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TO: Secretary Clinton
FROM: Gideon Rose, Editor, *Foreign Affairs*

SUBJECT: Diplomatic and strategic lessons from Vietnam for Extrication from Afghanistan

The similarities between the U.S. dilemma in Afghanistan today and its dilemma in Vietnam forty years ago suggest useful lessons. The strategy the Nixon administration eventually adopted managed to extricate the United States from the war in early 1973 but failed to head off a South Vietnamese collapse two years later. In today's different environment, a similar strategy of extrication should work better, permitting both U.S. withdrawal and the maintenance of acceptable local conditions following our departure. To improve the odds of achieving both these goals simultaneously, however, it will be important to blur the outlines of U.S. troop withdrawals with careful public rhetoric and diplomacy, cover the strategic retreat with tactical advances, and remain committed to Afghanistan even after U.S. combat troops have been withdrawn.

Nixon's Military Strategy

Coming to office in January 1969, Nixon initially decided to pursue a familiar goal—a negotiated settlement with the Communists that left the South Vietnamese regime intact and secure—with new means: expanded military operations, engagement with Moscow to restrain its North Vietnamese proxy, and attempts to transfer the capacity and responsibility for fighting to the South Vietnamese themselves.

But the first Nixon strategy failed, because the North Vietnamese did not give in. And rather than buy time for extended diplomacy, limited American troop withdrawals (begun in June) whetted rather than satisfied public desire for more. So by the end of 1969, Nixon and Kissinger devised what might be termed the second Nixon strategy, the goal of which was American extrication from the war no later than the end of 1972, in time for the next presidential election. This new approach consisted of gradual but steady U.S. troop withdrawals along with formal protection of the Thieu regime, together with a concerted effort to enshrine these elements in a negotiated settlement.

In the spring of 1969, there were almost 550,000 American troops in Vietnam. By the end of 1970, this number had dropped to 280,000; by the end of 1971, to 150,000; and by late spring 1972, to fewer than 70,000. Because the Communists had not stopped fighting, the only way for the troop withdrawals not to lead to an enemy victory was to have them replaced with something else. A vital part of the replacement package was aid and training for the South Vietnamese army (ARVN). Still, this alone could not create a true bulwark in the time allotted. So the Nixon administration supplemented aid to ARVN with other measures to keep the Communists off balance and entice them into a negotiated agreement.

One set of actions sought to make progress in counterinsurgency, including intensified efforts to “pacify” the South. Another set of actions constituted, in effect, a proactive defense. Rather than wait passively for new Communist attacks to emerge, the administration sought to disrupt them by striking at the base areas from which the attacks would be launched. So even as U.S. troop withdrawals undermined the long-term security of the Thieu regime, other U.S. measures made sure that regime was protected over the short term.

The Diplomatic Dimension

The administration followed the same pattern at the negotiating table. Kissinger met repeatedly in secret with the North Vietnamese in an attempt to formalize the American extrication in a written agreement, at first to little avail. In September 1970, Nixon and Kissinger went so far as to agree that the North’s troops could remain after a settlement in the parts of the South they controlled. Any agreement based on such a “cease-fire-in-place” would make eventual Communist victory likely absent continued U.S. involvement in the war. But the North Vietnamese remained intransigent, demanding the one concession American leaders refused to make—direct betrayal of Thieu in the short term.

Thanks to an intricate sequence of events in a changed international context (marked by détente with the Soviets and the U.S. opening to China), the second Nixon strategy eventually resulted in the 1973 Paris Accords. The process began in the spring of 1972, when the North Vietnamese—eager to take advantage of the near-complete withdrawal of U.S. ground troops—launched a massive attack on the South. This Easter Offensive made significant advances at first, but was eventually halted by a combination of ARVN resistance, American tactical air support, and American strategic bombing. By late summer 1972, the North Vietnamese, facing few opportunities for further military success and calculating that Nixon might be more motivated to cut a deal before reelection than after it, appeared willing to continue their struggle on the political front alone for a while. The Nixon administration, for its part, wanted to take credit for ending the war during its first term—and if still unwilling to dump Thieu, was nonetheless prepared to make further concessions affecting the long-term viability of his regime. Under these conditions, the negotiations began to move forward.

The United States agreed to accept the formation of a tripartite electoral commission—made up of the Thieu government, southern neutralists, and the Viet Cong—which would be formally responsible for handling political issues remaining in the South following a cease-fire-in-place. The North Vietnamese agreed to permit the continuation of the Thieu regime—as long as the legitimacy of the southern Communists’ political entity, the PRG, was acknowledged as well. By mid-October, Kissinger and his counterpart Le Duc Tho had worked out a draft agreement calling for the removal of the remaining U.S. troops and the return of the U.S. prisoners of war within sixty days after a cease-fire. Both men agreed to be responsible for the compliance of their respective sides in the conflict and they set a signing date for the end of October.

When Thieu realized that the Americans were serious about making a deal, however, he refused to cooperate, so the negotiations stalled. As the 1972 American presidential election came and went, the deadlock remained. Tantalized and frustrated by the prospect of a settlement just out of reach, Nixon and his advisers decided on a final pair of moves to end the war. First,

to corral Thieu, they ordered a massive quick infusion of aid to the South and secretly promised him they would “respond with full force” to any Communist violations of the accords, while at the same time explicitly threatening to abandon him if he didn’t fall into line. Second, to get the North Vietnamese back to the table, they ordered a new round of devastating air strikes. This “Christmas Bombing” succeeded in the limited goals of extracting a few minor concessions, compelling a North Vietnamese signature, and showing everybody that Nixon could buck public outrage. It also helped cover up American insistence that the South sign an agreement similar to the one negotiated in October.

Pulling along a reluctant ally and enemy, the United States signed the Paris Accords on January 27, 1973, formally extricating itself from the Vietnam War. The Nixon administration’s policies had enabled the United States to get its troops out and its prisoners back without directly betraying its client—though the conditions of the agreement left that client acutely vulnerable.

The Aftermath

The Nixon administration came to office recognizing that America’s global economic position had declined in recent years and wanting to bring America’s commitments into line with its reduced capabilities. This general attitude not only reinforced the domestic imperative of withdrawal from Vietnam; it also guided the policy of détente with the Soviet Union and the administration’s opening to China. Yet Nixon and Kissinger understood that retrenchment came with its own dangers, and wanted to make sure that in Vietnam and elsewhere, their retreat did not become a rout.

The central problem the administration faced in Vietnam, therefore, was how to extricate the United States from the war without looking too bad. Nixon and Kissinger first tried to win by escalating, bluffing, and negotiating. When that approach achieved little, they decided to disengage unilaterally while continuing to protect the Thieu regime. Such a gradual withdrawal might spell eventual doom for a non-Communist South Vietnam, but if the U.S. could credibly say that it had not betrayed an ally, the international ramifications and humiliation of such an outcome would be diminished—and that seems to have been senior policymakers’ chief concern.

In August 1972, for example, Nixon privately told Kissinger, “Let’s be perfectly cold-blooded about it. . . . South Vietnam probably is never gonna survive anyway. . . . [C]an we have a viable foreign policy if a year from now or two years from now, North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam? That’s the real question.” Kissinger replied, “We can have a viable foreign policy if it looks as if it’s the result of South Vietnamese incompetence. . . . So we’ve got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which—after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater.”

Yet if Nixon and Kissinger accepted the possibility of an eventual South Vietnamese collapse, they hoped it could somehow be avoided and sincerely intended to do what they could to keep it at bay. They were unable to do so, however, largely because of Congressional insistence on cutting Saigon loose following the Paris Accords and the administration’s own weakness and distraction stemming from the Watergate scandal.

In June 1973 Congress ordered that all U.S. military operations in Indochina cease by the end of the summer, and in November passed the War Powers Act restricting the president's ability to send troops into battle without congressional authorization. Congress also cut the aid the United States gave to South Vietnam, from about \$2.3 billion in 1973 to about \$1 billion in 1974 and still less after that.

The local belligerents had continued small-scale fighting even after the accords were signed, and in October 1974, the North Vietnamese leadership met to consider plans for future operations. The conference resolution summarized their conclusion: "Now that the United States has pulled out of the South, it will be hard for them to jump back in." So they attacked. Saigon made some clumsy moves in response, at which point the North stepped up its offensive and never stopped. Thieu outlasted Nixon by eight months, and on May Day 1975, Communist soldiers hoisted their flag above the erstwhile capital of South Vietnam, now Ho Chi Minh City.

Many have argued that this outcome was inevitable. Nixon and Kissinger have always taken the opposite position. The truth is somewhere in the middle. If events in Washington had played out differently—with Watergate not crippling the administration and with Congress less hell-bent on slamming the door behind the departing U.S. ground troops—Nixon might have been able to continue sending enough aid and airpower to keep the Thieu regime in power. Yet as Nixon and Kissinger knew full well, the settlement they had negotiated left the South vulnerable to future attacks, and it was precisely because a guarantee of renewed U.S. military intervention would have been political poison that Nixon had to keep his final promises of continued support to Thieu secret. Even without Watergate, in other words, it would have been difficult for the Nixon administration to counter northern actions.

The Implications of the Vietnam Experience for U.S. Policy in Afghanistan

In many ways, the situation today is similar to the situation four decades ago:

- Then as now, the United States finds itself embroiled in a thankless counterinsurgency in a remote theater of operations with little intrinsic strategic importance.
- Then as now, the enemy we are confronting appears capable, implacable, and unwilling to accept defeat or negotiate a partial solution—and is tied to a global anti-American ideological movement.
- Then as now, our local ally is relatively ineffective, corrupt, and difficult to deal with—and there seems little prospect of nurturing a robust friendly local political order in a reasonable period of time.
- Then as now, the enemy can make use of easily accessible sanctuaries in a neighboring country as bases of operations and staging areas for attacks.
- Then as now, the American public has tired of the war.

- Then as now, the U.S. global economic position is declining and a broader policy of grand strategic reorientation is under consideration.
- Then as now, a new administration has been elected with the de facto mandate of cleaning up the mess left behind by its predecessor, and has tried initially to end the war on positive terms through a new strategy—which has not yielded any settlement.

The good news is that the differences between the Vietnam and Afghanistan situations make the latter significantly more promising:

- The enemy is weaker today, more like the southern guerrilla forces in Vietnam than the regular northern conventional army that conquered Saigon.
- Domestic U.S. opposition to continued participation in the war effort today is less fervent, giving the administration more breathing room and making another forced abandonment of our local ally improbable.
- The administration's political position and the U.S. global position are both stronger.

All this suggests that it should be possible to achieve a more successful extrication this time around—one that not only withdraws U.S. ground combat forces from battle, but also protects U.S. interests in the area afterward.

A Successful Extrication

The key to pulling off such a feat lies in facing the situation squarely and acknowledging honestly (at least in private) the nature of the policy choice being made. Extrication is not victory, nor is it persistence (which essentially is hanging on in the hopes of eventual victory). It does not involve “conditions-based withdrawal,” at least if those conditions are defined as “having a high degree of confidence that the major objectives of the war have been sustainably achieved.” Extrication involves moving toward withdrawal *even if such conditions have not been fully achieved*. But nor is extrication the same as concession. Extrication is a policy designed to remove U.S. ground forces from combat *without having that removal lead to defeat, whether actual or perceived*.

Extrication involves presenting withdrawal, and supplementing it with other policies, so that its potential downsides are mitigated and kept at bay for as long as possible:

- Complete transparency is not desirable, and declaratory policy should diverge from actual policy. Withdrawal is being undertaken without all the war's objectives having been sustainably achieved, but that is something to be obscured rather than highlighted. Similarly, withdrawal is being undertaken because of a desire to avoid continued payment of the costs of war, but that too is something to be obscured. And withdrawal is likely to leave one's local ally in a somewhat

uncertain position afterward, but that fact should be denied as strenuously as possible to everybody. The goal of declaratory policy during extrication, in short, should be to minimize the significance of what is occurring so that one's enemies are not encouraged or one's friends disheartened.

- Strategic retreat should be complemented by tactical aggression. The goal here should be to make it clear that the removal of U.S. ground troops will not create a safe environment for enemy maneuver and advance. In practice, this could mean that operations such as drone strikes or raids into heretofore protected areas would increase rather than decrease as troop withdrawals move forward. (This principle led to some of the Nixon administration's most controversial policies in Indochina—such as the “secret” bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail and the attacks on enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971—so it is worth noting that on this front, conditions today have changed dramatically for the better. Technological advances have made it possible to carry out such operations at far less human, diplomatic, and financial cost.)
- If possible, enshrine extrication in a formal negotiated settlement. This is not an absolute necessity (especially since in Afghanistan, unlike Vietnam, there are practically no U.S. prisoners of war in enemy hands whose return has to be engineered). But it is obviously desirable, particularly for the opportunity it would provide for the American public to gain a sense of psychological closure. If negotiations can lead to a plausible arrangement for demobilization, political integration, and power-sharing among the local belligerents, that would be a bonus. But in a pinch, a fig leaf that presents at least the appearance of such a deal will do (as with the Paris Accords). Pay careful attention to the sequencing of any agreement's stages—implementation of anything truly critical should be front-loaded, since later stages of such agreements are often left undone. Here again, of course, declaratory policy should obscure any agreement's shortcomings.
- “Linkage” is worth trying but not getting hung up on. Nixon and Kissinger made a big point of how all the administration's major negotiations were supposedly mutually reinforcing. In truth, though, such “linkage” never really worked, nor did they let their fetish for it get in the way of the negotiating logic of each track. Thus, they repeatedly sought Soviet and Chinese help in easing facilitating withdrawal from Vietnam, but these efforts never produced much. And when the 1972 Easter Offensive threatened to topple Saigon, Nixon insisted on doing whatever was necessary to help stop it—including bombing Hanoi and mining Haiphong Harbor—even at the risk of potentially disrupting a crucial upcoming

U.S.-Soviet summit. (His boldness paid off—the line was held in Vietnam and the Soviets let the summit continue unaffected.) In spite of what Nixon and Kissinger would say themselves, therefore, the real takeaway seems to be to pursue each major negotiating track largely on its own terms, since both hopes and fears of possible linkages between tracks will probably be overblown.

- Following the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops, other aspects of U.S. power should be brought to bear in order to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a source of major regional and global instability. This means continuing to supply economic aid, military advisers, intelligence, air power, and indirect military support so that local U.S. allies have as good a chance as possible at holding their own in the continuing struggle. Rather than withdrawal of ground troops amounting to the end of U.S. involvement in the conflict, in other words—which it might eventually be trumpeted as doing for domestic consumption—U.S. involvement there should be sustained at as high a level and in as diverse ways as necessary and possible.