

Parallel Between Vietnam and Afghanistan Wars

Muhammad Karim *

Abstract

After the announcement of new US strategy for Afghanistan by President Trump's administration, the Afghan War now resembles that of concluding phase of the Vietnam War. At the end of the Vietnam War, the United States widened the war zone to spread it to Cambodia and Laos. Since last few months, US officials are blaming Pakistan for its failure in Afghanistan. Think Tanks are churning out new studies and reports suggesting tough conditions for Pakistan for its alleged supports for the terrorist groups. President Trump's Afghan strategy also suggests more pressure on Pakistan and favors sphere of influence for India in Afghanistan. In totality the United States wants to shift its focus towards Pakistan and Afghanistan is largely becoming a side show. The study argues that in overall context of the ground realities, similarities exist in Afghan and Vietnam Wars that may have long term implications for diplomatic, economic and security matrixes of Pakistan. On the face of emerging US policies for the region and prevailing circumstances the research makes an endeavor to foretell next phase of the Afghan War vis-à-vis its implications on Pakistan.

Keywords: US military; Afghanistan; Vietnam; Military Strategy; war zones

Introduction

Parallels between Vietnam and Afghan war are increasingly being drawn in the academic and scholarly debates, particularly with regards to the growing US military presence in Afghanistan. Voices, even within the President Barack Obama's and now President Trump's own party is advising that the US is risking being drawn into Afghanistan's quagmire which analogous to the Nixon's Vietnam and may become Trump's Vietnam. These resemblances also have implications for Pakistan as in the wake of recent developments and Trump's new Afghan policy; Pakistan may become Trump's new Laos and Cambodia¹.

Objective of the study is to analyze similarities in Vietnam and Afghan Wars in overall context of the ground realities,

* Dr. Muhammad Karim, Department of International Relations, Quaid e Azam University, Islamabad. E mail: spogmay03@yahoo.co.uk

prevailing circumstances and emerging US strategy/policies and make an endeavor to foresee next phase of the Afghan War vis-à-vis its implications on Pakistan. Point by point comparison and analysis of the two wars suggest that situation for Pakistan is worse than Cambodia and Laos during Vietnam War, as United States on one hand tries to coerce Pakistan on many accounts and on other promote Indian interests in Afghanistan as a regional hegemon.

Research Questions

During the discussion an attempt has been made to answer following queries:-

Q1: How current phase of the Afghan War is similar to that of Vietnam War?

Q2: If so, how will it affect sovereignty concerns and security matrix of Pakistan in the foreseeable future?

Theoretical perspective

Pakistan faces a grave security dilemma today. Current security situation in Pakistan can be linked to multifaceted factors; spillover effects of war in Afghanistan is however the key factor. The study examines security situation of Pakistan on the face of spread of the war to the border area and subsequently to settled areas of Pakistan, using “theory of Security Dilemma”². Spade-work of this study is based on the media reports, journals, magazines, scholarly papers, documents, books and analyses. In general, the study carries historical approach and is based on secondary data.

Significance of the Study

As long-drawn-out war in Afghanistan enters into its 18th year, loud concerns are being raised about actual motive, objectives and strategy /policies of the United States in conduct of the war. United States has openly started not only blaming Pakistan for supporting insurgents but also threatening it of grave consequences. United States is also encouraging India to be more active in Afghanistan creating “two fronts” security dilemma for Pakistan. It appears that the United States is looking for a scapegoat and may spread the war over to Pakistan, just as it waged war against Cambodia and Laos at the last phase of Vietnam War. The study therefore carries theoretical as well as practical significance.

Overview of US Pakistan Bumpy Relations

Looking back into the history, despite Pakistan's military alliance with the United States in SEATO and CENTO like treaties, America embargoed Pakistan in 1965 war against India and even during fall of the East Pakistan in 1971. Pakistan acted as frontline state during Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; United States left the region after the Cold War on the mercy of Afghan War Lords. United States also imposed sanctions on Pakistan in the backdrop of its nuclear programme. United States again needed Pakistan's help after the 9/11 tragedy and Pakistan joined the US-led global war on terror.

United States however continued its double game and ignored the great sacrifices of Pakistan as its close ally in War against terrorism. Armed Forces of Pakistan have dealt a severe blow to the terrorists in series of military operations in Tribal areas adjoining Afghanistan. Pakistan's intelligence agencies have arrested a large number of renowned Al-Qaeda leaders, masterminds and Taliban commanders. In this milieu, United States' high officials, on the one hand, praised Pakistan for playing leading role in war on terror, while on the other continued with the blame game against intelligence and security agencies of Pakistan. Former President Obama, during his tenure, had initiated drone attacks in FATA region of Pakistan. He however, continued its engagement with authorities in Pakistan for keeping leverage on the country.

President Trump has revised its Afghan war strategy but it is disappointing that the policy statement of the United State not only ignores the colossal sacrifices of Pakistan for the US efforts in war on terror but preferred Indian role in Afghanistan over Pakistan. Trump's Afghan strategy has the potential to change the geopolitical equilibrium in the volatile region and destabilize South Asia even more.

Emerging Scenario

On 20 August, 2017, United States President Donald Trump announced its new Afghan strategy, after months of deliberations. Main elements of the strategy, unremunerated increase of troops, greater freedom for the commanders for making quick decisions on the ground, encourage India for enlarging role in Afghanistan and warning to Pakistan to cease its support for Haqani like terrorist groups being operated from its soil .After the policy speech, President Trump said that his strategy would mainly focus on increasing pressure on Pakistan and counter terrorism.

While pointing towards Pakistan, President Trump said that “We cannot be silent regarding sanctuaries of terrorist organizations, the Taliban and other groups in Pakistan, presenting threat to the region and beyond.³ Rex Tillerson, US secretary of State also said that punitive actions against Pakistan could be taken if it failed to cooperate. He also said that they are going to attack terrorists anywhere they are⁴.

US National Security Strategy 2017 also blamed Pakistan for its dual role in Afghanistan. US President new year tweet further deteriorated the Pak- US relations in which, he claimed that “the United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more”.⁵ This tweet was followed by pronouncement of \$255 million cut in Collation Support and Foreign Military Financing Funds. Indian origin United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley is not missing any chance to blame Pakistan for the US mistakes in Afghanistan, on International Forums. Further punitive measures against Pakistan may be in offing. These are the hottest developments in the increasingly unraveling Pakistan United States relationship.

Though gulf existed in Pak-US relations since very beginning due to divergence in interests, yet President Trump is widening this gulf due to his political recklessness. US new strategy for Afghan War, in many aspects resembles to the Vietnam War. Latest developments and the emerging situation show that the President Trump strategy is:-

- 1) To increase blame game against Pakistan and make it responsible for all the misdeed in Afghanistan, also escalate the war to adjoining areas of Pakistan. Situation in Afghanistan is growing more multifaceted and deadly therefore, more concerns are being shown about involvement of NATO and US militaries there. Only way-out is to search for a scapegoat and readily available one is Pakistan.
- 2) Offering a larger role for India in Afghan crisis which would drastically change geopolitical equations in the region. It may further destabilize the region by putting Pakistan and China on a collision course with India and Afghanistan under the US umbrella.

Similarities between Vietnam and Afghan Wars

Vietnam War was the longest conflict of the United States, spread over 12 years from 1961 to 1973, till its engagement in Afghanistan which continues into its seventeenth year in 2018. Pentagon on 29 August, 2017 has acknowledged to have about 11,000 services men and women in Afghanistan and expected to send 4,000 more under the President's new Afghan strategy. The American military is stated to guide the selected Afghan units in the field, provide training to Special Operations Forces and use artillery and air strikes in support of Afghan brigades fighting against Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Islamic state elements.⁶

Some analysts suggest that as the advisors of President Donald Trump were deliberating over worsening conditions in Afghanistan and carving out new strategy for the country, shadows of the Vietnam War were no doubt hovering over them.⁷ As today, during the Vietnam War, the US had found itself entangled in apparently immeasurable circumstances with unclear goals, swelling costs, and bleak signs of success. Successive presidents were facing almost the same options, in both the cases: avoid losing war by doing just enough, escalate decisively or withdraw. Just like his precursors in both the cases, President Trump chose to adopt middle path. He adopted option to escalate incrementally without any clear plan for exit.⁸ Escalating the war not only in term of time but also in space is matter of concern for Pakistan. Its geographical escalation to Pakistan's tribal or settled areas will create a security dilemma for Pakistan.

Apart from the President Trump's new strategy there are number of commonalities between the two wars. Main commonalities in both the wars include;

Previous History

Both of the countries have history of resistance against foreign occupation. Viet Cong guerillas fought against the French and then the United States occupation. Afghans fought against British in 1800's, Soviet Union in 1980's and from 2001 onwards are fighting against the United States.⁹

Guerillas' War

Taliban guerillas were similar in many aspects to that of Viet Cong guerillas, which also consisted of insurgent groups of local warlords.¹⁰

Corruption at Government Level

Central governments in both the cases were famous for rampant corruption, ineptness and considered to be puppets of the United States and therefore did not have the public support.¹¹

Weaker Foes Exerted Leverage on the Stronger

It was Asymmetric Warfare, in both cases the weaker foes could exert leverage on a military much superior and organized force.

Role of Terrain

The terrain in both the cases was difficult, especially for the invaders. Vietnam was a tropical country, with rainy forests, and unfavorable heat/ humidity in rainy season. Afghanistan on the other hand was a rugged and mountainous country with no roads network and extreme climate conditions.¹²

Long Logistic Line

More than 9,000 kilometer long logistic lines with extremely harsh terrain neutralized technical, technological and material advantages of the United States in land wars.

Prolonged War and Public Support

Both the Wars dragged for prolonged period of time on a very high a cost in terms of money and human casualties. Sustaining public support was therefore difficult. US presidents; Nixon, Johnson, Ford, Bush, Obama and now Trump failed to guide populist sentiments in support for the wars.

Invaders were Invaders

Winning minds and hearts of the local masses is not possible as long you behave like the previous occupier. United States in Vietnam, behaved just like the French. For the Vietnamese, Americans were like the French. Similarly, for Afghans, the Americans were just like Britishers and the Russians. There was no difference for the locals. These invaders were after all invaders.

Coin Operations

In both the cases the United States fought Counter insurgency Campaigns.

Nature of Threat

Nature of the threat in Afghanistan is primarily different from that of Vietnam. According to some estimates, Taliban insurgents were about 20,000, whereas in 1968 there were over 80,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers involved in a series of well synchronized attacks on various towns of South Vietnam.¹³

Ideology

Primarily, the war in Vietnam was an element of a bigger ideological conflict financed/fueled by the two superpowers of that time. It was part of the Cold War in which communism and the “free-market democracies” were pitched against each other, around the globe. In contrast, war in Afghanistan is part of a latest paradigm, which Samuel Huntington has termed as Clash of Civilizations, and some of the analysts can call it clash of value systems. This clash is not based on political philosophy but religion and culture.

Policy Objectives

The stated goal of the Vietnam War was to avert guerrillas of the Viet Cong to overthrow the government of South Vietnamese. President Johnson, by 1968, had somehow, lost sight of any rational objective and within years widened zone of the war to Cambodia and Laos. Goal and objective of conflict in Afghanistan was to prevent the Taliban and its allies, Al-Qaida, to use the country as a home-base for attacks on the US led West. Earlier President Obama and now President Trump have largely renounced the stated goals. President Obama used extensive drone campaign by targeting border areas in Pakistan and there is likely chance that President Trump will also widen the war zone to Pakistani side of border areas.

Military Strategy

American forces, in Vietnam, concentrated on fighting with Viet Cong guerrillas on one hand and conventional units of the North Vietnam on the other. As the South Vietnam had a functional government on all levels therefore, no serious thoughts were given to the nation-building. Military strategy in Afghanistan was to make the country a functional democracy, as stated by General Stanley McChrystal, 95% of the US efforts were channelized towards shielding and persuading Afghan tribes to support the Kabul government and reject the Taliban and only 5% by the conventional military forces towards killing the enemy.¹⁴ Most of the resources in Afghanistan were devoted for reconstruction of infrastructure and institutions to run the country.

Security Council Advisor during President Johnson administration, McGeorge Bundy, said to a biographer in 1976 and quoted by McNamara's Retrospect that he approved a strategy to put military pressure on Vietcong sufficient enough to achieve a stalemate in the battlefield. This strategy would ultimately force the Vietnamese Communists to a Korea like armistice or bring them to the negotiating table. Bundy further argued that his strategy was based on "just more than un-examined assumptions."¹⁵ The same may be true for the President Trump's new Afghan policy. Rex Tillerson, ex Secretary of State said that the new strategy entrusts few thousand more troops to pressurize the Taliban and make them understand that the US may not win but they will also not win victory in the battlefield and at some point both the sides have to come to the negotiating table for finding the way-out to bring the war to an end¹⁶.

Widening Zones of War

Although, there are number of similarities between the Vietnam and Afghan Wars but the fact having profound consequences for Pakistan is the spillover of war to the neighboring countries. War in Vietnam did not confine to its borders but, in the concluding phase, when President Nixon took over in January 1969, he spilled over the war into neighboring Laos and Cambodia. There was a profound impact of interventions on the development of Cambodia and Laos.¹⁷

United States and Cambodian ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk were cooperating on multifaceted issues including training and equipping Cambodian military keeping Cambodia as an independent state free of Communist insurgency. United States also granted over \$85 million fund as Military Assistance to Cambodia.¹⁸ Though North Vietnam was continually threatening its border regions but there were however, no local elements in Cambodia who wanted to establish a Communist regime there. Doubts started casting on Cambodia as a reliable and trusted American ally when the country established diplomatic channels with China in 1958. By 1960 there were evidences of North Vietnam Army (NVA) making use of Cambodian territory for their operations. Sihanouk was convinced by 1965 that the American agencies were making plots for ousting him and he therefore started tilting towards communist countries. Within years these developments provided reasons for the United States to deploy teams of Special Forces to Cambodia on a mission Codename "Daniel Boone".¹⁹ Daniel Boone was followed by consistent air bombardments. This war continued till early 1970s.

Laos got independence from France in 1953 after prolonged struggle and became a constitutional monarchy. Pathet Lao, a communist movement in Laos, occupied large mountainous areas and continued to be a considerable political force. The movement formed a coalition government in Laos in 1957 which collapsed within a year under the US pressure. United States was apparently suspicious of Pathet Lao's ties with the communists. This led to Laotian Civil War. Royal government in Laos was backed by the US whereas; Pathet Lao was in control of major parts of Eastern and Northern Laos. Crisis continued till late 1960s when the United States intervened militarily, deployed ground forces and conducted air raids that continued till end of the war, in 1973.²⁰

From the recent developments, use of open warnings to Pakistan, new US Strategy, recurring drone attacks and preparing grounds for India to be part of the solution in Afghan crisis, it is evident that the United States is spreading zone of war and shifting it to Pakistan. As Cambodia was punished for opening diplomatic channels with communist China, Pakistan is also being pressurized for having close relations with China and its overtures to Russia. The mantra of "do more" and unrealistic expectations from Pakistan is focal point of the new US Afghan strategy.

Giving Preference to India

President Trump is promoting India's regional role to counter influence of China and subdue Pakistan. Recent speeches and tweets of President Trump show a stark contrast in his language used for India and Pakistan. He identified India as a key economic, security and strategic partner. President has urged for a larger Indian role, that in fact offering India an opportunity to work closely with the United States for determining what sort of Afghanistan India wishes to see. This also means a greater Indian economic involvement and greater role in the region.

United States Ambassador to India, Nikki Haley, an American politician of Indian origin, while addressing Indo-US Friendship Council in Washington stated that India can support the American's efforts by keeping an eye on Pakistan²¹. US ex Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, days before his visit to India also stated the new US administration wanted to significantly deepen its cooperation with India being a vital partner to counter Chinese influence in Asia. He said that the US has started discussing to create alternative for the Chinese infrastructure financing in Asia²².

Pakistan was mainly stung by new US strategy, embracing its rival India and including it in the Afghan strategy. While offering a bigger role for India in Afghanistan President Trump tried to provoke Pakistan. Ignoring Pakistan, US Defence Secretary, James Mattis visited Afghanistan and India. On 27 September, 2017, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and James Mattis addressed a joint conference. Mattis said that the United States views India as a regional stabilizer.²³

Pakistan rightly considers influence of India as one of the major causes of insecurity and instability in Afghanistan. It has been witnessed that India always supported hostile political establishment in Kabul and there are evidences that it is funding Afghan based militants for launching attacks inside Pakistan, particularly in Baluchistan. Indian agencies are supporting Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which is in hideouts in Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan²⁴. Unfriendly Afghanistan that too under Indian influence will be nightmarish and a primary security challenge for Pakistan.

US New Strategy and Potential Threats for Pakistan

It is very likely that Trump administration may adopt new forms of pressures against Pakistan. Developing strategy of the Trump administration towards Pakistanis aimed at employing tougher approach in a bid to make it a scapegoat is driven by the India's

concerns. In a bid to stabilize Afghanistan, Trump administration wants to fight Afghan war in Pakistan. Statements of President Trump, other US politicians, diplomats and studies/ reports originated from US Think Tanks and media outlets are a clear indication of the United States ending Afghan War on the lines of Vietnam War.

Congressmen Ted Poe Dana and Rohrabacher, during the Congressional hearing alleged Pakistan for its ties with terrorists and emphasized that that the America needs to suspend its military assistance to it. “We have to go on the record to say that we must not provide weapons to Pakistan’s like countries that we know are supporting the terrorists and we are fearful that it will shoot down our own people,” Mr. Rohrabacher said.²⁵

While addressing the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the US ex Secretary of States, Rex Tillerson, said that we expect that Pakistan should take decisive actions against Haqqani Network and other terrorist groups operating from there and are threatening Pakistani people and border region. He further said that those they use terrorism as an instrument of state policy will see not only their international standing but also their reputation diminish.

Lary Pressler, an ex-senator, during his interview with Time of India said that India and United States should carry out a pre-emptive strikes inside Pakistan to destroy its nuclear sites. He also said that United States must cut military and civil aid of Pakistan, should not treat it equal to India and declare it as terrorist state.²⁶

While talking to Voice of America, former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad suggested that the United States ought to target sanctuaries of the Haqqani Network and Taliban inside Pakistan and drive Islamabad out of its comfort zone. He further said that the US should revoke its major non-NATO ally status; pursue European and Asian allies, World Bank and IMF to cut their assistance programs for Pakistan²⁷.

In reports, articles and studies, emanating from various US Think Tanks, scholars and universities are blaming Pakistan on the line of statements issued by the US officials. A Hudson Institute’s recent report authored by Lisa Curtis, adviser to the White House on affairs of South Asia and former Pakistani ambassador Husain Haqqani recommended for the Trump’s administration to pressurize Pakistan and make it politically align with the United

States on terrorism and Afghanistan. The report recommends that²⁸;

- More vigorous and open attempts to force Pakistan to sever ties with the terrorist organization like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Haqani Network and the Taliban.
- Curtailing military assistance and revoke non-NATO ally status of Pakistan if it failed to do more.
- Consider option of declaring Pakistan as terrorism sponsored state if Pakistan does not change its policies.
- Provide a roadmap for Pakistan to transform its policies.

Hudson Institute report is of special importance because it has been authored by Lisa Curtis, a senior think tank expert and adviser to the White House on “South Asia affairs”. Her charter includes United States relations with Pakistan and its dealing with Afghanistan and India. As Senior Director and advisor for South Asia at ‘National Security Council’ of the White House, she will be in a good position of influencing policy decisions of the President Trump’ on South Asia. She is therefore in position to affect future of the United States Pakistan relations.

Conclusion

The new phase of the Afghan war very much resembles with that concluding phase of Vietnam War. Pakistan is more and more becoming focus of the war and Afghanistan now seems to be the side show. Future of a country has been very rarely tied to the actions in its neighborhood by the distant power as perplexingly as presently Pakistan’s future tied to the America’s policies in Afghanistan.

President Obama’s drone campaign in Pakistan Tribal areas and Trump’s new strategy alleging Pakistan for its support to Taliban and warning to end its support and advocating India’s major role in Afghanistan are somewhat mirror images of US Concluding phase in Vietnam War.

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