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*Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
United States House of Representatives*

July 18, 2012

## **Security Transition in Vietnam and Afghanistan**

Thank you Chairman Wittman, Ranking Member Cooper, and other members of the committee for the opportunity and honor to testify today. By way of background, I have written two books on the Vietnam War and am currently working on a third. From 2004 to 2010, I served as a professor at the U.S. Marine Corps University, and during two of those years, I wrote a book on the general subject of counterinsurgency entitled *A Question of Command*, which is also highly relevant to today's topic. I have been to Afghanistan four times, in each case focusing my attention mainly on Afghan's security forces. The first visit was a research trip for *A Question of Command*. The second came at the invitation of the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A), which asked me to speak to Afghan leaders and leaders-in-training about counterinsurgency as part of the organization's inaugural leadership initiative. In the third instance, I conducted analysis of the Afghan Local Police Program for the ISAF Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team, and in the fourth I was a member of a U.S. Central Command analytical team.

Today, I am going to compare the Vietnam and Afghan wars, with primary emphasis on security force development, which is the most important task facing nations under attack. As is true with most broad historical comparisons, this one includes important similarities as well as important differences, some of which are easier to discern than others. I believe that discussion of both the similarities and differences will provide insights that will be useful to this committee in its deliberations on Afghanistan and related matters.

### **Leadership in Counterinsurgency**

Fielding high quality leaders was the principal challenge in building security forces in Vietnam. It is the principal challenge in building security forces in Afghanistan today. I arrived at this conclusion, and decided to write a book about it, after many years of detailed study of counterinsurgency. If you speak with veterans of Vietnam, Afghanistan, or similar wars who have worked closely with indigenous security forces, they will all tell you the same thing: the effectiveness and integrity of those forces was driven primarily by the quality of their leaders. Units with good leaders fight skillfully and tenaciously and treat the population with respect. Units with bad leaders perform poorly on the battlefield and prey on the population. Good leaders figure out which tools are required to succeed in the peculiar environment where they are operating, while bad leaders are liable to apply tools that worked well somewhere else but not in the current environment. No amount of counterinsurgency doctrine will make bad leaders effective, for the variability of counterinsurgency frustrates reliance on cookie cutter solutions.

Leadership quality is determined by two activities: leadership development and leadership selection. The first is a long-term process, while the second can be done very quickly. One of the greatest mistakes that has been committed in security force development, and one that has been committed again in Afghanistan, is insufficient consideration of the time required for leadership development. An enlisted soldier can be recruited, trained, and equipped in six months. As a consequence, policymakers and planners often assume that entire military or police units can be produced in such a period of time. But effective security units require leaders with much longer periods of experience than the rank-and-file. A minimum of ten years of experience is required for critical mid-level positions such as battalion commander or district police chief. In our own system, we take fifteen to twenty years to develop individuals for those jobs. When security forces are expanded very rapidly, as they often are when a country undergoes political upheaval or comes under attack, officers with insufficient experience are thrust into critical positions of authority. The resultant security forces invariably lack the military prowess to defeat the enemy and the discipline to refrain from abuses of power.

Leadership selection is the process of assigning individuals to specific leadership positions. In the U.S. military, leaders are assigned by centralized boards. In many other countries, they are assigned by one or more senior leaders. Putting the power of appointment in the hands of one or a few individuals permits more rapid action and requires less compromise, which can be good or bad, depending on whose hands we are talking about. During the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines, Secretary of Defense Ramon Magsaysay turned the security forces around in quick order because the Philippine president granted him complete authority over personnel decisions and he promptly used that authority to weed out bad leaders. In many other cases, however, the concentration of appointment powers has resulted in decisions based on factors other than merit, such as partisan politics, personal connections, and bribery, much to the detriment of leadership quality.

### **Security Force Leadership in Vietnam**

The development of South Vietnam's security force leaders began during the Franco-Viet Minh War of 1946 to 1954. The French colonial government recruited and trained huge numbers of young men, from both the North and the South, and provided some of them with years of leadership experience as military officers, militia commanders, or civil administrators. When the war ended, many of those who were Northerners by birth joined the million-person exodus from the North to the South in order to escape Vietnamese Communist oppression.

Thus, when Ngo Dinh Diem became President of an independent South Vietnam at the end of the war, he had some human capital with which to work. Diem was not, however, satisfied with the leaders he inherited, because many were corrupt or lazy, particularly those at the middle and upper levels. He therefore set out to cultivate a new generation of leaders, consisting of raw recruits and young men with a few years of experience in the colonial era. When war returned in 1960, this new generation was not yet ready to take charge, with the result that the war went badly for the Diem government in 1960 and 1961. In 1962, Diem began inserting members of this new generation into key leadership positions, which led to a dramatic turnaround in the war.

In November 1963, the United States supported a coup against Diem based on a gross misreading of South Vietnamese politics. A military cabal murdered Diem and purged the new generation of leaders he had created, causing a precipitous decline in the effectiveness of the war effort. A succession of coups ensued, each of which was followed by purges that further

debilitated the leadership of the security forces. Fear of coups caused the national leadership to bestow critical commands on the basis of personal loyalty rather than competence. The politicization of appointments subsided following the solidification of rule by Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu in the middle of 1965, but it did not disappear entirely.

The weakening of South Vietnam during the period of coups resulted in a North Vietnamese decision to shift from guerrilla warfare to decisive conventional warfare, which compelled U.S. ground forces to enter the war in the middle of 1965. For the next several years, in recognition of the need for better leadership and the perils of overstretching the officer corps, U.S. and South Vietnamese security force architects concentrated on long-term development of South Vietnamese leaders rather than numerical expansion of the forces. These efforts began bearing fruit at the end of the 1960s, as the South Vietnamese Army, militias, and other security forces exhibited marked performance improvements at that time. By the early 1970s, the Viet Cong insurgency had largely been wiped out, compelling Hanoi to rely exclusively on North Vietnamese forces to wage war in South Vietnam.

Under President Richard Nixon's Vietnamization program, U.S. forces gradually turned over critical tasks to South Vietnamese forces. The withdrawal of U.S. forces led to a greater willingness of the South Vietnamese government to prosecute the war effectively, as it forced South Vietnam's elites to choose between stepping up their game and watching the nation go down in flames, and they were conscientious enough to choose the former. At all levels, South Vietnamese leaders showed greater resolve in fighting the enemy, and less tolerance for officers who failed to perform.

The first large-scale test of Vietnamization was the South Vietnamese incursion into Laos in 1971. Individual South Vietnamese units performed reasonably well, but the operation was hindered by deficiencies in advanced technical skills, particularly the use of air support. South Vietnamese personnel on the ground often failed to direct air strikes onto the intended targets, and in some cases hit friendly forces by mistake. The incursion caused serious harm to the North Vietnamese and disrupted their plans for an offensive that year, but also resulted in large South Vietnamese casualties and losses of equipment.

An even bigger and more momentous test occurred in the spring of 1972, with the launch of North Vietnam's so-called Easter Offensive. By this point in time, the United States had removed all of its ground forces from South Vietnam, leaving the South Vietnamese armed forces to face the formidable North Vietnamese Army on their own, albeit with support from U.S. military advisers and American aircraft. Because of the difficulties encountered by South Vietnamese personnel in directing air strikes during the Laotian operation, American advisers assumed responsibility for forward air controlling.

The North Vietnamese attacked in three parts of the country with a total of fourteen divisions, a far larger force than anything seen in the Afghan war. Given the many criticisms that had been leveled against the South Vietnamese Army by its detractors in the United States, one would have expected the South Vietnamese to have folded at this point. In a few places, South Vietnamese units did indeed surrender or disintegrate without putting up much of a fight. But at the critical points of battle, South Vietnamese units held their ground and, with American air support, kept the North Vietnamese from seizing their main objectives. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu replaced commanders who were showing themselves to be ineffective, which

shored up the defenses in the most precarious sectors. After several months of fighting, the South Vietnamese drove the North Vietnamese back throughout the country.

A number of commentators downplayed the significance of South Vietnam's repulse of the Easter Offensive, contending that the South Vietnamese prevailed only because of American air power. That assertion was unfair. Fourteen divisions cannot be defeated with air power alone. South Vietnamese infantrymen displayed considerable skill and resolve, and they often had to rely on small arms to defeat the North Vietnamese at close range. When American ground forces had fought the North Vietnamese earlier in the war, they too had relied heavily on air power, both to move troops and to smash the enemy. Only through air power was it possible to offset North Vietnam's huge strategic advantages—the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, freedom of concealed movement up and down South Vietnam's long western border, and massive Chinese and Soviet aid.

### **Vietnam – The Final Act**

North Vietnam was not able to mount another large offensive until 1975. This time they assembled an even larger force, numbering more than half a million men. The South Vietnamese, meanwhile, had been badly debilitated by the behavior of the U.S. Congress in the intervening years. At the start of 1973, in seeking South Vietnamese acceptance of the Paris peace agreement, President Nixon had secretly promised President Thieu that America would come to South Vietnam's rescue with air power in the event of a major North Vietnamese attack. Watergate, however, forced Nixon's resignation in 1974, and the U.S. Congress prohibited his successor, President Gerald Ford, from fulfilling that promise. Congress also slashed funding to the South Vietnamese armed forces during 1974. In the middle of that year, Major General John E. Murray, the head of the Defense Attaché Office in Saigon, reported that South Vietnam would face serious trouble in defending itself if the United States reduced the annual aid total to \$750 million. If the level were reduced to \$600 million, then the United States might as well "write off [South Vietnam] as a bad investment and a broken promise." In August, the U.S. Congress slashed aid to \$500 million. Thieu pleaded with President Ford and American Congressmen to restore aid to earlier levels, but to no avail.

By the fall of 1974, South Vietnam's stocks of fuel and ammunition were approaching perilous levels. In October, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff directed all commanders to reduce their military operations in order to conserve fuel and ammunition. This order reduced the ability of the South Vietnamese to find and engage the enemy before they reached their intended targets, a critical blow to South Vietnam's defensive capabilities.

At the start of 1975, the South Vietnamese military boasted an impressive roster of commanders. The four corps commanders had excellent records as combat leaders, as did most of the division commanders. But material resources count for more in conventional war than in counterinsurgency, and the South Vietnamese Army simply did not have them.

The final offensive began with an attack on the capital of Phuoc Long province. The North Vietnamese used this thrust to test whether the United States would respond with its air power. When the United States did not lift a finger, Hanoi went for broke.

Given the hopelessness of the situation, it is surprising that South Vietnamese forces fought with as much resolve as they did. Nearly all South Vietnamese commanders remained with their units to the end. Those who were not killed in the fighting or did not commit suicide at the time of the surrender were either executed or imprisoned in reeducation camps. Their suffering ranks high among the many shameful legacies of the Vietnam War.

### **Afghan National Security Forces – Leadership Development**

Afghanistan's history of leadership development is far different from South Vietnam's. In the latter stages of the Vietnam War, South Vietnamese forces could point to three decades of nearly continuous leadership development, a far cry from current conditions in the Afghan national security forces. In the decade of chaos and oppression between the fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992 and the ejection of the Taliban at the end of 2001, concerted leadership development in Afghanistan was virtually nonexistent. When Hamid Karzai came to power in 2001, he could summon the assistance of older military officers who had received training in the 1980s and early 1990s at schools organized or run by the Soviets, but he lacked professional junior officers. Not until 2004 did the new Afghan government and its NATO allies develop robust training and education capabilities for the Afghan National Army (ANA). If you look at the Afghan National Army today, you will find some competent senior officers who went through the Soviet-era system, a lot of good junior officers who went through the Karzai-era system, and a yawning gap in between. This gap has made it very difficult to find suitable leaders at the battalion level, the most critical level of command in this type of war.

The Afghan National Army is, for all its problems, considerably better off than the Afghan National Police (ANP). After the fall of the Taliban, the Afghan and NATO governments took nearly a decade to put together a viable large-scale training system for Afghan police officers. Initially, responsibility for police training was given to the German government, which concentrated on producing high-quality leaders but produced very few of them. After a few years, the U.S. government stepped in, ordering its Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) to facilitate the mass production of Afghan policemen. Hiring large numbers of American contractors to serve as trainers, INL generated a lot of quantity, but very little quality. The situation was not rectified until 2010, with the transition of police training to the military-led NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan. The NTM-A leadership assigned more and better personnel to police training and lengthened ANP leadership development courses, though these courses were still not long enough, in my opinion. Pressure from higher authorities to expand the size of the police rapidly has remained an impediment to the prolonged training that is necessary to produce high-caliber police leaders.

### **Afghan National Security Force Leadership Post-2014**

At the end of 2014, when the Afghan government is scheduled to assume full responsibility for security, the Afghan National Army will be in decent shape. By that time it will possess substantial numbers of officers with ten years of experience, with whom it can fill battalion command slots. ANA infantry units are already reasonably good in many instances, owing to strong leadership at the company and platoon levels. The biggest weaknesses for the ANA will be in combat enabling functions, such as logistics and maintenance. NTM-A has worked diligently to improve Afghan capabilities in these areas, but educational and cultural barriers have retarded

the rate of progress, as they have in most of the other non-Western countries where Western militaries have engaged in advanced security assistance.

The Afghan National Police, with only five years of legitimate leadership development under its belt when the end of 2014 arrives, will face much more difficult challenges. The Afghan government is seeking to alleviate the shortage of experienced leaders by transferring some veteran military officers into police chief positions, but as yet this approach has not yielded dramatic results. Further complicating matters is the renewal of international demands to remove the ANP from the counterinsurgency business and focus it on the sort of policing that takes place in peaceful first-world countries. Such a change in mission would require new training, at a time when police training capacity is already overstretched. Its success would also be contingent on drastic reductions in insurgent activity by the end of 2014, a highly unlikely turn of events given the current security situation, the withdrawal of NATO forces, and the persistence of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan. Civilian police models that work in peacetime do not work in wartime, a lesson that was learned in Vietnam in the early 1960s and has already been relearned in Iraq and Afghanistan. A beat cop with a pistol is no match for a squad of insurgents bearing assault rifles. I therefore strongly recommend that the ANP retain robust paramilitary capabilities.

### **Afghan National Security Forces – Leadership Selection**

The influence of factors other than merit has been much stronger in Afghanistan's personnel systems than it ever was in South Vietnam's. From the outset, nepotism, cronyism, tribalism, ethnicity, and bribery have influenced the selection of leaders in the Afghan security forces and nearly everywhere else in the government. In recent years, senior U.S. and Afghan officials have attempted to impose merit-based hiring on the Afghan ministries, and have achieved some successes, particularly in the army. But incompetent or predatory individuals continue to hold many critical offices.

President Karzai plays an informal but very large role in personnel decisions. At times, he has overridden the appointments made by ministers who sought to make merit the top job criterion. The outcome of the next Afghan presidential election will be crucial for that reason, among others.

### **Transition and Afghan Will**

Proponents of rapid U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan have argued that Afghan forces will improve once they no longer can rely on the crutch of the U.S. forces. As mentioned above, South Vietnam's armed forces did, in fact, improve late in the war for that reason. At the local level, transition of responsibility from NATO to Afghan forces has thus far resulted in better Afghan performance in some locales, and complete Afghan failure in others. Of greatest import, though, is what happens at the national level, where all of the local commanders are selected and managed. To date, transition does not seem to have stimulated improvements in Afghan performance at the national level.

In South Vietnam, the increase in self-sufficiency was facilitated by the presence of national leaders who were committed first and foremost to ensuring the nation's survival. In this regard, the country benefitted from a lack of deep ethnic, tribal, and religious cleavages. Such

dedicated nationalism has been lacking at the very top of the Afghan government. Although some of the Afghan cabinet ministers have performed reasonably well, ethnic and tribal rivalries and massive corruption have too often take precedence over the national interest in top-level Afghan decision-making.

The situation in Afghanistan today more closely resembles the Iraq War in 2005 and 2006 than the Vietnam War in any of its phases. In Iraq, it may be recalled, the national government was in those years more concerned with empowering Shiites and oppressing Sunnis than with defeating the insurgents. When the Americans tried to bolster Iraqi self-sufficiency by reducing American participation, the Iraqi security forces either avoided battle, attacked the wrong people, or suffered humiliating military defeats. General David Petraeus saved the day in 2007 by increasing rather than decreasing American participation.

### **Afghanistan's Security Force Requirements**

Afghanistan is never going to come under attack from fourteen enemy divisions, because none of the Afghan insurgent groups will be able to marshal anywhere near that amount of fighting power, even with the assistance of Pakistan. But they don't need huge forces to overthrow the government. Earlier in the war, before the U.S. military's presence in Afghanistan dwarfed those of the other NATO militaries, insurgents used small-scale violence and intimidation to take control of large amounts of territory, including much of the critical city of Kandahar. If the insurgents start regaining wide swathes of land in the south and east in 2015, they will develop a psychological momentum that will be very difficult to halt. Under such circumstances, some government commanders would probably avoid attacking the insurgents or even switch over to their side, as occurred when the Taliban came to power in the 1990s. Those commanders would undoubtedly be ethnic Pashtuns, which would heighten longstanding fears among Afghanistan's ethnic minorities of a Pashtun conspiracy to oppress them, resulting quite possibly in the ethnic splintering of the Afghan security forces and the onset of ethnic civil war.

In the event of an insurgent resurgence after 2014, the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and other Pashtun extremists would likely end up with control of at least southern and eastern Afghanistan. Some of these groups have recently renounced international terrorism in public, but I think we should be as suspicious of such pronouncements as we should have been of Ho Chi Minh's claims that he did not like the Chinese, who turned out to have been his staunchest allies. If Afghan insurgents regain control of southern and eastern Afghanistan, chances are good that they will reopen these areas to Al Qaeda and other international terrorists and deprive the United States of many of the counterterrorist assets that it currently employs against terrorists located in Pakistan.

Maintaining large and capable Afghan national security forces far into the future should therefore be a top U.S. strategic priority. Funding for these forces will have to come from the United States and other foreign countries until Afghanistan's geological wealth can be tapped. Progress will be slower and less efficient than we would like, but the Afghan government now has human capital of sufficient skill and dedication to ensure that the investment will not simply be wasted.

The Afghan Local Police program can play an important role in securing the countryside. Many Afghan communities would rather provide their own security than have Afghans from

elsewhere provide it, given the country's sad history of outsiders abusing local communities. But the program's limited size—a total of 12,000 members have been recruited—and the Afghan government's plans for eventual merger of the local police into the national police mean that it cannot be a large-scale substitute for national security forces.

## **Aid Levels**

Among the most disturbing parallels between Vietnam and Afghanistan is the reduction in American assistance resulting from war fatigue among some politicians and segments of the public. In Afghanistan as in Vietnam, more than a decade of bloodshed in combination with the reluctance of American political leaders to rally the country for war has eroded American support for military aid. Now as then, the survival of America's ally is widely viewed as dependent on American assistance, so reductions in assistance demoralize America's friends and embolden its enemies. And sharp reductions in American aid today can ensure our ally's ultimate defeat just as they did in 1974.

Although Afghanistan doesn't need armed forces capable of fending off a massive conventional adversary, it does need large quantities of trucks, fuel, radios, and machine guns. It must also keep paying the salaries of several hundred thousand people in the army and police. The Najibullah regime was ultimately overthrown because the loss of Soviet aid forced it to stop paying the salaries of some of its forces, the commanders of which then turned their units against the regime.

This spring, the U.S. government pledged its commitment to the long-term security of Afghanistan through the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement and the Chicago Summit Declaration. Vietnam tells us that such promises are no guarantee of an enduring partnership. Continuing to provide aid will not save the recipient if the aid levels are cut too far.

The Obama administration has already announced plans to reduce funding for ANSF to \$4.1 billion after 2014, down from current levels of \$6 billion, and waning American and European enthusiasm for foreign aid could result in steeper cuts in the future. In conjunction with the funding reductions, the United States is prodding the Afghan government to shrink projected ANSF strength from the previously planned 352,000 to 230,000 by 2015. Barring vast and improbable improvements in the security situation between now and the end of 2014, such cuts in Afghan force size, in tandem with the departure of most NATO troops, will put Afghanistan in grave danger. Afghan Minister of Defense Wardak made this point earlier this year when talk of the cuts surfaced. "Going lower [in Afghan troop numbers] has to be based on realities on the ground," he warned. "Otherwise it will be a disaster, it will be a catastrophe, putting at risk all that we have accomplished together with so much sacrifice in blood and treasure."

## **Residual U.S. Military Presence**

Retention of some U.S. forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014 could help deter a violent insurgent takeover or an ethnic civil war. It would definitely give the United States greater influence over the Afghan government and a greater ability to conduct counter-terrorist activities in the country than would be the case if all U.S. troops were withdrawn. The loss of U.S. influence

and capabilities in Iraq after the withdrawal of all remaining U.S. military personnel in late 2011 has shown how important even a small force can be.

As Vietnam demonstrated, however, a U.S. military presence alone cannot guarantee a country's safety. Our nation's adversaries have on a number of occasions launched provocative attacks attacking in a country where our troops were stationed based on the assumption that the American forces would abandon the country rather than fight to the bitter end. At times, their predictions have been correct, as for instance in Lebanon and Somalia, where we withdrew 1,800 and 5,000 troops, respectively, after coming under attack. In Vietnam, the Communists attacked when U.S. commitments were much larger. During late 1964, at which time Hanoi's leaders ordered a conventional offensive aimed at conquering South Vietnam, the United States had 23,000 troops in the country. When the offensive began in earnest in May 1965, U.S. troop strength had reached 50,000. At the start of Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive, the U.S. military had 69,000 advisory and support personnel in South Vietnam.

Even in the present era, with civilian contractors performing many support functions that were performed by military personnel in earlier times, U.S. military forces in hostile environments require large numbers of uniformed support personnel. Every rifleman is backed by truck drivers, aircraft mechanics, radio operators, doctors, logisticians, staff officers, and a host of others. In the case of Afghanistan, moreover, the U.S. military will need to maintain substantial numbers of uniformed advisers to the ANSF after 2014 if we wish to keep Afghanistan on our side, given the enduring deficiencies in ANA enablers and ANP leadership. Consequently, maintaining a force of between 5,000 to 10,000 Americans after 2014, which appears to be the administration's current plan, will not provide the United States with significant combat capabilities. Retaining the ability to foil a major offensive will require a much larger force. Our enemies recognize this truth, so our ability to discourage them from mounting such an offensive and our ability to draw them into peace negotiations also depend on maintenance of a large U.S. military presence.

Congress can play an important role in securing Afghanistan's future by seeking greater clarity from the administration on long-term troop commitments and encouraging maintenance of a large force after 2014. Such a force would engage in advice, support, and counterterrorist activities, and would also be capable of coming to the rescue of the ANSF in a major emergency. I believe that the American people are willing to support a prolonged commitment of this type, particularly since it would not involve large numbers of U.S. casualties, much as they supported the presence of U.S. personnel in Vietnam in 1972. All that is necessary is for the Congress and, more importantly, the administration to tell the public with deep conviction why we must persevere.