

**The Vietnam War ended in military defeat –
The Iraq War can be won by diplomatic means.**

Vietnam.

Senator John Mc Cain maintains that the US could have won the war in Vietnam by supporting general Abrams strategy of “Vietnamising” and upgrading the local fighting forces. Simplistically, he favours a similar strategy (a “surge” in US military force to help build-up the national army) to win in Iraq.

Indeed, as a result of general Abrams strategy, the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), with US Air force support, inflicted a massive defeat on the North Vietnamese army (NVA) offensive of 1972. The war had become a conventional war between two conventional Vietnamese armies. All American ground troops had been withdrawn and the defeat at the hands of ARVN convinced Communist North Vietnam of the solidity of South Vietnam and of the need to bring the war to an end. This enabled Kissinger to broker the peace agreement of 1973 between North and South and John Mc Cain to return after years of captivity in the “Hanoi Hilton” for a hero’s welcome at President Nixon’s White House.

In the following uneasy peace the “democratic” South Vietnamese Republic was protected by ARVN and supported by the majority of its people, without much internal dissent and without serious religious (catholic versus Buddhist) or tribal (montagnards versus Vietnamese) conflict. Guerilla activity hardly existed. According to all opinion surveys, the population in towns and countryside supported the Republic and seemed unwilling to exchange it for North Vietnamese style Communism. The peace (short lived as it turned out) depended on ARVN strength, US diplomatic deals with communist adversaries outside Vietnam and on the US ambassadors’ solid grip on the South Vietnamese government.

Senator Mc Cain rightly maintains that victory, or rather stalemate in Vietnam was thrown away by US congress’ collapse of support for ARVN, the guarantor of the 1973 peace agreement. After President Nixon’s resignation, America turned its back on Vietnam. US budget support to their South Vietnamese allies fell steeply to less than a billion dollars a **year** (support to Israel in the simultaneous Yom Kippur war amounted to 3 billion dollars in a few **weeks**). Sensing the loss of American resolve and the sudden weakening of ARVN, the USSR and the Chinese redoubled their military and civil aid to the NVA. They restarted the war with superior strength. During the 1973 oil embargo and the quintupling of our oil supply prices, I witnessed the South Vietnamese Air force grounded, their squadron pilots idle and their army crippled by lack of fuel. Officers’ families begged for a living or turned to the black market, while civilians in Saigon were suffering double digit inflation. American ambassador Graham Martin, CIA and top military leaders warned of the consequences, but failed to make an impression in Washington. In April 1975 they left Saigon by helicopter from the embassy roof, surrendering the population to communism.

IRAQ.

While in Vietnam the US embassy was clearly in charge, it seems that in Iraq the military have the upper hand as well as the ear of the President. On the surface, General Petraeus’ Iraq strategy seems the same and as successful as Abrams’ was in

Vietnam: The National Iraq army has been built up rapidly, shielded by a temporary surge in numbers of US troops. The general knows from Vietnam and from the rapid capture of Baghdad that US troops can gain huge victories against regular armies, inflict huge damage, but are ill suited to a long fight against irregular opponents. A national army is therefore essential to keep the peace on its own terrain. But South Vietnam had one government with one army; Iraq has no representative government and too many armies with different loyalties and agendas. In Iraq the problem is mainly political.

General Petraeus also has to support the Kurdish regional armies in Northern Iraq, which want independence from Baghdad and support their fellow Kurds in Turkey and Iran. They do not even admit the Iraq army on their territory. And to decrease “terrorist” incidents, he is paying millions of dollars in cash and equipment to another army of Sunni tribal insurgents (also supported by Saudi Arabia), who are opposed to the Shiite dominated government in Baghdad and to the US occupation. These Sunnis switched sides and keep quiet for the moment. They may switch sides again. With the powerful Shiite irregular armies, like the Mahdi army (supported by Iran) a precarious cat and mouse game of war and cease-fire agreements seems to be going on. The police force remains untrustworthy. Meanwhile General Petraeus goes to great lengths to build walls in Baghdad to separate Shiite fighters from Sunnis, which create ghetto’s, accentuate existing differences and dislocate the economy. Public services like electricity and water are worse than under Saddam even though the government is awash in oil money. However, military statistics show decreasing numbers of violent deaths and terrorist incidents and create the hopeful impression that the strategy is effective in making peace.

But in dysfunctional Iraq national policy cannot be led by the military. What is the purpose of military dominance, of playing rivals against each other in a wasted and essentially divided country when a final political solution is not being vigorously pursued?

The restoration of peace in Iraq has to be found within an agreed equilibrium of forces in the region, negotiated by the US, as the occupier, in cooperation with the UN and other nations, and then imposed on the Iraqi government. The threat of speedy withdrawal of foreign troops will help focus its mind. Unfortunately the region is in more than its usual turmoil.

Differences between Shia, Sunni and Kurds have been accentuated by the “war of choice” when the US administration abandoned diplomacy for iron fist and iron talk. Syria and Iran whose cooperation is essential have been stigmatised as the enemy with whom no direct contact can be made, in spite of repeated overtures from these nations at the highest level. Despite all the iron talk, US policy in the Middle East seems to waver. It favours Sunnis over Shiites generally and accepts democratic elections only when they go in its favour. (Not in Palestine, Lebanon and don’t even think of holding them in Egypt or Saudi Arabia.) This has negative consequences as far away as Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and the Gaza strip. The US turns a blind eye to extremist Wahhabi Sunnism in Saudi Arabia (oil) but nevertheless tries to use it to counter Shiite Iran and Syrian governments. Diplomats throughout region, including Condoleeza Rice, are speaking only to Israel and other safe allies. Above all, their failure during 8 years of tenure, to build on the near-settlement of the Israeli-

Palestinian question reached under President Clinton, is keeping the whole region on the boil.

The cost to the world economy of the diplomatic lethargy of the super power is scandalous; the price for oil could be half of what it is today if Iraq and Iran were to produce and export up to their normal capacity.

However, Some sub-optimal compromises have already been reached, like swallows heralding Spring. Iraqi PM Maliki has reached an understanding with his powerful Shiite neighbour Ahmadinejad of Iran without US endorsement. Qatar made itself responsible for a peace agreement between all religious factions in Lebanon, promoting the Shiite Hizbollah interests against American wishes. Saudi Arabia even bestirred itself in peace making in Palestine, trying to bring “terrorist” Hamas on board against American wishes. And Egypt and Syria are negotiating with Israel on prisoner exchange and territory adjustments. These compromises however cannot be optimal without active US involvement.

And Iraq, after the Palestine problem, is the hardest regional nut to crack. Iraq is a grab bag of proud Kurds striving for independence, dissident Turks and many other groups with a majority of Shiite Muslims arbitrarily subjected to Sunni dominance when the nation was formed after the First World War. Its Kings, Prime Ministers and Presidents ruled despotically and have almost without exception been murdered by their revolutionary successors. Saddam was no exception. The country has always been held together by force and it is doubtful if it can be held together by anything else today. The secular Baath party tried and failed. Moreover, Iraq’s borders, drawn up negligently in Europe, allow Kuwait and Iran to sit on its vital but tenuous connection to the sea as an invitation to trouble. Although Iraq needs better access for its oil and other exports, the matter was not even addressed in the allied peace settlement after the 1991 war with Kuwait when it should have been to avoid future wars.

In its present exhausted state, Iraq cannot validly decide on its future. The apparent peace in Iraq is the peace of a deserted home. Fully 10% of the 25 million population of Iraq including its best educated, mostly Sunni, have fled to “axis of evil” countries like Syria and to Jordan. Neither country gets much outside money to help these destitute fugitives, certainly not from the US which sorely needs their cooperation in future elections and peace negotiations. For anyone who has seen their miserable condition, the return of the refugees is a first priority. There can be no agreement without them or without acknowledging the debt owed to the Arab governments that welcomed them regardless of costs. An additional million refugees are dispersed inside Iraq. All of these are needed to participate in elections for a more reasonable balance against the Shiite majority. The outcome of such elections must be accepted by the occupying powers, not rejected if not complying with US wishes, as was the case of the Hamas electoral victory in Gaza. A reasonable time table should be set for proper preparation. Provincial elections planned for this autumn seem too early. The oil wealth should be used in to entice families back to their roots in Iraq.

Any success of the US military “surge” remains elusive like a mirage, without an acceptance of the constitution of a new federal Iraq by neighbouring countries. Such agreement should be within reach as Turkey, Iran and Syria all have a lot to gain from

stability on their borders. And without their involvement, the Shiite militia's of Muqtada El Sadr, backed by Iran, will simply wait for a reduction of US troops to assert themselves again. And Sunni tribes, once they have received enough money and weapons from Gen. Petraeus or his successor, will re-start fighting the Shiites. The Kurdish region will claim independence from Baghdad as they have already done by the unilateral allocation of oil exploration concessions in their region. They should be forced to rescind these illegal contracts

Shiite Iran in particular has an interest to guarantee a federal Iraq under a democratic constitution, which would create a significant increase in Shiite influence, although not an absolute Shiite majority in the Iraqi parliament. Iran could reclaim its normal role in the region if is no longer under constant threats of preventive attacks by Israel and the US. The end of the US economic boycott would lead to much larger Iranian exports of oil and gas and to lower world energy prices.

Free elections in Iraq, held after the return of the refugees, monitored by neighbours and international observers, will however take time to organise. But the amendment of the constitution, giving more power to the central government, cannot wait. The US ambassador should force the issue and imminent US troop withdrawal gives him a strong argument for the Iraqi government to accept the necessary changes right now. Federal Iraq has the potential to become the second largest oil exporter in the world. To shoulder its world-wide responsibilities it needs a constitution and a new petroleum law with better definition of authorities and allocation of revenues between federal parts. On the content of the petroleum law, allowing quick access to development by qualified international technological enterprises, state- or privately owned, while maximising national revenue, there is general consensus. Populist experiments, as from Chavez in Venezuela, are to be avoided and the present preliminary allocation of petroleum rights cannot be the final solution.

Temporary ups and downs in guerrilla or terrorist warfare are a side show. Guaranteeing the integrity of the Iraqi federation under a new constitution, by the US, Iran, Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, is the main event.

15th June 2008.