THE VIETNAM WAR: CONTAINMENT AND THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN INDOCHINA

With the end of the Second World War, policymakers in the United States turned their attention east of Europe, focusing on the Soviet Union. Here they saw the seed of the greatest and most immediate threat to American national security: the beginnings of the spread of international communism. Through the thoughts and public discourse of their policymakers, Americans came to believe that communists (first the Soviets and eventually the Chinese) not only fomented unrest around the world, but fueled it and focused it – seeking to precipitate revolutions and the installation of communist governments worldwide (Paterson et al, p. 320). The nature of communism was perceived by American policymakers in somewhat infection-like terms: it was something that, if left unchecked, that would spread around the globe and tilt the scale of global power in favor of the Soviets. With this viewpoint in mind – communism and its contagious character as the fundamental threat to American interests – American foreign policy accordingly focused on the global containment of communism in any form wherever it appeared. This policy seems to be the primary motivation behind the decision to engage the spread of communism by military means in Indochina, resulting in America’s longest military engagement and only military defeat; the Vietnam War.

This paper holds a brief examination of some of the factual and theoretical premises of containment theory and attempts to show that they are not wholly applicable to the prewar scenario in Vietnam. This paper breaks containment down into two major phases, early containment, and Cold War era containment. Each phase of containment
holds its own flawed premises. Some of these premises and associated assumptions were flawed for two principal reasons: irrelevance and exaggeration. They were irrelevant because they did not apply to the Vietnam region or Vietnamese people due to incomplete consideration by American policymakers of Vietnamese history and culture, and exaggerated due to an excessively anticommunist mindset amongst American policymakers. To understand the pertinence of Vietnamese culture to containment is to understand the French imperial occupation immediately preceding the Vietnam war, and this paper investigates this. Given an understanding the unique Vietnamese relationship with imperialism and communism, the appropriate framework exists to consider the later assumptions of Cold War era containment, and critique them for ignoring the Vietnamese situation, and bending under the weight of rampant American anticommunist sentiment. Consequently, this paper seeks to cast doubt on the final decision to go to war, and proposes the first steps of a non-military alternative to post World War II Vietnam based on the very facts that flawed containment.

**The Vietnamese People and Early Containment**

Vietnam had been colonized repeatedly in its history: by the Chinese, the French, and most recently the Japanese. Each time the Vietnamese fiercely resisted colonial forces and fought for independence. As the Second World War closed the Vietnamese ousted the Japanese. Nationalism had always been a strong force in Vietnam, and so it was not a surprise when Nationalist Vietnamese, led by Ho Chi Minh – a communist – sought to finish purging their country of the remaining imperial presence – the French.
Ho Chi Min appealed to America in hopes of receiving political and economic support on several occasions. Ho went as far as offering a naval base at Cam Rahn Bay in an attempt to curry American favor.

The French refused to surrender their Indochinese colonies, and to the Americans – whose principal concern was the containment of communism in Europe – were unwilling to go against French sentiment for fear that “denying France its empire would alienate a potential European ally needed to stabilize the post war world” (Paterson et al, p. 321). America also feared the rise of a communist leader in southern Asia and thus was unwilling to assist Ho Chi Minh’s aims. These two reasons led America to support the noncommunist French puppet regime under Emperor Bao Dai over Ho. The Vietnamese, true to their nationalist nature, rose against the new face of imperialism – imperialism this time condoned and indirectly supported by America.

America policy as it strove towards containment was flawed in its decision to support the continued existence of French colonies. The colonies were by no means an asset to the French; they were a drain given the vehemence of Vietnamese resistance. America was concerned about the stability of France; if anything, French stability would be greater without the drain of maintaining its colonies in the face of the Vietnamese anti-imperialist struggle. Moreover, America did not need to appease the French – the France, shattered by World War II, needed America much more than America needed France. Put another way, France would never forsake American support, and so America was in a position to tell France what to do. These decisions made in the spirit of containment were faulty conclusions based on incomplete premises.
The Soviet Union and the threat of communism loomed large in 1949 as it took large strides towards greater global power; China had recently fallen to communism, and the Soviets had successfully detonated a nuclear weapon. The American National Security Council cautioned that “extension of the area under the domination of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled” (NSC 68). Under this provision and the assumption that insurgency in China was a planned and deliberated act, containment policy came into play in Southeast Asia.

America considered Vietnam the “cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia.” (Herring, p.83) The fall of Vietnam of communism would be a major blow to the stability (the non-communist nature) of the region, tipping the scales of the global power balance in the Soviet’s favor. That conclusion – a great net benefit to the Soviets from a communist Vietnam – hinges on three assumptions: one, that Vietnam would act as an extension or loyal vassal of Soviet (or Chinese) influence and interest in the region, two, that this Soviet-loyal communist presence would cause other countries to fall in lockstep with the Soviet empire, and third, that these countries, were they to fall, would provide a great economic, military, or political windfall for the Soviets.

ASSUMPTION ONE: VIETNAM AS A SOVIET/CHINESE PROXY
The first assumption rested on Vietnam being subservient either directly to the Kremlin, or indirectly through Beijing, and that Vietnam’s communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, become a direct puppet and extension of the communist presence in either country. This apprehension springs from the early 1950s Chinese military aid to Vietnamese. However, to conclude that the Vietnamese are acting as a tool of the Chinese is unfounded and neglects the extenuating circumstances of the Vietnamese. “[I]solated diplomatically and desperately in need of external assistance” (Herring, p. 14) in order to expel French imperialists, the Vietnamese turned to the Chinese not out of communist ideological sympathies, but out of situational necessity.

Considering the intent of the Chinese aid compounds the invalidity of assuming it was communist proxy action. According to Herring (p. 301), the Chinese “saw support for the Vietminh as a means of securing their southern border”. A more stable Vietnam would mean securer borders for China – especially if that southern neighbor didn’t decide to try to appeal to the United States for aid again, or install an American naval base. The Chinese were seeking security with their aid to the Vietnamese, not the spread of Communism.

Ho Chi Min was far from a puppet of the Chinese. Herring describes Chinese-Vietnamese relations as “frequently tense” – not surprising considering the history of hostility between the two. The extreme Vietnamese nationalism had historically resisted any form of control and would continue to do so. The Vietnamese also excluded the Chinese from significant decision making, based on the Chinese support of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, longtime antagonist of the Vietnamese. The extreme nationalist sentiment in Vietnam combined with unforgotten Chinese imperialist history
and concurrent anti-Vietnamese Chinese actions invalidated any claims to Chinese proxy control of Vietnam.

In 1979, the Vietnamese became an ally of the Soviet Union and presented the Soviets with a significant naval base at Cam Rahn Bay – the same site offered to America decades prior. Again, what seemed at first blush to be the action of a communist (Soviet) puppet proved to be a product of circumstance. The Vietnamese were on the defensive, and need a powerful ally to maintain their national existence. America had been stepping up involvement in the area and killing Vietnamese. China had, in 1978, invaded Vietnam in retaliation for the Vietnamese invasion of Chinese-allied Cambodia. Vietnam needed an ally, and turned to the Soviet Union. This was not the action of a loyal Soviet puppet, but that of a nation seeking security in the face of growing hostilities. While not invalidated, the assumption of Vietnam as a Soviet proxy is cast under a significant degree of doubt.

The existence of these tensions and differences amongst communist nations belied the American assumption that the collected communist nations of the world would give rise to a monolithic global presence. Vietnam specifically would never be part of such a monolith, as their actions and behavior had shown clearly nationalist character, not communist. The Vietnamese sided with communists not out of sympathy for their ideology, but as a means to support their personal actions. the Vietnamese had shown willingness to cooperate with capitalists, but had been turned down and were consequently forces to use communist support, their only available option, to maintain their fight against imperialism and create an independent, unified Vietnam. Nationalism
trumped communism in Vietnam - the nation was by no means taking steps towards communist servitude, it was taking steps towards independence.

**ASSUMPTION TWO: VIETNAM AS THE FIRST IN A CHAIN OF DOMINOES**

The domino clause of containment posited that without persistent and pervasive containment communism would spread through Indochina by subversion, subjugation, inspiration, or intimidation of neighbor states, leading to the rapid sequential collapse of not one contested nation, but entire blocks of Southeast Asian nations. That America lost the Vietnam War provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the merits of American assumptions; that is to say, America fought this war to preclude certain events – did these events come to pass when America withdrew from the war? In this case, there was no such sequential fall of Asian nations, and domino theory is found lacking. Analysis of the events following the American withdrawal implies that the domino theory incorporated so heavily into American containment doctrine was highly exaggerated.

Domino theory cast the nations of Indochina in the role of individual entities with no international friction – discrete entities without relations that might delay or prevent the spread of communism. This fails to consider the “historic ethnic and national conflicts [that] were much of the source of instability in Southeast Asia as communism.” (Herring, p.128). The high level of inter-ethnic hostility in the region would retard the rapid expansion of any ideology, including communism. Also, Vietnam, were it to undertake such an endeavor, would be unlikely to succeed in spreading communism.
through conquest or intimidation as it lacked the power to coerce neighboring states through aggression.

Two dominoes did fall; Laos, and Cambodia. However, these are both exceptions. Laos had been collaborating with the North Vietnamese for years (Paterson et al, p. 340) and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was provoked by the constant harassment of the Vietnamese by the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime. Considering this provocation, the invasion was motivated by the Vietnamese search for national security, not a crusade to spread communism. Domino theory had been a gross miscalculation; none of the significant states - Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore or Indonesia - embraced communist ideology following the fall of Vietnam. Through this postwar stability, Domino theory was consequently discredited.

**Assumption Three: Indochina as a Strategic Region**

The strategic region assumption required that Indochina be a strategic asset to either the Soviet of the Chinese, and that the region’s resources would be cumulative, to the end that they would enhance the power of communist control in the area. Vietnam was by no means such an area, being principally a country of peasant farmers and few significant raw materials. Those resources that Vietnam and surrounding regions did produce - rice, rubber, tin, and tungsten (Paterson et al, p 320) – were insignificant fractions of their respective world outputs.

More importantly, there were none of the significant industrial centers that made Europe so valuable. There was no thriving manufacturing-based economy from which
the Soviets could distill greater military power, and no wealth of mineral resources that would be a boon to Soviet power, and consequently a loss to America’s. Indochina held merely peripheral interest, but the newly minted American fixation with anti-communism provided the “rationale for expanding means and interests”, and forced American leaders to “extend an ambiguous commitment to the defense of South Vietnam” which was now considered of vital importance. This misplaced importance led to an extremely costly and eventually fruitless engagement in an area of dubious strategic importance.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental flaws in containment policy grew from the pervasive American capitalist ideology and consequent vehement obsession with the total defeat of communist wherever it stood. As worded by Patterson (et al.) “Vietnam was a prime example of American global expansionism and arrogance, encouraged by a zealous belief that the United States, through superior power and ideals, could and should manage events everywhere.”

The doctrine of containment, when laid upon American pride, made it impossible for American policymakers to account for the historical and cultural nuances of the Vietnamese situation. Rampant anticommunist rhetoric blinded American policymakers to the consummate relevance of Vietnamese anti-imperialist nationalism. Containment policy also “failed to make distinctions between peripheral and vital areas [and] applied military force to political problems” (Paterson et al, p. 396). Containment policy was the
incorrect prescription to an area and atmosphere that required a more subtle and situation-specific policy.

**TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE POLICY**

As discussed above, the principal error of American containment policy in Vietnam inability to account for the specific nature of the Vietnamese people. Ho Chi Minh had a problem he needed to solve - a problem America could arbitrate and at the same time gain something of tactical significance. Ho Chi Minh wanted the French out of Vietnam, and America was in a position to broker a French withdrawal from Vietnam – something that would ostensibly benefit the French anyway. In return, Ho Chi Minh would have willingly assisted America in securing Indochina, as seen in his offer of the Cam Rahn naval base. Logically or not, America valued the security of Indochina, and a naval base would be a significant step towards this security. American policymakers would have benefited, had they stepped away from their black and white view of communist parties and recognized the fierce nationalism that permeated the Vietnamese people. This nationalism would have superceded many American fears that propped up containment theory and America could have seized an opportunity to make inroads towards Indochinese security – a seizure that could have preempted the fruitless tragedy that was the Vietnam War.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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