority favour either speeding

up US withdrawal or sticking to the 2014 timetable set by the Obama administration (see Table 1 next side).

**TABLE 1: Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

Poll showing the public demand for withdrawal. Notice that half wish to speed up US withdrawal.

*As you may know, the U.S. plans to withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year 2014. Which would you prefer to see happen - for the U.S. to - stick to its timetable for withdrawing troops by 2014, speed up its withdrawal from Afghanistan, (or) keep troops in Afghanistan as long as it takes to accomplish its goals?*

	Stick to 2014 timetable	Speed up withdrawal	Keep until goals accomplished	No opinion
	%	%	%	%
Mar 13, 2012	24	50	21	4

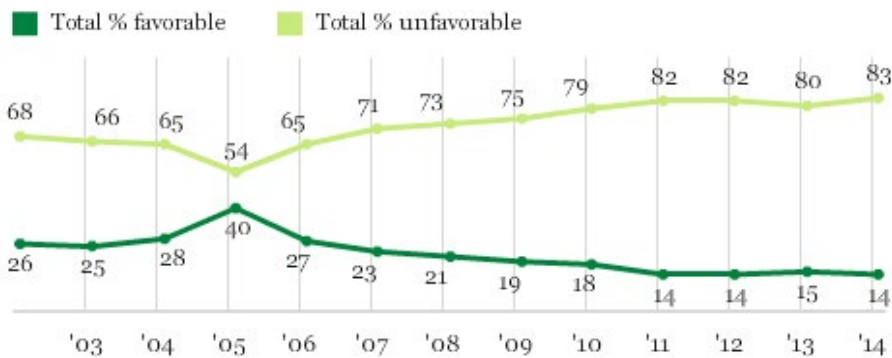
GALLUP®

\*GALLUP POLL: available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116233/Afghanistan.aspx> (accessed June 19, 2014)

**FIGURE 2: Overall opinion of Afghanistan**

Graph showing the steady deterioration of public opinion regarding Afghanistan in general. In 2014, a total of 83 % described their overall opinion of Afghanistan as either mostly or very unfavourable.

*Next, I'd like your overall opinion of some foreign countries. What is your overall opinion of Afghanistan? Is it very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*



\*GALLUP POLL: available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116233/Afghanistan.aspx> (accessed June 19, 2014)



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Public disapproval of the war in Afghanistan, however, is a different beast than that of Vietnam. The percentage of Americans thinking it was a mistake sending troops to Vietnam had already crossed over to a majority by the time Nixon took office in 1969.<sup>6</sup> On 15 January 1973, Nixon suspended American military action in Vietnam. Consequently, approval ratings for his handling of the Vietnam War increased remarkably from 43 % to 75 % in the space of just a few weeks.<sup>7</sup>

Opposition to the war effort in Vietnam also came in the shape of broad protest and demonstrations. This form of active opposition to the Vietnam War is not easily equated to the non-physical protest and resigned weariness associated with the war in Afghanistan. This is not to say, however, that public opinion on Afghanistan is not important. On the contrary, the historic case of Vietnam serves as an example of how public support for overseas military operations may decline over time; and without the support of its people, any democratic state will have difficulties in sustaining a substantial and prolonged war effort like that of the United States in Afghanistan. Growing war-fatigue may indeed be as detrimental to the current administration's effort to manage US interests abroad as was the anti-war opposition of the late 1960s and early 1970s. When analysing the statistics on the war in Afghanistan, it becomes evident that a trend towards growing disapproval will gradually undermine support for the continued presence of US forces. A politically alert leadership may well respond to these numbers, and it can be assumed that the Obama administration has taken this development into account when determining the way forward in Afghanistan.

## **Second concern: Protecting US reputation**

*- The history of self-determination from Vietnam to Afghanistan*

The public's growing demand for disengagement from Afghanistan therefore leads to the possible conclusion that the Obama administration will increasingly prioritise the eventual termination of US military presence in the country. But responding positively to the public demand for disengagement must result in the subsequent concern of how to design such a strategy in a way that does not compromise US reputation. The Obama administration is thus anew presented with political concerns (as was the Nixon-administration in the case of Vietnam) – this time not related to domestic politics but to the reputation of the United States as determined by the international community. As Nixon bluntly stated in a private conversation with Henry Kissinger:

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(6) Carroll, Joseph; Newport, Frank (2005), "Iraq Versus Vietnam: A Comparison of Public Opinion", Gallup, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/18097/Iraq-Versus-Vietnam-Comparison-Public-Opinion.aspx> (accessed 19.06.2014). See also <http://www.gallup.com/poll/2299/americans-look-back-vietnam-war.aspx> for more detailed statistics.

(7) Carroll, Joseph (2004), "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison", Gallup, available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx> (accessed 19.06.2014).

“... unless the United States can stay in there indefinitely, South Vietnam is gonna fall. All right, if that is the case, then what we have to look to is the bigger subject: How does the United States look in the way it handles this goddamn thing?”<sup>8</sup>

The concern for how the United States “looks” in the handling of Vietnam and Afghanistan is informed by the international context in which the two wars have been managed. In the case of Vietnam, the United States was locked in an ideological struggle against the Soviet Union and international communism. This has not been the case regarding Afghanistan. However, the legacy of the Cold War-jostle for normative superiority and ideological attractiveness is still present in today’s strategic planning of military intervention, and Afghanistan is an excellent example of this.

Following the Second World War and the establishment of the UN, the move for decolonisation fast became a leading agenda in international affairs. The argument for decolonisation was founded in the very principle of self-determination.<sup>9</sup> The ready introduction of new states to the international system directly affected the bipolar security environment of rivalry between the world’s two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. These dynamic changes to the international state system, derived from decolonisation and the realisation of self-determination by hitherto non-existing nation-states, resulted in an increased risk of conflict. During the Cold War, conflicts between nation-states, as well as conflicts within nation-states, were thus frequently kept in check by the global scope of overarching bipolar conflict between Washington and Moscow.<sup>10</sup> This was also the case regarding Vietnam.

The widening arena of new states ready to enter the international system thus introduced a platform of ideological rivalry between East and West – between communism and liberal democracy. Both presented the (so-called) Third World with ideological arguments based on the principle of self-determination. The US approach was informed by *modernisation theory* resting on the concept of a linear history determined to culminate in a global community of liberal democracies. This theory was underpinned by the liberal consensus, which dominated the post-Second World War American society and intelligentsia with its internationalist goal of increased global economic integration. Under the rationale of *modernisation theory*, it thus became legitimate to intervene in the affairs of aspiring nations, assisting them towards what was perceived as true realisation of self-determination.

During the mid-1960s, the liberal consensus sustaining *modernisation theory* began to fail in light of the geopolitical situation and the apparent attractiveness

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(8) Hughes, Ken (2010), p. 506 [Emphasis added]. In conversation with National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger.

(9) Wilde Ralph (2012), “Competing Normative Visions of Exit”, Caplan, Richard (ed.), *Exit Strategies and State Building*, p. 267

(10) Berger, Mark T.; Reese, Justin Y. (2010), “From nation-states in conflict to conflict in nation-states: The United States of America and nation-building from South Vietnam to Afghanistan”, *International Politics*, Vol. 47, 5, 451-471, Macmillan Publishers, p. 454

of Marxism in the Third World.<sup>11</sup> This development was accentuated by the growing importance of the UN, which became the most legitimate platform for managing international relations with several new polities entering the UN system in the wake of decolonisation. This brought about a new liberal approach to the issue of self-determination for nations in the process of shedding colonial ties. This new approach embraced multilateralism and the institutional framework of the UN resulting in a foreign policy less centred on the unilateral protection of hard narrow interest and more focussed on defending US reputation under strong pressure from Soviet attempts to cast US international involvement as evidence of American imperialism. The policy of Vietnamisation should be viewed in the light of this development in international affairs and American foreign policy in which security also included issues related to reputation and international appeal.

The unilateral character of US foreign policy during the George W. Bush presidency, which led to the initial intervention in Afghanistan, is not without relation to the idealism of US foreign policy in the early years of the Cold War. When the liberal consensus failed during the mid-1960s, the political Left gradually gained control over the liberal platform in American politics. Disenfranchised liberals, committed to the traditional view of *modernisation theory*, eventually developed the political philosophy known today as neo-conservatism, which to some degree has contributed to the Bush administration's foreign policy toward both Iraq and Afghanistan. This unilateral approach of disregarding the international community and bypassing the UN (in the case of Iraq) associated with the so-called "War on Terror" has left a dent in the international reputation of the United States.<sup>12</sup> The rationale behind the neo-conservative approach to US foreign policy relies on a historical interpretation of the United States as the ideological winner of the Cold War, thus vindicating the philosophical basis of *modernisation theory*. This, however, ignores the multipolarity of current international relations leaving US reputation vulnerable to injury.

The Obama administration has taken a more realistic approach to US foreign policy declaring an end to the "War on Terror" and attempting a strategic rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific Region. This approach to managing US interests takes into account the multipolar security environment in which US supremacy is no longer left unchallenged and the unilateral foreign policy of the Bush administration is not sustainable with respect to US reputation. Just as the policy of Vietnamisation was influenced by developments in international relations and marked by a realist concern for US reputation, so is today's strategy for disengagement from Afghanistan.

The case of disengagement from Afghanistan is to some extent exemplary in the way it has sophisticatedly integrated the principle of self-determination as a stable component in strategy and in the narrative surrounding strategy. From the outset of

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(11) This was coupled with a domestic attack on the liberal consensus from counter-culture and 'New Left'/'New Right' movements, which strongly added to the active domestic opposition to the Vietnam War as covered earlier in this analysis.

(12) Patman, Robert G. (2009), "Out of sync: Bush's expanded national security state and the war on terror", *International Politics*, Vol. 46, 2/3, 210-233, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 19.

the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the notion of “local ownership” dictated what was to become a rather “light footprint” as expressed by some observers and officials. The idea of “local ownership” – building capacity through domestic forums – has gained systematic recognition in the historical aftermath of other cases of international or foreign territorial administration with a heavier footprint. Carsten Stahn explains this prioritisation as a “structural principle” guiding the mission in Afghanistan from its original UNAMA-outset to today’s disengagement.<sup>13</sup> Integrating the principle of self-determination into the structural make-up of a strategy for disengagement allows for a more genuine transition to Afghan responsibility as it reinforces the notion of Afghanistan as an independent, sovereign, and fundamentally self-determining state. The promotion and reinforcement of Afghan self-determination is perhaps most evident in the political-rhetorical narrative surrounding the disengagement strategy. Thus, in his Kabul speech of May 2012, President Obama stressed that the relationship between the United States and Afghanistan is one of “equal partnership between two sovereign states.”<sup>14</sup> The strategic purpose of a statement like this can be viewed as a way to legitimise disengagement. By stressing Afghan sovereignty and relational equality to the United States, a transition to Afghan responsibility becomes not only legitimate but in fact a requirement in accordance with the international principle of national self-determination.

### **Vietnamisation-Afghanisation: A mechanism for withdrawal**

*- Using the principle of self-determination to turn the wheels of disengagement*

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, the disengagement strategy has been fashioned as a combined response to (1) public disapproval and (2) the potential threat to US reputation. The public demand for disengagement may likely be driven primarily by a concern for the safety of the soldiers fighting in a war in which the United States stands to gain less than initially hoped. This may indeed have little to do with Afghan or Vietnamese self-determination. Similarly, accusations of “American empire” by actors within the international community may have less to do with a genuine concern for Afghan or Vietnamese self-determination and more to do with seizing the chance for dealing a blow to American reputation when the opportunity arises. However, public and international demand for disengagement may fit neatly together in concert with the principle of self-determination: Americans may be more concerned with the safety of their soldiers; international actors may be more concerned with sticking it to the Americans; both, however, are plying for US retraction – and self-determination delivers.

(13) Stahn, Carsten, *The Law and Practice of International Territorial Administration: Versailles to Iraq and Beyond*, 2010, Cambridge University Press, p. 348-49

(14) *President Obama’s speech from Kabul, Afghanistan, as released by the White House. (May 1, 2012)*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/02/world/asia/text-obamas-speech-in-afghanistan.html?pagewanted=1&ref=asia>

This presents the opportunity for an effective, strategically structured response to both concerns. The effectiveness of the strategic approach witnessed in Vietnam and Afghanistan is linked to the fusion of the two concerns. By introducing the principle of self-determination as the structural focal point of strategy, both concerns are positively affected in relation to each other. This mechanism ultimately goes together to turn the wheels of disengagement creating a sustained momentum. It is this mechanism that characterises both Vietnamisation and the similar strategic approach to Afghanistan, subsequently termed *Afghanisation*.

**FIGURE 3: The mechanism of Vietnamisation-Afghanisation**

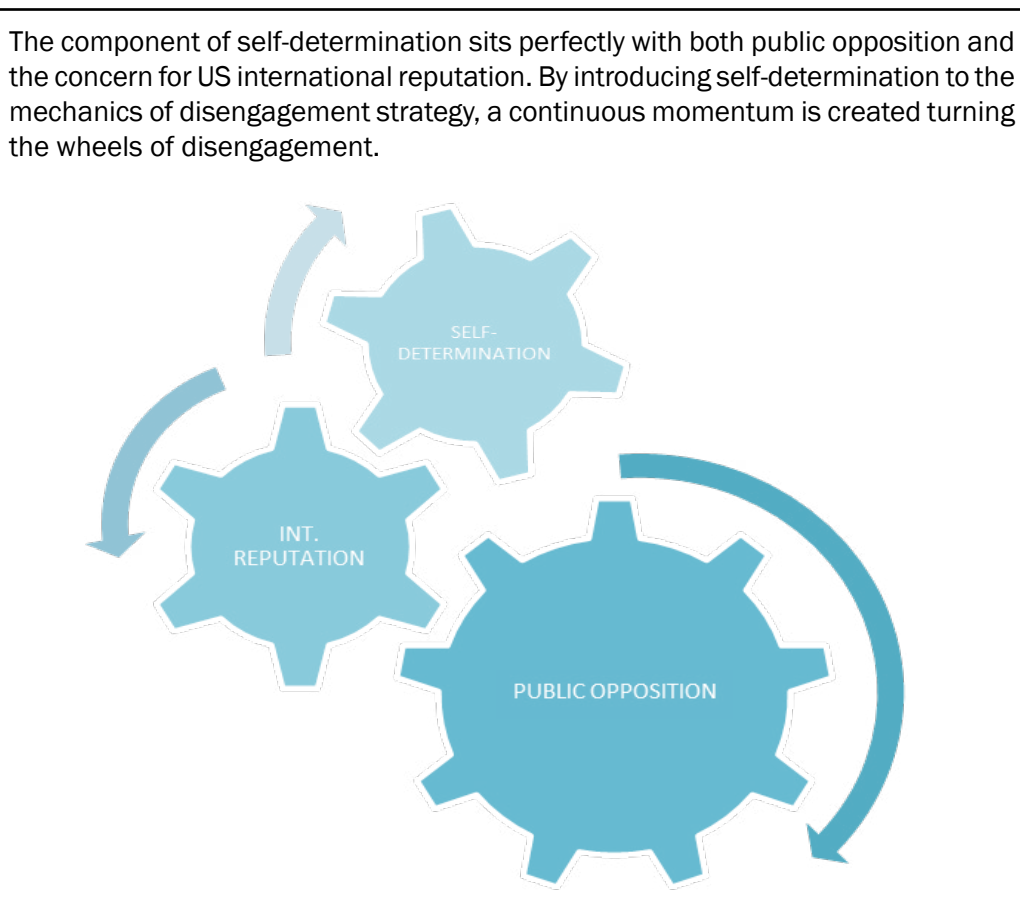


Figure 3 offers a visualisation of the mechanism evident in both Vietnamisation and Afghanisation, in which the political principle of self-determination relates to both public opposition and international reputation. This common mechanism, *Vietnamisation-Afghanisation*, falls under the category of political strategy. In political terms, Vietnamisation-Afghanisation is effective as it enforces a self-perpetuating movement towards achieving the political goal of reputable disengagement keeping the process of withdrawal going with sustained momentum. In military terms, however, Vietnamisation-Afghanisation carries with it the precarious effect of potentially undermining the military aspects of strategic decision-making.

## The coercive effect on military strategy

- *How military strategy integrates the strategic rationale of self-determination in response to the pressure of speeding up withdrawal. From the Cambodian incursion and Operation Lam Son 719 to the reintroduction of body counts and a shift towards counterterrorism.*

The negative effects of Vietnamisation-Afghanisation on the military aspect of the two campaigns can be said to represent the “flip side” of this common strategic approach to facilitating a politically legitimate withdrawal. In both cases, military strategy has lent itself to political expediency rather than serving as an important check on the strategic decision-making with the purpose of securing continuity between political intent and realistic action.

In the case of Vietnam, the objective of transferring responsibility for the war effort to Saigon and the South Vietnamese forces, thus allowing for a complete US withdrawal, were dependent on the success of Vietnamisation. Military success was never actually within reach during this process. Nonetheless, the programme offered a possible platform for creating *ad hoc* military objectives that, when met, could justify US withdrawal. These objectives were loosely defined and in large part retrospectively informed by criteria not related to military strategic importance but rather to political argument. The incursion into Cambodia and Operation Lam Son 719<sup>15</sup> in Laos made up two of the administration’s major arguments for the success of Vietnamisation. In the first case, the Cambodian incursion of 1970, the South Vietnamese forces played only a secondary role.<sup>16</sup> In Operation Lam Son 719, however, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was in complete command on the ground, only supported by US air power. The operation that had been designed to complement policy turned out to be a complete military fiasco.<sup>17</sup> To salvage the original PR objective of the campaign, Nixon nonetheless went ahead and publicly defined Operation Lam Son 719 as a success – regardless of the situation on the ground and regardless of the administration’s unofficial acknowledgement that the ARVN had not performed in any way satisfactorily. Consequently, on the specified basis of these two military campaigns (and contrary to his private beliefs), Nixon declared in his 7 April 1971, Address to the Nation that “Vietnamisation has succeeded.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus the policy of Vietnamisation reflected directly on military strategy – evident in the Cambodian incursion and Operation Lam Son 719. These campaigns were undertaken with the purpose of speeding up the process of transition to Vietnamese responsibility. They were guided by the principle of self-determination, which allowed for a reputable disengagement that attempted to satisfy both public and international demand. Similar operational aspects of strategy can be observed in the case

(15) Huei, Pang Yang (2006), “Beginning of the End: ARVN and Vietnamisation (1969-72)”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 17:3, p. 297

(16) Huei, Pang Yang (2006), p. 292

(17) Huei, Pang Yang (2006), p. 297

(18) Nixon, Richard M., “Address to the Nation on the Situation in South East Asia”, April 7, 1971.

of Afghanistan. One such example is the re-emergence of enemy body counts, the return of which, according to Lawrence Kaplan, “offers the clearest illustration yet of the new official thinking about our enterprise in Afghanistan.”<sup>19</sup> This new thinking has to do with a quantification of the war that, according to Kaplan, has escalated in direct proportion to the administration’s political strategy for drawing the US enterprise in Afghanistan to a close. The use of enemy body counts serves the purpose of defining narrow quantified parameters for success: depleting the Taliban and al-Qaeda sufficiently for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take over responsibility. Within this narrow interpretation of the US mission in Afghanistan, success is more readily expressed than in the more abstract enterprise of winning hearts and minds. Thus, accompanying its surge of an additional 30,000 troops in Afghanistan, the administration could define a clear set of objectives, including a refocus on al-Qaeda. Consequently, Obama could announce in his speech of 22 June 2011 that more than half of al-Qaeda’s leadership had been “taken out”<sup>20</sup> – a tangible statement of success. The practice of focusing strategy towards the creation and counting of enemy dead has, nonetheless, been widely discredited in respect to counterinsurgencies since its use in the Vietnam War. The re-emergence of instrumental body counts should therefore be viewed as sign of a move away from counterinsurgency and towards the more limited US role of counterterrorism. This re-balancing in strategy has also been officially acknowledged by the administration.<sup>21</sup>

The growing demand for disengagement as shown above has thus facilitated a change in military strategy in Afghanistan, as was the case in Vietnam. Like Nixon’s Cambodian incursion, Obama’s surge has been described as an escalate-then-exit strategy.<sup>22</sup> The reintroduction of body counts provides for a quantification of the war, which allows for objectives in accordance with the escalate-then-exit strategy of decimating the Taliban and al-Qaeda enough for the ANSF to take over. The ability of Vietnamisation to coerce military strategy in a direction similar to the steps seen taken in the Afghan transition-strategy comes together to show the highly coercive nature of Vietnamisation-Afghanisation. As soon as the political argument to link US withdrawal to the legitimating principle of self-determination has been made and the strategic wheels set in motion, military strategy will eventually fall in line to complement rather than challenge the mechanism for continuously speeded transition and withdrawal. This presents a potentially significant risk to the soundness of US military strategy.

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(19) Kaplan, Lawrence F. (2011), “Vietnamization: Enemy body counts make a grim return”, *The New Republic*, March 24, p. 9.

(20) President Obama’s “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan” (June 22, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>

(21) Garamone, Jim, “Commanders Re-balance Strategy in Afghanistan”, [defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=62002) (December 8, 2010), <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=62002>

(22) Baker, Peter, “How Obama Came to Plan for ‘Surge’ in Afghanistan”, [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (December 5, 2009), [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

## Conclusion

The objective of Vietnamisation was never to win the Vietnam War – the objective was to end US involvement as demanded by the American public. The policy, however, was not designed simply as a one-to-one response to the public demand for disengagement. Nor was it an idealistic stand on its guiding principle of South Vietnamese self-determination. Rather, the policy was derived in unison between the two: (1) the necessity of ending US involvement as demanded by public opinion; and (2) the objective of protecting US reputation in the process. Similarly, some 40 years later, the Obama administration has been faced with approval ratings on the war in Afghanistan conveying a negative trend reminiscent to that of Vietnam. President Obama's response has been to narrow US involvement in Afghanistan to a close through the process of transition to Afghan responsibility. This strategy is remarkably alike to that of the Nixon-administration and its policy of Vietnamisation. Both strategies place the principle of national self-determination at their centres, thus replacing political necessity (public demand) with idealist principle (adherence to the idea of self-determination) as the rationale for disengagement.

This common approach creates a mechanism, here described as Vietnamisation-Afghanisation, with which to create momentum and speed for the ultimate objective of legitimate withdrawal. The strategy affects positively on the initial political concerns (responding to the public demand for disengagement and protecting US reputation), as withdrawal is facilitated through a process of transition guided by the internationally agreed upon principle of self-determination. Thus US reputation is protected against potential vulnerabilities generally linked to the administration of an international military intervention and its different stages, including the stage of disengagement – it is difficult for any actor in the international system to express a legitimate criticism of a disengagement-process that is guided by the principle of self-determination. Nonetheless, the mechanism of Vietnamisation-Afghanisation has the precarious effect of coercing military aspects of the strategy so that the rationale on the ground tends to lend itself to political expediency rather than military necessity.

In the case of Vietnam, recorded conversations from the Oval Office show that the administration harboured no false hope of actually preventing a communist takeover of South Vietnam once US forces had been withdrawn. In that sense, the objective of winning the war had become secondary to the objective of disengaging from Vietnam in an acceptable manner, and thus the negative effects of Vietnamisation-Afghanisation were not of importance as long as military strategy on the ground served the purpose of supporting the political objective of disengagement.

In the case of Afghanistan, however, where the official objectives of a post 2014 Afghanistan are still considered achievable, the drive for disengagement may well prove an ill-fated decision – unless, of course, the Obama administration has come to a similar conclusion as the one that led to Vietnamisation.



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