

What Ho Chi Minh can teach us about bringing peace to Afghanistan.
Foreign Policy
15 August 2013
By Lawrence Korb

Talks aimed at ending the Afghan war got off to a rough start last month when the Taliban hung a plaque outside their Doha, Qatar office that read: "Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." The brazen attempt to present themselves as a government in exile prompted Afghan President Hamid Karzai to call off the whole exercise -- even temporarily severing negotiations with the United States over a long-term security agreement between the two countries.

But the false start hardly signals the death of a negotiated settlement. And as the United States mulls whether or not to engage in peace talks with the Taliban, it would do well to bear in mind the lessons from past negotiations with the Chinese communist regime over the future of Korea from 1951-53, and with the North Vietnamese communist leaders over the fate of Vietnam from 1968-75.

In both cases, as Gideon Rose points out in *How Wars End*, the United States entered into negotiations with what many considered to be unsavory groups because it was unable or unwilling to pay the price required to defeat its opponents militarily. As a result, it was clear that the United States needed to accommodate them politically, regardless of concerns about their past behavior.

After a year of fighting in Korea, it was evident that the United States would not be able to drive the Chinese out of North Korea at an acceptable price. As General Omar Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress in 1951 during the hearings on President Harry Truman's dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur, "Korea was the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." Therefore, the United States began negotiations to end the conflict with the Chinese and their North Korean allies in the summer of 1951, approximately one year after the North Korean invasion.

In Vietnam, the Tet Offensive in 1968 demonstrated that after nearly a decade of war -- and despite the claims of Lyndon Johnson's administration, the presence of more than 500,000 American boots on the ground, and a massive bombing campaign -- the United States was not breaking the will of its North Vietnamese foes and Viet Cong allies. The war had become a stalemate. Therefore, shortly after the Tet Offensive, Johnson announced he would not run for reelection, called a halt to the bombing, and offered to begin negotiations with the North Vietnamese, an offer that was quickly accepted. However, the negotiations failed to produce results quickly, as the North Vietnamese believed that time was on their side in achieving their goal of creating a unified Vietnam under communist control.

The parallels to Afghanistan are striking. The Taliban are still supported by about 30 percent of the Afghan population, and by roughly two-thirds of the Pashtuns, who are the largest ethnic group in the country. After 12 years of military operations, moreover, the United States has not been able to destroy them or prevent them from having some future role in Afghanistan's political landscape. But talking to the Taliban does not mean that the United States condones their past or potential future behavior.

A second lesson from Korea and Vietnam is that peace talks will not conclude quickly, and will not bring an immediate end to the fighting. The Korean negotiations lasted twice as long as the fighting that preceded the talks, and while the negotiations were being conducted the United States and its partners suffered about half the total casualties of the war. The negotiations with the North Vietnamese, meanwhile, lasted almost five years, during which time the United States again suffered half the casualties of the war, as each side tried to maximize its leverage at the Paris talks. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Taliban continues to conduct offensive military operations against Afghan and NATO forces after opening its office in Doha, just as the Chinese and North Vietnamese did after the United States began negotiating with them. In fact, it would be surprising if the Taliban undermined their negotiating position in Doha by halting military operations in Afghanistan.

Third, we should not expect Karzai to play a positive role in talks about the future of Afghanistan. South Korean President Syngman Rhee, who wanted to see Korea united under his control, actively tried to scuttle the negotiations in June 1953, just as the United States and China were about to finalize an

armistice agreement by releasing tens of thousands of Chinese and North Korean prisoners of war from their South Korean camps. Likewise, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu refused to support an agreement that then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and his North Vietnamese counterpart had concluded in October 1972, publicly opposing a provision that mandated withdrawal of American military forces 60 days after the conclusion of hostilities, even though the agreement left him in power, because he feared that without American forces he would not be able to prevent the North Vietnamese from overrunning the South. Karzai's refusal to participate in talks with the Taliban, therefore, should come as little surprise.

Fourth, the terms of any negotiated agreement will not ultimately decide the outcome of the conflict -- and nor will the outcome be known for years after the agreement is concluded. The armistice in Korea has held for 60 years; America's South Korean ally has become a stable and prosperous democracy; and China, America's adversary in the Korean War, has become a partner in certain areas, now standing as one of the United States' largest trading partners and occasionally helping rein in North Korea's irrational behavior. The South Vietnamese government, meanwhile, lasted only 26 months after the American withdrawal. Within two decades, however, the United States restored diplomatic relations with communist-controlled Vietnam and now cooperates with its government to deal with China's increasingly assertive behavior in the region. None of this could have been foreseen by negotiators at the time the conflicts came to an end.

Finally, the United States will have only a limited role in deciding the fate of its allies once hostilities end. South Korea remained a dictatorship for more than 30 years after the signing of the armistice, and while the American military presence may have helped deter another invasion by the North, it did not prevent the North Koreans from capturing an American ship in 1967, shooting down an American military aircraft in 1969, or developing nuclear weapons in 2005. When the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam in early 1975, their forces quickly met with stunning success, partly as a result of a number of strategic blunders by Thieu, but mostly as a result of the fact that Congress, responding to the wishes of a war weary public, cut aid to South Vietnam in half and mandated an end to military operations. In addition, by 1975 South Vietnam was plagued by runaway inflation, high unemployment, and low morale. If the United States is able to conclude an agreement with the Taliban that gives them a role in governing Afghanistan, the extent of their influence will be determined in the final analysis by whether Karzai's successor wins the support of the Afghan people by holding fair elections and governing for the benefit of ordinary Afghans. It will not be determined by the United States.

These lessons should give pause to those with objections to talking with the Taliban on moral or strategic grounds. Taliban leader Mullah Omar may be a very distasteful opponent, but both Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh were equally distasteful. To those who would refuse to negotiate with the Taliban, stop and consider what would have happened if the United States had applied such criteria to its Chinese and Vietnamese communist opponents during the Cold War.

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