Administrative Capacity, Veto Points and Counter-Insurgency Doctrine: Comparing the American COIN tactics in Vietnam and Afghanistan

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2014 ISSS-ISAC Conference, Austin, TX
Preliminary Work: Do not cite without permission.
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American foreign policy in the Obama era has been beset by the specter of the failed inheritance of the Bush Doctrine and the pragmatist caution of the Obama Doctrine. Whereas Obama the candidate spoke about the need for a clean break with the foreign policy of his predecessor, Obama the Commander-in-Chief has chosen to follow the Bush presidency in a variety of important foreign policy issues. The withdrawal of American forces from Iraq has been gradual, the commitment to fighting the Global War on Terror has continued, and, last but not least, the Obama administration has engaged in a significant increase in the number of combat forces in Afghanistan. For all intents and purposes, Obama has continued Bush’s unilateral policy of democracy promotion and nation-building in both Iraq and Afghanistan and has not implemented the vaunted and praised promises of his 2008 campaign about liberalizing and softening the methods used in the conduct of the Global War on Terror.\(^1\) All the while the American unipolar moment has continued.

While accounts of declining American military capacity abound, notions of an “imperial” over-stretch have not been validated so far. If anything, the American unilateral project as the provider of security guarantees to allies and as a source of fear and coercion to rivals has continued unabated. The American hegemon is not only omnipresent, but shows no interest in changing its goal of maintaining its omnipotence.\(^2\) Even in the case of rising Chinese power, the empirical evidence of an expansionist and revisionist China is rather scant. Despite theory-based claims of rising Chinese power, the Chinese regime has continued a policy of carefully-crafted engagement with the United States that is based on a mutually symbiotic relationship of artificially-pegged exchange.

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\(^1\) See Desch (2010).

\(^2\) See Miller (2010).
rates, capital flows and bourgeoning trade deficits with limited interest in the projection of rising Chinese power.

Finally, American foreign policy has not changed course even in the context of a deep economic crisis, unlike the predictions of the literature on the effects of crisis on the chances on policy reform.\(^3\) Despite a series of calls for the scaling down of American ambitions, both Bush and Obama have combined a commitment to a muscular and expensive American foreign policy with an even more expensive economic policy agenda that has sought to prevent the radical restructuring of the American as well of the international economy. Much like previous American administrations that have sought to combine guns with butter even in the face of rapidly declining fiscal capacity, the Bush and Obama administrations have utilized the opportunity granted to them by unrivaled hegemony to stake their legacies on the power of hegemonic seigniorage, both in the security and the economic arenas.

These sets of grand strategy decisions have been surprising, both from policy and theory perspectives.\(^4\) From a policy perspective, both Bush and Obama have pushed an aggressive agenda of democracy promotion and nation-building without any tangible and concrete results. Even more surprising, they have insisted upon this agenda as the cornerstone of American foreign policy with much greater intensity than any of the core supporters of American Exceptionalism ever thought possible.\(^5\) Similarly, they have

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3 See Ferguson (2010).
4 These sets of decisions are surprising even from a rhetorical perspective since neither one of these Presidents indicated that they would engage in such policy-making when they were campaigning for the presidency. Indeed Bush presented his policy as a carefully-crafted realist antidote to Clinton’s Wilsonianism with its commitment to sovereignty and avoidance of nation-building and consistently pushed a foreign policy approach bereft of arrogance. While Obama may be deemed as having been forced to play the hand that he has inherited, the speed with which he has accepted his predecessor’s policies, especially on the Afghanistan, democracy promotion, and GWOT issues has been surprising.
5 See Huntington (1982).
argued about the importance of a continued American involvement in wars of choice within failed states that have convincingly illustrated the futility of their missions.

Finally, both Bush and Obama have doubled down on their bets, fervently committed to the advice of their civilian and military advisers that what causes the failure of their missions has not been the content of the missions, but the methods with which they have pursued the aforementioned missions.

Theoretically, nearly two decades of international relations theorizing has not been able to explain this commitment to aggressive, expensive and possibly self-defeating unilateralism of untamed American power. In effect, unlike neo-realist expectations of restraint and offshore balancing and unlike liberal internationalist expectations of institutional re-calibration and multilateral restructuring, American foreign policy has continued to remain unilateral, aggressive and interventionist and its decisions on the issue of grand strategy have not been what both theoretical traditions have predicted or advocated. Whereas international relations theorists could blame the ideational consensus of the Bush administration or the intrusion of ethnic interest groups in the formulation of American foreign policy or decreased bipartisanship that the Bush electoral strategies had caused, the Obama commitment to the Bush policies, which Obama promised to change and which have not demonstrated their effectiveness, cannot be easily accounted for by ideational and doctrinal similarities or by the functional need for a pragmatist successor foreign policy. Put differently, the Obama administration had every electoral and diplomatic incentive to be different from the Bush administration and

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6 See Posen (2007)
7 See Monten (2005), Desch (2008), Daalder and Lindsay (2005)
8 See Mearsheimer and Walt (2006)
9 See Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007).
faced a rapidly escalating financial crisis that undermined American fiscal capacity, but chose to continue Bush-era policies in an Obama time-period. Hence the puzzle that is driving this paper: why has the Obama administration chosen to follow the Bush administration?

This paper seeks to answer this puzzle by arguing that it is divided, decentralized, and weak nature of the postwar American state that prevents the formulation of a coherent and adaptable American grand strategy. In essence, both neo-realist and liberal internationalist arguments fail to capture the “politics” of the postwar American state.

The neo-realists fail to incorporate how the limited administrative feasibility of the American state has enabled the rise of intra-executive-branch politics that has hampered the effective implementation of executive branch decision-making, thus limiting the adaptability of American foreign policy. By administrative feasibility I refer to the actual policy gap that exists between what the decision-makers have chosen and what actually gets implemented. Given the delegative nature of the American bureaucratic machine, one would expect the aforementioned gap to be sizable. Moreover, the greater the distance from standard operating procedures, the greater the gap. Similarly, the greater the number of organizations involved and the greater the demands for inter-organizational or inter-agency coordination, the greater the gap will be as well.

The liberal internationalists fail to incorporate the need for American presidents to engage in both retrospective and prospective electoral satisficing. Put differently, given the relative autonomy of American foreign policy making, American presidents have to

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10 For some scholars this form of bureaucratic constraint serves to minimize the scope and frequency of reform within American foreign policy. See Mastanduno (2010).
11 For more see Allison (1969) as well as Krasner (1972). While they both disagree about the relative causal merits of the bureaucratic politics model, they do agree on the ability of decision-makers to implement their policies and the role that this ability plays in terms of state capacity.
satisfy not only those who voted for them but also those who could vote for them. Any foreign policy endeavor which does not immediately pay off in popular opinion success, has to be re-adjusted as quickly as possibly either by a redoubling of bureaucratic effort or by a new idea. Given the relatively greater porousness of American government, American presidents will often utilize the services of policy entrepreneurs, pushing new ideas when confronted with mounting public displeasure and implemented new approaches. As such, American foreign policy will be volatile, driven by the demands of the legislative branch and by the President’s electoral coalition.

To illustrate my argument I compare the Bush and the Obama’s administrations’ conduct of foreign policy in Afghanistan with the Johnson and Nixon administration’s foreign policy in Vietnam. This comparison allows us to control for the United States to be involved into a major conflict of extended duration in the context of a major economic crisis and how two different administrations dealt with it. Indeed, in both cases American presidents stressed the short commitment in the beginning while their successors stressed their commitment to promises which had been made while the actual relevance of the original mission had lost its relevance. Utilizing this comparison, I demonstrate how the limited administrative flexibility of the post-war American state combined with the limited initial success of both foreign policy endeavors to limit the decision-makers’ options in terms adjustment and flexibility.

In effect, the American state has a structurally-limited capacity to engage in large-scale reform that would adjust its goals to new realities. It is either repeating what it just

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12 For a particularly incisive application of the literature on policy entrepreneurs see Mazarr (2007).
13 While both cases are not identical, they are comparable in the following important way: in both cases, the two dominant explanations for American foreign policy would have predicted a different type of American foreign policy.
did with more intensity or it is searching for the latest idea to implement without checking whether the existing policy can be tinkered with and ameliorated. Such a conclusion should force us to reconceptualize our causal arguments about hegemonic state behavior, even in the context of acute economic crisis and unsuccessful military action. When placed on a certain course of foreign policy action, the American state, regardless of its hegemonic capacity, cannot change its course or the intensity of its preferences when confronted with the requirement for flexibility.

**Vietnam**

A commitment, partly ideational/partly material, preceded the Vietnam conflict. This commitment was a commitment to containment. American policy-makers, starting from the Eisenhower era and continuing through to the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations, perceived the fall of Vietnam into Communist hands as the basis for the fall of the other dominoes in the region and the expansion of Communism throughout Southeast Asia.\(^\text{14}\) And this policy outcome was consistently perceived as an unacceptable one either for neo-realist concerns partly because of its effects on the bipolar distribution of capabilities and partly because of the mineral deposits in the area,\(^\text{15}\) or because of liberal internationalist concerns about the inability of America to protect its allies from Communist expansionism. In both cases, the threat of Communist expansion was perceived as real, intense and powerful enough to get Vietnam on the radar of American policymakers.

Yet, this commitment to Vietnam did not automatically translate into American policy. Regardless of its support for decolonization, the Truman administration waited on

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\(^\text{15}\) It should be noted that as soon as realist scholars perceived the strategic relevance of Vietnam as relatively unimportant, they adopted a strong anti-war sentiment. See Morgenthau (1972).
the sidelines while the French colonial authorities dealt with the Vietnamese independence movement. Despite attacks by the Republican hawks, Truman remained uncommitted militarily and rejected Eisenhower’s pressure to forcefully advise the French into more aggressive and tactics and greater utilization of Vietnamese soldiers. Even under the new Eisenhower administration, which had campaigned on a more aggressive foreign policy platform, American foreign policy did not drastically change until the independence conflict became irreversibly perilous for the French. While the Eisenhower administration vacillated between an actively involved policy of military intervention in the Dienbienphu siege and a policy of non-intervention, thus avoiding to be dragged into the conflict,\textsuperscript{16} the French colonial administration collapsed after the fall of Dienbienphu.

The fall of the French colonial administration and Vietnamese independence led to an activist American foreign policy in Vietnam. The Eisenhower administration was the first in a series of American administrations that took it upon itself to serve as the provider of internal and foreign security for the nascent Vietnamese state while providing with the necessary economic resources so as to render it a viable economy. This pattern was even more surprising when all these administrations were committed to avoid any entanglement with Vietnam that could drag on a path of escalation.

Kennedy’s election increased the American commitment to Vietnam but in a limited fashion.\textsuperscript{17} While Kennedy was passionately committed to America’s role as the

\textsuperscript{16} See Gelb and Betts (1978, 56).
\textsuperscript{17} Again though, his administration’s commitment to Vietnam ended up being greater than he had originally expected.
enabler of democratic regimes throughout the world,\textsuperscript{18} he was also aware of the limited capacity of American policy-makers to implement successful state- and nation-building policies across the world. Intra-executive battles were emerging between those who pushed for greater American involvement into Vietnam such as Taylor and Rostow and those who warned against it such as Harriman and Bowles.\textsuperscript{19} In a pattern that would later repeat itself, these disagreements percolated throughout organizational stovepipes and affected policy implementation. While Kennedy was concerned about the reputational consequences that America’s abandonment of Vietnam would have on other developing countries in the region and across the world, he was also interested in avoiding a military commitment to Vietnam.\textsuperscript{20} While the number of American advisers increased, as did the scope of their mission,\textsuperscript{21} so did the logistical and administrative problems of the implemented policies. Indeed, by 1963, it was increasingly becoming clear to senior American policy-makers that the United States lacked the ability to implement a successful hamlet movement policy.\textsuperscript{22}

While Kennedy’s death did not change American decision-making, Johnson’s assumption of the presidency had a palpable effect upon American involvement in Vietnam. Johnson transformed a limited commitment to the South Vietnamese into an open-ended one because of his commitment of prevent Vietnam from going the way of China and hurting him from attacks by Republican and Democratic hawks much like

\textsuperscript{18} Commenting about the importance of Vietnam for American foreign policy, Kennedy stressed how Vietnam was America’s offspring and how it could not be ignored or abandoned. Cited in Herring (1996, 47).

\textsuperscript{19} See Cannon (1989).

\textsuperscript{20} See Schlesinger (1965, 547).

\textsuperscript{21} See Hilsman (1967, 432).

\textsuperscript{22} Partly because of American design, partly because of structural problems, the American-led and Vietnamese-implemented hamlet movement was not working. See Blaufarb (1977).
Truman had been hurt. Johnson utilized the Gulf of Tonkin to not only pass the resolution that allowed him to commence the military buildup but to also defeat Barry Goldwater. Having won an election on a muscular, but effective, foreign policy and Great Society domestic policy, Johnson had to deliver to his electoral coalition. Domestically, he had to deliver on the provision of social services and the construction of a welfare state and he had to push the civil rights agenda through. In terms of foreign policy, he had to maintain an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam regardless of the intensity of the North Vietnamese attempts to undermine South Vietnam. While the goal was clear, it was not clear how successful the tactics would prove to be. The limited success of Operation Rolling Thunder, where air power had been used without using significant levels of ground forces, meant that Johnson had to confront the use of more ground forces.

Johnson knew that introducing American ground forces in significant numbers on Vietnamese soil meant that there was a possibility for an American Dienbienphu on the ground. However, he could not withdraw because of domestic pressures from the Republicans and the right-wing Democrats and he had to follow the advice of Westmoreland and of the Joint Chiefs who were pressuring for a surge. Bereft of additional viable options, Johnson pushed Congress to pass the March 1965 $700 million military operations bill. Yet, confronted with opposition by Clifford and Ball to the military’s demands for escalation, and sensing the rising level of domestic opposition to escalation, Johnson decided against large-scale bombing and the open-ended commitment

24 The Joint Chiefs had been adamant about the ability of air power to drastically change the resolve of North Vietnam.
of ground forces that the military officials were demanding. In effect, Johnson was balancing the costs and the demands of Vietnam with his commitment to the Great Society projects he had promised his electoral coalition.\(^\text{26}\)

While Johnson believed that he was following in Kennedy’s footsteps in terms of maintaining a middle position between the demands for escalation and the demands for withdrawal, he was increasingly coming under attack for having failed to deliver on the Vietnam issue. Confronted with the possibility of electoral failure, especially when he had promised that victory would have been achieved at such a low cost, Johnson opted for escalation and had increased the number of soldiers to 500,000 by 1967 and was spending nearly $2 billion per month on Vietnam.

Yet, it was increasingly becoming difficult to realize any benefits from all these expenditures. The military officials were refusing to change their operational doctrine and continued to fight a conventional war even though it was increasingly becoming clear that the conflict had already started to resemble an insurgency. Both operationally and strategically the air bombing campaigns were not achieving their stated goals.\(^\text{27}\) Even in the cases of the Revolutionary Development Program, which was conceptualized as development-oriented, hearts-and-minds approach towards winning the support of the countryside,\(^\text{28}\) failure was rampant because of the ineffectiveness of the South Vietnamese forces to provide security and the corruption of the South Vietnamese forces to provide security and the corruption of the South Vietnamese

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\(^{26}\) Johnson informed his staff that he wished the decisions to be implemented in a "low-keyed manner in order (a) to avoid an abrupt challenge to the Communists, and (b) to avoid undue concern and excitement in the Congress and in domestic public opinion." Cited in Herring (1996, 154).

\(^{27}\) See Herring (1994, 26-62).

\(^{28}\) Johnson was committed to making sure that “the South Vietnamese government wins the battle...of crops and hearts and caring.” Cited in Valenti (1973, 133). In terms of the performance of the programs see Stewart (2008).
administrative officials.²⁹ It was increasingly becoming obvious to Vietnamese and American observers that the partially democratized South Vietnamese regime suffered from rampant corruption. As if these issues were not enough, Johnson was increasingly pressured by the liberal wing of the Democratic Party to abandon Vietnam since domino theory was increasingly appearing to be disconfirmed.³⁰ Last, but not least, the intra-executive branch infighting was increasing as McNamara was ready to jump ship further increasing the costs of achieving the interagency coordination that was necessary in the hearts and minds projects that Johnson was increasingly resting his hopes for the stabilization of South Vietnam.

Confronted with McNamara’s de-escalation approach in mid-1967, Johnson found solace in the clear-and-hold tactics advocated by the Carnegie Endowment working group. For Johnson the increased use of interagency-based counter-insurgency policies could resolve the continued sub-optimal performance of the conventional military. While public disappointment was rising and bureaucratic infighting continued unabated, Johnson needed a game changer. Utilizing the Carnegie Endowment report, Johnson continued to look for solutions. Surprisingly, not only did Rusk, Rostow, Taylor, Clifford and Bundy support Johnson in his continued commitment to the conflict, but so did the Wise Men who had appeared to be rather stingy in their support previously.³¹ Buoyed by the consistently positive predictions by the senior military officials, Johnson decided to stay the course and push for the expansion of the conflict in the fall of 1967.

However, when confronted with the Tet Offensive in early 1968, Johnson rejected the advice from Westmoreland and Wheeler who demanded 206,000 more troops and the

²⁹ See Blaufarb (1977, 205-242).
activation of the reserves. Instead Johnson followed the advice of Clifford who was increasingly being convinced Nitze, Hoopes and Warnke to push for a change in strategy from the search-and-destroy to the population security one. When Westmoreland and the JCS pushed back vehemently, Clifford sided with his civilian advisors and presented Johnson with a particularly deadlocked situation at the highest levels of executive branch decision-making.32

While Johnson was pondering his commitment to the cause of an independent and non-Communist Vietnam, the rampantly-expanding budget expenditures of fighting a war and building a Great Society were piling up. The spiraling balance-of-payments deficit, which was threatening the strength of the dollar in the fixed-exchange rate system, was only beginning to increase monetary pressures on American hegemony. The United States was in such dire straits that if Johnson accepted Westmoreland’s demand for the 206,000 additional troops, spending on the Great Society programs would have to be curtailed and taxes would have to increase, both in an election year in which Johnson was pressured both from the Republicans and within his party.

Harriman, Acheson and Nitze sprung into action and pushed Johnson to consider disengagement from Vietnam as the only way to save resources and re-order American foreign policy. Pressured by the Wise Men and by Clifford, who by March 1968 had switched over to the Acheson side of the argument, Johnson rejected Westmoreland’s demands. Confronted with increasingly hostile armed forces that had little to show for its efforts in Vietnam and an insurgent left wing within the Democratic Party that was threatening to shut down the country, Johnson decided to give up on seeking re-election.

Serving as a President with a fixed time horizon Johnson for a halt in the air campaign,

but supported the commitment of a substantial part of American resources towards controlling the countryside.

While Nixon shared Johnson’s commitment to an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam,\(^{33}\) he did not share his belief that American involvement in the conflict had to be open-ended in terms of resources and time.\(^{34}\) What Nixon primarily cared about was peace with honor, because of his belief in the reputational consequences for America if withdrawal was abrupt and haphazard and he was willing to utilize American preponderance of force to achieve those goals. In a pattern that had repeated itself when Johnson took over from Kennedy, there was faith in the underlying doctrine, but the intensity and scope of violent action had to be increased in order to break the resolve of North Vietnam. As such, Nixon accepted the long-held belief of the JCS that North Vietnamese Army sanctuaries in Cambodia had to be destroyed. In addition, he pushed for increased Vietnamization, following the advice of Sir Robert Johnson who convinced him that within 2 years the South Vietnamese could defend themselves. Last, but not least, Nixon pushed the Accelerated Pacification Campaigns in the 1969-70 period and the increasingly successful Phoenix Program,\(^{35}\) both of which increased rural security, reduced National Liberation Front guerilla activity and increased state control over the countryside. Yet, and much like Johnson’s Revolutionary Development Programs, corruption remained rampant, trust in government was low and enthusiasm for the South Vietnamese government remained limited.

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\(^{33}\) See Nixon (1967) and Kissinger (1969).

\(^{34}\) Kissinger shared both Nixon’s commitment as well as his lack of faith in the long-term viability of the project. See Haldeman (1978).

Yet, while Nixon was able to take the war into Cambodia, he could not engage in punitive strikes against North Vietnam in the fall of 1969 because of the opposition in the Democrat-controlled Congress. Much like Johnson, he had to deal with domestic political pressures that limited his room for strategic maneuverability. While the 1970 proposed Amendments did not pass through Congress, they indicated the unwillingness of a substantial part of the electorate to continue supporting the war in Vietnam. When Nixon informed Abrams that he was reducing American forces in Vietnam from 275,000 to 175,000 of whom 75,000 would be combat forces, Nixon was responding to electoral pressures for increased disengagement.

By 1972, that situation had deteriorated. The failed campaign into Laos demonstrated that the South Vietnamese Army could not conduct successfully large-scale, cross-border military operations. The March 1972 North Vietnamese Army invasion had already demonstrated how the South Vietnamese regime came close to collapse save for American intervention. The talks between North Vietnam and the United States were demonstrating that the North Vietnamese were interested in negotiations insofar as they could increase the chances that the American domestic political scene would change sufficiently enough to force Nixon into withdrawal. Unlike expectations for disengagement, Nixon intensified the bombing campaigns into North Vietnam, which included the May 1972 Haiphong harbor mining, the naval blockade and the massive air bombing. While the stalemate continued, Nixon pushed for the most massive demonstration of air superiority in December 1972. Again, the result was a stalemate with a higher Vietnamese death toll, effectively changing nothing in the American bargaining position. When the peace treaty was signed in January 1973 it
became increasingly clear that the goal of an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam was neither feasible nor as acutely important for American foreign policy as it had originally been perceived.

**Afghanistan**

The Bush administration initiated and conceptualized Operation Enduring Freedom as the quickest and most efficient way in which to accomplish a twin set of goals: eliminate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and end the use of Afghanistan as the base of operation for Al-Qaeda. Moreover, it combined a commitment to the high-tech communications platform in combination with Special Forces working together with intelligence personnel and local fighters that had become the hallmark of the Rumsfeldian revolution at the Pentagon. Light, mobile, and motivated, these forces had by December 2001 pushed the last remnants of the Taliban and of the al-Qaeda network into the borderlands of Pakistan, provided the security for the emergence of new governing coalition in Afghanistan, and had enabled the Bush administration to avoid the implementation of a costly, complex and formal occupation structure.

However, this commitment to a low presence in terms of combat forces was running into serious problems by the middle of 2006. The continued weakness of the Karzai government had combined with the organizational complexity of the American and Western presence in Afghanistan to create the perfect storm of nameless accountability and endemic corruption which had led to the re-emergence of the

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36 Despite losing Osama bin Laden in the mountains of Tora Bora because of leadership-level ineffectiveness and bad coordination at the interagency level, the Rumsfeldian experiment in the reorganization of American warfare was being effective. See Daalder and Lindsay (2005).

37 However, this commitment to a presence on the cheap meant that there were significant inter-organizational issues that had to be resolved. See Bensahel and Moisan (2007).
Taliban. Confronted with the rapidly escalating conflict in Iraq, the Bush administration gambled that it could contain the conflict in Afghanistan with a small combat force. This policy decision did not prove to be viable and the Bush administration was forced to increase the number of Brigade Combat Teams from one in December 2006 to 3 by December 2008 in addition to a number of Marine units.

The increasingly unsafe conditions during the 2006-07 period and the re-emergence of a vibrant and expanding Taliban movement enabled the insertion of a resurgent COIN doctrinal movement within the American military planning and decision-making structures. Much like the Vietnam counter-insurgency period, which had moved from the “search and destroy” to the “population security” model with its emphasis on “clear, hold, build” techniques that were implemented by Johnson in the 1967-68 period in the South Vietnamese countryside, the Bush administration pushed a COIN approach that stressed the importance of an integrated civil-military approach in order to minimize Afghan support for the resurgent Taliban insurgency and the immediate need for the acceleration of the transfer of responsibility for security the Afghan forces. Indeed, by October 2008, ISAF had issued a Joint Campaign Plan that stressed the importance of COIN operations, along with the motto of “shape, clear, hold, build,” and lobbied for a conceptual and terminological move away from NATO insistence on ideas such as “stability operations”.

Following the institutionalization of the COIN doctrine in Afghanistan, the Obama administration adopted an even stronger commitment to the implementation of a

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38 Starting in mid-2006, the Taliban increased their violent acts either in the form of improvised explosive devices or in the form of direct fire, and targeted more Afghan forces. This process continued unabated throughout the 2006-2008 period with the Taliban increasing the sophistication of its attacks as well as their geographical impact. See Bowman and Dale (2009, 23-24).

39 See Bowman and Dale (2009, 10).
complex organizational structure that combined military and civilian elements. Driven by the goals of providing security, governance and economic development, this approach was intensely self-aware of the virtuous cycle of interdependence among these three aforementioned goals. Security could provide the necessary background for the growth of governance and economic development that could then interact and generate a socio-economic context in which functional and people-oriented governance can combine with economic opportunity to decrease the security threats. It was within this context that the COIN strategy would combine with the use of targeted and bounded military force to achieve the much needed transformational setting in which “hearts and minds” could be won.

This commitment to COIN in Afghanistan was part and parcel of the Obama’s administration intensification of the Bush administration’s policies in Afghanistan. More support for the PRT teams, more support for COIN, more support for the Afghanization of the military operations, as well as more support for a self-reliant Afghan participation in the counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism parts. In addition, and much like Johnson and Nixon in Vietnam, the Obama administration was confident that a more focused commitment to governance and a greater effort in the combat of corruption and

40 Field Manual 3-24 on counterinsurgency, which has become the all-encompassing text for the COIN community, has stressed that “the integration of civilian and military efforts is crucial to successful COIN operations. All efforts focus on supporting the local populace and HN [host nation] government. Political, social, and economic programs are usually more valuable than conventional military operations in addressing the root causes of conflict and undermining an insurgency.”

41 As Petraeus had mentioned himself, “you can't kill your way out of an insurgency.” Cited in Bowman and Dale (2009, 4).


43 Having first been deployed in 2002, by 2009 the PRT teams were number between 80-150 members, involved all of the agencies which had been tasked with some part of the reconstruction process and were led by a military officer of rank sufficiently high so as to engender confidence with the military members of the team that the military organizations were taking the PRT teams seriously. See Borders (2004), Nuzum (2010).
government inefficiency would increase the chances for the emergence and solidification of more capable, effective and accountable government in Afghanistan. A development that was bound to have a positive consequence in the region, especially in the stabilization of neighboring Pakistan.

Yet, by August 2009 the leaked McChrystal report was forcefully arguing for the immediate need for more soldiers on the ground and a more comprehensive and better-funded COIN strategy. Thoroughly committed to the COIN doctrine, McChrystal was adamant that the Afghanistan campaign could be won only when the local Afghans were convinced that the ISAF military operations did not pose a martial threat to them, that the allied forces were committed to the elimination of corruption and the proper provision of public goods and that there a strong commitment to the emergence of an Afghan-led security-providing, organizational structure. For all of these reasons and contexts and because of the critical time constraints of the process, McChrystal was convinced that serious policy changes needed to happen.

Obama responded to these demands more than adequately. Eerily reminiscent of the Bush “surge” decision in Iraq, Obama committed an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, thus satisfying the demands of the military officials for increased troop levels. To satisfy the demands of an increasingly impatient Congress, Obama committed to an exit timetable that stipulated that the American troops would begin their withdrawal from Afghanistan by July 2011. Last but not least, in order to deal with the increasingly difficult relationship with McChrystal Obama replaced him with Petraeus, reminiscent of the relationship between Johnson and the JCS. In effect, the Obama policies have started to look like the Johnson policies: unwilling to withdraw and uncommitted to escalation.
but constrained to some form of action with a administrative apparatus that cannot be effectively monitored or efficiently allocated.

**Conclusion**

When comparing these two instances of distant and uncertain American military involvement in peripheral countries, one is struck by the similarities: the commitment to escalation without acute need, the willingness to break parameters of fiscal prudence, the passionate implementation of very similar counter-insurgency programs without checking for any lessons learned, and the active and voluntary participation in nation-building, the inability to generate an honest client regime. And again all of these events occurring in a context of a global financial crisis, which has been facilitated by the hegemon and during which the hegemon is actively softening its budget constraint to engage in more deficit spending.

As such, certain implications emerge regarding the ability of the American state to generate a grand strategy: it will be difficult if by grand strategy we refer to a set of coordinated and sustained policies designed to address already-prioritized national concerns about future security threats. Should it be able to generate a grand strategy it will be impatient, volatile, and expensive.


