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pp. 78-93

Recommended Citation

Cooley, Jason. "Do Political or Security Conditions Determine When American Security Transfers Are Made?." *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 2 (2020) : 78-93.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.2.1795>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol13/iss2/5>

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Do Political or Security Conditions Determine When American Security Transfers Are Made?

Abstract

When terrorist attacks became more frequent and destructive in the early portion of the twenty-first century, American officials asserted that Islamist networks needed to be crippled. After a campaign against these groups was launched, Washington began to rely on some new security measures. For the past two decades, several studies have been produced about innovations such as drone strikes. What has not been seen, though, are analyses of measures that the U.S. unveiled in the Cold War and has continued to use in the effort against Islamist organizations. Within this article, America's continued reliance on transferal operations will be taken into consideration. While a military intervention is in progress, policymakers declare that U.S. troops will be withdrawn from a country once indigenous elements are capable of inheriting their responsibilities. However, a security transfer usually takes place when the intervention becomes unpopular on the American home front.

Introduction

Since becoming the most powerful capitalist nation at the conclusion of the Second World War, the United States has conducted several military campaigns in developing nations. When policymakers in Washington have recognized that certain operations are not generating desirable results, they have implemented new strategies to salvage them. While inspecting various missions from the post-World War II era in a superficial fashion, it becomes apparent that the favored strategy of U.S. officials is the transferal policy or having indigenous elements in a particular nation assume the peacekeeping responsibilities of U.S. soldiers. Once policymakers embrace this policy, they must select the point at which an army or police force will inherit the tasks that U.S. troops are performing. The remarks of George W. Bush lead one to believe that the security conditions in the target country determine when the United States makes a transfer. During a speech about an operation in Iraq, he said, “As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.”¹

The closer an individual looks at prior initiatives, the more he or she is likely to realize that the political situation in the United States actually determines when an army or police force inherits the responsibilities of U.S. soldiers. Thorough examinations of the U.S. interventions in Korea and Vietnam in the upcoming pages will enable the reader to see the manner in which U.S. presidents have a propensity to complete transfers when military interventions start to become unpopular on the home front. The operation on the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s will commence in the next section.

U.S. Involvement in the Korean War

In order to develop a solid understanding of the transfer in Korea, it is imperative to discuss some of the developments that preceded it. Within *Proxy Wars*, Eli Berman and David Lake note how a major power has two options for neutralizing an external threat. When the leaders of the country do not want to place troops in harm’s way or spend a considerable amount of money, they can rely upon indirect action. In other words, they can ask another state to take the necessary steps to eliminate the security threat. There is the possibility that an ally will not have soldiers that are capable of weakening an enemy for an extended period. If this deficiency is

present, the major power will need to resort to direct action by having its own soldiers cripple the foe.²

At the end of the Second World War, the United States appeared to be a power that would just use direct action in the ideological struggle with the Soviet Union. In the middle of the 1940s, there were anti-communist actors in Japan and Germany that would have provided assistance in the fight against the USSR. However, policymakers in Washington decided to place combat troops within these nations in the midst of reconstruction. By the end of the 1940s, there were events that indicated the United States was amenable to having others take the lead in the battle against international communism. The most important event in relation to this discussion is the manner in which Harry Truman, the thirty-third U.S. president, had approximately five hundred troops assist the South Korean government with the development of its military.³

Officials in Seoul and Washington had different perspectives about the future use of this military. In the aftermath of the Second World War, a communist regime came to power in North Korea. It did not take long for Moscow to start providing the North Koreans with tanks and other equipment to construct a formidable military. Because this military buildup was occurring above the thirty-eighth parallel (the boundary that separated the two Koreas), U.S. officials believed that the members of the incipient South Korean military would be used to thwart acts of aggression. Syngman Rhee, the leader of South Korea, did not envision using military personnel to repel North Korean attacks. Instead, he anticipated utilizing them to prevent his political rivals from removing him from office.⁴

During the summer of 1950, Rhee's political foes did not organize a coup d'état, but North Korea did launch a full-scale invasion. On June 25, 1950, North Korean soldiers began to move across the thirty-eighth parallel at various points. As they met members of the South Korean army, they did not encounter much resistance since South Korean soldiers fled from their assigned defensive positions. Just one week into the war, the hierarchy of the South Korean military could not account for 44,000 of the troops that had received training from the United States.⁵ Since the South Korean desertion rate was so high, North Korean forces took control of key locations such as Seoul without much difficulty.⁶

Inside *A General's Life: An Autobiography*, Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Truman, says that U.S. officials typically give the military commander in a theater of operations the autonomy to decide how acts of aggression should be handled.⁷ At the time of the North Korean invasion, Douglas MacArthur was the leader of U.S. forces in Asia. On June 29, 1950, MacArthur traveled to the Korean Peninsula to ascertain whether U.S. combat troops would have to fight against the North Koreans. Shortly after his arrival, MacArthur concluded that the United States needed to make the transition from indirect to direct action because he frequently saw South Korean soldiers that were both “defeated and dispersed.”⁸ He quickly sent a cable to Washington that requested the deployment of the U.S. 24th Division. In addition to granting this troop request, Truman named his subordinate the leader of all United Nations forces in Korea.⁹

From the information at the end of the preceding paragraph, one can gather that the United Nations supported the military campaign on the Korean Peninsula. This international institution elected to back the operation, but the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate did not pass a resolution sanctioning military action in Asia, making the Korean conflict the first major U.S. war without Congressional authorization. Something else, which separates the Korean conflict from preceding wars, is its outcome. In the Mexican-American War, Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II, U.S. forces managed to secure convincing triumphs against their adversaries. The U.S. troops in Korea, on the other hand, had to settle for a stalemate against their communist opponents. As early as the summer of 1950, there were signs that the United States would be unable to replicate the success it had experienced in prior conflicts. When troops from the 24th Division arrived in South Korea, they consistently lost to North Korean forces on the battlefield. This disappointing turn of events forced officials to accelerate the U.S. troop buildup below the thirty-eighth parallel.¹⁰

Once the U.S. reinforcements arrived, there were indications that the North Koreans were beginning to lose their momentum. Although the North Koreans acquired several strategic positions in their initial advance, they were cognizant of the fact that more would need to be seized if they were going to be victorious, especially the Taegu-Masan-Pusan-Kyongju

rail connection that was allowing the UN to transport supplies and personnel throughout South Korea. For six weeks, the North Koreans attempted to gain control of this rail connection. However, they were unable to do so because the members of the U.S. Eighth Army thwarted all of their offensives.¹¹ When the U.S. reinforcements were not preventing the North Koreans from taking territory, they were liberating South Korean cities and towns. While the Second World War was in progress, MacArthur saw his troops perform successful amphibious landings across the Pacific Ocean. At one point on his tour of the Korean Peninsula in late June, he concluded that it would be advantageous to conduct another amphibious landing in Inchon, a port city near Seoul. Truman and others in Washington did not share MacArthur's enthusiasm for this plan, but they eventually told him he could execute it. On September 15, 1950, personnel from the U.S. Seventh Division and First Marine Division did not come under heavy fire from North Korean troops, so they managed to move inward at a rapid pace and retake Inchon without much difficulty.¹²

Because MacArthur disregarded presidential directives on more than one occasion, Truman believed he was similar to George McClellan, the Union General who had trouble following Abraham Lincoln's orders during the U.S. Civil War.¹³ What the thirty-third U.S. president failed to realize was that these famous generals had more in common than a propensity to be insubordinate. In the fall of 1862, the Army of Northern Virginia was experiencing a considerable amount of casualties in the Battle of Antietam. Aware of the serious position he was in, Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, instructed the remainder of his soldiers to return to their home state. If he told his forces to pursue these retreating troops, McClellan probably would have been able to eliminate the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia, but he refrained from ordering such a maneuver. As American soldiers liberated South Korean cities and towns in September 1950, North Korean officials instructed their troops to move above the thirty-eight parallel. Like McClellan, MacArthur did not instruct the soldiers under his command to pursue those who were in retreat, so over 90,000 North Korean soldiers managed to find refuge in their native country.¹⁴

The preservation of the North Korean army made it more difficult for the United States to unify the Korean Peninsula under the rule of Syngman Rhee. However, it was not as impactful as another development that took

place later in 1950. On October 2, 1950, Chou En-Lai, the Chinese Foreign Minister, met with Kavalam Panikkar, the Indian Ambassador to China, in Beijing. While this meeting was in progress, En-Lai informed Panikkar that the crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel by U.S. led forces would prompt his nation to enter the Korean conflict.¹⁵ This warning, coupled with intelligence reports of a Chinese troop buildup in Manchuria, a province on the border of North Korea, should have resulted in policymakers in Washington electing to keep soldiers out of North Korean territory, but they allowed MacArthur to send the Eighth Army and other U.S. units above the thirty-eighth parallel. During the initial stages of the campaign in North Korea, U.S. troops managed to seize some cities and towns, including the capital of Pyongyang. Once Chinese troops began to arrive in North Korea, though, they seldom had opportunities to take control of locations of strategic value. Instead, they spent the majority of their time fleeing from Pyongyang and other seized land since the Chinese attacks were so overwhelming. By the end of 1950, every portion of North Korea was back in communist hands and U.S. soldiers were below the thirty-eighth parallel once again.

Over the years, analysts have focused on the differences that were present between capitalist and communist nations during the Cold War. Consequently, they have rarely acknowledged the manner in which these rivals also shared some important similarities. At the beginning of 1951, it would have been prudent for officials in Beijing to refrain from launching a full-scale offensive in a hostile nation. However, like U.S. policymakers in October 1950, they decided to have the soldiers under their command conduct an invasion. Just one month into the Chinese campaign in South Korea, there were indications that it was not going to generate a desirable outcome. On February 10, 1951, X Corps, a U.S. division commanded by Edward Almond, MacArthur's protégé, pushed Chinese forces out of Wonju. During the following month, the Eighth Army was able to regain control of the South Korean capital.¹⁶

In the second year of the conflict, there was a major change in the fighting on the Korean Peninsula. Following the North Korean invasion in June 1950, the majority of the battles that took place were reminiscent of the ones, which transpired during the Second World War. That is, they involved troops making territorial gains through the utilization of conventional tactics. During the summer of 1951, the engagements started

to remind observers of the battles that occurred in the First World War. Soldiers were still fighting against each other in a conventional fashion, but they seldom seized control of strategic locations.¹⁷ This evolution helped convince the members of the Truman administration that they needed to abandon the goal of unifying the Korean Peninsula under Rhee and concentrate on protecting the territorial integrity of South Korea.

Not only did the figures from the Truman administration adopt a new objective, they developed another strategy for dealing with the conflict in Asia. Since South Korean soldiers were humiliated in the first month of the war, Truman had U.S. combat troops lead the effort against the North Koreans. Although South Korean troops were still performing poorly on the battlefield in 1951, there were signs that Truman wanted to hand the responsibility of leading the military campaign to them. If inefficient soldiers from an allied country are going to inherit a military campaign at a future date, they will need to receive additional training from troops that have experienced success in previous engagements. Aware of this need for more training, Truman started to increase the number of U.S. advisors in South Korea in 1951. By the month of September, 1308 trainers were below the thirty-eighth parallel to work with the members of the South Korean military.¹⁸

A U.S. president who turns to the transferal policy anticipates that the withdrawal of combat troops will eventually follow the addition of advisors. When a troop withdrawal does take place, it is inevitable that the commander-in-chief will claim that the soldiers are being removed because the army or police force in a particular country has improved considerably. However, there is a chance that he is making the move because he believes it will be helpful to him or his political allies on the home front. In such a situation, how can a U.S. citizen ascertain whether security enhancements abroad or political conditions at home are precipitating the drawdown? If the members of an army or police force maintain or seize territory in several battles against an opponent before the withdrawal, it will be possible for the American to conclude that the security conditions have improved in the target state. On the other hand, if a president is dealing with a war-weary Congress, running for re-election, or attempting to get a member of his party into the White House and military triumphs are rare, it will be appropriate for the citizen to presume that political considerations are influencing the drawdown.

Under Truman, multiple U.S. divisions were withdrawn from South Korea.¹⁹ While looking at the performances of South Korean troops in the time leading up to these withdrawals, it becomes apparent that they did not experience impressive victories against their communist opponents. Since the South Koreans were still struggling on the battlefield, one must turn to the developments inside the United States to explain the withdrawals that took place during the Truman presidency. As U.S. citizens learned about the lack of progress on the Korean Peninsula, their support for the war effort began to decline. Not only did these individuals become disillusioned with the military conflict, they started to lose confidence in the politician who was leading it. By December 1951, Harry Truman's approval rating had plummeted to 23 percent.²⁰ With the majority of the electorate opposed to him, Truman did not have the desire to seek another term in office the following year, but he was determined to see his party maintain control of the executive branch. In fact, when he was talking about Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee he encouraged to run, in front of one audience, he said, "I am going to take my coat off and do everything I can to help him win."²¹ There is a chance the preceding material will not be enough to convince some readers that Truman's troop withdrawals in 1952 were politically motivated. However, as they read about the U.S. experience in Vietnam in the next section, these skeptics will probably begin to think that a sitting president is capable of behaving in such an unappealing fashion.

U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War

The initial portion of the U.S. intervention in South Vietnam was similar to the early part of the mission in Korea since it also entailed the use of indirect action. There are two important differences between these indirect interventions, though. In Korea, only 500 U.S. advisors traveled to the Korean Peninsula to assist South Korean soldiers. The indirect intervention in South Vietnam commenced with approximately the same amount of advisors. However, in 1961, the number of U.S. advisors helping the South Vietnamese military rose to 17,000.²²

The other major distinction between these campaigns is the manner in which the U.S. trainers in South Korea and South Vietnam had different goals for their trainees. At the beginning of the 1950s, U.S. officials

believed that North Korea could launch an invasion of South Korea at any time. Consequently, the advisors below the thirty-eighth parallel were determined to turn the South Korean military into a force that was capable of repelling an invasion. During the early 1960s, many in Washington feared that a communist takeover in South Vietnam was on the horizon. However, they did not think the North Vietnamese would attempt to spread communism in the same fashion as the North Koreans. In other words, they did not believe officials in Hanoi would have military personnel invade South Vietnam since the North Vietnamese were already providing guns, grenades, and other weaponry to the members of the National Liberation Front, an insurgent group that was seeking to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem's anti-communist regime. U.S. officials hoped that the thousands of U.S. advisors below the seventeenth parallel (the boundary separating North Vietnam and South Vietnam) would transform the South Vietnamese military into an entity with the ability to quell the communist insurgency.

The actions of the general population determine the length of a political insurgency. If the majority of the people in a country continue to stand behind the government, the insurgency will only last for a brief period. If numerous citizens stop supporting those in power, though, the insurgency will probably not end until a new political order is established. At the beginning of the 1960s, the Diem regime started to lose a lot of support in the South Vietnamese countryside. Consequently, it became possible for the National Liberation Front to take control of several villages. The first inclination of some in a counterinsurgency campaign is to respond to a loss of territory as if they were soldiers in a conventional conflict. In other words, they immediately presume that it would be advantageous to try to regain the land by utilizing a considerable amount of coercion. However, as one analyst has noted, such a reaction "is almost always entirely counterproductive."²³ In order to regain seized villages and other population centers, soldiers must enhance the living standards of citizens by distributing supplies, repairing roads, and so forth. Diem responded to the National Liberation Front's territorial gains in a sagacious fashion by having military personnel implement a series of measures to improve the conditions in South Vietnamese villages.

The U.S. government financed some of Diem's programs. The one, which received the most U.S. funds, was his Strategic Hamlet Program. After it

was unveiled in 1962, many peasants moved to villages that were not as vulnerable to National Liberation Front penetration. Besides receiving more protection, the peasants got a substantial amount of economic aid. Although the Diem regime took these steps, the National Liberation Front kept seizing villages in the countryside. This increase in strength prompted multiple journalists in the fall of 1963 to conclude that Hanoi's proxy was on the verge of winning the war.²⁴

U.S. officials possessed a more optimistic outlook about the conflict in Southeast Asia towards the end of 1963. Prior to the introduction of the Strategic Hamlet Program and other reforms, policymakers agreed with the Diem regime about what it would take to defeat the communist insurgency. In other words, they also believed that the best way to weaken the National Liberation Front was by improving the living standards of the South Vietnamese people. When this approach failed to bear any fruit, U.S. leaders reached the conclusion that progress would only emerge on this front in the struggle against communism if a new leader came to power in Saigon. One can notice this evolution in U.S. thinking while looking at some remarks from the individual who was serving as president at the time. During a television interview, John F. Kennedy said South Vietnam was in need of "changes in policy and perhaps...personnel."²⁵ Fortunately, for Kennedy and his advisors, there were figures in the South Vietnamese military that were in the process of plotting Diem's downfall. On November 2, 1963, the followers of Tran Van Don, the acting Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, successfully removed Diem from power. After these rogue members of the military conducted the coup, the situation in South Vietnam did not get any better. Under Diem, analysts only found signs of deterioration outside of the government. In the post Diem era, unwanted developments such as villages falling into the hands of the National Liberation Front did continue, but there were also alarming events within the corridors of power in Saigon, including five other coups.²⁶

Unprecedented developments also transpired in the U.S. government following Diem's ouster. While Diem was in office, U.S. policymakers always focused on developing strategies that could enable the South Vietnamese military to defeat the National Liberation Front. Once he was gone, they began to claim that a favorable outcome would only emerge if U.S. combat troops assumed control of the counterinsurgency effort from

the South Vietnamese. In the summer of 1965, Lyndon Johnson, John F. Kennedy's successor, made the move from indirect to direct action by sending 100,000 combat troops to South Vietnam. When the United States resorted to direct action in Korea fifteen years earlier, it received the support of the United Nations, but this international institution refused to sanction the mission in Vietnam. Although the United Nations did not support the campaign in Vietnam, it was backed by the body that refrained from authorizing the operation in Korea. Before the combat troops arrived in South Vietnam, both chambers in the U.S. Congress passed a resolution that encouraged Johnson to "take all measures...to repulse aggression and prevent further aggression."²⁷

The U.S. troops in South Vietnam encountered a war that was becoming even more complicated. For years, North Vietnamese involvement in the conflict below the seventeenth parallel was limited to providing military assistance to the National Liberation Front. In 1964, though, officials in Hanoi began to send combat troops to South Vietnam. By 1966, there were approximately 50,000 North Vietnamese soldiers in South Vietnam.²⁸ When Johnson made the decision to send combat troops to South Vietnam, he presumed that they would just need to concentrate on quelling the insurgency. However, once he learned about the size of the North Vietnamese troop buildup, he became cognizant of the manner in which these soldiers would also have to participate in conventional battles on occasion.

The U.S. soldiers consistently experienced success as they carried out their unexpected responsibility. When North Vietnamese troops launched offensives to take control of government buildings or military bases, U.S. forces usually managed to keep them from seizing their targets. Although the Americans performed well in engagements against this conventional foe, they failed to develop an effective strategy for dealing with the unconventional one. In other words, they were unable to find an approach for weakening the National Liberation Front. Of all the introduced strategies, the one, which received the most use, was the search and destroy mission. While a search and destroy mission was in progress, soldiers were just supposed to eliminate National Liberation Front operatives hiding in a village. However, there were times when they also killed innocent civilians who were mistaken for National Liberation Front

members. After individuals saw friends or relatives die in one of these raids, they typically went on to join the National Liberation Front.²⁹

The rise in National Liberation Front recruits and other negative developments in the late 1960s forced William Westmoreland, the general overseeing the U.S. military effort in Vietnam, to ask Johnson for 200,000 more combat troops. When Westmoreland had made troop requests in the past, Johnson had always provided him with the amount of men he wanted. However, on this occasion, the thirty-sixth U.S. president refrained from sending additional soldiers to Southeast Asia. In order to understand this unprecedented turn of events, one must take certain developments inside the United States into consideration. At the start of the U.S. escalation in the middle of the 1960s, eighty-five percent of the U.S. citizenry was in favor of becoming more involved in the Vietnamese conflict.³⁰ By the latter portion of the decade, though, most Americans wanted to see military personnel withdrawn from South Vietnam. Since the war had become so unpopular, Johnson knew that news of a major troop increase would upset citizens on the home front. He also recognized he was in the same position that Harry Truman had been in at the beginning of the 1950s. That is, he realized that if he ran for another term in 1968 he would be defeated in a convincing fashion by his opponent. Once Johnson announced that he would not run, he tried to help Hubert Humphrey, his vice president, win the election. This provides another connection between Johnson and Truman, but they attempted to help their preferred candidates in different ways. In 1952, Truman decided to pull some troops out of South Korea. Sixteen years later, Johnson opted to halt the bombing campaign over North Vietnam shortly before U.S. voters went to the polls.³¹

Although Humphrey received this assistance from Johnson, he still lost to Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate. After Nixon assumed control of the executive branch in January 1969, there were signs that he was another proponent of the transferal policy. In multiple addresses, the new commander-in-chief asserted that he planned to have South Vietnamese soldiers take over the military campaign.³² As the South Vietnamese became more proficient, it would be possible for him to withdraw U.S. soldiers from Southeast Asia. What deserves attention at this point is the manner in which Nixon was putting South Vietnamese soldiers in a far more difficult position than the South Koreans were in when Truman

turned to the transferal policy at the end of his presidency. South Korean soldiers, as mentioned in the preceding section, just had to concentrate on weakening a conventional enemy as U.S. troops departed. South Vietnamese personnel, in contrast, would have to deal with both conventional and unconventional foes.

There was an indication in the summer of 1969 that Nixon had begun to implement his policy for the war. During the month of August, the new president removed 25,000 American troops from South Vietnam.³³ One must remember that a troop withdrawal can only be attributed to better security conditions if the reduction is preceded by indigenous forces performing well on the battlefield. Prior to the withdrawal in August, the members of the South Vietnamese military did not show much improvement in battles against the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front. In the middle of May, they became involved in a memorable engagement with the former. At the beginning of the month, the North Vietnamese were in control of Apbia Mountain. This mountain near the Laotian border did not have any strategic value, but Creighton Abrams, the new U.S. commander in Southeast Asia, still wanted to seize it from the North Vietnamese. On May 10, 1969, he had U.S. and South Vietnamese forces launch an assault against the North Vietnamese on Apbia. Ten days into the campaign, troops from South Vietnam's 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment, and 1st Division retreated when the North Vietnamese met their attempt to reach the top of Apbia with fierce resistance.³⁴ Shortly after this disappointing turn of events, the members of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division managed to make it to the top of Apbia with another offensive that forced North Vietnamese soldiers to abandon their defensive positions.³⁵

Because the South Vietnamese military did not become more proficient in the time leading up to the August withdrawal, one must turn to the U.S. home front to explain Nixon's decision. Truman, as mentioned in the discussion about the Korean War, believed troop withdrawals could help a member of his party win the presidential election of 1952. When Nixon came into the Oval Office in 1969, his long-term objective was not to make it easier for another Republican to win the 1972 presidential race. Instead, it was to ensure that he would not be a one-term president. As one historian has noted, Nixon knew that if he did not decrease the amount of

U.S. troops involved in the unpopular Vietnam conflict he would have “as little prospect of being reelected as LBJ had in 1968.”³⁶

For the rest of Nixon’s first term, other troop withdrawals took place in the aftermath of disappointing performances by South Vietnamese troops. However, if one inspects the subsequent years of Nixon’s only full term in office, one comes across notable differences between the drawdowns in 1969 and the ones between 1970 and 1972. During the prior discussion about the Battle for Mount Apbia, it was mentioned how South Vietnamese soldiers fought alongside U.S. combat troops. From 1970 to 1972, members of the South Vietnamese military often participated in engagements without this form of U.S. assistance. Ever since the start of the conflict, Hanoi had used a road through Cambodia and Laos to deliver supplies below the seventeenth parallel. In February 1971, South Vietnamese soldiers invaded Laos to eliminate the northern portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At the beginning of the offensive or Lam Son 719 as it was called in Saigon, the South Vietnamese managed to seize control of some towns inside Laotian territory, but they were eventually forced out of these locations by members of the North Vietnamese military.³⁷ In addition to losing these pieces of land, the South Vietnamese military lost a considerable amount of men. By the end of the forty-two day campaign, the South Vietnamese only had half of their forces left.³⁸

When the pilots of U.S. surveillance planes flew missions over Laos following the offensive, they recognized that “truck-traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail” had been “restored to its pre Lam Son 719 density.”³⁹ Since the South Vietnamese were unable to accomplish their main objective, Nixon should have refrained from withdrawing more combat troops from Southeast Asia in 1971, but he elected to do so. In fact, by the end of the year, there was only one active American combat division left in South Vietnam.⁴⁰ To see how Nixon’s desire to be re-elected was still affecting the decision-making in the White House during the latter stages of his first term, it is necessary to take some comments just one month after the conclusion of Lam Son 719 into consideration. At that time, his National Security Adviser told him: “If we can, in October of ’72, go around the country saying we ended the war and the Democrats wanted to turn it over to the Communists.... Then we’re in great shape.”⁴¹ Something that sets this policy-making apart from what was taking place in 1969 is the manner in which the members of the Nixon foreign policy team now had to mollify

legislators who were making it difficult to prosecute the war in an aggressive fashion. Prior to the failed invasion in 1971, members of the House of Representatives and Senate passed a measure that prohibited U.S. combat troops from operating inside Laos and Cambodia.⁴² Following it, they approved another act that prevented personnel from participating in missions throughout all of Indochina.⁴³

Conclusion

One of the most important tasks that presidents assume once they adopt the transferal policy is determining when U.S. soldiers should be withdrawn from different countries. In speeches and interviews, multiple presidents have led U.S. citizens to believe that the capabilities of fledgling security forces determine when reductions transpire. However, the information in the preceding sections of this article indicates that the political landscape in the United States prompts chief executives to order drawdowns. While all presidents are concerned about what is happening on the home front, it is important to keep in mind that they do not always have the same political goals. Harry Truman reduced the number of troops on the Korean Peninsula because he wanted to help another member of the Democratic Party win the Presidential Election of 1952. Approximately seventeen years after these drawdowns in Korea, Richard Nixon started to withdraw soldiers from South Vietnam, but he took this step because he wanted to be re-elected and placate members of the legislative branch.

The removal of troops gives presidents the opportunity to develop a more favorable political landscape inside the United States. What one must remember, though, is the manner in which drawdowns are likely to have an adverse impact on the security conditions in a developing country. As the members of a nascent army face an invading force or a contingent of insurgents, they may lose more battles or even go so far as to surrender to their enemies as many Iraqi soldiers did in the fighting against the Islamic State in 2014. A U.S. president obviously does not want to see these developments transpire abroad, so he should rely upon a policy that gives him a better chance of killing two birds with one stone. In other words, he should depend on a strategy that has the potential to allow him to deal with political problems on the home front and maintain order in a target nation. One option is to change the party that assumes the security responsibilities of American soldiers. The Korean and Vietnam cases

demonstrated that an American intervention could happen with or without support from the United Nations. When this international body sanctions a U.S. military mission, other countries usually deploy soldiers to the nation where it is taking place. If future presidents only participate in UN backed missions, there will be chances for them to use aid and other incentives to convince another intervening country to have its experienced soldiers assume the tasks of U.S. troops until indigenous elements are more capable.

Endnotes

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