



Why we went to war in Vietnam

In the decades after the departure of the last U.S. combat troops from Vietnam in March 1973 and the fall of Saigon to communist North Vietnamese forces in April 1975, Americans have been unable to agree on how to characterize the long, costly and ultimately unsuccessful U.S. military involvement in Indochina. To some, the Vietnam War was a crime – an attempt by the United States to suppress a heroic Vietnamese national liberation movement that had driven French colonialism out of its country. To others, the Vietnam War was a forfeit, a just war needlessly lost by timid policymakers and a biased media. For many who study foreign affairs, the Vietnam War was a tragic mistake brought about by U.S. leaders who exaggerated the influence of communism and underestimated the power of nationalism.

Another interpretation, a fourth one, has recently emerged, now that the Vietnam War is history and can be studied dispassionately by scholars with greater, though not unlimited, access to records on all sides.

The emerging scholarly synthesis interprets the war in the global context of the Cold War that lasted from the aftermath of World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In this view, Vietnam was neither a crime, a forfeit nor a tragic mistake. It was a proxy conflict in the Cold War.

The Cold War was the third world war of the 20th century – itself part of what some have called the Long War or the Seventy-Five Years' War of 1914-1989. Unlike the first two world wars, the Cold War began and ended without direct military conflict between the opposing sides, thanks to the deterrent provided by conventional forces as well as nuclear weapons. Instead, it was fought indirectly through economic embargoes, arms races, propaganda and proxy wars in peripheral nations like Vietnam.

The greatest prizes in the Cold War were the industrial economies of the advanced European and East Asian nations, most of all Germany and Japan. With the industrial might of demilitarized Japan and the prosperous western half of a divided Germany, the United States could hope to carry out its patient policy of containment of a communist bloc that was highly militarized but economically outmatched, until the Soviets sued for peace or underwent internal reform. The Soviet Union could prevail in the Cold War only if it divided the United States from its industrialized allies – not by sponsoring communist takeovers within their borders but by intimidating them into appeasement after convincing them that the United States lacked the resolve or the ability to defend its interests.

For this reason, most crises of the Cold War, from the Berlin Airlift and the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Korean and Vietnam wars, occurred when the United States responded to aggressive probing by communist bloc nations with dramatic displays of American resolve. The majority of these tests of American credibility took place in four countries divided between communist and non-communist regimes after World War II: Germany, China, Korea and Vietnam.

In an internal Johnson administration memo of March 1965, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton emphasized credibility as the most important of several U.S. objectives in Vietnam: In a speech the following month, President Johnson stressed America's reputation as a guarantor: "Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of America's commitment, the value of America's word."

Full-scale war was avoided despite repeated crises involving divided Berlin and Taiwan, where the remnant of China's Nationalist government took refuge after the 1949 victory of Mao Zedong's communists in China. The Cold War soon turned hot in divided Korea and Vietnam.

What Americans call the Vietnam War was the second of three wars in Indochina during the Cold War, in which the United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China intervened in shifting patterns of enmity and alliance. None of these would have occurred in the form that they did if Mao's communists had not come to power in China in 1949. Although the regimes in Moscow and Beijing were enemies of one another by the end of the Cold War, in the conflict's early years the triumph of the Chinese communists created a powerful Sino-Soviet bloc that opposed the United States and its allies around China's periphery: Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. Direct Chinese military intervention in the Korean War ensured a bloody stalemate rather than reunification of the peninsula under a non-communist regime. At the same time, indirect Chinese and Soviet support in the First Indochina War (1946-1954) helped Ho Chi Minh's communists drive the French from their former colony.

Only a few years after the Geneva Accords in 1954 established the 17th parallel as the boundary between Vietnam's communist north and non-communist south, the Hanoi regime resumed war by means of infiltration and southern insurgents. After the conquest of the south in 1975, Communist Party historian Nguyen Khac Vien admitted, "The Provisional Revolutionary Government was always simply a group emanating from the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). If we had pretended otherwise for such a long period, it was only because during the war we were not obliged to unveil our cards."

The assassination in 1963 of South Vietnam's dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem, created anarchy that led to rising U.S. involvement – starting with advisers under President Kennedy, then turning to bombing and ultimately large-scale ground forces under Johnson. In 1964, the Johnson administration won congressional passage of the Southeast Asia Resolution after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, using as a pretext for U.S. military intervention the confrontation in which North Vietnam fired on the USS Maddox. The number of American forces peaked in 1968, when more than half a million U.S. troops were waging war in South Vietnam, as well as bombing North Vietnam and taking part in incursions into Laos and Cambodia. At great cost in American and Vietnamese lives, the attrition strategy of Gen. William Westmoreland succeeded in preventing the Saigon regime from being overthrown by insurgents. The Tet Offensive of January 1968, perceived in the United States as a setback for American war aims, was in fact a devastating military setback for the north. Thereafter, North Vietnam's only hope was to conquer South Vietnam by means of conventional military campaigns, which the United States successfully thwarted.

In the United States, public opinion grew opposed to the costs in blood and treasure of the controversial war. President Richard Nixon sought to achieve "peace with honor" by combining a policy of "Vietnamization," or South Vietnamese self-reliance, with a policy of détente with the Soviet Union and China, in the hope that the communist powers would pressure the north into ending the war. His strategy

failed. Following the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, U.S. combat forces were removed, and the south, deprived by Congress of military aid, was invaded by the north. In 1975, upon uniting Vietnam under their rule in 1975, the victorious heirs of Ho Chi Minh imposed Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism on the south and helped their allies win power in Laos. The Third Indochina War soon followed. Mao's heirs in China viewed communist Vietnam as a Soviet satellite on their border, and in early 1979 China invaded Vietnam in a brief war, following the 1978 Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, during which Vietnamese communists ousted the Chinese-backed regime of the murderous Pol Pot.

Of the three great powers that intervened in Indochina after the ouster of France in the 1950s, the Soviet Union gained the most. By backing Hanoi, Moscow simultaneously obtained an ally on China's border and reasserted its leadership of international Marxism-Leninism. The former U.S. base at Cam Ranh Bay became the largest Soviet military installation outside Eastern Europe. In "The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War" (1996), Russian historian Ilya Gaiduk wrote, "Inspired by its gains and by the decline of U.S. prestige resulting from Vietnam and domestic upheaval, the Soviet leadership adopted a more aggressive and rigid foreign policy, particularly in the Third World."

But in December 1979, only months after China was humiliated in its brief war with Moscow's Vietnamese ally, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. That decade-long conflict proved to be Moscow's Vietnam.

Just as the Soviets and Chinese had armed and equipped Vietnamese opponents of U.S. forces in Vietnam, the United States and China – now allies against Moscow – armed and equipped the insurgents who fought the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan. The Soviet war in Afghanistan was the third major proxy war in the Cold War.

In 1989, the year in which the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War effectively ended, the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, as the United States had withdrawn its troops from Indochina a decade and a half earlier.

The United States lost the proxy war in Indochina but prevailed on a global level in the Cold War. The USSR not only lost the Cold War but ceased to exist in 1991. The discredited secular creed of Marxism-Leninism has survived in only a few dictatorships, including China, North Korea and Vietnam.

As the narrative of the 20th century is interpreted, historians are regarding the Vietnam War in a global context that spans decades and concludes with the fall of the Soviet Union. No matter their differences of perspective, they will define the Vietnam War as the Cold War in Indochina.

The interventions of the United States, the Soviet Union and China turned civil wars in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia into proxy wars. This provides an answer to those who claim that the United States, by its intervention, mistakenly turned a pure civil war in Vietnam into part of the Cold War. The United States shared its belief that Indochina was a major theater in the global Cold War with the Soviet Union and China. In "Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam," Lien-Hang T. Nguyen writes, "While Moscow hoped to see Soviet technology defeat American arms in Vietnam, Beijing wanted to showcase the power of Mao's military strategy on the Vietnamese battlefield."

There is no evidence that Ho Chi Minh or his successors ever envisioned the kind of neutrality that Yugoslavia's communist dictator Josip Broz Tito pursued during the Cold War. On the contrary, the North Vietnamese communists identified themselves with the main communist bloc of nations, sought to maintain the support of the Soviets and the Chinese alike, and by the end of the Cold War had turned their country into the Soviet Union's major Asian ally.

Was South Vietnam too marginal an interest to justify a U.S. war in the 1960s and 1970s? To this day, the United States garrisons South Korea and provides arms to Taiwan. If you consider that in today's world, the United States could go to war if China attacks Taiwan and almost certainly would go to war if North Korea attacks South Korea, the use of U.S. military force to defend South Vietnam against North Vietnam at the height of the Cold War seems less puzzling. Indeed, a U.S. decision in the 1960s not to try to avert a communist takeover of South Vietnam would need explanation.

Viewing the Indochina wars as Cold War proxy wars, along with the conflicts of that era in Korea and Afghanistan, answers one set of critics: the realists. It also provides an answer to other critics who claim that the United States should have been more aggressive toward North Vietnam. In 1978, Adm. William Sharp wrote, "Why were we not permitted to win? In my view, it was partly because political and diplomatic circles in Washington were disproportionately concerned with the possibility of Chinese and Soviet intervention."

The late Col. Harry Summers Jr. argued that the United States allowed itself "to be bluffed by China throughout most of the war."

Undermining this critique is the fact that China and the Soviet Union played a much greater role in the Vietnam War than Americans realized at the time. Fifty percent of all Soviet foreign aid went to North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968. Soviet anti-aircraft teams in North Vietnam brought down dozens of U.S. planes. According to former Soviet colonel Alexei Vinogradov, "The Americans knew only too well that Vietnamese planes of Soviet design were often flown by Soviet pilots."

China's indirect role in Vietnam was even more massive and critical. It is now known that in a secret meeting between Ho Chi Minh and Mao in the summer of 1965, China agreed to enter the war directly if the United States invaded North Vietnam. As it was, China's indirect involvement in Vietnam was its greatest military effort after the Korean War. According to Beijing, between 1965 and 1973, there were 320,000 Chinese troops assigned to North Vietnam, with a maximum of 170,000 – roughly a third of the maximum number of U.S. forces – in the south at their peak. On Sept. 23, 1968, Mao asked North Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong, "Why have the Americans not made a fuss about the fact that more than 100,000 Chinese troops help you building railways, roads and airports although they know about it?"

Historian Chen Jian concludes that "without the support, the history, even the outcome of the Vietnam War, might have been different."

Nobody can ever prove that the People's Liberation Army would have fought U.S. troops directly if the United States had invaded North Vietnam. But the depth of China's involvement in the war suggests that U.S. policymakers were being prudent, not pusillanimous, when they worried that China would send troops to fight directly in Vietnam as it had done in Korea. Reviewing the evidence, historian Qiang Zhai concludes, "If the actions recommended by (Col. Harry) Summers had been taken by Washington in Vietnam, there would have been a real danger of a Sino-American war with dire consequences for the world. In retrospect, it appears that Johnson had drawn the correct lesson from the Korean War and had been prudent in his approach to the Vietnam conflict."

From today's perspective, the Vietnam War looks less like a senseless blunder on the part of the United States than like a replay of the Korean War in a different region with a different outcome. Elsewhere in Asia, including the Philippines, Malaya and Indonesia, communist insurgencies were defeated by local governments, sometimes with the help of British or French advisers and combat troops. It may be that those insurgencies failed, while communist regimes survived in part of Korea and unified Vietnam, because of one factor: the absence of a land border with post-1949 communist China, which provided material support, manpower and deterrence of a U.S. escalation that might risk wider war with China.

Ever since the fall of Saigon, Americans have sought to draw lessons from Vietnam, but some have been short-lived. In the late 20th century, U.S. policymakers and military strategists, hoping to put the memory of Vietnam behind them, focused on swift, high-tech warfare against technologically advanced adversaries – only to painfully relearn forgotten lessons in Iraq and Afghanistan about counterinsurgency and nation-building.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the United States sought to put Asian conflicts behind it. But the recently announced “pivot” away from the Middle East toward Asia is widely viewed as an American strategy of containing China, with which the United States fought bloody proxy wars in Vietnam and Korea in living memory. In a Sino-American conflict in the 21st century, Vietnam might even be an American ally.

As a historical event, the Vietnam War is an unchanging part of the past. As a symbol, it will continue to evolve, reflecting the values and priorities of later generations. In discussing and debating the nation’s most controversial war, Americans would do well to remember the words of the poet T.S. Eliot: “There is no such thing as a Lost Cause, because there is no such thing as a Gained Cause.”

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