

## American motives behind the Vietnam War: A neo-realist perspective<sup>\*</sup>

เป้าหมายของสหรัฐอเมริกาเบื้องหลังสงครามเวียดนาม: ทศนะสกุลคิดสังนิยมใหม่

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### Abstract

American motives in the Vietnam War, from a realist perspective, were irrational, since the US had no explicit interests in Vietnam. However, this article argues that in order to understand American motives behind the war, neo-realist views must be adopted. Therefore, while applying neo-realism, which mainly refers to Waltz (1979), this article does not agree with Waltz, particularly his argument on the bipolarity in the world during the Cold War. Rather, the Sino-Soviet split can be seen as a change in the polarity, which directly affected the American strategy in Vietnam. Consequently, the article concludes that American motives behind the Vietnam War were shaped by the contemporary international system or structure, since the system narrowed US policy options, despite its domestic factors.

**Keywords:** neo-realism; Vietnam War; US foreign policy; China; the Soviet Union

### บทคัดย่อ

ในมุมมองของสำนักสังนิยมใหม่นั้นเห็นว่าเป้าประสงค์ของสหรัฐอเมริกาในสงครามเวียดนามเป็นเรื่องที่ไร้เหตุผล เนื่องจากสหรัฐฯไม่มีผลประโยชน์ที่แท้จริงในเวียดนาม อย่างไรก็ตาม บทความนี้ได้แย้งว่าการจะทำความเข้าใจแรงจูงใจของสหรัฐอเมริกาหลังสงครามเวียดนามนั้นจำเป็นต้องใช้มุมมองของสำนักสังนิยมใหม่ ด้วยเหตุนี้ ขณะที่ลัทธิสังนิยมใหม่มักอ้างถึงวอลท์ซ (Waltz, 1979) บทความนี้กลับไม่เห็นด้วยกับวอลท์ซ โดยเฉพาะข้อโต้แย้งของเขาเรื่องระบบสองขั้วอำนาจในช่วงสงครามเย็น ทั้งนี้ความแตกแยกกันระหว่างจีน-โซเวียตสามารถมองได้ว่าเป็นการเปลี่ยนขั้วอำนาจ ซึ่งส่งผลโดยตรงต่อยุทธศาสตร์สหรัฐฯในเวียดนาม ดังนั้นบทความจึงสรุปว่าเจตนารมณ์ของสหรัฐฯเบื้องหลังสงครามเวียดนามได้ถูกวางไว้แล้วโดย

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โครงสร้างหรือระบบระหว่างประเทศร่วมสมัย โดยเหตุที่ระบบได้จำกัดทางเลือกด้านนโยบายของสหรัฐฯ ทั้ง ๆ ที่สหรัฐฯเองก็มีเหตุจากปัจจัยภายในของตนก็ตาม

**คำสำคัญ:** สัจนิยมใหม่; สงครามเวียดนาม; นโยบายต่างประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา; จีน; สหภาพโซเวียต

### Introduction: the realists' critiques of the Vietnam War

...we have sent the flower of our armed forces to Vietnam without having a chance to win. ...And what will our prestige be like if hundreds of thousands of American troops become bogged down in Vietnam, unable to win and unable to retreat?

The above statement by Morgenthau (1965: 12), a renowned realist, represents the paradoxical nature of the US involvement in the Vietnam War. Classical realists believed that America's intrusion into Vietnam was unnecessary. They believed that the US did not have any explicit interests in Vietnam, particularly with regard to security (Saul 2008: 65); therefore, the US's motives in establishing its dominance in Vietnam and the Far East are unclear. Foreign policy, according to classical realists, 'minimizes risks and maximizes benefits' (Morgenthau 2006: 10) in order to pursue the 'interest defined in terms of power' (Ibid.: 5), which is 'concerned with the observance and analysis of the political "fact," the often sober and hardboiled "what is" of history and politics' (Herz 1951: 17). In addition, international politics is an 'autonomous sphere of action and understanding apart from other spheres' (Morgenthau 2006: 10). If American motives behind the Vietnam War corresponded to these criteria, its national interest in the Far East was real.

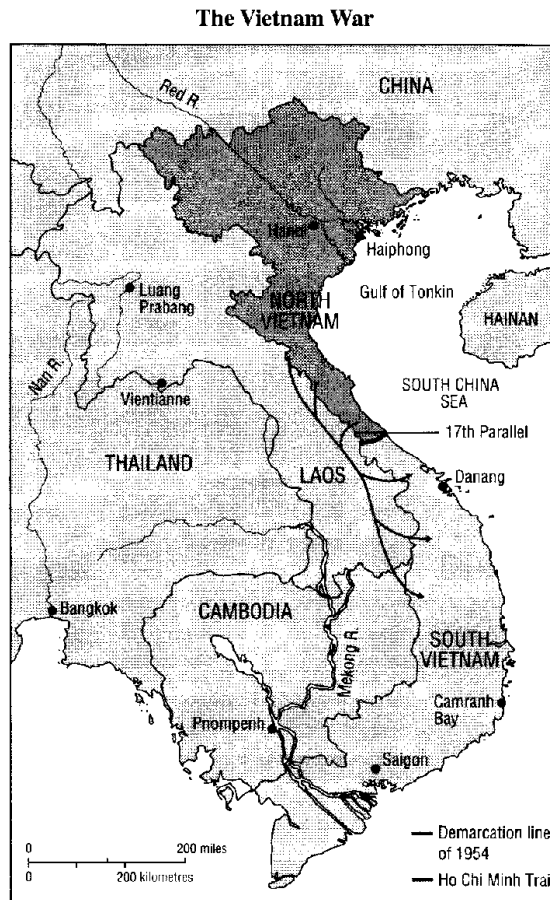
However, realists argue that in reality, the American motives did not correspond to these criteria at all. As Lippmann states, 'The notion that China can be contained in South Vietnam, south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, is sheer mythology' (Lippmann 1968: 274). This means that the Americans were 'not only escalating the war in South Vietnam but are [were] expanding it to a big war on the periphery of China' (Ibid.). Furthermore, Morgenthau also argues that while the US had motives of containing Communist China, it ignored three facts that led it in the wrong direction. First, China had already contained by nationalist sentiments within both North and South Vietnam. Second, Americans at war in Vietnam forced the Vietnamese to unwillingly rely on China; this conflicted with the US

interest. Moreover, even if the US won the Vietnam War, the outcome would be the same, since the new government in Vietnam would be supported by the US, and it would not be able to sustain its regime without US assistance, because it would lack legitimacy in the eyes of its own people (Morgenthau 1970: 403).

Along with Lippmann and Morgenthau, Kennan, the great practitioner who first introduced the concept of containment, insists that the US 'had... no business trying to play a role in the affairs of the mainland of Southeast Asia' (1968: 58). For Kennan, the US policy was a result of the misperception of Soviet and Chinese threats. He argued that there were no signs that the USSR desired the occupation of another territory, especially the Far East, apart from the territories it possessed as an outcome of the Second World War. Kennan (1968: 51-55) did not see Communist China as a great power since China, at that time, was weak in many aspects, including industrial capacity, military power, and severe overpopulation. Thus, he argued that the US should not have opposed the admission of Communist China into the United Nations. On the basis of this background, it can be said that the reason classical realists resisted American involvement in Vietnam and the Far East was the misconception that Asia faced a communist threat.

The best elucidation of American oversights in the Vietnam War was given by Morgenthau in his influential book, *Politics Among Nations*, in which he indicated that the main American failure was superstition that induced the demonological approach to foreign policy, which 'strengthens... pathological tendency, which is the refusal to acknowledge and cope effectively with a threatening reality. [And it] has shifted our attention and concern toward the adherents of Communism... and the real threat: the power of states' (Morgenthau 2006: 9). Consequentially, classical realism does not offer insights into American motives in the Vietnam War, since, according to the aforementioned views, it can be said that the war in Vietnam was a war of error, as the US national interest in the Far East was unnecessary.

### **Waltz's neo-realism and the American War in Vietnam**



Source: Virden 2008

In contrast to classical realism, the author argues that American motives behind the Vietnam War in particular and the Far East in general can be attributed to neo-realism. The term neo-realism derives from Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, published in the late 1970s, which adopts a systemic approach toward the study of international politics. Unlike classical realists, neo-realists argue that the whole, some parts of the whole, should be the unit of analysis, since the whole acts autonomously to constrain the parts. In terms of international politics, the whole is an international system which is anarchical in nature, and the parts are the interacting units within it (Malhotra and Sergounin 1998: 165). Waltz (1979: 38-41) calls these 'systemic theories'. For him, power, defined in terms of distribution of capabilities is not an end in itself but a means (Ibid.: 192), and the distribution of capabilities among states as the units dictates the polarity of an international system; for example, the world witnessed a bipolar distribution of capabilities during the Cold War (Ibid.: 176-183).

Within the bipolar system, states tend to behave rationally in order to sustain their security while realizing the potential threats posed by relative powers. From this viewpoint, there are no differences between democratic states or communist ones, since they tend to behave in the same rational manner. Consequently, the outcome of state behaviours is a balance of power that is based on the principles of rational choice (Brown and Ainley 2009: 42-44). Nevertheless, notwithstanding the presupposition of the same rational direction adopted by states, it is important to mention that Waltz asserts that state behaviours are not entirely determined by a system or structure. Rather, as he points out, *'Structural constraints are barriers, but men can try to jump over them. Structure shapes and limits choices; it establishes behavioral tendencies without determining behavior'* (emphasis by the author) (Waltz 1971: 471). Because of these characteristics of the international system or structure, in addition to the features of polarity from the 1950s–1970s and the fact that this article disagrees with Waltz, the author proposes that American motives behind the Vietnam War can be explained in many ways, if not all, by neo-realism.

Despite the controversy regarding the actual time the Vietnam War began, this article argues that US initiatives in its involvement in the Far East can be traced back to the National Security Council Report Number 68 (NSC 68), a major, confidential policy recommendation that was drafted in 1950, before the Korean War took place. NSC 68 suggested that, in response to the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons, strengthening its military as well as economic capabilities was a pressing need for the US, and it had to be ready to support states that were threatened by the USSR, particularly states in Europe and on the periphery of Japan (Virden 2008: 82-83). This aim was clearly international in scope, and military forces were prepared for an encounter (Crockatt 1995: 82-83). From this viewpoint, it can be said that the logic behind NSC 68 is systemic in international scope, which corresponds to neo-realist explanations, as a change in the distribution of capabilities, particularly nuclear weapons, led to the change in the extant polarity to bipolarity. Thus, the US foreign policy during the 1950s to the early 1970s, including the US involvement and presence in the Far East, guided by NSC 68's recommendations, can be seen as a rational reaction to an international system which had become bipolar.

As is already mentioned, for neo-realists like Waltz, state behaviours are not determined completely by an international system; rather, states' options are limited. Security and strategic interests, however, should be conceived through systemic views

rather than reductionist ones. Thus, with regard to Vietnam, Waltz indicates, ‘The international-political significance of Vietnam can be understood only in terms of the world’s structure’ (1979: 190). In this sense, despite the importance of McCarthyism within domestic politics, the configuration of international politics in the 1950s significantly narrowed US rational choices toward Vietnam. The triumph of Mao Tse-tung over nationalists in China in 1949 and the instability of the French regime in the Far East after 1950 gradually led the US to take France’s position in the region. In terms of the relationship between the USSR and Communist China, China demanded that they be ‘foreign friends’ since, as Kirby points out, ‘They could not remain standing alone or unaided, but would have to “unite” with others, in this case with the Soviet Union and its allies’ (Kirby 1994: 13).

The relationship between the two states, therefore, can be called bandwagoning, which Waltz defines as follows: ‘States work harder to increase their own strength, or they combine with others, if they are falling behind’ (1979: 126). The Sino-Soviet bandwagoning relations menaced the US since the world map had transformed drastically. Moreover, the recognition of Ho Chi Minh’s government as the legitimate Vietnamese regime by the USSR and China led to the threatening notion that Vietnam and the Far East would become their spheres of influence, and it seemed that French power was significantly deteriorating. The defeat of France at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and sequential withdrawal gave the US no options, apart from balancing through proxy and subsequently sending American troops to Vietnam.

China’s potentiality of becoming another polar international system, the author contends, concerned Washington with regard to its policy toward Vietnam. Furthermore, China shared southern boundaries with North Vietnam. In the 1950s, despite the limited modernization as well as military capabilities of China, its vast boundaries, massive population, and more importantly, its geographical proximity to Japan, an America imperium, the country was able to rise against both the US and the USSR. Organski (1958: 321-322) predicted in 1958 that China would become a dominant nation if Chinese internal development could be industrialized. These anxieties manifested in a number of presidential speeches. President Eisenhower’s speech (1956) vis-à-vis the China threat and Japan is one such example:

There is no one in this room that needs a blueprint of how important it is to us that Japan stay outside the Iron Curtain. A nation of 90 million industrious and inventive people, tied in with Communist China... would indeed pose a threat to us that would be very grave indeed.

The Sino-Soviet friendship and China's geographical proximity to North Vietnam, nevertheless, did not mean that their triangle relationship (between Russia, China, and Vietnam) was stable. Again, systemic explanations of conflict, introduced by Waltz, help us understand US strategic interests in Vietnam. By applying Waltz's systemic theory of conflict (1971: 454-374), there were two sets of structural conditions limited by the triangular relationship. First, the insecurity of the Sino-Soviet relations must be acknowledged; therefore, notwithstanding the alliance, the relationship was instable since 'the uncertainty of each about the other's future intentions and actions – works strongly against their cooperation. The fate of each state depends on its response to what other states do. ... [This] depends not only on the extent to which their fates are linked in terms of security but also on how closely they are entangled in other than military ways' (Ibid.: 460-461).

The alteration in the relationship was not explicit until the period 1965–1969, which subsequently led to the Sino-Soviet split. With regard to Vietnam and the two powers, Vietnam, as a weaker state, had very few choices owing to the highly asymmetric nature of interdependence between Vietnam and the two greater powers. As Crockatt indicated, 'Among other reasons, geography dictated the maintenance of good relations with both powers: while North Vietnam was dependent primarily upon the Soviet Union for heavy military equipment, the main supply route for these deliveries lay through China' (Crockatt 1995: 245). This communist triangle not only narrowed options for all communist states, but they also shaped US motives in Vietnam.

The American motives behind sending troops to Vietnam, after President Johnson came to office in 1965, should not be understood separately from the dynamics of relative capabilities in an international system, namely the Chinese acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964 (Rusk 1968: 255-257). Furthermore, in that year, the Sino-Soviet relationship had not yet failed. Again, there were the Soviet spheres, including China, its subordinate state, on the world map of 1964. Therefore, the US presence in Vietnam was only a part of a whole map, which could be seen merely as an option among American

endeavours to deal with the overall threatening situation, notwithstanding the possibility of a political backlash by the Republicans in domestic politics (Hall 2008: 15). In terms of the US strategic perspective, the Chinese acquisition of nuclear weapons was a crucial incident in that the US had to revise its strategic policy toward the status of Communist China (Lall 1968: 263-268). In addition, the Soviet inability to counter Chinese bellicosity in the Vietnam War was also another incentive to the US in revising its policy (Tow 1994: 135). Nevertheless, the revised policy toward China could not be implemented until the late 1960s.

During the period of 1965–1969, there were rapidly growing anti-war movements on the US home front. Much of these movements, including the student movement, the black movement, and the feminist movement, were more or less related to the US presence in Vietnam (Virden 2008: 128-148). Consequently, Johnson's administration was pressured by these upheavals; moreover, his escalating military budgets and the US involvement in Vietnam led to a budgetary backlash against his domestic projects (Ibid.: 133). These civil unrests spurred Washington to find a way out from Vietnam since, as Zaroulis states, 'The war in Southeast Asia... was causing a kind of civil war in the United States' (Hall 2008: 57).

In 1965, McNaughton, McNamara's Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, listed the priorities of American foreign policy toward Vietnam as follows: '70%—To avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor). 20%—To keep South Vietnam (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands. 10%—To permit the people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better, freer way of life' (Crockatt 1995: 241). The question, nevertheless, was 'how'. By considering international systems during that period, there was no doubt that withdrawal could not be an option, since it would bring great strategic disadvantages to the US, especially regarding its satellite states in Northeast Asia, namely Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, as well as the declination of American prestige as leader of the 'Free World'. Thus, the author argues, by looking at the whole situation, American motives in Vietnam and the Far East included fighting for the sake of strategy, not victory.

#### **From bipolar to tripolar: its implications to the US's options in Vietnam**

The excessive losses in the Vietnam War, which led to fires at American homes, as demonstrated above, had provoked Washington into finding a solution to its involvement in the Vietnam War, but the Sino-Soviet communist relationship provided the



US with no other option except to continue the war. However, as was already mentioned, the Sino-Soviet friendship was fragile, since the Chinese strategy ‘constantly sought to develop the autonomous military resources necessary for it to make a crucial difference in the global balance of power, whether bipolar or multipolar in nature’ (Tow 1994: 121). The turning point emerged in August 1968, when Czechoslovakia was intervened by the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. The incident instantly concerned Beijing in that a strategic counterweight to neutralize the Soviet threat to Chinese national security was prioritized (Ibid.: 129). In the following year, its relations with the USSR worsened rapidly, and the prospect of border conflicts between them became obvious. In addition, this also reflected on the disagreement with North Vietnam through the second half of the 1960s (Ibid.: 129-136). Thus, the Sino-Soviet split could be seen as the transformation of an international system from a bipolar scenario to a tripolar one, since, as the article already mentioned, the acquisition of nuclear weapons was a great success in terms of military resources as it has become a deterrence to its northern threat as well as the US. Neo-realists like Waltz, however, disagree with the idea of tripolarity during the Cold War.

The changing polarity provided opportunities to Nixon’s administration, which came into office in 1968 and considered new options toward the Vietnam War. Nixon’s Vietnamization policy, in which the US would strengthen the South Vietnamese regime while gradually withdrawing American forces, was accepted as a way of reengineering its policy toward China (Ibid.: 136). In addition, it must be noted that the need to abandon the Vietnam War was a crucial stimulus to revise existing Sino-American relations (Crockatt 1995: 248). After declaring the Guam Doctrine in 1969, President Nixon officially visited China in 1972, and the diplomatic success reflected on the issuing of the Shanghai Communiqué. Moreover, the US was assured that the Far East would not be intervened, and China would not threaten the US satellite states in Northeast Asia. In addition, the USSR was regarded as the world’s principal security concern by both states (Tow 1994: 136). Despite the fact that the US was defeated in the Vietnam War, it is an exaggeration to conclude that the US eventually suffered as a result. As Waltz points out, ‘Success or failure in peripheral places now means less... America’s failure in Vietnam was tolerable because neither success nor failure mattered much internationally’ (1979: 190-191), since Vietnam as well as the Far East were only parts within the whole situation.

In summary, this article demonstrates why neo-realism offers an insight into American motives behind the Vietnam War. Since the war was only a small clause of the

US strategic policy, the American motives, therefore, cannot be understood separately from the dynamics of an international system. As is already pointed out, the emergence of the US presence in Vietnam and the American struggle in the War during the turmoil at home were the effects of a system which limited rational options for the US. While the former derived from a change in the distribution of capabilities, namely Chinese nuclear weapons, the decision on the latter was limited by the Sino-Soviet relationship. Even though the defeat in the Vietnam War led to political disasters for many politicians, including President Johnson, the US, as a great power in an international system, incurred only insignificant damage from the war.

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