

UNITED STATES POLICY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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There is a serious and far-reaching debate about U.S. foreign policy. A major theme in this discussion is the criticism that the United States is overcommitted in too many parts of the world. It is charged that we have attempted to enforce a Pax Americana or that we have an "arrogance of power." This process of re-examination of U.S. foreign policy in the 1960's has been focused on and is inevitably related to the tragic war in Vietnam. The Vietnam conflict and American involvement in it raises nearly every question about goals of U.S. policy in Asia, the obstacles to the achievement of those goals, and the instruments of foreign policy within which we are forced to work.

Our policy in Southeast Asia should be seen in the broader context of the current debate about America's role in foreign affairs. The issues of Vietnam are more than whether to stop the bombing of the North or whether to mine Haiphong harbor. Rather the issue raised in Vietnam is, how far are we willing to go and at what costs to suppress Communist associated revolutionary change in the non-Western world? A closely related issue is, are the ideological, organizational, military, and economic tools at our command sufficient for the task which we have set for ourselves?

Since World War II, besides furthering our national security, the United States has been performing, more or less consciously, the role of guardian of a particular set of values about the nature of world order and the relationships between states. This order includes both the recognition of a principal fact and the elaboration of a hope. The principal fact which we recognize is that the present world order is based on the persistence of the nation-state as the basic unit of political organization. Unlike Communist ideology, our world view accepts the durability of the nation-state as the basic unit of political organization. A major goal of U.S. policy is to support the independence and territorial integrity of nation-states. The hope which we hold out is that the emergent pattern of relationships between nation-states will be governed by a growing body of world law, in which ultimately even the most intense political conflicts, involving territory and who shall control it, are resolved by peaceful means.

These two principles, therefore, are important over-all guidelines of U.S. policy which have not varied much since our emergence as a great power. What has changed is the world in which these principles must be given practical effect. We recognize, of course, that we live in a world where change is rapid and fraught with the possibility of violence. Everywhere, political questions funnel quickly into armed conflicts. A cursory look at the last several years will count armed attempts at territorial change, sometimes successful, in the Middle East, with the Arab-Israeli conflict; in South Asia with the Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistan conflicts; and in innumerable small-scale wars in Africa. The United States has not engaged in a direct military sense in the majority of these conflicts. While we have rejected the role of policeman in this world order, impersonally carrying out the logical implications of a commitment to uphold world law, we have helped to build international cooperation through the sponsorship of regional and international conferences, by our participation in international organizations, and by our contributions to various peace-keeping efforts of the United Nations. We try to encourage the recognition by all states of the need to carry on international relations in a civilized manner.

On the hard question of directly involving our strength in one side or the other of an armed conflict involving the control of people and territory, the United States has moved with great caution. We weigh the consequences of a commitment in one area on our commitments in other parts of the world. We ask whether our involvement can bring about a desirable conclusion to the conflict. Finally, we examine the implications of involvement or noninvolvement on the long-range course of American interests.

We must assume that all of these questions were asked by our policy makers at the various turning points in our Southeast Asian involvement. We must assume that our policy makers in the four administrations which have made and reaffirmed so pointedly our commitment to the defeat of the Communist goal of unification of Vietnam under Hanoi's auspices, have agonized over the consequences of their action. What factor has been added to the Vietnamese situation which has compelled the United States at every turning point to increase the involvement of the United States?

Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy describes the U.S. position during the waning days of the French Indochina war as one of supporting the French fight against the Viet Minh while at the same time urging that the French give national independence

to all of Indochina.¹ After 1950 the United States perceived the Communist world as a near monolith. Our major concern at the close of the French engagement was whether to attempt to continue to work through the French as the bulwark in Southeast Asia against the expected advances of Communist influence, or to let the French withdraw and assume the “bulwark” role ourselves.

United States’ direct involvement began in the period of the Geneva convention of 1954. We did not participate directly in the Geneva meeting, according to Assistant Secretary Bundy, because our policy makers “did not wish to associate themselves in any way with a loss of territory to Communist control.” At this point we made clear a third guiding principle of American foreign policy in the postwar period—that we would do everything possible to prevent the acquisition of any more territorial control by Communist governments. It did not matter whether these territories were divided nations as in Korea, Germany, and Vietnam, or independent entities on the border of a Communist state, such as Greece or Iran. It was to this end that we pressured the French into installing Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister of South Vietnam.

By 1954 the United States had committed itself to preserving the independence of non-Communist states in Southeast Asia. Among these states was South Vietnam.

The Geneva accords clearly refrain from referring to either of the divided halves of Vietnam as states. Nevertheless a set of authorities did exist in the North and likewise through French and U.S. efforts in the South. Certainly it was the intent of the conferees to provide some mechanism for the unification of the two units. Political arrangements concerning who would control what territories were to be left to those directly engaged.

Since this arrangement clearly raised the threat of a Communist North Vietnamese takeover, the United States did not leave matters to chance. We were aware that in 1954, and presumably for at least a year or so after that, the North would win in any election, North or South. Ho Chi Minh was the single most popular figure in the country. We took it upon ourselves to create a non-Communist alternative to Ho Chi Minh in the figure of Ngo Dinh Diem.

In this act lies ambiguity of our position. By supporting non-Communist nationalism under Diem, were we saying that here is a national, that is, all-Vietnamese alternative to Ho Chi Minh? To

¹ This discussion is based on a speech given before the National Student Association, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, August 15, 1967.

be sure, we had always said that we would be willing to see the unification of North and South through free elections under United Nations auspices. Thus it appears from this that the United States had no desire to create a new "South Vietnamese nationalism." On the other hand, we did extend the SEATO guarantee to South Vietnam as an independent nation-state. Again in the words of Assistant Secretary Bundy, in 1954 "a new national entity came into being in South Vietnam." This new nation was one of the "valid national entities" of Southeast Asia that we were committed to defend. Thus it seems clear from Mr. Bundy's remarks and from the action of the United States at that time and at present, that we have tried to create a non-Communist nation in South Vietnam which was nationally distinct from its Communist enemy, North Vietnam. Not only did we create it, but "we moved into a major supporting role and undertook a major treaty commitment involving South Vietnam."

What about our support for a reunified Vietnam? We stipulated and the Geneva accords stressed that the election or plebiscite, whichever interpretation prevails, should be free. Mr. Bundy and other spokesmen for our policy have said that a free election was impossible in North Vietnam under Communist aegis. Any proposal for such an election by the South was not forthcoming so we cannot know. We do know that whether it was for reasons of pride or because Diem doubted his own political base in the South as a Northern Catholic, that the elections proposed by the Geneva accords were never held.

Whatever the case, by 1961 and the advent of the Kennedy administration, in Bundy's words, we were "deeply engaged in Southeast Asia and specifically in the preservation of the independence of South Vietnam." Since we have repeatedly expressed that reunification can come only through free elections, and since we are firmly convinced that free elections cannot be held under a Communist regime, and since we have assured the North Vietnamese that we have no intention of destroying the Communist government there, we must conclude that we are committed to existence of a separate South Vietnam as an independent nation-state. Thus we have a more or less permanent division of what was once a single nationalist movement, led and probably fully controlled by the Communists under Ho Chi Minh. This division has been given legal status by virtue of the United States defining South Vietnam as a state, and by our political judgment that it is a "viable political entity."

We have undertaken a task in the creation of South Vietnam as

a non-Communist state based on a genuine sense of national identity with the government in Saigon, which we cannot fulfill. By our own admission, nationalism was defunct in all Vietnam except for that controlled by the Viet Minh. By our own admission the policies of Diem, a Northerner and a Catholic, were at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive. By our own count the Viet Cong, however much they had been trained in the North, were Southerners and did control the majority of the population throughout much of the Diem regime. We contributed to the overthrow of Diem because we believed that he was destroying any chance for a South Vietnamese nationalism to emerge. We have further stated that from that time until the Thieu-Ky regime of 1965, South Vietnam "wallowed in political confusion."

We had asserted the existence of a Vietnamese nationalism which could effectively counter that of the Communists. We placed our bet on a Northern Catholic in a Buddhist country. We were forced by circumstances to hope that we could at least create a South Vietnamese nationalism, surely a new phenomenon, which is not shared today by political leaders in the South, many of whom still consider themselves Northerners. It is time to admit that the history of the last thirteen years has told us one story, that non-Communist nationalism is not a strong commodity in Vietnam and that it cannot be manufactured by American policies. This is especially true when we realize that anti-Communist nationalist feeling is strongest among those persons who fled from the North at the time of partition, and that the dominance of these refugees in the ruling places of the Saigon government, both under Diem and under Ky, is a source of constant friction and hostility on the part of the Buddhist Southerners.

An objective reading of our policy leads to the conclusion that in the interest of our over-all policy of containing Communist expansion, or, put another way, preventing the emergence of Communist regimes, we have acted consistently to first create and then sustain through American assistance, military training, and now actual commitment of U.S. troops a separate South Vietnamese nation-state. We have made South Vietnam an ally in fact through the extension of the SEATO protocols. With these policies we have created a situation where, by definition, any political involvement in the South by North Vietnam is both subversion and aggression against a sovereign state.

We state that we have offered to negotiate without conditions with North Vietnam. Yet for the North Vietnamese to negotiate without the active and equal status of the National Liberation Front is to accept the U.S. definition of the war. The negotiations would

be about the withdrawal of aggressive forces and subversive influence from South Vietnam. For the North Vietnamese, it would be an admission that the U.S. definition was correct.

We are emphatically committed to protecting the separate existence of South Vietnam. From the Northern point of view, it is precisely the issue of whether South Vietnam is a separate national political entity that the war is all about. For them to negotiate on the grounds that South Vietnam is a viable nation-state which the United States is pledged to protect would be to admit defeat at the outset. We are, therefore, imposing very real conditions on negotiations.

In the world view of the administration, the success of Communism in South Vietnam would be a major boost to Communist subversion in other parts of Asia. Thus the line is drawn. Either we persist in South Vietnam by defeating the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, or we withdraw from the field of battle, go back on our commitments, and in all likelihood open the doors to Chinese Communist dominance of Southeast Asia. The forces of Communism everywhere would be encouraged, and all the enemies of the United States would move to quickly make political propaganda out of our defeat. Is there an alternative to our present policy in Southeast Asia? In the view of the administration, there is not.

What will we have gained from a defeat of the Viet Cong and Hanoi in Vietnam? We have expressed no desire for bases in Southeast Asia. Presumably we would evacuate our major troop strength in South Vietnam and Thailand. Presumably we would leave behind in South Vietnam a government and military structure reasonably able to take care of itself. Frankly, if the war were to end in the next six months, it is doubtful if the United States could withdraw with much confidence that the present government would survive. In short, "victory" in South Vietnam means:

1. Forcing the Viet Cong and Hanoi to withdraw from the armed conflict.
2. Eradicating the political structure of the National Liberation Front, either by imprisonment, reindoctrination, or exile of of its leadership.
3. Creating a national government in South Vietnam which reflects the basic social and cultural make-up of South Vietnam.
4. Creating the beginnings of a viable economy, sufficient to sustain and improve the standards of living of the South Vietnamese.

5. Creating an internal security force sufficiently strong to prevent the re-emergence of sustained guerilla activity in the South.

Only by achieving these objectives could the United States afford to withdraw militarily from Vietnam in terms of the present policy.

I am not convinced that we have the power or political determination to pursue a long period of quasi-colonial tutelage of the South Vietnamese, in the hope that in the distant future they can take care of their own internal problems with only technical and capital assistance from the United States.

Assuming for the moment that we are willing to stay for a long period, first to crush the insurgency militarily, then to rebuild and stabilize the political situation, what would be our position in other parts of Asia? By defeating Hanoi in Vietnam, would we necessarily have solved the problem of political chaos and revolutionary change in other parts of Asia? Does it follow that Laos would be relieved of its internal difficulties with the Pathet Lao? Does it follow that there would be no more Communist activity in the northeast of Thailand? We have backed ourselves into the position where we must believe that a solution in Vietnam is a solution for all of Southeast Asia. Yet it seems that we will not have solved the internal political and economic conditions which make Communism a viable alternative in Southeast Asia. And we will not have eliminated the natural tendency of Communist China to become involved in the affairs of the states on its borders.

The consequences of our present policy may well be just the contrary of what we hope to achieve. Instead of a China that has somehow learned a lesson in South Vietnam, we have had a rapid increase in Chinese disruptive activity, as pointed out in Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia. I do not see the logic of a position which says that by defeating Hanoi we have somehow reduced Peking's capacity to be engaged in subversive activity in other parts of Asia.

In the long run it is futile to persist in a policy which attempts to seal off the states on the southern border of China from Chinese influence. Where there is nationalism and a fairly well-established political elite, as in Thailand, the United States can and should assist in the development of that nation. Certainly Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and perhaps Malaysia would be targets for increased American capital, technical, and internal security assist-

ance. Edwin O. Reischauer suggests that the strategy of shifting the basis of support to Thailand would only spread American military commitments "into areas where the Vietnam war had just shown that our type of military power was relatively ineffective."² This is not necessarily the case. It is not ineffective U.S. military power which is contributing to our inability to defeat the Communists. It is our inability to find the key to a viable political organization and ideology which could sustain a Saigon government. Our military power can be very effective when we are acting in a supporting role of a government which has its roots in the political tradition of most of the people and which demonstrates its capability to carry the main burden of responsibility for its own security. Neither of these factors have existed to any significant degree in South Vietnam. What must any alternative policy in Southeast Asia seek to achieve if it is to be preferred to the present position? An alternative U.S. policy would have the following objectives:

First, it must achieve a reduction in the U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam with the simultaneous goal of seeking the reunification of North and South. We should seek a withdrawal of North Vietnamese regulars coincidental with a phased withdrawal of the U.S. military. This should be initiated by a unilateral halting of the air war in the North. Reunification and the process of reconstruction could be assisted through offers of U.S. capital assistance, ostensibly committed to the South but available throughout Vietnam. We should make it clear that we will not oppose unification by any formula worked out by the Vietnamese themselves.

Second, it must find some way of permitting Communist China to have greater influence in Southeast Asia. We cannot expect this to be friendly or constructive influence. But we can hope to engage China in a more rational dialogue than the present situation permits. I do not believe China will join the "community of nations" as we wish unless she has a greater say in Southeast Asia than we are presently willing to accept.

Third, it must find some way of permitting the United States to continue to have a role in Southeast Asia, although not a dominant one. We have already moved to encourage regional cooperation in the Mekong River development scheme and numerous other projects. If we indicate that we are prepared to do more, once the Vietnam problem is out of the way, I see no reason why this should not be acceptable and desirable to the nations of the area.

²Edwin O. Reischauer, "Vietnam: What Are Our Choices?" in *Look*, September 19, 1967.

Fourth, the United States should reaffirm its military commitments to the SEATO signatories against overt attack from China or Vietnam. We should also make available to them internal security assistance short of direct intervention where there clearly exists a threat that cannot be handled by the country's own resources.

Such a policy, pursued carefully and gradually, could result in a situation where the small states of Southeast Asia would be permitted to reduce the reliance on their own security solely on their good relations with the United States. It might permit them gradually to enlarge their contacts with China, always keeping the United States in the equation as a counterweight to Chinese influence. It would be a policy which would reduce the immediate American military involvement in Southeast Asia, and substantially reduce the enormous financial cost of the present war. Finally, it would be a policy which might restore the support of many domestic internationalists in the United States to a policy of reasonable U.S. involvement in Asian affairs.

What are the costs of withdrawal, however gradual and however papered over with other activity? We should not minimize the psychological effect it might have on our Asian allies. Certainly they would re-evaluate their relationship with the United States and China. It does not follow, however, that this policy would result in a massive diplomatic shift of Thailand, the Philippines, or Indonesia to a pro-Chinese stance. After all, these countries would still have an interest in a U.S. presence in Asia. They would continue to have a vital interest in their own political independence. So long as the United States is a global power, it will figure in the foreign policies of these states. I do not think a withdrawal from Vietnam would mean the rapid rise of Communist insurgency in other parts of the world. The success or failure of a Communist guerilla movement in Venezuela, for example, depends on factors internal to the hemisphere and Venezuela.

Perhaps the most telling argument against withdrawal from Vietnam short of victory rests on the fact that we would be going back on our commitments. As Assistant Secretary Bundy points out, "When great powers commit themselves—by treaty and by a total course of conduct extending over many years—an element of reliance comes into being, both within the area and within other areas in which commitments have also been undertaken." This no doubt is true. Yet it seems that the United States, as a great power, has a variety of commitments both foreign and domestic. To the extent that the Vietnam conflict makes it politically impossible to meet some pressing commitments to our own domestic social and political well-being, it is time that we examine our priorities. Furthermore,

there is a real danger that the war in Vietnam is eroding domestic support for an internationalist position by any administration.

What, then, are our alternatives in Southeast Asia?

We may proceed with our present course, gradually increasing the application of military pressure on Hanoi on the assumption that China will not intervene, and that Hanoi cannot hold out forever. As I have tried to suggest, I see this as a long-term commitment of very high cost to the United States. With military victory there still would be no guarantee that political stability would be achieved in South Vietnam and that the whole affair would not begin again.

The other reasonable alternative is to elaborately and carefully withdraw from Vietnam, cushioning the psychic shock of withdrawal with every possible diplomatic effort. In connection with withdrawal we should step up our efforts to encourage China to play a role as a legitimate power in Southeast Asia. They may reject this. The moderation of the present regime will not happen overnight. Nevertheless we will have held the door open to a more responsible role than is presently the case. I believe it is worth the risk.

It has been asked, why are we in Asia? We can no longer ask the question. It may have been relevant when the United States opened Japan to Western influence. It may have been less than rhetorical prior to World War II. The United States has considered itself a Pacific power since at least that time and I doubt if a complete withdrawal from this position is possible or desirable. Having said that, however, I can but feel that through our quite honorable efforts to protect the freedom of small states in Southeast Asia, we have gradually come to perceive ourselves as the dominant power in Asia. However much we may dislike the Communist Chinese, it is futile for the United States to attempt to prevent China from having a major role in the affairs of that region. A policy of containment, pursued as it is in Vietnam, seems destined to prevent the hoped for moderation of Chinese attitudes and policies. I believe that the United States has a real opportunity to do more than contain China. We have an opportunity to begin to bring China into the "community of nations." We cannot do it while bombing within ten miles of the China border.

I must close with the war in Vietnam. Our persistence in this effort works against the emergence of a truly effective U.S. role in Southeast Asia. I have suggested that a withdrawal from Vietnam would not be the disaster our present leadership portrays, but would open a new and more realistic era of U.S. involvement in Asian affairs.