

Failure in Vietnam and Afghanistan

A comparative analysis of the U.S. and Soviet Interventions



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Introduction

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Over the last years personal interest attached to the prolonged animosity between the United States and Soviet Union between 1945-1991 made clear the best thing to do was to write a thesis on a Cold War subject. When starting this project it was not quite sure whether this thesis would elaborate a conflict, politics or maybe a technological issue. However, it was evident this thesis would include involvement of both U.S. and Soviet interest. As the thesis also had to contain a comparative analysis, it seemed best to set a U.S. conflict opposite a Soviet. The choice for an American conflict was quickly made. Without any doubt this meant a deeper examination of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. To choose a Soviet conflict was more complex because it had to be suitable for a fair comparison with the events in Vietnam. Research on Cold War literature and articles led to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan between 1979-1989. Especially the denotation “the Soviet Union’s Vietnam War”, a term widely used when referring to the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan made conjunction with the American participation in Southeast Asia and created an opportunity for further examination. A next tool was the addition of the role of U.S. and Soviet politics. Thus conflict and politics became the main ingredients to forge a comparative analysis. As an addition to the ongoing debate on subject matter in Cold War historiography this thesis may place the examined conflicts and politics in a different perspective.

Subject of the thesis

This thesis consists of a comparative analysis of two conflicts that originated during the Cold War period; U.S. participation in the Vietnam War (1954-1973) en the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989). It discusses similar and comparable economic, political and military behavioral patterns of the U.S. and Soviet governments and explains why both nations eventually failed to achieve their strategic objectives in Vietnam and Afghanistan. To elaborate the analysis eight aspects are used which can be applied to both the United States and the Soviet Union. The following aspects are discussed:



- Economy
- Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (geopolitics)
- Domestic Politics
- Prestige
- Ideology
- Détente
- Military Objectives
- Media Coverage

For the United States the year 1964 can be considered the starting point of the war. Yet, the analysis about Vietnam begins with 1954 because from this moment U.S. political attention shifted to events occurring in Southeast Asia which eventually led to the escalation. The year 1973 is selected as a concluding year because disengagement from Southeast Asia of U.S. troops and officials was already in advanced stages, although complete withdrawal was not reached before 1975. The starting point for the analysis about the Soviet Union is 1964, when the Kremlin for the first time drew political attention towards Central Asia. The Soviet part ends with the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989.

Why a comparison between these two conflicts?

A comparison between these two conflicts emerged from a deep interest in the Cold War period since the conclusion of the Second World War, especially the position therein of the two mightiest powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. During this restless period both powers dealt with many political and military conflicts in domestic spheres, but foremost abroad. After rapid decolonization halfway during the 1950s there slowly emerged a hierarchical classification of divided worlds. Thereby the Third World became a synonym for the total of all developing countries, most of which were located in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Although most of these Third World countries were not associated with alliances such as NATO or the Warsaw Pact they chose to side with either the United States or the Soviet Union. For the fragile Third World countries a neutral position in the greater conflict was almost impossible as they remained too dependent on American or Soviet economic/military aid. Since the total collapse of the Soviet



Union in 1991, the Cold War period may be considered as ended. A historical revision of this period can be used to think about the role the two mightiest powers have played in the Third World for many years. Why could both powers not win in the Third World and attached themselves with their long term political and military conflicts? Even more important became the question why both powers enmeshed into a conflict which proved to be inescapable without causing and incurring serious damage. What had two Third World countries in Central Asia and Southeast Asia to offer the most powerful political powers in the world? Was there an opportunity for economic gain? Or did they both want to show each other and the outside world simply which proved to be more powerful in geopolitical terms? Anyhow, the fact is that both the United States and the Soviet Union used behavioral patterns in their Third World conflict which can be put beside and against each other in a comparable manner. This comparative approach of structuring behavioral patterns gets a peculiar character because in its historiography, the Soviet-Russian conflict in Afghanistan is sometimes referred to as “the Soviet Union’s Vietnam War”. Here conjunction with the American conflict in Vietnam is made. The reason why both the U.S. and Soviet conflict can be regarded a “Vietnam-type conflict” can be found in the fact that both powers got involved in a conflict they could hardly escape. They sank further away into a quagmire of self-created problems. Within the Vietnam historiography this phenomenon is known as the Quagmire-theory.¹ This theory is widely accepted by orthodox Vietnam historians. The theory’s logic consists of the assumption each next political or military step taken in conflict can be considered escalatory without escaping opportunities. Thus adepts of the Quagmire-Theory believe escalation of conflict is caused by failure of the previous step taken which inexorably will worsen the conflict’s situation with each (possible) subsequent step. Strikingly, this theory cannot only be attributed to events happened in Vietnam. Events in Afghanistan between 1979-1989 could equally serve as a theory’s example. Yet, it must be emphasized this thesis does not demonstrate to what extent the term “the Soviet Union’s Vietnam War” and the Quagmire-theory can be applied to the situation in Afghanistan and although both powers mutually participated in an indirect manner in each other’s conflict this analysis nor focuses on this crosswise involvement which faltered D tente, a political policy conducted by the Americans and Russians in the 1960s to relax their mutual hostile relationship. This thesis simply

¹ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, (Mass Market Paperback, 1988), 7.



tries to explain why both superpowers failed to achieve their strategic objectives in Vietnam and Afghanistan using eight comparable aspects.

Why is this interesting for the observer to know?

First, this is the first time the role of both the United States and the Soviet Union in Vietnam and Afghanistan are compared in the same thesis which tries to answer why both powers failed to achieve their strategic objectives in a Third World country. Second, the analysis focuses on U.S. and Soviet political behavior in a Cold War conflict. Thus no reference or comparison is made to post-Cold War conflicts of both nations. Thirdly, a comparative method known as the Boolean method is added to the analysis to explain the failing outcome for both nations. Also a deeper examination of certain behavioral patterns can be helpful to understand certain decisions taken in the past and the impact they had on the developing course of the Vietnamese and Afghan conflict. For those with above average interest in these conflicts this analysis could also offer more insight in American and Soviet Cold War politics.

What is the comparative method?

The comparative method used for this analysis is derived from the account of Charles Ragin - *The comparative method - Moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*.² Most common for this method is the use of the Boolean method, a way to tally several variables that have affected the examined conflicts. The analyzed variables can be forged into a Boolean table. This table determines whether a variable attributes to the failure or not. The Boolean table directly shows the influential variables. To keep everything well-ordered only three digits are used. (1) = significant, (0,5) = important or influential, and (0) = non influential or unimportant. Though it is desirable to only use 1 and 0, this is rather too abstract because the analyzed variables may overlap and are all in some way responsible for the failure. Nonetheless, a distinction has been made between the variables, otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish the important from the non-important variables.

² Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method – Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies*, (University of California Press, 1987)



Example. Hypothetical Boolean table showing three causes of regime failure

	Country 1.	Country 2.	Similar variables
A. Conflict between older and younger military officers	0	1	
B. Death of a powerful dictator	1	1	<i>Politics</i>
C. CIA dissatisfaction with the regime	0,5	0	
Outcome			Failure (F)

Country 1.

$$O = aBc$$

Country 2.

$$O = ABc$$

When a letter is depicted as a capital letter this means the events attached to this letter were significant for the final outcome. When a letter is depicted as a small letter the events attached to this letter may have been influential, but not significant for the final outcome. The following equation can be derived from putting together the combination of both countries. A, has no significant influence on the final outcome as well as the equation. Because 1 is attributed to B for both countries, the latter can be considered as a present variable. 0,5 and 0 are attributed to C which means *CIA dissatisfaction with the regime* was an absent variable for both countries.

(1.) (2.)

aBc + ABc

Bc

Present = B

Absent = c

As noticeable country 1. and 2. only have one similar present variable, B. Apparently the *Death of a powerful dictator* was a similar feature for both countries which caused a regime failure. Both countries also have one similar absent variable, c. Thus *Bc* is the final outcome of the combined equation. For both U.S. and Soviet behavioral patterns I have worked with evident comparable material, thus provable political or military decisions verified by secondary literature or scientific or journalistic articles. Furthermore, some statistical overviews and graphs include this thesis. The choice for this method is made due to its ability to structuralize behavioral patterns.

The thesis is split into three parts. The first part consists of the analysis of the United States between 1954 and 1973. The U.S. part starts with an introduction and then explain how the Americans got involved in the Vietnam War. Subsequently the U.S. failure is examined by using the eight aspects. The American part ends with a conclusion and an overview of statistics. The second and Soviet part also starts with an introduction followed by an explanation why the Kremlin choose to intervene in Afghan politics between 1979 and 1989. The next section elaborates the eight aspects which were responsible for the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. Like the American part, the Soviet part ends with a conclusion and gives statistics at the end. The description of events in Vietnam comes first because they serve as a mirror for Soviet behavior prior and during its occupation of Afghanistan. The third and final part elaborates the conclusive comparative analysis based on the Boolean method. This thesis concentrates exclusively on U.S. and Soviet interests. Thus no extensive conflict-related attention is drawn to (South)Vietnamese or Afghan perspectives. Some observers may note U.S. comparison between “Vietnam” and “Iraq” would have been much easier to digest. In this case it could be very interesting to inquire whether



the United States learnt from its mistakes in the past (Vietnam) when it chose invading Iraq. Although this was a very tempting idea it would also impede the realization of a fair comparison. First because this thesis is about the Cold War and after 1989 the international situation changed radically. Another problem is that the Iraq conflict's outcome is yet unknown, thus not a suitable case to compare to the events in Vietnam.



Chapter 1

The United States (1954-1973)

Introduction

*“Let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that”*³ – Richard M. Nixon, 1969

After the conclusion of the Second World War, the United States emerged as the world's most powerful military and economic nation. Therefore Washington felt a responsibility to its allies to secure them with economic and contingent military aid. As an adept of rapid decolonization of the Third World, the United States got involved in the French conflict with the nationalist movement led by the revolutionary Ho Chi Minh in French Indo-China (Vietnam). The Geneva Accords which emerged shortly after a humiliating defeat for the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 pledged for an armistice and carefully worded the division of North and South Vietnam with a provisional military demarcation line on either side of which the two forces would be regrouped after their withdrawal. Also new elections were announced, with the ultimate goal to reunify Vietnam within two years. However, these elections were never held because there was still too much air to clear between northern and southern Vietnamese political representatives. Also the communist or rather nationalist North was considered to be too much of a threat by U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower who had just recently stated his anxiety about communist expansion in Southeast Asia (Domino Theory), though until then Ho had not yet manifested himself as a communist. Eventually the result of Northern revolutionary spirit and Southern discontentment led to a divided Vietnam. The struggle for Vietnamese independence instigated a civil war in the South between the Vietcong (literally; Vietnamese communists) and the South Vietnamese government. To halt communism the U.S. administration felt a great responsibility for the preservation of a non-communist and stable South Vietnamese regime. From the outbreak of the Vietnamese civil war, the United States became more anxious to hold the line against the Northern insurgency, especially when the South Vietnamese showed their

³ <http://www.vietnamwar.net/quotations/quotations.htm>,
23 March 2011.



American ally they could not alone withstand the insurgency. From the moment Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson dragged his nation into war; the United States was unable to turn the tide to its own advancement and became entangled in a conflict which they could not escape from without serious damage.

It would take Washington many years to realize that the decision to engage in a Vietnamese conflict was probably the biggest political and military mistake the United States made during the Cold War. The next section explains how the Americans got involved in Vietnam politics, which eventually led to an embarrassing defeat, and caused a severe blow to U.S. prestige.

How did the United States end up in Vietnam?

After the conclusion of World War II, the United States and its allies were determined not to let another world war occur in the future. However, in early 1945 the United States and one of its strongest allies, the Soviet Union differed in their vision on how to preserve peace and a stable world order. Still devastated by the German invasion, the Kremlin believed it was entitled to former occupied Soviet territory by the Nazi's. In a short time parts of the current Baltic States, Poland and Eastern Germany were swallowed up by the Soviet Empire and communist regimes were installed in satellite-states Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. Because of the division of Germany into four occupation zones after the war, most tensions between the western allies were expected to involve the fate of post-war Germany. Berlin in the middle of the Soviet occupation zone was the most controversial topic discussed by the western allies. The announcement of the Deutsche Mark in West Germany and West Berlin, led to a blockade by the Kremlin of the Soviet part of Berlin in 1948. A counter reaction by the western allies, which soon followed, resulted in the establishment of NATO in 1949. Although already started around 1947, animosity was still rising between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1949, and soon the post-war years were dominated by Soviet communism and U.S. capitalism, with the latter believing communism was a huge threat to a balanced new world order. From that moment Washington's Cold War policy almost completely concentrated on the containment of communism around the globe. In the early 1950s further Soviet penetration into the West was ruled out, but the United States was still unsure of Soviet intentions towards the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Washington regarded



especially the Asian nations as extremely vulnerable to fall into the hand of the Kremlin. This thought may seem a little exaggerated, however many U.S. officials believed if one nation would become communist, other Asian nations would follow suit. Within this 1950s Domino Theory Vietnam was considered a key factor, especially since the nationalist movement (Vietminh) under the auspices of Ho Chi Minh, tried to oust the French from its soil. At first the United States remained neutral, but when U.S. strategists became aware of the vulnerability of Vietnam to communism if the French would leave Washington shifted from neutrality to open support for the French. The massive support for the French was the result from the intensification of the Cold War in Europe, its extension in Asia, and the establishment of direct links between the Vietminh and the Soviet Union and communist China. All succeeding Cold War events caused a snowball effect for the United States, and before many U.S. officials realized it, American involvement in Vietnam became irreversible.

U.S. failure in Vietnam

As an outcome this thesis assumes a failure of the United States to prevent the South Vietnamese regime from falling to the Northern insurgents and to contain the further spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. Eight aspects are examined which contributed to this failure. By explaining these eight aspects, the reasons for the Americans failure in Vietnam should be made much clearer. Hence, the aspects are completely determined by their influence on the failure of the American intervention. Most aspects elaborated in the following sections focus on foreign and domestic politics.

The following aspects are discussed:

- Economy
- Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (geopolitics)
- Domestic Politics
- Prestige
- Ideology
- Détente



- Military means
- Media Coverage and the First Televised War

1. Economy

With a powerful economy the United States could provide the South Vietnamese army with fresh U.S. troops and a massive arsenal of modern weaponry. Though during the 1960s more economic resources were attached to domestic issues, the United States was able to equip South Vietnamese forces without any restriction. However, the U.S. economy was heavily affected by the war. Requirements of the war effort strained production capacities, leading to imbalances in the industrial sector. Companies which normally produced consumer goods were being ordered to manufacture military equipment. Washington's military expenditures overseas contributed to an imbalance of payments and a weak dollar, since no corresponding expenditures were returning to the United States. Combined with high domestic social costs – the heritage of Johnson's Great Society- the military expenses created a budget deficit which fuelled inflation. Simultaneously many consumers lost confidence in the government. Interest rates rose, restricting the amount of capital available for business and consumers.

In 1965, President Johnson sent a request to Congress for additional appropriations to pay for the war. At the same time it would be clear more money would be needed in the next year. The war became a very expensive enterprise. In 1965, the war in Southeast Asia had cost \$100 million until May. In May, the administration asked for another \$700 million. Between January and August the total amount of military aid for Vietnam came to more than \$14 billion.⁴ At the same time it seemed Johnson did not realize his desire for a 'Great Society' could only be hampered by the huge expenditures on the war. In fact, the Johnson administration had overestimated its economic strength: the American system could not produce the resources both to improve society at home and to resist communism abroad. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara who served under Kennedy and Johnson, believed the United States could afford the war forever: "and I say it for this reason: that there are many things, many prices we pay for the war in Vietnam, some heavy prices indeed, but in my opinion one of them is not strain on our

⁴ Godfrey Hodgson, *In Our time - America from World War II to Nixon*, (Macmillan London limited, 1976), 245.



economy”⁵ Yet, federal spending on domestic social services did almost rise as fast as the military budget. For a long time, the U.S. economy could afford both guns and butter. The difficulty was that the federal budget could not, unless it transferred resources from the private sector, without running a deficit. During this period with an economy that reached full employment, a deficit meant inflation. The only option to continue the fighting was to raise taxes. But Johnson realized the war was not popular and he hesitated to raise taxes instantly. Then Congress hesitated too long before increasing them and inflation and a balance-of-payments crisis were the result. The war had mounting economic consequences and was draining funds from government programs that benefited a large part of society. The administration had always underestimated the costs of the war, including the time and the number of troops it would take to win the war. This meant that as long as the war would continue, the administration was willing to spend a huge amount of money on the fighting. The costs of operation Rolling Thunder for example, were ridiculously high. The cost in bombs of a B-52 mission alone ran to \$30,000 per sortie. Direct costs of the air war, including operation of the aircraft, munitions and replacements of planes, was estimated at more than \$1.7 billion during 1965 and 1966. Between 1965 and 1968, the United States lost 950 aircrafts costing roughly \$6 billion. For each \$1 of damage inflicted on North Vietnamese targets, the United States spent \$9,60.⁶

In short, the economic consequences of the decisions of the Johnson administration were inflation and the problem of the balance of payments deficits. Though the problem of imbalance was older than the Vietnam War, the decision to escalate the war in 1965 had both a direct and indirect negative effect on the balance of payments position.

When the Nixon administration took office in 1968, the economic situation only worsened. Nixon realized the United States could not proceed with its huge spending on South Vietnamese and U.S. military equipment. The U.S. economy was heading for a serious crisis if irresponsible spending continued. Since the end of World War II, the United States had spent almost \$200 billion on foreign aid, and by the mid 1970s, had concluded that there was no significant relationship between extending aid and winning, or even retaining, allies such as South Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger knew the war was too expensive to continue and searched for a fast solution.

⁵ Godfrey Hodgson, *In Our time - America from World War II to Nixon*, (Macmillan London limited, 1976), 245.

⁶ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 179.



However, a solution was not found in an economic strategy but in negotiations. The economic strength of the Americans was its weakness at the same time. Because economic possibilities seemed limitless until the early 1960s, many statesmen believed the costs of warfare could be covered as long as the United States would exist. This was a miscalculation. Hanoi was not intimidated by the bulk of money the Americans spent to advance militarily in the war. With the mounting oil crisis, deteriorating relations with the Arab nations of OPEC, and the unrest at home, it was almost impossible for the administration to put too much financial effort into the war. The war was turned into a financial disaster for the United States and Nixon realized the United States could not afford a weakened future economic system due to an extension of an unwinnable war. Not only many policymakers in the White House believed the war had become unwinnable in the early 1970s, it was also simply impossible for the United States to continue the war with all the emerging financial constraints.

2. Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (geopolitics)

First several arguments which may have driven the United States into Vietnam are elaborated. The arguments must be seen in a geopolitical context, which explains Washington's decision to get involved in Southeast Asian politics. After World War II, the United States tried to contain communism all over the globe. Europe could easily be safeguarded by the Americans, because U.S. strategists in the early 1950s analyzed Soviet penetration of the West was ruled out, simply because they believed Stalin would not risk a war which might lead to a new occupation of his beloved Soviet empire. However, at the same time the Chinese regime was overthrown by Mao Zedong's Communist Party and therefore the Southeast Asian region was regarded by Washington as extremely vulnerable territory to be controlled by the communists. Especially French Indochina or Vietnam was considered a key nation, which had to be freed of communist influence. What followed was a period of over more than two decades of U.S.-Vietnamese relations with commitment, warfare, and misery.

Containment, the Geneva Accords, and the Domino Theory

Before 1940, Vietnam had been of little concern for the United States. But by the outbreak of World War II, U.S. strategists had come to view it as important to the nation's global interests.



According to Washington, Asia was a continent highly vulnerable to the influence of communism, whether this came from Moscow or Beijing. However, the latter was perceived the most threatening because it was believed by U.S. statesmen that the Soviet Union did not have ideological interests in Southeast Asia. U.S. involvement in Vietnam was the result of a significant policy change concerning communism in Southeast Asia, which the United States believed had to be contained. America's policy of containment in Asia was initiated and supported by successive groups of officials under successive Cold War presidents who were motivated by a sense of purpose and responsibility, a sincere desire to preserve the status quo in Asia, and a dedicated interest in extending U.S. political values to Asia. These were America's preoccupations and desires, and America's desires became Washington's foreign policy objectives. The burden of the war in Vietnam caused a narrowing of America's policy focus to the exigencies of the day-to-day process of waging that war. This focus was considered justifiable because success in Vietnam was mandatory if America's objectives were to be fulfilled in the rest of Asia and, in fact, in the rest of the world.⁷

The Truman Doctrine: Containment

The first step to contain the further spread of communism was taken by the Truman administration. In 1947 a fierce speech was held by Truman in which he announced America's primary purpose was to limit the further spread of the communism around the globe. Although not in so many words, the speech was in fact directly addressed to the Soviet Union.

Washington's desire to contain communism focused not only on Europe but also on Asia, where the Chinese government was overthrown by the Communist Party of Mao Zedong, Soviet ties with North Korea intensified and the French and the Vietminh backed by Chinese aid fought over the independence of Indochina. Though opposed to colonialism, the United States supported the French in their struggle in Indochina (Vietnam) against the nationalist movement, the Vietminh led by Ho Chi Minh, because of Ho's long standing ties with Moscow which were seen as suspicious by Washington. Indeed U.S. strategists believed ties between Ho and Moscow might lead to a communist regime in Vietnam, which was unacceptable to the United States. Because

⁷ Henry T. Nash, *American Foreign Policy- A Search for Security*, (The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1985), 258.



large Asian nations like China and North Korea were already having a communist regime, officials in Washington believed Vietnam was the key nation from where the United States could prevent the further spread of communism, at least if the French would succeed.

Military support for the French

The aid and comfort given to the French military in retaking their Indo-French colonies in the fall of 1945, was regarded by Washington as an act of anti-communism, but to Ho Chi Minh, the anti-communist response in Vietnam and to the Chinese revolution and the Korean War, was only to mask U.S. colonialism in Southeast Asia.⁸ The more U.S. rulers tried to dominate others, the more they had to subjugate the citizenry to pursue their militarist project. Thus although U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War only began during the early 1960s, the Americans were already active in the Pacific Rim since the 1940s. The backing of the French colonialists was odd behaviour from Washington. Indeed, it was the United States which overtly opposed the return of Indochina to the French after World War II, because an attempt to regain control of its colony might provoke a long and bloody war, bringing instability to an area of economic and strategic significance. Even if France should succeed, U.S. strategists reasoned, it would restore monopolistic controls that would deny the Americans access to raw materials and naval facilities.⁹ However, the French did not succeed, and an armistice between France and the Vietminh, and division of Vietnam between the North and South were settled by the Geneva Accords in 1954. Nonetheless, the outcomes of the Geneva Accords made U.S. involvement in Vietnam politics inevitable.

Eisenhower and the Domino Theory

According to the Geneva Accords, unification of Vietnam would only occur after elections were held in July 1956. However, when Eisenhower lamented Ho Chi Minh would probably achieve an easy communist victory because the North had over fifteen million people whereas the South had only twelve million, elections were postponed and eventually abandoned. Washington was

⁸ Moss Roberts in, *Anti-Americanism* edited by Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross, (New York University Press, 2004), 259.

⁹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 9.



afraid and also convinced that the communists eventually would win the elections and defeat the South Vietnamese regime of Diem.¹⁰ U.S. officials believed if South Vietnam fell to communism, Southeast Asia would also soon succumb. Communism in Southeast Asia would lead to communism in all of Asia. Communism, regardless of the nation in which it appeared, was tied to and directed primarily from one center, Beijing, with some additional support from Moscow. The belief that North Vietnamese communism was different from, and would conflict with Chinese communism, was discounted.¹¹ U.S. violation of the Geneva Accords of 1954 slowly sucked the United States into incremental participation in the Vietnamese civil conflict.

Anti-Sovietism

U.S. officials became convinced that no region in the world was immune to the communist threat. Communist regimes were in control in Eastern Europe, North Korea, China and North Vietnam. Important and dramatic incidents such as Soviet aid to Egypt and the ensuing Suez crisis in 1956, the intervention in Hungary at the same time and the launching of Sputnik 1, convinced Washington in the early 1960s, the Soviets were deadly serious about world dominance.¹² Because further enlargement of the Soviet empire towards the West was ruled out, many observers in the White House believed Moscow would bet its cards on Southeast Asia. In some respects it may seem to be going this way. Indeed there were Ho's long-standing ties with Moscow, however evidence of direct Soviet contact with the Vietminh was not found by U.S. diplomats. Although the Soviet Union was the primary preoccupation of American foreign policy officials, the threat of communism refused to be so geographically confined.

Anxiousness toward China

The United States tried to prevent the Chinese as a communist nation from obtaining a seat in the United Nations and its allies from interacting with the PRC. Washington perceived the Chinese as one of the greatest threats in the Southeast Asian region. Relations with Beijing became even more precarious when the Chinese communist party began to provide the North Vietnamese with

¹⁰ Jaya Krishna Baral, *The Pentagon and the Making of US Foreign Policy – A case study of Vietnam, 1960-1968*, (Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1978), 54.

¹¹ Henry T. Nash, *American Foreign Policy- A Search for Security*, (The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1985), 259.

¹² Nash, *American Foreign Policy*, 247.



military aid and technical support in 1949. In fact Beijing was perceived as even more threatening than Moscow, because of its aid to the Vietminh. U.S officials may have reasoned the Chinese aid to Ho Chi Minh was only the beginning of a communist take-over of Vietnam, which eventually would spread to Laos and Cambodia and perhaps other vulnerable Asian nations.

Johnson and the escalation of the Vietnam War

In 1957 civil war was the inevitable result of all the domestic and foreign tensions around the postponed unification of Vietnam and U.S. violations of the Geneva Accords. Alongside the turmoil, the United States felt it could not abandon the non-communist regime of South Vietnam. But with an unstable South Vietnamese regime heading for collapse, it seemed this could only be preserved by U.S. military involvement. Nevertheless Kennedy did not yet wanted to play out this card and did everything to postpone any kind of deployment of U.S. military support, though the political instability in South Vietnam remained a serious concern for Washington.

On November 1, 1963 Diem was assassinated by some discontented South Vietnamese officers. Although evidence of U.S. involvement in the assassination was never found, the attempted 'coup' directed by the White House proved the United States was leading the South Vietnamese and not the other way around, and autonomy for the South Vietnamese evaporated almost entirely. Thus the result was that after the assassination of Diem a relation developed in which the South Vietnamese were completely dependent on U.S support and the South Vietnamese leaders lost control of the situation. After some rapid presidential successions, Diem was eventually succeeded by Thieu, a former military officer who was considered suitable by Washington, to lead the fragile South Vietnamese regime.

Only a couple of weeks later, Kennedy himself was assassinated and the U.S presidency fell to Lyndon B. Johnson. From the moment he took office in the White House in December 1963, Johnson tried to avert any possibility to enhance further U.S. involvement in Vietnam politics. Strategic objectives were already set during the Eisenhower era, namely the preservation of an independent and non-communist South Vietnam and to contain the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. But almost nine years after the objectives were set by the U.S. government, there were no signs that the Americans would achieve these objectives as long as a civil war divided Vietnam. Although Johnson favored his domestic 'Great Society' policy over a



war in the remote jungles of Southeast Asia, he also stressed he would not be held responsible for the Americans losing a war to the communists. “Nothing was worse than that”.¹³ Thus Johnson overtly supported the South Vietnamese people and administration in their struggle against an external communist conspiracy, as he qualified the insurgency. Though Washington may have desired to draw not too much attention to the political situation in Vietnam, it was obvious from the start the Americans could not remain aloof if they wanted to protect South Vietnam. Because it was clear the South Vietnamese regime could not hold the line on its own, some U.S. officials opted to assist Thieu at least politically. Indeed the United States could offer the regime very experienced political strategists. For Johnson this was a desired and serious option to conduct. Indeed, from an U.S. perspective this was not only a safe, but also the most inexpensive option, because no military force would be used, and to send some officials to Saigon was not a severe blow for the Department of the Treasury. Besides, during this stage of war, the insurgency from the North was not considered strong enough by the White House to dominate the South Vietnamese army. Therefore deployment of U.S. troops to Southeast Asia was ruled out, at least for now. It was obvious Johnson feared that an Americanization of the war would further undercut the self-reliance of the Vietnamese and therefore stated a non U.S. third party was more suitable to hold the communists.

By the year’s end there were 16,300 U.S. military advisors in country, supported by \$500 million dollars of aid. From the moment Johnson had sent his men to Vietnam, he realized this engagement in Vietnam could turn its allies against the United States, and also spark domestic unrest. Therefore Johnson decided not to inform the public about the latest developments concerning Vietnam. Instead, the president tried to shift the attention to his cherished domestic, Great Society program. Though Johnson also stated in public the United States would not get military involved, he requested his military advisers to look into opportunities for secretive warfare. Johnson may have reasoned these measures would be sufficient to keep the South Vietnamese out of the hands of the communists, but events in August 1964 made sure Johnson could no longer ignore the escalating situation in Vietnam anymore when events in the Gulf of Tonkin brought the Americans closer to war.

¹³ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 70.



On July 1 1964, Maxwell Taylor was appointed by Johnson as the Ambassador in Vietnam. Taylor indicated that the result the Americans might achieve in South Vietnam was an accurate barometer for the future of the whole of Southeast Asia. After one of his visits to South Vietnam, Taylor reported to Washington that the Vietcong had made dramatic gains in recent months, and were increasing in number as their control over the countryside expanded. There was also the ongoing deteriorating situation of the South Vietnamese government, which Taylor blamed on its continued ineffectiveness. Therefore military progress was stifled and the ambassador doubted this-or any other-government could master Saigon's political divisions. Taylor wrote, "Indeed in view of the factionalism existing in Saigon and elsewhere throughout the country, it is impossible to foresee a stable and effective government under any name in anything like the near future." Since South Vietnam seemed unable to halt its decline Taylor, but also William Bundy, a foreign affairs advisor, believed the United States had to perform this task for it, by pressing attacks against North Vietnam. The ambassador expressed some anxiety about this approach. "(T)he actions may not be sufficient to hold the present government upright," he confessed. But he saw no alternative to escalation, given Saigon's desperate condition. Washington, Taylor concluded, must "be prepared for emergency military action against the North if only to shore up a collapsing situation."¹⁴ According to Johnson's national security adviser McGeorge Bundy, military force on North Vietnam merely included two considerations. Firstly Johnson wanted to morally support the Saigon administration, and second he wanted to restrict infiltration of North Vietnamese forces and materiel into the South.¹⁵ At the same time, Johnson also appointed Lieutenant General William C. Westmoreland to be the new U.S. military commander in Vietnam. As a West Point graduate and a much decorated veteran of World War II and Korea, Westmoreland seemed a suitable candidate for this position. Taylor believed that if his proposal of attacking the North could save South Vietnam, this would be an enormous contribution to the stabilization of the total situation of Southeast Asia. Conversely, a loss of South Vietnam to the communists would be the start of an erosion of the U.S.'s position on that subcontinent.¹⁶ A failure of the proposal would also affect America's durability, determination and reliability, not

¹⁴ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire – Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), 34.

¹⁵ J. Sampiemon, *De Affaire Vietnam toegedicht met de Pentagon Papers*, 56.

¹⁶ Sampiemon, *De Affaire Vietnam*, 154.



only in Southeast Asia but also in Africa and Latin America. Thus Washington conceived South Vietnam as the hinge in a worldwide confrontation with communism and therefore it was essential to terminate the Vietnamese conflict soon. Nonetheless, Johnson hesitated to deploy U.S. troops. He saw no point hitting the North, if the South was not together.¹⁷ Negotiations were offered to the North Vietnamese. North Vietnam indicated its willingness to enter into negotiations. When Johnson was calling Hanoi to abandon its Chinese ally and join in a Western-funded and Western inspired development scheme the North Vietnamese leaders were astounded and moreover insulted. To give up its objective of reunifying Vietnam in return for American largesse was in no way negotiable. Hanoi rejected the offer.¹⁸ The peace moves brought the two nations no closer. On April 8, Hanoi's Pham Van Dong released a four-point program which did not conflict with U.S. objectives, and some officials urged further contacts to explore Hanoi's position. Johnson and his top advisers however, interpreted Hanoi's statement that a settlement must be in accordance with the program of the National Liberation Front (Vietcong) as a disguised cover for the communist domination of South Vietnam and saw no reason to discuss it further.¹⁹ As a prudent politician Johnson requested \$700 million for military operations in Vietnam on May 4, 1964. During this stage of war there may have been no need for Johnson to request such an amount for military operations. However, the tide would turn when the incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin officially dragged the United States into the war. While Johnson at the beginning of 1964 was not yet convinced the South Vietnamese needed U.S. military support, he was indeed worried about the growing influence of the Vietcong among Southern hamlets. The secretive military acts under the auspices of McNamara were useful, but did not deter the North Vietnamese enough to drive them back behind the demilitarized zone. In August of the same year the tide would turn when a U.S. destroyer had an unfriendly encounter with a group of North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The incident at the Gulf of Tonkin sparked an enormous reaction in Vietnam as well as across the Atlantic Ocean. The Vietnam War was no longer strictly a Vietnamese issue, but slowly evolved into an Americanized conflict with no end at sight.

¹⁷ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire – Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), 36.

¹⁸ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 66.

¹⁹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War – the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 161.



This line of official thought suggests that America's involvement in Vietnam was a logical extension of the principles embodied in the Truman Doctrine, the policy of containment, the obsessive preoccupation with the threat of communism, and the persistent faith in military power as the means for resolving America's perceived threats.²⁰ Nonetheless, it seemed that Johnson was hardly interested in waging a war in Vietnam, but was rather persuaded by his advisers to seize the incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin to justify his decision to escalate the war.

Nixon and Kissinger

While continuing Johnson's Vietnam policy, Nixon spoke of peace as "ending" the war, but not "at any price." The goal was a lasting peace, which required the preservation of American credibility and the creation of an American led structure to peace.²¹ Because the war also negatively affected the U.S. economy, Nixon hoped a Vietnamization of the war could alleviate this burden. With a costly war the Americans seemed to walk straight into a dead-end alley. Despite domestic unrest, Nixon seemed the right man to avoid defeat. Nixon stressed, Vietnam was a testing ground of Mao's "wars of liberation" which served both Chinese and Soviet interests. He considered Hanoi as controlled by the Vietcong. Nixon stressed the war went far beyond Southeast Asian borders as he claimed a direct involvement of the Soviet Union ought to be a undesirable possibility;

"Beneath the struggle among Vietnamese lies the larger, continuing struggle between those nations that want order and those that want disorder; between those that want peace, and those that seek domination. It is this larger conflict which gives the war in Vietnam its importance far beyond Southeast Asia... We must recognize if we are to restore a realistic perspective on the war... the deep and direct involvement of the Soviet Union."²²

Thus avoiding defeat was the primary purpose for Nixon and Kissinger, but the containment of communism also remained a high priority. Although many officials in Washington believed this

²⁰ Henry T. Nash, *American Foreign Policy- A Search for Security*, (The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1985), 259.

²¹ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, (University Press of Kansas, 1998), 37.

²² Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 50.



war could not be lost, most Doves were convinced this conflict could neither be won. Though Nixon's still focused on war by attrition, and even the most dovish, continued to hope that somehow the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong would conclude they could not win and the United States could not be defeated. Perhaps then they would agree to a negotiated settlement acceptable for Washington, one that would preserve the Saigon government, thereby enabling the United States to exit from the war while maintaining its honor.²³ It seemed however, that the Americans wanted to come to acceptable terms with Hanoi only to their own advantage. Kimball correctly states this could be wishful thinking and it illustrated even more how trapped US officials were in their commitment to credibility. The Johnson administration had already failed to achieve negotiations with the North, so at this moment in 1968 there were no signs of positivism to renew an effort for another round of negotiations. Although Nixon was determined to bring the war to an end, whether there would be negotiations or not, he also stressed there was no such thing as 'losing this damn war'. At most there would be peace with honor. He too believed that American foreign policy was in crisis. But to him, in a world of challenge and change, it was a crisis of will and understanding, of power and credibility, of public order and economic health. The United States needed to realize it could not solve anything with military power. The negotiation table had to become the new platform to discuss U.S. foreign politics with other nations. Nonetheless, military action should be considered if calamities would undercut negotiations. The question however, remained how to start negotiations with Hanoi without losing the ability to achieve the set U.S. objectives.

"Peace with Honor"

With his most reliable companion, Henry A. Kissinger, the chapter of Vietnam had to come to a final end. "We will not make the same old mistake", "we will we make peace or win" stated Kissinger in 1969 about the Vietnam affair.²⁴ Although it seemed Nixon and Kissinger trusted each other unconditionally, there was also the development of a strange relationship of distrust and paranoia between the two politicians. Both shared an obsession for secrecy, intrigue and

²³ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, (University Press of Kansas, 1998), 53.

²⁴ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 271.



unexpected political acts.²⁵ According to Nixon and Kissinger, U.S. foreign politics had to alter drastically if the Americans wanted to leave Vietnam in an honorable way without breaking their promises of 1954 to the South Vietnamese of a politically stable and non-communist South Vietnam. Paradoxically, although in 1969 and around the Washington there were talks about peace, behind closed doors only warfare was considered important. Both Nixon and Kissinger wanted to risk a possible further escalation of the war if this would lead to negotiations with Hanoi on a short term. However, further escalation had to be executed very carefully. The first step to achieve negotiations with the North was characterized by the term, “Peace with Honor”. Nixon and Kissinger were convinced the use of excessive force as displayed by Operation Rolling Thunder (1965-1968) rather had an opposite effect. To coerce Hanoi to put down their weapons other measures were also considered necessary. Both Nixon and Kissinger believed warfare was a plausible weapon to achieve strategic objectives. On the other hand the war was, “a bone in the nation’s throat”, that divided the nation and was a serious hindrance for the conduct of domestic and foreign politics. Nixon stressed he wanted to distance himself from the old Vietnam policy of Johnson and realized Vietnam would further determine his future as a politician. “I’m not going to end up like LBJ,”- “holed up in the White House afraid to show my face outside on the street. I’m going to stop that war. Fast.”²⁶ However, the war had to end in an honorable way. But in this stage of war it was not easy to just leave the South Vietnamese. Nixon could not confound the confidence Saigon had in the Americans. Besides U.S. credibility was also at stake and Nixon and Kissinger feared a direct withdrawal of all U.S. forces would send a bad message to the strong communist nations as the Soviet Union and China, which might become interested in an upcoming power vacuum in Southeast Asia. During 1969 “a war for peace” was a widely used sentence in the White House. Kissinger at least wanted to end war peacefully because he believed peace in Vietnam was essential for world peace. Kissinger stated, “any other solution may unleash forces that would complicate the prospects of international order”.²⁷ The idea to end the war in Vietnam in a peaceful way was an exponent of the new cold war policy which was concentrated on détente. To achieve the cherished peace some conditions

²⁵ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 272.

²⁶ Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 273.

²⁷ Ibidem, 274.



were set. First, an U.S. withdrawal could not be seen as an expression of losing the war. Further Kissinger agitated against the idea of a ruling coalition of representatives from both North and South Vietnam, because this “would destroy the existing political structure and thus lead to a Communist takeover”. Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger hoped for a fair negotiated settlement with Hanoi and the preservation of South Vietnam. At least the South had to get a reasonable chance to survive.²⁸ Unlike Nixon, Kissinger was foremost directed on negotiations with Hanoi. Kissinger was prepared to leave Vietnam, but a stable South Vietnamese regime under the leadership of Thieu had to be given in return. In 1969 Nixon and Kissinger were full of confidence and believed they could bring Hanoi to a negotiated settlement which would meet the terms acceptable for the Americans and end the war within six months to a year.

Although Nixon and Kissinger publicly stated they were for negotiations, the discussion in the oval office headed in an opposite direction when discussing Vietnam. Nixon told his advisers the United States had wrongly used its military apparatus in the past. With short and heavy strategic bombings Nixon and Kissinger literally wanted to bomb Hanoi towards the negotiation table. The term “Peace with Honor” was in fact no more than a political tool used to hide the real intentions of Cold Warriors as Nixon and Kissinger. Thus the policy of “Peace with Honor” was transformed into a policy of “Peace through Coercion”. To implement this policy, Nixon realized he had to improve relations with China and the Soviet Union. Because a stop of Soviet or Chinese military aid to the Vietcong probably made Hanoi realize they better start to negotiate. Nixon was willing to do everything in his power to end war in this stage. In a private conversation with White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, Nixon expressed his feelings about his new war policy;

“I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry -- and he has his hand on the nuclear button' -- and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace”²⁹

²⁸ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 274.

²⁹ H.R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power*, (Dell Publishing, 1978), 312.





Fig 1. On the evening of April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that the United States was going to attack North Vietnamese and Vietcong sanctuaries which were threatening allies from the Vietnamese-Cambodian border

Failing negotiations

Whatever Nixon did to express his desire for a “just peace”, the North Vietnamese were not impressed by the president’s proposals, which they considered no improvement over those of Johnson, and to have excepted them would have represented abandonment of goals for which they had been fighting for nearly a quarter of a century. Though the Vietcong was not standing strong in the south, they saw the need to wait for a more propitious opportunity and continued to demand the total and unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Vietnam and called for the establishment of government from which Thieu would be excluded. Nixon’s Vietnam strategy would be a never ending story, had it not been for Kissinger to convince the North Vietnamese to take up another round of negotiations in 1973. The Cambodia crisis represented yet another effort on the part of a profoundly insecure individual to prove his toughness ton an ever widening list of enemies, real and imagined. Nixon and Kissinger tried everything in their power to terminate all U.S. engagement in Vietnam. And though this took yet another six years, they succeeded in their desire in an unorthodox way of heavy war rhetoric and bloodshed.

Washington’s role was over but not without serious damage to its image as the world’s most powerful nation. Indeed the political duo did what they had promised. But Nixon’s use of the



strategy during the Vietnam War was problematic. First, while he would pretend to be willing to pay any price to achieve his objectives, his opponents actually were willing to pay any price to achieve theirs. Second, Nixon had the misfortune to preside over a democracy growing weary and increasingly critical of the struggle. When taking these arguments into consideration, it became clear the war would barely lead towards satisfactory results for Nixon and Kissinger which was already the case when “Vietnam” was still in the hands of the Johnson administration. With a deeply divided White House, outraged citizens and frankly no support of its allies, the United States fought an unwinnable war.

3. Domestic Politics

Domestic politics remained not untouched by the events in Vietnam. Within Congress, opposition emerged between Dovish and Hawkish politicians. Most Democrats could be considered doves, whereas Republican politicians were hawks in many respects. Dovish politicians overtly opposed U.S. military engagement in Vietnam, whereas the Hawkish supported aggressive use of force against the Vietcong. For Johnson and later Kissinger and Nixon the dispute between the two sides was a daily and reiterating concern. Especially Johnson tried to balance his attention to both sides to avert any discontentment which could negatively affect his domestic policy. Nonetheless, Johnson neither pleased Dovish nor Hawkish politicians. Generally insecure and anxious, he felt his ‘Great Society’ became heavily endangered by the Vietnam War. To make things worse, Johnson not only deceived the Congress and Senate by stepping onto the battlefield, but also blurred public opinion. Eventually all attention on domestic politics vanished, and even social or educational policies became attached to Vietnam. When more and more U.S. citizens expressed their aversion regarding military engagement in Southeast Asia, Washington tried to convince as many citizens as possible to win back their support for the war. Promotional and educational material was distributed among universities and colleges. Especially students were avid protesters against the war. They not only protested against U.S. engagement but also against any kind of warfare conducted in Vietnam. While the Johnson administration could regulate the antiwar protests, the Nixon administration met with huge mobs of angry citizens all around the nation. Especially Nixon’s decision to expand the war to Cambodia and Laos in a later stage motivated the protesters to express their dissatisfaction with the 1970s Vietnam policy of Nixon and



Kissinger. Antiwar movements gave rise to harsh suppression by the U.S. government. Police and military force was deployed to stifle all unrest in the streets of large cities as Washington, Chicago and San Francisco. Demonstrations erupted on campuses across the nation, and the protest took on new force when four students at Kent State University in Ohio and two at Jackson State College in Mississippi were killed in angry confrontations with the National Guard and police.³⁰



Fig 2. Deadly demonstrations against the war at Kent State University, Ohio, 4 May, 1970

The whole Vietnam affair was a tough journey for Johnson, especially because there was no clear plan to solve the misery of the war. Since the escalation, the White House was deeply divided about U.S. involvement between Doves and Hawks politicians and the war played a crucial role in the ongoing disagreements between Democrats and Republicans.

Johnson's political ideal of an American Great Society was deeply influenced by the conflict and wanted to terminate the war as quickly as possible, but from a moral point of view he also thought he could not abandon Vietnam without leaving the South Vietnamese with a stable regime and freed from Hanoi's invasion. So the year 1968 ended as it started, with an impasse on the battlefield as well as within diplomatic spheres of influence. Already in the eight weeks after March 31 1968, about 3,700 Americans and more 43,000 Vietcong guerillas were killed. It became clear Johnson would not solve the Vietnam problem before the ending of his first term in office. Hess claims Johnson had only himself to blame. He listened principally to his civilian

³⁰ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 293.

advisers and was particularly enthralled by McNamara, who never paid much attention to the opinions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.³¹

Johnson successor Nixon made domestic unrest even worse. As soon as Nixon took office in the White House his Vietnam policies were foremost Hawkish, which in return sparked a lot of dissatisfaction within the Doves camp. He also strongly opposed the rising antiwar movements and conducted harsh measures to suppress and deceive them. Violence against the antiwar movements caused an outrage throughout the whole country. To meet the call of the antiwar movements and most Dovish politicians, Nixon announced a phased withdrawal of 150,000 troops over a year to silence the storm of anti-war protest.³²

The Vietnam War shattered domestic politics for over almost two decades of mistrust and disapproval between Dovish and Hawkish politicians. Yet, it was not very helpful political distress could not be taken away by the Johnson administration nor by Nixon and Kissinger in a later stage of war. Rather both presidencies were characterized and responsible for expanding the war beyond Vietnamese borders and spark more unrest at the home front.

4. Prestige

U.S. commitment to a remote Southeast Asian nation was not only supportive of the South Vietnamese but was also a matter of self-interest. The Americans could not afford to lose their credibility as the most powerful nation in the West. Highlighted from a U.S. perspective the whole Vietnam War from the outset was also a battle for the credibility of U.S. foreign policies and its military power. If the post-war world wanted to recover and improve economically, it would be wise to build this world to the standards of U.S capitalism. However, while the western part of Europe followed suit a capitalist or 'American' way to recover from its economic collapse, the Soviets further imposed communist influence onto their satellites states. With this shift, the world became more divided in geopolitical and ideological terms. Less than two years had passed since the glorious victory over the Axis powers, and the two Grand Alliance members now found themselves locked in a tense struggle for world dominance. For the Americans this eventually led to a containment policy in 1947 during the Truman administration which aimed to

³¹ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 70.

³² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 288.



impose a restriction of the spread of communism throughout the rest of the world, including Southeast Asia. Although it was quite obvious that this policy foremost pointed at the Soviet Union. In 1954 it was President Eisenhower who stressed the dangers of communism and feared that a downfall of Indochina would lead to a downfall of the rest of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. The Americans considered themselves as defenders of the war, resisters of communist aggression and to stand by their allies to uphold the international order. The survival of South Vietnam was important in terms of upholding America's position and prestige in the world. A failure to hold the American position in South Vietnam would undermine the nation's credibility. Policymakers also believed that the way the United States responded to communist provocations in Vietnam would have profound consequences everywhere.³³ Turbulence in the Third World, especially in Southeast Asia and the Western Hemisphere, appeared to pose serious dangers to American credibility and world order. Especially the communist nations were considered a threat because Soviet-influenced nations were seen as disrespectful toward the United States.

There were also a prestige related disagreement within Congress and the Senate. Domestic politicians could be separated between dovish and hawkish advisers and debates concerning Vietnam did not accomplish any consensus. Regularly disagreement was the result of heated arguments between the two political sides. Dovish politicians, mostly Democrats, were opposed any U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, whilst Hawkish and Republican politicians pleaded for a quick military or political intervention. The 'Doves' assessed Vietnam could be a drain on resources and prestige and would divide the country in the near future. From the moment the conflict in Vietnam threatened to escalate, republican 'Hawks' supported any kind of intervention even if this meant a huge draft of U.S. military personnel and the effort of billions of dollars for other military purposes and stressed the importance of American national consciousness and their image toward the outside world.

The call for acknowledgment of credibility was something the Americans were searching for since the peace treaty of World War I in Versailles in 1919. Virtually in all stages of war including U.S. involvement, issues about credibility came onto the surface. But as history had shown American policymakers, U.S. credibility was never fully accepted by the rest of the world.

³³ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 137.

Thus it was hardly surprising North Vietnam, a nation with military support from the Kremlin was no exception to this kind of thought. Failure to stand by a beleaguered ally meant not only the loss of Vietnam to communism, but an erosion of America's global stature with potentially devastating geopolitical consequences³⁴ Nonetheless, prestige remained an important feature for the White House which could at best be explained by Nixon and Kissinger's desire to solve the war through 'peace with honor'. Apparently U.S. credibility as the world's most powerful nation was more important than ending the war within limited time. Thus officials in Washington, especially during the early 1970s may have been driven by an unconditional belief in their nation's capabilities to leave Vietnam as the ultimate victor. Reality however, showed this stubborn grip on U.S. credibility and prestige had only cost the United States an extension of the war, more casualties and distrusting allies.

5. Ideology

The struggle with ideology just after the conclusion of World War II may have fuelled Washington's defensive policy to contain further expansion of communism. As for the White House, containment was a necessary element to preserve national security. From 1945 to 1968, U.S. citizens had strongly supported its government's view of world politics. But when the Vietnam War escalated and U.S. engagement kept rising, many citizens did not see the moral cause for the United States to wage this war upon a group of - though stubborn-bewildered guerrillas. For the first time in U.S. military history ostensible balance between power and morality was lacking. As for South Vietnam, Washington had always stated a democratic Vietnamese government was not a first demand. Rather the prevention of a communist regime was considered much more important, though in economic respects, the South Vietnamese economy was forged after a U.S. capitalist ideal. Thus ideology was not completely abandoned by the Americans, though this was only applied to economics. In political respects, ideology was no longer an objective for the Americans. After some years of warfare observers in the White House realized, ideology could not be used as a decisive feature to persuade the South Vietnamese, and a logical consequence was the abandonment of any ideological implementation in South Vietnamese politics. Thus, ideology was not directly responsible for an U.S. failure in

³⁴ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 25.



Vietnam, though foreign politics were deeply concentrated on containment, indeed it was the communist NLF, Washington tried to suppress. Would the United States have also escalated a war if the adversary was a non-communist state? Probably they would, but within the Cold War context it seems plausible why the United States did fight for the preservation of a South Vietnamese and non-communist regime. This explains the undeniable need of Washington to provide the South Vietnamese with a democratic regime, a regime which in fact had to serve as an ideological counterpart of the communist administration in the North. In more advanced stages of conflict, U.S. attention shifted to the prevention of the Vietcong passing the demilitarized zone, nonetheless ideological aspect remained at present when political decisions concerning Vietnam were taken into consideration. When the French were ousted by the guerrillas of Ho Chi Minh, the current U.S. administration felt obliged to use ideological aspects to increase the credibility of its foreign policy towards Southeast Asian affairs. Because all U.S. attention in the first phase of the war was drawn to saving Vietnam from the communist Northern insurgency, ideology played a prominent role at first. But as the war continued and the Americans took charge of the South Vietnamese command, the focus shifted to the prevention of the NLF forces to cross the demilitarized zone rather than obstruct the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. For the final outcome of the war this meant ideology did not play a significant role. However, it seemed the Americans may have concentrated too long on the belief that communism played a key role in the war and would negatively affect its course. Indeed the outcome of the war showed the White House had made the wrong assumption.

6. Détente

Because Washington was unsure of Soviet intentions in Southeast Asia, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union remained tense. Though the Americans were not yet involved in the Vietnam War during the Cuban missile crises in 1962, U.S. statesmen were convinced that if no decisive action would be taken to force the removal of Soviet missiles, America's strategy of nuclear deterrence would be seriously weakened. Inaction would suggest to the Soviet Union and to the world that when it came to a nuclear showdown, the United States was inclined to back away.³⁵ If the Soviet Union would not eschew to install intermediate range and medium range

³⁵ Henry T. Nash, *American Foreign Policy- A Search for Security*, (The Dorsey Press, Homewood, Illinois, 1985), 255.



missiles in Cuba, just a few miles from U.S. territory, what were the odds, the Kremlin would not do the same in Southeast Asia? Besides all nuclear worries in an earlier stage, the United States was concerned with the military aid and technological support Moscow provided to the North Vietnamese. U.S. strategists, especially General Westmoreland in the early 1960s, believed a war of attrition would be the right strategy to combat the NLF forces. However, if the Soviets and the Chinese kept providing the North Vietnamese with all sorts of aid and other protective measures, U.S. officials in Saigon stated the war could become a long and frustrating project. In the first years of the war, the Johnson administration's focus shifted from upholding a stable South Vietnamese regime to obstructing the Northern insurgency, which resulted in the relentless attacks on North Vietnamese targets. Johnson was aware of the Soviet and Chinese aid, but was also wary to risk a border conflict with China and another round of nuclear tensions with Moscow. An additional concern was the impossibility for Washington to get a good analysis of the Soviets military capabilities. Therefore it was believed by Washington for many years, deterrence was the only option to deal with the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent, China.

Johnson may have been cautious toward the Kremlin, his successor Nixon was quite the opposite and rather eager to improve relations with the Soviet Union, but also China. Because both Moscow and Beijing began to urge the North Vietnamese to take up negotiations with the Americans, Nixon was of full confidence he could persuade at least China but perhaps also the Soviet Union to assist the United States, though indirectly, to work out his cherished plan of "Peace with Honor". It must be emphasized the new Cold War policy of *Détente* was not only aimed at Vietnam but to an improvement of political ties with the Soviet Union in general. However, a cunning Nixon and Kissinger believed, *Détente* could be the key towards a peace agreement with Hanoi. A first step was a visit to Beijing. Relations with the Soviet Union worsened when Nixon reconciled Sino-U.S. relations. When the Soviet Union became aware of Nixon's visit to Beijing, the Kremlin threatened to fully support the NLF and North Vietnamese forces with unlimited military resources. To counter this threat, Nixon also opted for rapprochement with the Soviet Union. Though Soviet-U.S. relations remained not particularly friendly, they were sufficient. Which meant an actual clash between U.S. and Soviet troops on Southeast Asian soil, was out of the question.



In the end Détente was not directly responsible for the disappointing outcome in Vietnam. Firstly Détente was not yet at stake when Johnson dragged his nation into war and second when Washington during the 1970s for the first time opted for Détente, Nixon was already planning massive extrication from Vietnam. Rather the home-front and Nixon's own personal abilities to be remembered as the greatest president in U.S. history were of much more importance for the final withdrawal than improvement of political relations with the Soviet Union.

7. Military Objectives

Until the controversial events in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, U.S. military engagement was restricted to an advisory role. The first use of direct American military force in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident was to pressure North Vietnam into abandoning its support of the NLF insurgency.³⁶ The American way of waging war in Vietnam since 1965 had been consistent with U.S. military practice in the nation's great wars of the past century. It emphasized big ground-unit campaigns of a thousand men or more and the massive application of military technology on the ground and in the air in pursuit of decisive, annihilative battles against enemy armed forces, the destruction of economic resources, and the undermining of civilian moral.³⁷

U.S. military strategy during the period of escalation from 1965 to 1968 constituted of a two pronged strategy: a ground war in South Vietnam based on the doctrine of "search-and-destroy" and an air war against North Vietnam, "Operation Rolling Thunder".³⁸ U.S. military doctrine emphasized the destruction of an enemy through war by attrition. Destruction of an enemy's war-making capacity would force that enemy to come terms. Because U.S. officials in Saigon were concerned by the capabilities of the South Vietnamese army, Washington decided to Americanize the ARVN. This meant supporting and training the South Vietnamese armed forces and put battalions under U.S. commands.

Between 1968 and 1973 Nixon and Kissinger were determined to quickly extricate the United States from the war. However, the way both politicians tried to reach this goal was rather unorthodox, and Nixon's Vietnamization and the expanding of the war to Laos and Cambodia only extended U.S. presence in Vietnam.

³⁶ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 53.

³⁷ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, (University Press of Kansas, 1998), 47.

³⁸ Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, 85.



Johnson's war: 1965-1968

The Gulf of Tonkin, August 1964

Carrying out electronic espionage off the coast of North Vietnam, the destroyer *USS Maddox* on the afternoon of August 2 encountered a group of North Vietnamese torpedo boats. South Vietnamese gunboats involved in the 34 A plan³⁹ had bombarded the nearby island of Hon Me the preceding evening, and the North Vietnamese, perhaps assuming that the *Maddox* had been supporting the covert South Vietnamese attacks, closed in on the destroyer. Although the Americans never clarified what happened that day, it seems that a brief and frenzied engagement followed in which the *Maddox* opened fire, the patrol boats launched torpedoes, and aircrafts from the *USS Ticonderoga* joined the fighting.⁴⁰ Johnson was reportedly enraged when he learned of the encounter, but no retaliation was ordered. After the second incident, Johnson sent a message to Congress, requesting the passage of a Congressional resolution expressing the support of the Congress for all necessary action to protect “our armed forces, to assist nations covered by the SEATO Treaty and prevent further aggression in Southeast Asia”. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution was ratified by an overwhelming majority of both Houses.⁴¹ On August 7, 1964 the Senate approved it by a vote of 88 to 2, and the House of Representatives by a margin of 416 to 0.⁴² Simultaneous with the events in the Gulf of Tonkin, military officials from the Pentagon presented the White House a so-called Command and Control report. This report does not figure in the Pentagon Papers published by the House Committee on Armed Services. However, the *New York Times* was able to intercept a copy. This report showed three main elements in decision-making relating to the Tonkin affair. There were (1) the planning and

³⁹ The 34 A Plan was a secretive military operation which held U-2 reconnaissance-flights above North Vietnam and to abduct North Vietnamese civilians to obtain U.S. intelligence. The second part of this secretive operation took place in Laos. Here a force of 25 to 40 T-28 strategic bombers were installed. The bombers were manned by Laotian and American pilots. The whole operation was supervised by the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane, Leonard Unger. A last and third element of the military operation were the DeSoto-patrols in the Tonkin Gulf, executed by U.S. navy destroyers.

⁴⁰ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 142.

⁴¹ Duco Hellema, *Frontlijn van de Koude Oorlog in Azië* in *Spiegel Historiae* – nummer 11/12 jaargang 39 november/december 2004

⁴² Jaya Krishna Baral, *The Pentagon and the Making of US Foreign Policy – A case study of Vietnam, 1960-1968*, (Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1978), 88-89.



launching of covert activities against North Vietnam; (2) preparation of contingency plans in respect of an U.S. response to a Tonkin-type scenario; and (3) the passage of a Congressional Resolution empowering the president to take appropriate military steps to attain U.S. objectives in Vietnam. Thus by 1964, besides the importance of a stable and reliable South Vietnamese regime, the containment of North Vietnamese expansion towards the South became another key problem for the Johnson administration.

Americanization

Because there was barely any confidence in the South Vietnamese army, U.S. officials stated the South would only stand a chance against the NLF forces with U.S. military aid. Military officials were sent to Saigon to train and prepare the ARVN forces. Americanization of the war created new and equally formidable problems. Those Americans who visited South Vietnam were stunned by the sheer enormity of the U.S. effort, a many-faceted military-civilian apparatus, generally uncoordinated, in which all too frequently the various components worked against rather than in support of each other. By late 1967, the United States had almost a half million troops in Vietnam.⁴³ One of the most serious problems caused by Americanization of the war was the refugee problem. The expansion of American and enemy military operations drove an estimated four million South Vietnamese from their native villages. Though Washington furnished around \$30 million a year for the care of the refugees, much of the money never reached them. Thus a large portion of South Vietnam's population was left rootless and hostile, and the refugee camps became fertile breeding grounds for the Northern insurgents. The sudden invasion of half a million of U.S. troops had a profoundly disruptive effect on a weak and divided nation. Another consequence were the rising tensions between Americans and the South Vietnamese as the U.S. presence grew and though both parties were fighting for a common cause, they grew increasingly suspicious and resentful of each other. At best, the Saigon's attitude toward the Americans was ambivalent. The Vietnamese appreciated U.S. generosity, but resented U.S. ways of doing things. The Vietnamese recognized their dependence on U.S. aid. On the

⁴³ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 196.



other hand many Vietnamese resented the domineering manner of the Americans and came to consider the U.S. “occupation” a “demoralizing scourge”.⁴⁴

Operation Rolling Thunder, 1956-1967

One of the consequences of the Americanization of the war was the conduct of operation Rolling Thunder. Given the precarious situation in the South, many U.S. officials tried to force Johnson to take harsher measures, by preference military action. Especially Hawkish politicians were convinced that the North Vietnamese insurgents could not cope with a superior U.S. military apparatus. Succumbed by internal pressure Johnson finally admitted military action could be the answer to the advancing North. On 2 March 1965 the first heavy bombing on the North began and Johnson officially dragged his nation into war. Johnson hoped the overwhelming bombing tonnage on Northern soil would force the insurgency to surrender and if this would not work, the bombing could at least coerce Hanoi into negotiations. Johnson’s decision to continue operation Rolling Thunder would be of crucial importance for the remaining course of the war. At this moment of the war, U.S. officials in Washington were very optimistic about ending the war within a few months. Reality however, showed there was no actual progress made and Hanoi became only more agitated by the ongoing bombardments and the North Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong was reluctant to start negotiations with Washington to look for a settlement of the heavy fighting.

Operation Rolling Thunder was intended to weaken North Vietnamese’s war-making infrastructure and sever its lines of supply, thus reducing its capacity to assist the Southern insurgents. The operation relied heavily on bombing of military bases, supply depots, and infiltrations routes in the southern part of the country. From the outset U.S. military strategists believed bombing would deplete the Southern insurgents. An almost immeasurable amount of sorties was deployed on North Vietnamese soil. The bombing was expanded over the next two years in the futile hope that it would check infiltration into the south and force Hanoi to the conference table. As each phase of the bombing failed to produce results, Johnson expanded the list of targets and numbers of strikes. Sorties against North Vietnam increased from 25,000 to

⁴⁴ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 200.



79,000 in 1966 and to 108,000 in 1967; bomb tonnage increased from 63,000 to 136,000 to 226,000 in 1967.⁴⁵

Yet the operation was based on a fundamental miscalculation: that destruction of industrial and communications system would force North Vietnam to abandon the Southern insurgency.⁴⁶ In addition, several factors reduced the effectiveness of the bombing. Heavy rains and impenetrable fog forced curtailment of missions during the long monsoon season. Because techniques had not advanced since World War II, many targets had to be bombed repeatedly by the pilots before they were finally destroyed. Also U.S. aircrafts encountered with a deadly air defense system of Soviet SAMs and MiG fighters. Despite the extensive damage inflicted on North Vietnam, the bombing did not achieve its goals. It did not destroy Hanoi's determination to prevail, and it gave the leadership a powerful rallying cry to mobilize the civilian population in support of the war. By 1967 the United States had paid a heavy price for no more than marginal gains. The continued pounding of a small, backward country by world's wealthiest and most advanced nation gave the North Vietnamese a propaganda advantage they exploited quite effectively. Opposition to the war at home increasingly focused on the bombing, which in the eyes of many critics, was at best inefficient, at worst immoral.⁴⁷

Search and Destroy

After the disappointment of Rolling Thunder, General Westmoreland formulated a new strategy of attrition in 1968. The major objective to achieve with this strategy, which came to be called "search and destroy", was to locate and eliminate NLF and North Vietnamese regular units. Westmoreland reasoned once the enemy would be destroyed, the South Vietnamese regime could stabilize its position and pacify the countryside, and the adversary had to negotiate on terms acceptable to the United States.⁴⁸ Furnished with thousands of fresh U.S. troops and a massive arsenal of modern weaponry, Westmoreland took the war to the enemy. With its technological superiority, the Americans believed they could cope with the peculiar problems of a guerrilla warfare. Nonetheless, the strategy of attrition had serious flaws. In a war without front lines and

⁴⁵ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 173.

⁴⁶ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 86.

⁴⁷ Herring, *America's Longest*, 179.

⁴⁸ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldiers Report* (Garden City, New York., 1976), 149-150.



territorial objectives, where “attiring the enemy” was the major goal, the “body count” became the index of progress. However, most authorities agreed the figures were notoriously unreliable.⁴⁹ It was impossible to distinguish between guerrillas and noncombatants, and in the heat of battle American “statisticians” made little effort. As with the war in the air, targets were hard to control by the Americans. The NLF forces remained extraordinarily elusive and were generally able to avoid contact when it suited them. They fought at times and places of their own choosing and on ground favorable to them. If losses reached unacceptable levels, they simply melted into the jungle or retreated into sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The United States could thus gain no more than a stalemate. The NLF had been hurt, but their main forces had not been destroyed. Thus despite the impressive body counts, it was clear by mid-1967, that the hopes of a quick and relatively inexpensive military victory had been misplaced.⁵⁰

The Tet Offensive, 1968

The Tet Offensive which started on January 30, 1968, was a turning point for the United States. It was the largest set of battles in the war up to that point, and the first to be fought in the cities of South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive is significant in the military aspects of the fighting, but its greater importance is its political and psychological impact in the United States and, in particular, inside the Johnson administration. Tet changed the nature of the debate about the war, enlarged the credibility gap between the administration’s explanations of events in Vietnam and the public’s understanding of the war, created an economic crisis at home, and bolstered the presidential aspirations of antiwar candidates.⁵¹ The effects of Tet were devastating for the Americans.

After Tet, the North Vietnamese could be addressed as the moral winner of the battle. Although the Americans had inflicted greater damage on the North Vietnamese, who lost many men during the covert operation, the latter stood still firm as an organization. Johnson and his advisers had hoped that the strategy of war by attrition would force the NLF to negotiate with the Americans or to maybe even surrender. But in early 1968 this point was not reached yet. Thus the

⁴⁹ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 186-187.

⁵⁰Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 191.

⁵¹ David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: politics, war, and public opinion*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), xiii.



patience of the White House was challenged once again now it seemed the end of the war was out of sight for now. The conclusion of Tet only confirmed the thoughts of McNamara and Rostow, who began to fear depletion of the NLF guerrillas would not lead to an independent and stable South Vietnamese regime and a victory for the Americans. Because Tet had showed Washington, the NLF would only become a harsher enemy to fight in the future, the possibilities to end the war in an honorable way were at stake. In March 1968, a weary Johnson announced in televised speech he would not run as a candidate for the next presidential elections. He also announced a halt to the bombing on the North and appealed to Hanoi to begin peace talks. The sequence of events that led to negotiations probably started with General Westmoreland's visit to Washington in November 1967. On that occasion, General Westmoreland told a Joint Session of Congress that the war was being won militarily. He outlined "indicators" of progress and stated that a limited withdrawal of American combat forces might be undertaken beginning late in 1968. On January 17, 1968, President Johnson, in his State of the Union address, emphasized that the pacification program- the extension of the control of Saigon into the countryside- was progressing satisfactorily. Sixty-seven percent of the population of South Vietnam lived in relatively secure areas; the figure was expected to rise. A week later, the Tet offensive overthrew the assumptions of the American strategy. Tet was a major blow to the achievement of America's strategic objectives and in late 1968 the war reached a stalemate to Washington's dissatisfaction.



Fig 3. U.S. Marines patrol a street in Hue after the Tet offensive, 30 January, 1968



When Johnson took office in the White House in 1963, he inherited a vague policy towards Vietnam of his predecessor Kennedy, who was very reluctant to enhance U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia. Johnson hoped he could continue the line set by Kennedy and be as far away from Vietnam politics as possible. Besides Johnson feared U.S. engagement in the war would have a devastating effect on the development of his cherished domestic program of the Great Society. On the other hand, Johnson did not want to become the first U.S. president to lose a war to communist guerrillas, and seized the occurring events in the Gulf of Tonkin to look for an opportunity to restrain the Northern insurgency by military measures. Although Johnson was responsible for dragging his nation into war, he could not be blamed entirely. Indeed his decisions were foremost established by the advisory roles of his ministers as McNamara and Taylor, whom were a dominating factor in the decision making towards Vietnam. Characterized as an indecisive and soft politician it looked like Johnson wanted to please both his dovish and hawkish politicians, which resulted in a doubtful compromise in where ground troops were sent to Vietnam and operation Rolling Thunder was endorsed, with the guarantee the war would be over within a couple of months. Given the optimism in the White House about a positive ending of a U.S. engagement in the war, the decision to go to war in 1965 was no unreasonable decision. But Washington's reluctance to negotiate with Hanoi in contrast, proved to be an unwise act. Operation Rolling Thunder was still in full progress, but had not yet brought the Americans what they had expected, namely a withdrawal of the Northern insurgents behind the 17th parallel. By 1968, the war went into a stalemate and casualty records on both sides rose dramatically. Instead of a stabilization of the South Vietnamese regime, Johnson's Vietnam policy had only Americanized the war. Washington could no longer deny to its allies and citizens, it was fully at war. For Johnson the war was over in principle. But he left his successor with the most unwanted political and military heritage a U.S. president would have ever desired.



Nixon and Kissinger's war: 1968-1973

Vietnamization

The Johnson administration was responsible for escalating the war. However, the military measures taken by Nixon and Kissinger were no less provocative toward the North Vietnamese. And though Nixon stressed he would terminate all U.S. involvement in the war within a couple of months to a year, the eventual result was another rise of casualties for both the Americans and Vietnamese, an extension of the war, and an aggravated Hanoi, reluctant to negotiate with Washington on the advocacy of U.S terms. To avert further Americanization, Nixon tried to reverse this process, by Vietnamizing the war. In other words, the war had to become the responsibility of the South Vietnamese again. Yet, Nixon still firmly defended the commitment in Vietnam. According a British counterinsurgency expert, South Vietnam was daily growing stronger and that if the United States continued to furnish large-scale military and economic assistance, the Saigon regime might be strong enough within two years to resist a communist takeover without external help. Nixon reasoned that if he could mobilize U.S. opinion behind him, persuade Hanoi that he would not abandon Thieu, and intensify the buildup of South Vietnamese military strength, Hanoi might conclude that it would be better to negotiate with Washington now than with South Vietnam later.⁵² With the Vietnamization of the war, Nixon and Kissinger hoped they could extricate U.S. ground troops from Vietnam, while simultaneously handing over the command of the ARVN to its South Vietnamese superiors. Nixon and Kissinger may have reasoned this was the best way to withdraw as many U.S. troops as possible. However, when the military got in the hands of the Vietnamese again, the latter felt not only unprepared to continue the war without its ally's support, but also abandoned. The Thieu regime felt it was not yet prepared to continue the fighting and found the term *Vietnamization* demeaning, protesting that they had been fighting for years before the Americans became involved and even after 1965 had sacrificed and suffered the most.⁵³ While U.S. combat forces sought to keep the North Vietnamese and NLF off balance by relentlessly attacking their supply lines and base areas, U.S. advisors worked frantically to build up and modernize the South Vietnamese armed forces.

⁵² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 281-282.

⁵³ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 284.



Vietnamization was in full swing by early 1970, yet real progress remained uncertain. Also the corrupt Thieu regime was an obstacle for Washington to make Vietnamization into a success. Indeed, cooperation of the South Vietnamese was required for bringing the war to a good end. Nixon had rather naively hoped that Vietnamization would create a breakthrough in the war. But Hanoi could not be persuaded to take up another round of negotiations. Desperate to terminate the war once and for all, Nixon planned a last relentless series of bombardments on infiltrate-routes, trails and sanctuaries in Cambodia, which were used by the NLF forces. Nixon wanted to display he was resolute in his measures and wanted to show Hanoi but also the home-front this was serious business, and that the United States could settle the war on his desired terms of “peace with honor”.

Cambodia and Laos

Though Nixon may have looked irrational and volatile, his strategy seemed to work for a period, when the NLF was forced to retreated deep into the jungles of Cambodia. With a sense for dramatic ending, Nixon stressed America’s survival hinged on his Cambodian adventure. This was however, a bit exaggerating. If Hanoi was willing to negotiate, this would be done by internal decision and could by no means be the result of the heavy bombing on Cambodian soil, although North Vietnamese officials tried to prevent worse for the noncombatant Cambodians out of pity and self-protection. Hoping to break the diplomatic deadlock by going into Cambodia, Nixon seems merely to have hardened it. North Vietnamese and NLF delegates boycotted the formal peace talks in Paris until U.S. troops had been withdrawn from Cambodia. Hanoi continued to bide its time and the uproar in the United States certainly reinforced its conviction that domestic pressures would eventually force an American withdrawal.⁵⁴

In the early 1970s the situation in South Vietnam remained stable, but Nixon had expanded the war, by approving a major ground operation in Laos in 1971. Once again, the Laotian operation was to buy time for Vietnamization by disrupting enemy supply lines and bring Hanoi to the negotiation table. As with the Cambodian operation, no victory was achieved in Laos either, although Nixon and Kissinger deluded themselves by continuously addressing the

⁵⁴ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 296.



body count which was in favor of the Americans. Many Americans preferred that war would simply go away. But by the summer of 1971 a conflict now more than decade old had begun to come back to haunt the nation.⁵⁵

Despite all harsh military measures taken by Johnson and Nixon, it were the North Vietnamese themselves who felt pressured to continue the peace talks with the United States, after they discovered its allies could no longer be relied on for crucial diplomatic support. Hanoi had survived “the second U.S. war of destruction” but it had suffered heavily. Hanoi was eager to see the removal of all U.S. troops from South Vietnam, because it recognized that dealing with the Saigon forces alone would be much easier. And although Nixon and Kissinger claimed the bombing forced the North Vietnamese to accept a settlement satisfactorily to the United States, it rather was Hanoi’s shift from continuing the war to a strategy of peace that made the peace talks in Paris a meaningful venture.

Concluding words

Both the Johnson and Nixon administration tried to solve the war with the conduct of military power, in which both presidents believed unconditionally. However, when analyzing the course of the war it turns out, the most powerful military apparatus on the globe was not able to be decisive, or at least achieve America’s strategic objectives. There are a number of explanations for the failing conduct of U.S. military power. First, U.S. military strategists overestimated their own capabilities. They believed a remote nation as South Vietnam would never be able to fight the NLF forces without the guidance of U.S. strategists. Many U.S. statesmen realized that by Americanizing the war, the United States would be held responsible for the course of the war and had to face the critical judgement of its allies and the South Vietnamese regime. Further Americanization made extrication for the United States almost impossible. Indeed it would seem ridiculous if the United States abandoned its South Vietnamese ally, only for their own sake and leave Saigon in shambles. Second, the troops sent by Washington were poorly prepared for a war in the swampy jungles of South Vietnam. In fact, America’s military apparatus until then was only applicable for conventional warfare, which the battles fought in Vietnam were clearly not.

⁵⁵ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 299.



Many U.S. soldiers lamented about the humid weather, and about fighting an “invisible” enemy as almost an unbearable task. Hanoi was in the advantage in almost every respect and the NLF forces were only motivated by the failing South Vietnamese military operations and the failing negotiation attempts by Washington. It seemed, the United States had truly underestimated the mentality of the NLF forces, which they perceived as rather fragile and a target which it could literally bomb toward negotiations, if the Americans would roll up their sleeve. Americanization of the war did hardly anything good for the United States, because the Americans were not used to the kind of warfare conducted by the NLF. Thus how was it possible that a rather unprepared group of U.S. commanders would lead the even more inexperienced and ill-equipped South Vietnamese troops? Obviously this could only lead to failure. Vietnamization did not bring the Americans the desired outcome either. When statesmen in Washington realized, Americanization only triggered the opposite effect, they hoped Vietnamization would be successful. However, this time the ARVN displayed so many incapacibilities, that the Americans could simply not abandon the South Vietnamese militarily. The frustrating effect was that the United States could not extricate its troops from Vietnam.

In short, the United States were poorly prepared for this non-conventional war. And whether they Americanized or Vietnamized the war, the NLF forces were simply not willing to yield their independence as long unification was not feasible. A concluding argument about America’s military involvement in Vietnam would be that its military superiority in Vietnam was useless in most respects and rather an obstacle for Washington, but also for the South Vietnamese. American cultural beliefs about men and war, and faith in science and technology delude them about the true nature of war, causing them to consistently prepare to fight the wrong war and to underestimate the will, tenacity, and capabilities of people in developing nation-states.⁵⁶

8. Media Coverage and the First Televised War

During the first years of the war, before the escalation, some reporters questioned assertions of progress that flowed liberally from the U.S, mission in Saigon. Yet, great sympathy was shown

⁵⁶ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense. A Military History of the United States of America* (New York, 1984), 17.



for the U.S. soldiers advising the South Vietnamese.⁵⁷ Noticeable was the positive view in the media about the role the United States should play in South Vietnamese affairs. Journalist David Halberstam even asserted South Vietnam was one of the five or six nations in the world truly vital to the interests of the United States and in that sense he believed it might well be worth a larger U.S. commitment. “We do have something to offer these emerging nations. We can get things done.”⁵⁸ As the U.S. commitment increased support for the war turned fragile and policy makers understood they needed the press to manipulate American public opinion. At first after the escalation of war, U.S. public opinion completely turned against further involvement in Vietnam, let alone to send more troops to Southeast Asia which would lead to the risk of inflicting more casualties. Vietnam became the ‘First Televised War’ for the home-front and the more misery was shown on television by U.S. correspondents, the higher the rates of opposition stacked against further U.S. engagement. American public opinion was divided over Vietnam’s importance. Johnson however, stressed the essence to uphold American interests in South Vietnam. He rejected disengagement and reluctantly offered negotiations to Hanoi after a major policy consult with his advisers. Although negotiations did not belong to the president’s preferences. Nonetheless, it was senator Mike Mansfield and a close companion of Johnson since the 1940s who correctly warned when the president should reject negotiations, “years and years of involvement and a vast increase in the commitment, should be spelled out in no uncertain term to the ... nation”⁵⁹ Support for the war dropped sharply during 1967. Though reporters in Vietnam worked under heavy restriction of the U.S. embassy, more information about the course of the war reached over the Atlantic Ocean. For the first time overt disapproval of U.S. involvement in Vietnam came onto the surface. Public approval of Johnson’s handling of the war plummeted to 28 percent in October, 1967.⁶⁰ Particularly, African Americans opposed the war in number much larger than the general population. Many came to view the war as a racial conflict whose goal was to oppress another people of color. With all the racial tensions in the United States, African Americans correctly saw themselves as the primary victims of an inequitable

⁵⁷ Stanley I. Kutler, *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, (Macmillan Library Reference USA, 1996), 309.

⁵⁸ . Kutler, *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 309.

⁵⁹ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire – Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), 41.

⁶⁰ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 211.



selective service system that drafted their sons in disproportionate numbers and used them as cannon fodder. Though blacks did not join the antiwar protests in large numbers, their growing opposition damaged the administration politically, and their resistance to the draft and discontent within the military itself weakened the war effort.⁶¹ The most controversial story uncovered by the media probably was the My Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968, right after the Tet-offensive. What started as a strategic military hamlet operation in “Pinkville” ended in the brutal killing of hundreds of Vietnamese women and children, though some NLF guerrillas were also hit. When the events in My Lai came into the media it led to an enormous outrage within the international community and the United States. Though there was held no official body count by U.S. authorities, at least 504 civilians must have been killed according to inscription on the My Lai Massacre memorial. My Lai showed the media could not be banned by some official restrictions of the U.S. government. The media deeply influenced the course of the war, particularly during the years of Nixon and Kissinger. When U.S. television stations broadcasted war footage which showed hundreds of wounded civilians and soldier, many Americans were shocked. At this time many antiwar movements were daily protesting across the nation. The longer the conflict continued, the more protest movements were eager to be heard. Journalists and other reporters were stunned by the events in Vietnam. With the daily coverage of the Vietnam War in the media, it seemed there was no room left for objectivity. Frankly all the coverage concerning Vietnam was aimed at a quick ending of the war. In most of these articles it were not the North Vietnamese, but the Americans who got blamed and characterized as a brutal instigator. Washington on its turn was not very helpful to reverse its negative image. The biggest mistake the White House probably was the deceitful way it tried to serve the public. Both the Johnson and Nixon administration have constantly tried to thwart the media, which obviously resulted in a counteract by the many reporters and journalists which had visited Vietnam. The media was not directly responsible for the extrication of U.S. troops from Vietnam. However, the disclosure of the many battle stories, the bloody casualty footage and other revealing war reports pressured the White House to take responsibility for its actions in Southeast Asia.

⁶¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War –the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill, Boston – fourth edition, 2002), 213.



Conclusion: the United States

As a concluding argument, the various aspects are shortly summarized.

Economy: When the United States got involved in the Vietnam War, its economy was the most powerful tool the Americans could deploy. Since the ending of the Second World War the Americans were ahead of the rest of the world in developing the most advanced and technological weaponry ever designed. Washington regarded its economic resources inexhaustible and therefore a solid ground to return home with a quick victory from the remote jungles of Southeast Asia. As the 1960s went on more and more economic resources were exerted to suppress the North-Vietnamese insurgency. But this turned out to be a hard hit for the Americans. How powerful the U.S. economy may have been during the Cold War era, it could not escape its limitations during the 1970s. The oil crisis of the Arab nations was of too much strategic importance for the Americans to ignore. Especially when the Arab nations involved (OPEC) proclaimed an oil embargo on the United States, economic consequences were disastrous. Simultaneously this meant the United States had to reevaluate its military expenses towards the Vietnam War. Nixon realized the United States could not afford unlimited use of its economic resources for war purposes anymore.

Nonetheless the U.S. economy was partly responsible for a failure in Vietnam. As was proven by the North-Vietnamese insurgents, wealthy economic resources were no assurance to win a war. Not even against a group of factional guerrillas who were supported by China and the Soviet Union, although the latter had to pull back its aid because of its own economic crisis. If not economic possibilities had raise the sky, the United States would probably have been more carefully in its deployment of unlimited military troops and modern weaponry.



Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (geopolitics): Post-war U.S. foreign policy dragged the nation into war. Washington felt it could not abandon a helpless South Vietnam in its struggle against the much stronger communist guerrillas from the North. The United States presumed a same attitude in the struggle against communism from its allies. However, when it became clear no ally wanted to encounter unfriendliness in Vietnam, especially the western European allies, the Americans were they only supporters of their paranoid containment policy. With the support to a remote South Vietnamese regime, the United States became a prisoner of its own commitment. Though the Americans wanted to terminate the war from the moment the first U.S. troops entered Da Nang in 1965, the whole event turned ugly. Washington drowned in a Vietnamese quagmire and lasted the Asian quicksand for more than twenty-five years. Because statesmen in the early years of the war believed South Vietnam was of vital interest, Kennedy and Johnson were convinced the United States could not afford to lose. But as the war continued and U.S. engagement increased, Washington began to realize the war became a frustrating and unwinnable undertaking, therefore the only way out was a strategy of “peace with honor” in the perception of Nixon and Kissinger. In fact, “peace with honor” was nothing more than a strategic manoeuvre to leave South Vietnam as soon as possible and favorably without losing America’s dominating world image.

Domestic Politics: Domestic politics were obviously affected by the events in Vietnam. Hawkish and Dovish politicians in Congress could not agree over the course of the war and Johnson and Nixon had both tried to blur Congress and the Senate about the state of war. As soon as the public found out, the streets were filled with antiwar movements, although Washington tried to cover the enormous U.S. material and personnel losses and preached its positive standpoint towards the war. Nonetheless, the White House remained divided over the war. If Johnson and Nixon had not blurred the seriousness of the war in Congress, the support for the war might have been much higher as well in the Washington as on the streets.

Prestige: From its onset, the war was also conceived by the administration as a challenge to U.S. prestige. The aftermath of World War II had proved the United States could dispose of superior military and economic strength. Since the Americans felt they had a responsibility for what they



called the “free world”, every peculiar political event taken place anywhere in the world was carefully monitored by the post-war administration in Washington. Meanwhile the communist ideology was on the rise in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia and the Americans were determined to contain the spread of further communist influence around the globe. To Washington it was not as much the ideological standpoint as well as the Soviet strength they believed which had to be challenged. A consequence of the effects of prestige was the dramatic use of military force upon the NLF guerrillas. The heavy bombardments caused many casualties among innocent Vietnamese citizens on both sides of the demarcation line. Many South Vietnamese officials doubted U.S. intentions. Though they were pleased with all the U.S. military assistance, they were suspicious about the United States taken all the credit for the minimal progress that was made during the war. Especially the Nixon administration realized although the war was unwinnable affair in 1969, at least the Americans should achieve “peace with honor”. In other words, the image of an untouchable America had to be protected from more damage at the costs of a fragile South Vietnam.

Ideology: Although the United States swore by western capitalism, South-Vietnam was not meant to be Americanized in an ideological way. Though many Vietnamese were influenced by American consumer goods as the war went on, they never pledged for democracy. Washington obviously hoped the South Vietnamese would democratize, but this was no top priority. Yet, Washington tried to contain communist expansion in Southeast Asia, in which it eventually would fail. Yet, ideology was not directly responsible for a U.S. failure, because the containment of the communist ideology may have been an important a factor when the war escalated, but was no longer a decisive feature for the ending of the war. Firstly because, though the United States was convinced Hanoi was a communist bulwark or a Soviet ally, whereas the North Vietnamese rather considered themselves nationalist. Therefore the Soviet Union could only be supportive of the Hanoi regime but never turn the disciples of Ho Chi Min into a delegation of the Red Army. In a later stage of war this was also realized by the White House and the importance to contain communism was heavily devaluated.



Détente: As initiator of Détente it was of great importance for the United States that renewed rapprochement with China and the especially the Soviet Union would succeed. From the moment Washington escalated the war almost all NATO allies overtly opposed U.S. military engagement in Vietnam. As champion of the free world, the United States had a great interest to uphold its superpower status. The Vietnam War indeed damaged this status heavily and was certainly considered threatening by Washington for the United States in political relations with the rest of the world. On the other hand, U.S. conduct in Southeast Asia had its paradoxical side, in which the Americans wanted to display their military and political superiority over the North Vietnamese, but also as a warning to its allies and the Soviet Union.

Military means: Assurance of U.S. military superiority over the North Vietnamese may have driven the Americans into Vietnam, but at the same time, this superiority was also Washington's greatest opponent. With an unlimited amount of troops, the most advanced and technological weaponry in the world, the United States overestimated its own capabilities. As a military superpower, Washington was convinced it would achieve a quick victory over ill-equipped North Vietnamese guerrillas. However, the opposite occurred. The longer American troops remained on Vietnamese soil, the harder it became to suppress the insurgents.

Media Coverage and the First Televised War: The Vietnam War was the first televised war, broadcasted with live footage from the Vietnamese shores. U.S. citizens now see could the devastating effects of the war with their own eyes. Although many journalists tried to cover the realities of war, Johnson and Nixon in a later stage of war, tried to play down the seriousness of the war. The confronting war footage and the newspaper articles sparked a wave of dissatisfaction among U.S. citizens, Doves and other western allies which were against U.S. engagement in Vietnam. Students around the globe rallied down the streets and forged antiwar movements. In the United States this opposition against the war led to violent riots with a deadly end for some protesters.



Epilogue

Why did the United States fail to achieve its strategic objectives in Vietnam? From the outset the Vietnam War was a complex undertaking for Washington. As a superpower, the United States had showed its abilities to regenerate the economic ruins left in post-war Europe. And its military apparatus could not be challenged by another nation. Overconfident in Southeast Asia, the Americans perceived a fragile South Vietnam as a threshold for communist activities by the North Vietnamese, or in U.S. eyes, even worse the Soviet Union or possible China. Thus when the North Vietnamese wanted to restore their divided nation by occupying the South, the Americans felt they could not remain aside. Incremental engagement in Vietnam evolved, and during the presidency of Johnson, the war involvement for the United States escalated completely.

After weighting up all eight aspects, most importance for the failure in Vietnam could be attached to foreign and domestic politics, the economy and military objectives, though media coverage had its share also. Indeed, the other aspects also contributed to a U.S. failure. However, their importance was rather small compared to the other four. Nonetheless, it was a mixture of all, and frankly all aspects influenced each other and directed a disastrous exit for the United States. Yet, it all started with odd decision making by the White House. Although it remains unclear what could have been, would Kennedy still be alive in 1964, Johnson and Nixon may not have been the right leaders at the time. Both, as did many members of their administration, had deeply underestimated the NLF and its stretchiness, and overestimated their own military capabilities. This arrogance kept pursuing both leaders while dealing with Vietnam throughout their term as president. Also both leaders felt a deep commitment towards their allies and their own citizens which may have blurred the seriousness of the conflict, which both perceived would be solved in just a matter of time. Strengthened by a victorious role in both world wars, a loss against an army of North Vietnamese guerrillas was unimaginable for the White House. Nonetheless it happened and nor was there a lasting peace. When the first U.S. ground troops set foot at the shores of Da Nang, no one in the United States reckoned with a possible loss of the war and the White House could count on massive support among U.S. citizens. But when the war remained inconclusive for some successive years, both politicians and citizens got frustrated by waiting too long for positive results. Besides U.S. allies were not supportive and therefore unwilling to provide troops to assist the ARVN. After more than twenty-five years of fighting and a lousy peace agreement



many U.S. officials wondered how this could have happened to the strongest and powerful nation on the planet. How was it possible an army of ill-equipped and poor farmer guerrillas could even compete with the best – though unprepared to fight in a remote jungle- army in the world? The more questions about U.S. superiority came to the surface the more it becomes clear why the United States had failed in Vietnam. With all this negativism towards the war, the latter was doomed to be lost. While Johnson could still count on strong support of Congress, the Senate and most citizens, Nixon and Kissinger lost almost complete grip on those who still favored the conduct of war from 1968 onward. Of course the inconclusiveness of the war had its share in the rising opposition against the war. However, the harsh and uncompromising attitude of Nixon and Kissinger towards Hanoi and Dovish politicians also contributed heavily to the toppling support. From the early 1970s onward, the United States could only hope the war should be brought to a quick end. Although Nixon was reluctant to make concessions, he had to admit the war was taken almost completely out of his hands. With some radical action, Nixon hoped to solve all war problems. However, this led only to an extension of the war and left both parts of Vietnam in ruins. Even the bordering countries, Laos and Cambodia were a victim of Nixon's "madman-theory".

In the end there were no winners and both Vietnam and the United States needed a long time to recover from the experience of war. Vietnam remains one of America's most humiliating historic military undertakings. If the war had taught Washington one thing, it was that the most powerful nation in the world was not invincible after all. A harsh fact to accept.



Statistics

During the first years of the war, more than half of the U.S. citizens argued military commitment in Vietnam was a correct decision. But as the war continued, more citizens thought the military commitment in Vietnam was a big mistake.(Table 1.)

Table 1.

Public opinion on US military commitment in Vietnam (1965)	
Correct	60%
Mistake	24
Uncertain	15
Public opinion on US military commitment in Vietnam (1967)	
Correct	44%
Mistake	46
Uncertain	10
Source: Richard Sobel, <i>The Impact of Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus</i> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) in Gary R. Hess, <i>Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War</i>	

Although most people in 1968 agreed the military commitment to South Vietnam was a mistake, they were also thought the best way for Washington to end this war, was to hold the line. This actually meant that, although considered a mistake by many, the war could not be lost. (Table 2.)

Table 2.

Which course of action should be followed	
Hold the line	48%
Negotiate and get out	31
Carry the war to North Vietnam	17
Undecided	4
Source: Richard Sobel, <i>The Impact of Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus</i> (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) in Gary R. Hess, <i>Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War</i>	



	Total US Forces Worldwide	Maximum Deployed Strength	Total Combat Casualties	Killed and Died of Wounds	Wounded	Prisoners or Missing	Non-Battle Deaths
Total	3,300,000	625,866 (27 March 1969)	205,023	42,266	153,311	5,486	10,326
Army	1,600,00	440,691	130,359	30,644	76,811	2,904	7,173
Navy	600,000	37,011	6,443	1,477	4,178	788	880
Marines	400,000	86,727	64,486	12,953	51,389	144	1,631
Air Forces	400,000	61,137	3,735	1,152	933	1,650	592
RVN Forces		c. 1,000,000	c. 800,000	196,863	502,383	N/A*	N/A
Other Free World** (1969)		72,000	17,213	5,225	11,988	N/A	N/A
North Vietnam and Vietcong (est.)		c. 1,000,000	c. 2,500,000	c. 900,000	c. 1,500,000	N/A	N/A

*Not available

** Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand

Source: R.E. Dupuy and T.N. Dupuy, *The Collins Encyclopedia of Military History*, 4th edition (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 1333.



Chapter 2

The Soviet Union (1964-1989)

Introduction

*Russia should not think we have lost a war. We – the army- now know what we want and what we can do. The question is, rather, how long will it take the politicians to realize it.*⁶²

The conclusion of the Second World War left the Soviet Union in ruins as was the case in other territories formerly occupied by Nazi-Germany. This devastating war placed a heavy burden upon the citizenry and the communist party. Now the war was over there was no more need to produce extra military equipment. Plants and stores remained unopened and in many cases they were demolished. Thus a logical result was the loss of thousands or maybe even millions of jobs and decreasing employment for many Soviet citizens. The Soviet economy stagnated after 1945 and at first sight there seemed no solution to reverse this disappointing process. Beside all economic misery Soviet citizens had to cope with the mental consequences of another horrendous German occupation. Russian pride was negatively affected and only a minor part of the population felt safe within its own boundaries. The call for change was evident, and it was to the Russian authorities to set this change in motion. Miraculous, the Soviet Union managed an economic recovery which left other European countries initially far behind. The economic plan system of Josef Stalin not only improved the Soviet economy, it also increased faith in the communist ideology. Simultaneously, Moscow was involved in a competitive arms race with the United States and diplomacy was used to convince, especially Third World countries that socialism would be the guide to outrun western capitalism. Whilst the Cold War was still in an inconclusive phase, the “Soviet Empire” began to break up and it seemed that there was nothing - not even the moderate policies of Brezhnev – that could turn the tide. Nationalist tensions in Eastern Europe already existed from the late 1940s and the Soviet Union was in danger of being of losing its hold over satellite-states. Relations with Eastern European leaders deteriorated. Somehow, the Soviet Union had to keep, not only its credibility within its own empire, but also toward the non-communist world. If this was not enough, there still was ideological en military

⁶² Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan -The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 168.



animosity with the United States and a border conflict with communist China. With all these domestic difficulties how could the Soviet Union ever be a credible role model for the communist world again? Nonetheless, the Kremlin sought to extend its interests beyond its Eastern European borders. Though contemporary historical research revealed that despite American or Western nervousness, the Soviet Union was never after world domination, it sent military aid to North Vietnam, overtly supported the communist regime of North Korea and invested nearly \$2 billion in military and economic aid in the Indonesian regime of Sukarno. Because U.S. interests in the Middle East became shaky, the Kremlin now shifted towards the Middle East but also Central Asia - a region yet unexplored by the superpowers- during the 1970s. Because U.S. foreign politics were now more concentrated on Latin America and some OPEC members had proclaimed an oil embargo on the United States, there was a power vacuum ready to be exploited by the Soviets. Central Asia is a vast region which consists - among others- of Pakistan and Iran, which could have been of great military interest for Moscow. Yet, the Soviet Union ended up in another poor and mountainous Central Asian country, Afghanistan. The next section explains how the Soviets got involved in Afghan politics, which eventually led to an insolent Soviet occupation of Afghanistan of almost ten years.

How did the Soviet Union end up in Afghanistan?

In late 1962 the Cuban missile crisis demonstrated U.S. military superiority over the Soviet Union. A desirable reversal in the arms race was put on hold by the Khrushchev administration for a short period when more attention was drawn to advancement of the Soviet space program (Sputnik II). In economic respects Khrushchev adjusted the agricultural policy and denounced the acts of his predecessor Stalin in his renowned secret speech. In geopolitical terms the Soviet Union was still assured of a cordon sanitaire consisting of Eastern European satellite-states. Thus further expansion of communist influence in the West came to an end - though there has been no evidence the Soviets actually cherished an extension of western expansion. When Moscow's attention shifted to the Middle East and Central Asia, an ongoing Sino-Soviet border conflict was already in progress and proved to be a bulky obstacle for the Kremlin to spread its socialist influence into the Asian regions. However, given the imperialist opportunities in especially



Central Asia, the Kremlin decided it should concentrate on the provisioning of military and economic aid to this non-communist orbit.

The Soviet Union perceived the Central Asian region as an interesting domain which could offer them greater possibilities to obtain new Soviet gains. Growing Soviet military influence in the region was probably the contributing factor important to this decision.⁶³ Next to growing military influence there were a number of key arguments for the Kremlin to modify its former political objectives in Central Asia. First, the naval communication routes that ran through the area and the Soviet's willingness to deal with U.S. missile-carrying Polaris submarines already cruising in the Mediterranean at the time of Khrushchev's fall, made the region particularly important for Soviet military purposes. A second contributing factor which drew the Soviet's attention to the Middle East and Central Asia was the increasing instability in the region itself. In Egypt, Nasser's regime was beset with economic and political difficulties and during 1966 its relation with the United States rapidly deteriorated. In addition, the Arab-Israeli conflict worsened and turned out to have a devastating effect on U.S. influence in this same region. To increase its influence in Central Asia the Soviet Union was also aided by some events occurring elsewhere. Most appealing perhaps were the escalation of the Vietnam War in 1964 and the deployment of U.S. ground troops to South Vietnam in 1968. This was a major bonus for the Soviets for a number of reasons. First, the events in Southeast Asia not only increased internal turmoil within the United States, they also served another major Soviet objective namely the containment of a communist China in Vietnam.⁶⁴ For with a half-million U.S. troops to its south, a hostile India to its southwest, and fifty Russian divisions along its northern border, China was indeed "contained" from the Kremlin's point of view. U.S. policy in Vietnam also forced the Americans to diminish their energy and attention in other parts of the world, including Central Asia, thus enabling the Soviet Union to operate more freely there. Another advantage for the Soviets was China's so called Cultural Revolution which occurred in 1966. This effectively prevented the Chinese from competing with the Soviet Union in the Third World and reduced their influence within the international communist movement.⁶⁵ Not having to compete economically with China allowed

⁶³ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East – Soviet policy since the invasion of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 26.

⁶⁴ Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, 27.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 27.



the Kremlin to concentrate its resources on Central Asia. Yet another bonus for Moscow was the British withdrawal from Yemen in February 1966. This, together with increasing discussion in England to pull out of the Persian Gulf, gave the Soviets the impression that a major power vacuum was opening up along the southern and eastern periphery of the Arabian Peninsula. Soviet failures elsewhere in the Third World also may have sharpened the drive into Central Asia. The fall of Sukarno's regime in Indonesia in October 1965, a regime in which the Soviets had invested nearly \$2 billion dollar in military and economic aid, was a severe blow to the Kremlin.⁶⁶ These events must have made the Soviets feel that increasing its influence in Central Asia was a promising opportunity to extend its communist policy beyond its borders. On its eastern border China was no longer regarded a threat and U.S. foreign policy was too divided to concentrate solely on the Middle Eastern and Central Asia region. Thus all opportunities for the Soviet Union to establish a new orbit outside Europe throughout the 1970s were open.

In 1964 Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev as head of the CPSU (communist party) Secretariat. For the Soviet Union the new political landscape consisted of emerging global tripolarity between the USSR, United States and China, Soviet-American military parity, and stagnation of the Soviet economy. Moscow's focus, however, on the Middle East and Central Asia remained intense through the ideological principles of the Brezhnev Doctrine which made the Soviets aware of the indivisibility of world communism. The basic ideal of this doctrine was a concept that if any of its client communist states was threatened, the Soviet Union had the right to intervene militarily or politically. Thus to Moscow communism was indivisible and its defence the common cause of all communists.⁶⁷ This also meant a communist regime outside the Soviet's orbit, except China, could count on Soviet cooperation, friendship and military or political aid if requested. To control its borders the Kremlin was anxious about a Chinese or U.S. dominated border state. It suspiciously looked to the Chinese, which were considered a threat to Soviet-built communism and the risk to wage a war on the United States was obviously not met which much confidence in Moscow.

⁶⁶ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East – Soviet policy since the invasion of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28.

⁶⁷ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 135.



The coup and a communist regime in Afghanistan

Hence the Kremlin was also concerned with the events occurring in Afghanistan in 1973. A monarchical Afghanistan under King Zahir or a republican Afghanistan under President Daoud could be tolerated without Moscow feeling any compulsion to invade the country and overthrow its government. But as a neighboring border state with a communist regime, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan suddenly appeared on the Kremlin's political agenda. As with so many other 'people's regimes' Afghanistan was not established by revolution, but by a coup. As a Central Asian state, Afghanistan differed enormously from its communist counterparts in Eastern Europe like Czechoslovakia and Hungary, which were regarded by the Kremlin as westernized states and fertile soil for socialism. Though a *democratic* republic, Afghanistan's monarch Prince Daoud who seized power in 1973 was unable to impose his will on the fractioned countryside or satisfy the demands of the educated intellectuals, for social, political and economic modernization. From this moment the Soviet Union demanded from Daoud that he keep them informed on the Afghan political situation. Daoud, however, perceived the Soviet demand as an insult to what he claimed was a non-aligned Afghanistan, and refused to come to terms with Moscow. He stated;

'We will never allow you to dictate to us how to run our country and whom to employ in Afghanistan. How and where we employ foreign experts will remain the exclusive prerogative of the Afghan state. Afghanistan shall remain poor, if necessary, but free in its acts and decisions.'⁶⁸

It was the Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) who benefited most from Daoud's failure and in April 1978 the PDPA leaders staged a coup which forced Daoud to resign and left the state in the hands of Nur Mohammed Taraki, Chairman of the Revolutionary Council, and Hazifullah Amin, his Prime Minister, though Taraki stated "this was not a putch or a coup but a revolutionary act for the masses."⁶⁹ The Soviets may not have been involved in detailed planning but the Afghan communists probably would not have planned a coup without consulting the

⁶⁸ M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan, The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982.*, (University of California Press, 1995), 14.

⁶⁹ Taraki press conference of May 6, 1978, as reported in *FBIS*, May 9, 1978 in Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 54.



Soviets and discussing it with them.⁷⁰ From the moment Taraki and Amin seized power, the Afghan leaders insisted they were committed to the traditional policy of non-alignment. At the same time Taraki denied the PDPA was a communist or Marxist party. The actions and statements by the leaders in Kabul soon made it clear that the new regime was definitely communist and that it had no intention of being non-aligned. There were many indications that the new regime had aligned itself closely with Moscow. The Soviet Union was the first country to grant diplomatic recognition. Numerous economic agreements with Afghanistan were signed and trade between the two states increased. A culmination of recent improved relations came in December 1978 when Brezhnev and Taraki signed a mutual Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation.⁷¹

Moscow's dissatisfaction with Afghan politics and the road toward invasion

At first the Soviet Union may have been satisfied with a pro-communist border state but when the new regime instituted a communist reform program, the Afghan people were driven into rebellion. The rebellion consisted of fragmented nomadic religious groups also known as the Mujahedeen. To suppress the rebels the Taraki/Amin regime used heavy military force. But the Afghans had a long tradition of fighting for their rights and the opposition inevitably took the form of an armed revolt. As the rebellion grew the communist regime showed itself less and less able to suppress it, and the Soviets were forced to increase their role in the conflict. Because the Afghan army proved to be a highly unreliable tool for suppressing the rebellion, the Afghan regime hoped for Soviet aid. Amin's request for military assistance was conceived by Moscow as an open invitation for intervention. In November 1979 Soviet military personnel were sent in to advise the Afghan forces. Step by step Moscow was moving in the direction of massive invasion.⁷² But before a Soviet invasion was set in actual progress, Moscow's dissatisfaction with Amin and his policies increased. Additional disputes between the *Parcham* and *Kalq* faction within the PDPA intensified the Kremlin's discontentment as it looked with dismay as Taraki and Amin antagonized the population and goaded them into rebellion. As the Kremlin saw it, failure to

⁷⁰ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 54.

⁷¹ Robin Edmonds, *Soviet foreign policy – the Brezhnev years*, 15

⁷² T.H. Rigby, *The Afghan Conflict and Soviet Domestic Politics in the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, 68.

⁷² Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan*, 75.



preserve a pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan might create the specter of a third anticommunist republic on the periphery of Soviet Central Asia. Despite Soviet support the rebellion was far from being contained by the military forces. When the Taraki/Amin regime pleaded for the introduction of education for women, it sparked a revolt in the western city of Herat. The bulk of the government's 17th Infantry Division supported the mutiny and loyal troops took a week to suppress the uprising. Amongst the approximately 5,000 dead were 100 Soviets. Herat was to prove decisive: it stimulated the first serious contingency planning for intervention (either to stabilize the country or rescue Soviet nationals) and conditioned attitudes in Moscow to the 'savages' of Afghanistan.⁷³ The Soviet Union sent helicopters and helicopter gun-ships to assist the Afghan regime in fighting rebels in Afghanistan's mountain regions. Escalation of the Herat conflict obliged Brezhnev to aid the new Afghan regime. A partial quote of the official response was publicized in an article named, 'The Target: Afghanistan's Revolution' by Dmitry Yolky in the New Times in 1979.

"The USSR cannot remain indifferent to the violations of the sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, the incursions into territory from Pakistan, and the attempts to create a crisis situation in that area ... What is at stake is virtual aggression against a state with which the USSR has a common frontier".⁷⁴

On December 25 1979, mechanized forces began crossing the Soviet-Afghan border, with the 356th and 66th MRDs (Motor-rifle Division) occupying first Herat, then Shindand, Farah and Kandahar, the 360th MRD passing through the Salang to reach Kabul by 26 December, and the 201st moving to Kunduz, Badakhshan and Baghlan. Lieutenant General Mikhailov Tukharinov's advance force commander established a forward command centre at Bagram, while continuous airlift brought Soviet forces in Kabul to some 5,000 by 27 December.⁷⁵ The Soviet's dismay intensified its role in Afghan policies which turned Amin into an indignant minister who

⁷³ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 7.

⁷⁴ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East – Soviet policy since the invasion of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 72 – cited by Dmitry Volsky, "The Target: Afghanistan's Revolution." *New Times* no. 24 (1979), 13.

⁷⁵ Galeotti, *The Soviet Union's Last War*, 13.



suddenly inclined to his non-alignment policy, though this did policy not exist formally. In the aftermath of the Herat conflict, Moscow was willing to support the communist regime in Afghanistan. However, when Amin- even though the Soviets regarded him a Marxist theorist- became a threat to Moscow's domination, he was deposed by Babrak Karmal who was regarded a more reliable and pro-communist leader than his predecessor. Amin's elimination and the capture of Kabul were to be the aim of Operation *Shtorm*, a coordinated plan involving the finest troops at Moscow's disposal, from its paratroopers to KGB and military intelligence commandos.

Soviet objectives during the Brezhnev era

Soviet objectives regarding Afghanistan during the reign of Brezhnev were twofold. First there was the forestalment of the anticommunist movement and the installation of a firm communist regime under strict control of the Soviet Union. Second there was the desire to expand the Soviet's military border, 1,000 kilometres to the south and within 500 kilometres from the Arabian Sea. Brezhnev's Third World policies also presumed a weakening role of the United States in the near future, so rising popularity for socialism could embrace Third World countries including Afghanistan, and other pro-Soviet countries within its orbit. Despite intelligence reports that the Soviets were massing troops and arms along the Afghan frontier, U.S. officials were surprised. The U.S. ambassador in Moscow at the time, Thomas J. Watson, Jr., admitted that he did not expect the Soviet Union to invade. "I was surprised by Afghanistan," he says, "because I thought they had a better appreciation of the {dangers} of thermonuclear {confrontation} and didn't think they'd be willing to take that kind of risk".⁷⁶ This expectation seemed somewhat naïve; indeed U.S. officials had to acknowledge their country was not alone in its willingness to extend its influence in the Third World. Another possibility was that the Soviets were willing to take a risk of a thermonuclear conflict, because Soviet intelligence officials had always known American policy would never deploy another thermonuclear weapon to start another transnational war.

⁷⁶ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 131.



When the Soviets entered Afghanistan in late 1979, this was the beginning of a military undertaking without serious notion when it would end. The invasion ultimately damaged the Soviet Union in many respects. The next chapter examines eight aspects which could be considered the most obvious contributors to the eventual Soviet failure.



Fig 4. Map shows main invasion routes

Soviet failure in Afghanistan

As an outcome this thesis assumes a failure of the Soviet Union to suppress the Mujahedeen rebels and to establish a stable communist and pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan. Eight aspects are examined which contributed to this failure. By explaining these eight aspects, the reason for the Soviet's failure in Afghanistan should be made much clearer. Hence, the aspects are completely determined by their influence on the outcome. Most aspects elaborated in the following sections

focuses on foreign and domestic politics, which are based on the findings of several U.S., British, Afghan and Russian historians.

The following aspects are discussed:

- Economy
- Foreign Politics and strategic significance (geopolitics)
- Domestic Politics
- Prestige
- Ideology
- Détente
- Military means
- Media Coverage and Glasnost

1. Economy

After Leonid Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev in 1972 as General Secretary, the Soviet Union tried to balance its strategic parity with the United States. The Anti-Ballistic Treaty of 1972 was one indication of this parity. Oddly enough this was also the time of continuing, almost routine, Soviet usage of imported western food and technology. The late Brezhnevian era was marked by economic stagnation. This may have looked paradoxical because the Soviet Union was a beneficiary, not a victim at first, of the oil-price hikes of the 1970s. As a net exporter of oil and gas the Soviet Union derived larger terms-of-trade gains from the actions of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).⁷⁷ The increased revenues allowed Moscow to import more from the West than it would otherwise have done. Yet at the same time Soviet economic growth was slowing down. The growth of per capita GDP in 1990 dollars, slowed from 2.7 per cent a year in 1964-73 to 1,5 per cent a year in 1973-85.⁷⁸ Secondly, Soviet leaders sanctioned military adventures of some substance. Moscow not only provided troops to Afghanistan, but also gave military assistance, without overt participation, in civil wars in Ethiopia and Angola. This

⁷⁷ Philip Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy – an economic history of the USSR from 1945*, (Longman, London, 2003), 130.

⁷⁸ Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy*, 131.



military expansion put a tremendous strain on the economy of the Soviet Union. The economic slowdown affected all three main dimensions: consumption, investment and defence. The extent to which the slowdown in investment and the growth of defence effort was intended by the leadership remains unclear. It is possible that at least into the mid-1970s they were trying to extract more investment and more defence from their economy than they were able to, and in the case of investment simply made the best of a bad job by publicly lowering their sights. It is also possible, however, that there was such anxiety about possible discontent among Soviet citizens that defence and investment priorities were deliberately reduced. The early 1970s Détente with the United States, including the ABM treaty, might have been ground for curbing the military effort. Though Moscow's terms of trade improved dramatically because of a tenfold increase in world oil prices, purchasing power was soon followed by a string of harvest failure, a breakdown in the Soviet-U.S. commercial détente, by the adverse secondary effects of oil-price rises, in the form of accelerated inflation in western prices and slackening of western import demand in real terms; and by western sanctions following the invasion of Afghanistan.⁷⁹ U.S. president Reagan presided over a general tightening of sanctions and of the strategic embargo, directed against the Soviet Union. In general, the European allies were reluctant to follow the U.S. lead in these matters and the sanctions were finally diluted. It appeared that Soviet policy-makers were taken by surprise by the vehemence of the western reaction to its invasion of Afghanistan. Probably the strategic embargo had some retarding effect on the development of Soviet military capabilities.⁸⁰ During the early 1980s the Soviet Union tried to improve its economic performance. However, after a great deal of political activity in 1983 and 1984 there was not much real change.⁸¹ The arms race with the United States was a self-destructive feature of the Soviet economy that virtually experienced no real growth in over a decade. These factors were the main reason why an economic and technological gap arose between the Soviet Union and the capitalist West.⁸² When Gorbachev was elected General Secretary in 1985 he inherited a situation almost as bad as that prior to the moment Stalin rebuilt a ruined Soviet economy after the Second World War. It

⁷⁹ Philip Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy – an economic history of the USSR from 1945*, (Longman, London, 2003), 155.

⁸⁰ Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy*, 162.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 174.

⁸² Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, *The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union* - Review of International Studies (1999), 25, 693–708 Copyright at British International Studies Association, 3



was not even half the size of the U.S. economy, and yet it was burdened with the need to support a fully competitive military establishment.⁸³

With the threat of western restrictions and an unwinnable arms race, the war in Afghanistan became a highly criticized topic in the Soviet Union itself. Many citizens wondered why it was necessary for the Kremlin to compete with the United States militarily, while at same time it was its largest consumer. Moscow was indeed aware of its economic shortcomings and restricted its deployment of troops to Afghanistan. The consequence, however, was that Soviet troops were constantly outnumbered by the rebels, when it was already clear military superiority was no guarantee to force rebels to retreat.

2. Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (geopolitics)

First several arguments which may have driven the Soviets into Afghanistan are elaborated. Though it must be emphasized, these arguments were never clarified nor confirmed by the Kremlin.

Expansionism

Generally seen as part of a drive toward the oil rich 'rim lands' of the Middle East and Central Asia – whether out of the traditional Tsarist quest for warm-water ports or Marxist-Leninist expansionism –and necessitating determined Western resistance. A rather unconvincing line that ignored the facts of the essentially conservative nature of Soviet foreign policy while talking up (overwhelmingly exaggerated) military deployments and strategic infrastructural development in the region. It tends to come down to a gut belief in the essential acquisitiveness of the Soviet Union. As one émigré put it: “The Soviet government behaves like an ordinary Soviet consumer. He grabs anything which happens to be on the counter, even if he doesn't need it, knowing that tomorrow it may no longer be available”.⁸⁴

⁸³ Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia – Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1998), 93.

⁸⁴ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan- The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 11.



Brezhnev Doctrine

With an ally state about to fall into anarchy or to outright hostile forces, intervention was an essentially defensive, reactive move to forestall such a humiliating and potentially dangerous outcome.

Fear of Americanism

A more extreme version of the Brezhnev Doctrine argument, that sees the Russians convinced – rightly or wrongly – that Amin was cutting secret deals with the USA, and even a CIA agent, and ready to let Washington use Afghanistan to repair the break in their ‘chain’ around the USSR left by the Iranian revolution. This was a line adopted by Soviet sources for a while and echoed by some of their more slavish supporters elsewhere, but soon fell into disuse until late in the Gorbachev era, when the KGB began resuscitating it, in a bid once again to stoke up the image of a foreign threat.⁸⁵

*Fundamentalism*⁸⁶

Afghanistan became a cordon sanitaire to insulate Soviet Central Asia from Islam Resurgent. Certainly, the Kremlin was fully aware of the potential danger that religion could pose – witness its concern to muzzle, suppress or tame organized religion within its own territory. Yet there is no evidence that it felt fundamentalism was some sort of moral plague contagious through physical contact, still less that religion could be penned behind a wall of tanks and left to wither and die.⁸⁷ What is more, had Islam been the main motive behind the intervention, then one could have expected some clear policy on relations with, or the suppression of, the faith in Afghanistan, or at least evidence of an awareness that it was a factor in the country’s spiritual life. As it was, through, there was no such policy and briefings for political officers serving in the 40th Army contained literally nothing on Islam.

⁸⁵ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan- The Soviet Union’s Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 11.

⁸⁶ Galeotti, *The Soviet Union’s Last War*, 11-12.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 12.



Prancing Proconsuls

The Kremlin thought it was in command, but it was led about by the nose by Afghan Communists eager to use it to solve internal disputes and by local Soviet officials with a personal interest or prejudice at stake. Though in its 'pure' form this line does not really stand up, there is more than a little truth here. Soviet officers and advisers brought into Afghanistan apparently their immediate political interests. Certainly figures such as Ivanov, Puzanov and perhaps Karmal were very important in feeding Moscow information biased in certain ways, and the Soviet Union would hardly be the only state to fall foul of the machinations of its pawns.⁸⁸

Defensive aggressiveness⁸⁹

From the 1900s onwards, the Soviet empire was invaded several times. When the Second World War was over Stalin extended his communist power onto the Soviet border states. The ring of satellite-states served as a cordon sanitaire for the Soviet Union. Although many U.S. policymakers have regarded Soviet behavior as expansionist this was a misguided interpretation. Indeed it was more the paranoid and xenophobe Soviet political attitude towards the rest of the world, including Afghanistan that caused Soviet policy of defensive aggressiveness. Thus the ratification of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in Moscow with a pro-communist regime in Afghanistan was foremost a self-protective measure to secure Soviet borders rather than an expression of expansionism.

The 'Tar Baby' syndrome⁹⁰

While Détente was deteriorating; the Kremlin may have feared U.S. military deployment in the Middle Eastern and Central Asian region. Together with the cumulative military requests by Amin, Moscow may have argued it had "to get in" to avoid the rise of an anticommunist establishment in Afghanistan.

⁸⁸ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan- The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 12.

⁸⁹ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 134.

⁹⁰ Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan*, 138.



*Debilitation of Détente*⁹¹

U.S. ambiguities in Iran created a power vacuum the Soviets were not able to fill at first due to a lack of military strength. From the first phase of peaceful coexistence in 1956 until Détente in the 1970s animosity with the capitalist world remained at presence.

A mutual treaty with the United States which sought to curtail the manufacture of strategic nuclear weapons (SALT II) was signed on June 18 1979 after negotiations between Brezhnev and Carter. However when it became clear the Soviets deployed troops to Afghanistan just six months after the signing, the United States decided not to ratify the treaty, though both powers would respect its spirit in the future. The failure of SALT II further soured Soviet-US relations and was responsible for the termination of Détente.

*Fear of China*⁹²

As a powerful communist border ally, China was of great interest for the Kremlin and at the same time considered a threat to Soviet security. With an upsurge of socialist unrest within the Soviet orbit, rapprochement of the United States with China by Nixon was an unpleasant surprise for the Soviets. Improvement of Sino-U.S. relations meant saturation of remaining sour Sino-Soviet relations. Chinese engagement in Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern politics might have been a threat to Soviet credibility towards the outside world. Further U.S. disposition of missiles in the Middle East threatened Soviet security. If the Americans were also able to deploy their weaponry on Chinese soil the Soviet Union was encapsulated by nuclear threat.

Whether the Kremlin had really considered these general arguments as described above, Soviet policies towards the Middle East and Central Asia were at least affected by a mixture of all. The discussed considerations show that whatever may have brought the Soviets into Afghanistan, it was by no means a simple decision. The Soviet Union was literally dragged into the war. This could not only be blamed on the acts of Amin and the later unwillingness of Karmal to obey Moscow, as overconfidence by the Kremlin also did its part. As with earlier conflicts in Eastern Europe the Soviets may have argued they could easily suppress the rebellion without any serious

⁹¹ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 140.

⁹² Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan* , 194.



effort. It seems Moscow's decisiveness towards the war only became more evident the longer it remained on Afghan soil. Further it seemed there was no actual planning to deal with the Afghan problem. Clear objectives were set by Brezhnev, but at the same time there was a lack of common knowledge of how to achieve these objectives. In fact Afghanistan never appeared as a first matter of concern on the Soviet's political agenda until Gorbachev came to power and it appeared as if the Soviets really did not know how cope with this border conflict. As the world's most powerful communist stronghold, Moscow did want to make the same mistakes as were made earlier by other socialist states as Yugoslavia and North Vietnam, though eventually it ended up with the same problems as in the named socialist states.



Fig 5. The headquarters of the Soviet 40th Army in Kabul, 1987. Before the Soviet intervention, the building was Tajbeg Palace, where Hafizullah Amin was killed.

3. Domestic Politics

Aside from the heavy losses that were costing the Kremlin a great deal of money and manpower, the war undermined the morale among Soviet citizens as more and more coffins were shipped home. Initially around 1985 when the war was already in progress for six years, public protest was confined to small groups with experience in decoding and exposing the state's doublespeak,



the motivation publicly to criticize the invasion and a constituency which would appreciate such defiance. Most protests came from the intelligentsia, and maybe a few unexpected feminist groups. Nonetheless the Brezhnev administration showed no compassion with these protesters, and some of them were even expelled. Another protest movement was driven by nationalism. The latter stressed common suffering by Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who were under pressure themselves, and also had to obey the brutal orders of Russian officers and shed both their own and Afghan blood.⁹³ Nonetheless, evidence of general disenchantment was markedly lacking. Strict media prescriptions did not allow the use of public polls or could reveal the nature of public attitude to, and even awareness of the war.

The political and military authorities sought to make the veterans heroes once the war had become an admitted fact, both to legitimize their actions and to counteract the negative rumours. These acts brought the war's profile closer to public debate and opinion. With the emerging glasnost policy, veterans came to be considered as model citizens. Simultaneous with the exaggerated worshipping of the veterans, by 1989, ordinary people were protesting in the streets of Soviet cities against mobilization of reservists for the pacification of Baku with the slogan 'no more Afghanists'.⁹⁴ Many political intelligentsia had hoped Afghanistan could be used as a means to further their ends of opening up the policy-making process, demilitarizing foreign policy and retreating from the global war game of East versus West. Sadly it took almost eight years for the war to be noticed as an issue for the wider public. At that point, Afghanistan had already irreversibly damaged the veterans, not to mention the home-front and 1989 called for reassessment of former dispatch of Soviet forces. For the first time home articles appeared that criticized earlier interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

In fact the Soviets were just poorly prepared when entering the war. However this was not considered problematic as Moscow believed a quick victory would curb the upsurge against the procommunist regime. Although Brezhnev hoped to withdraw all Soviet troops before the 26th Party Congress on March 3, 1981, the political will to win the war, let alone end it, was not present within the Kremlin. There are arguments the war could have been won if the Kremlin was willing to accept more losses and take the risk of an attack of Pakistan. Another argument was

⁹³ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 140.

⁹⁴ Galeotti, *The Soviet Union's Last War*, 153.



given by U.S. historian Mark Urban who even went a step further in his account, *War in Afghanistan*, to state the Soviets did not even want to win the war. However Urban does not give plausible reasons why the Soviets might have cherished a loss. Neither is there any other proof to be found in further reading; therefore the claim of Urban could be considered far from reliable. After all, what nation goes to war with the intention to lose?

In sum domestic politics were at least partly responsible for the withdrawal in late 1989. Protests against further expansion of the war mostly came from disillusioned war veterans, who returned as drug abusers, or mentally and physically ill. From that moment many veterans tried to influence domestic politics by forming their own political factions and alert public opinion. Obviously the Kremlin was dissatisfied with this development and hastily honored the veterans as war heroes.

4. Prestige

The invasion of Afghanistan and the continued slaughter of Afghans by the Soviet invaders was an enormous blow to its prestige and had a negative effect on the Soviet image, not only in the West but almost everywhere. At a special session of the United Nations General Assembly in January 1980, 104 states voted for a resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. After the invasion further prestige was challenged by Third World states which perceived Soviet attacks on imperialism with greater scepticism than in the past. From that moment, it would become even more difficult for Moscow to support its claim that it was the staunchest foe of imperialism when it was engaged in a campaign of blatant occupation, or its claim that it was the most faithful supporter of the national liberation movement when it was using tanks, jets, helicopter gunships and chemical weapons against a genuine national liberation struggle.⁹⁵ The Soviet invasion also worsened relations with its neighbors in the Far East. Communist China repeatedly stated that Sino-Soviet relations could not be significantly improved as long as Soviet armed forces were occupying Afghanistan.

Afghanistan also had a negative impact on the Soviet political position. The occupation of Soviet forces out of Afghanistan soured Soviet-American relations and created a new “cold war”

⁹⁵ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 174.



atmosphere in the early 1980s.⁹⁶ Although disengaged from the Afghan mountains, the Soviet Union still supplied the communist government with weaponry.⁹⁷ Not only the Third World, but the Islamic community in particular was heavily offended by Moscow's imperialist acts. Over decades Soviet muftis propagated slavish propaganda as they believed they owed a debt to Soviet Muslims for standing by them in 1967 and 1973. Actually however, the Soviets had not stood firmly by the Muslims in either conflict. Therefore Soviet leaders presumably believed their investment in an Islamic strategy could be salvaged by divorcing it from both Russian power politics and the notion of advancing communism.⁹⁸

5. Ideology

Though the Kremlin did not have actual expansion in mind when it crossed the Afghan border, the Soviets were concerned for a communist regime within its sphere of influence. Because Afghanistan had become communist, it had to remain communist. If the people of Afghanistan were to oust their communist leaders, this would destroy the myth that the masses everywhere desired communism. Russian ideological principles left no space for compromise. If reactionary elements in some country attempted to overthrow a communist regime or lead it away from Soviet-style communism, then other communist countries were duty bound to intervene and save it.⁹⁹ Communist ideology was not directly responsible for a failure in Afghanistan; it rather was a motivating factor. Indeed there was a desire to strengthen Soviet power over the area, but not to construct communism per se, although a communist stable regime remained a high priority for the Kremlin.¹⁰⁰ However, the conservative vision did hamper Moscow's opportunities to easily withdraw before a stable communist regime was established. Thus the new communist Afghan regime rather was an obstacle for the Kremlin, than a possibility to extend Soviet influence over its borders. Compared to Eastern Europe the fighting with Afghan rebels definitely bears some resemblance with the Soviets preceding bloody warfare. Nonetheless presence of ideological

⁹⁶ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 318-319.

⁹⁷ Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan*, 337.

⁹⁸ Alexander Bennigsen, Paul B. Henze (ed.), *Soviet Strategy and Islam*, (Macmillan 1989), 58.

⁹⁹ Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan*, 132.

¹⁰⁰ Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Ideology and Power in Soviet Politics*, (Frederick A. Praeger, publisher New York, 1962), 109.



policymaking cannot be underestimated, as ideology and power in Soviet politics were conceived by the Kremlin as unavoidable guidance.

6. Détente

After Stalin's death, the new Soviet leader Khrushchev wanted to break with the old Stalinist regime. As a faithful adherent of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, Khrushchev believed socialism would eventually outrun western capitalism. He also believed after the humiliation of the Cuban missile crises rapprochement with the West was necessary for retaining a strong communist bloc. Khrushchev's policy of "Peaceful Coexistence" was soon replaced by Brezhnev's Détente with the United States. This new model of relations between the two superpowers was intended to transit from enmity and confrontation to a mutual understanding and cooperation.¹⁰¹ Relations with Washington were strained, but it is fair to state the war actually brought the final collapse to an already moribund Détente and ruptured the globalist Soviet shade over Eastern Europe. With the invasion the Kremlin also alienated itself from non-aligned countries and its Chinese communist counterpart. If the Soviet Union decided to stay in Afghanistan, there was more than a slight chance, many pro-Soviet countries would turn to the United States and NATO. From the outset, the United States was displeased with any kind of invasion conducted by the Soviet Union. With every day the Soviet Union decided to remain in Kabul, the rebels were strengthened by their allies, including Pakistan and the United States. Within the Cold War context this major disturbance in the relation between the two superpowers, however seemed acceptable to Soviet terms. Indeed, the Kremlin must have realized invading a border state would lead to an outspoken reaction in the western world. On the other hand, it could be argued due to Détente was already considered a closed chapter on the Kremlin's political agenda, there were no political or military boundaries left to prevent the invasion of Afghanistan. Thus, the war in Afghanistan may have been the end of Détente, but was by no means responsible for a Soviet failure in its border state. It is even doubtful whether Détente was of actual importance when Soviet policymakers set their political objectives towards Central Asia.

¹⁰¹ Viktor Kuvadin, *From Cold War To New World Order*, in *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991- A Retrospective* (Frank Cass, London, 1994), 193.



7. Military Objectives

To avoid condemnation of NATO and other non-aligned states, the Soviet Union declared it was not intervening. Red Star, the organ of the Soviet army stated:

“Our coming to our neighbor’s aid – at his urgent request- is not aggression or intervention, as ill-intentioned slanderers try to prove. The only duty of the Soviet military contingent is to help Afghanistan repel threat from outside”

The Red Star’s statement was by all means, of course a typical example of Moscow’s propaganda apparatus. Within a few weeks after the invasion the Soviets already deployed about 85,000 soldiers in Afghanistan. This number remained constant until the later part of 1981. By March 1982, the figure was increased to around 100,000 and later in the year it grew to 105,000. There is some evidence the Kremlin initially wanted to deploy more than 110,000 soldiers. However, according to the Politburo the Soviets simply could not afford to keep more troops in Afghanistan. Another consideration might be the desire to minimize casualties. To repel the insurgency the Soviets tried to keep losses low by substituting firepower for manpower and made full use of their superior weapons-helicopters, bombers, tanks, armored personnel carriers, rockets, and artillery. Against the dramatic use of an arsenal of the most advanced weaponry, Soviet soldiers in contrast were ill-equipped and did in fact not really differ from their predecessors who fought in the Patriotic War (World War II). To clear rebel areas the Soviets moved in with massive firepower. Though the Soviets could easily outgun the rebels, this only meant the latter would return and reoccupy the area as soon as the Soviets left. Obviously such conduct as the use of massive firepower only aggravated the hatred toward the invader and made the rebels only more determined to withstand and mutilate or kill their Soviet prisoners.

As a consequence of the failure to decrease the insurgency, the Soviets used brutal, scorched-earth tactics bombing and strafing hostile villages and towns into piles of mud and brick rubble. They also deliberately wrecked irrigation systems, burned crops, killed livestock, and contaminated water sources in an effort to starve out those peasants who supported the insurgents. The idea was to destroy housing, food and water supplies which would it make impossible for the



Afghans to return to their homes, the idea being that empty villages offered no resistance.¹⁰² The primary military objective still was to protect the communist regime and to repel the rebels who were regarded a threat to this objective. Still, though there are no accurate statistics available it is believed that by 1983 over 3 million Afghans had fled their homeland, going mostly to Pakistan, but also to Iran, Europe, and the United States. In addition to bombing and the use of heavy artillery, the Soviets used extensive chemical warfare. It has been said the Soviets attacked the Afghans with irritants, incapacitate, nerve agents, phosgene oxime, and perhaps mycotoxins, mustard lewisite, and toxic smoke. Approximately 3,000 Afghans were killed in forty-seven chemical attacks between the summer of 1979 and the summer of 1981. The total number of Afghans actually killed by chemical attacks might be much higher, more than 6,000.¹⁰³ Because Moscow never confirmed its military objectives in Afghanistan, most information on Soviets military behavior is drawn from sources within the U.S. State Department and reports by Western journalists or Afghan refugees. By the first half of 1982 the rebels became more than a serious threat to Moscow's intentions and the Soviets tried to eliminate some of the most troublesome rebel strongholds. Qandahar and Herat, Afghanistan's second and third most-populous cities were dominated by the rebels. Concluding this could no longer be tolerated, the Soviets subjected both cities to savage aerial and artillery bombardments. During 1982 the Soviets also made strenuous efforts to destroy rebel forces in areas near Kabul, although with minor success. There were some small victories with the antiguerrilla operation of 1982 in the Panjshir Valley, located about 60 miles northeast of Kabul. This seventy-five mile long valley was of strategic importance because it was near the military airbase at Bagram and lay astride the key highway leading from Kabul to the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴ Although the Soviets launched no fewer than six offensives in 1981 and 1982 they were unable to get this valley under control. Nonetheless the Kabul government proudly announced that the centres of bandits and counterrevolutionaries were liquidated forever, which was clearly not the case. Within a few months after the last offensive, the residual rebels in the Panjshir valley inflicted heavy casualties on the Soviet and Afghan army and forced the communist troops to retreat. The rebels continued to resist actively during the last half of 1982.

¹⁰² Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 161.

¹⁰³ Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan*, 162.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 162



From that moment only a small amount of clashes between Soviet troops and the rebels took place until the end of the war of 1989. Rapid succession of different General Secretaries within the communist party not only influenced foreign policies towards Afghanistan, it also meant differing views on how Soviet military engagement in Afghanistan should be conducted. All Soviet leaders had their own thought of dealing with to the war, which showed the instability and indecisiveness of Moscow's politics if it came to dealing with a border conflict which could not be won, at least not by a landslide.

Brezhnev's war: tactical innovation, policy stagnation.

The Soviets had anticipated a quick operation to install a more stable and reliable leader, rebuild the Afghan army (DRA), enforce a new alliance on the various wings of the PDPA and overawe opposition to the regime. At first Soviet troops secured communications routes and supported DRA units. When DRA units were freed from this duty they were able to inflict a heavy defeat on the rebels. But with the divide between the Persian-speaking intelligentsia of *Parcham* and the tribal *Kalq*, DRA's forces proved unable or unwilling to suppress the ongoing insurgency and the Soviet army found itself forced to participate in a war for which it was neither trained nor equipped lest to forced instead to withdraw. By the end of January 1980 there were 50,000 Soviet troops, which crossed the Afghan border and by the end of summer this had risen to 80,000. During the Brezhnev-era the Soviet army was restructured and specialized counter-insurgency forces were created, forming the 66th and 70th independent brigades as experimental prototypes. The 40th Army was expanded and more helicopters introduced while periodical conventional offensives were launched against insurgent concentrations. In December 1981, Marshal Petrov was appointed. Under his auspices the Soviets began to emphasize the role of light infantry and air-mobile troops and evolve new tactics for the war.¹⁰⁵

Andropov's war: willing spirit, weak flesh

During his brief tenure as General Secretary 1982-84, Andropov had little energy to spare for Afghanistan. Though he did make moves towards sounding out chances for a negotiated withdrawal, like Brezhnev. Without any worth mentioning events, Andropov's administration

¹⁰⁵ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 140.



changed some tactics over policy. They ensured that the DRA built up its own equivalent to the KGB, the KhAD, which also took on an increasing role in operations and in expanding its network of informants and paid allies.¹⁰⁶ Further the Soviet army tried to improve its training programs and equipment and the expansion of the role of light, special and airmobile forces.

Chernenko's war: limited Armageddon

Unlike his predecessors, Chernenko, General Secretary 1984-85 came closest to winning a military victory in Afghanistan. Under Lieutenant General Generalov, Soviet forces adopted far more aggressive and brutal tactics, from high-altitude carpet bombing to massive major assaults such as attacks on refugee camps, as well as heavy bombing by Tu-16 aircraft flying from bases inside the Soviet Union. With brutality the Soviets wanted to shatter the rebels morale and destroy their support infrastructure by encouraging mass emigration from rural areas outside Kabul's control. Galeotti stresses this was a policy of 'migratory genocide'.¹⁰⁷ During this period Soviet casualties increased but were still low compared to Afghan casualties. Nevertheless, the Soviets were not able to inflict heavy losses upon the insurgents let alone to force them to emigrate from the Afghan mountains and fertile 'green zones'. Eventually Chernenko's iron fist did not lead the Soviets to convincing military success. Instead the war was escalated.¹⁰⁸

Gorbachev's war: bringing the boy's back home

As the war continued, the Soviet's new promising leader Mikhail Gorbachev wanted to end all Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Gorbachev considered Afghanistan as a part of the 'socialist' world, as a state with a socialist orientation.¹⁰⁹ Especially in economic respects, Gorbachev stated resources, instead of being ploughed into war, could better be diverted to more productive uses. The fighting had to be put to an end, otherwise relations with the West, but also China and the Arab nations were further soured. With the support of the Arab world and the West to the rebels, Gorbachev considered the war as an unsolvable conflict for the Soviets. As long as the Mujahedeen was supplied with foreign military support, Soviet chances to win were reduced to a

¹⁰⁶ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 17.

¹⁰⁷ Galeotti, *The Soviet Union's Last War*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 18.

¹⁰⁹ R. Miller, *Afghanistan and Soviet Alliances*



minimum. Thus the Kremlin not only wanted to get out, but to do so quickly. In early October 1985, Gorbachev arranged talks with Karmal, where the latter allegedly replied the Soviet troops had to leave Afghan soil immediately. By the end of 1985, Moscow made the decision in principle to withdraw all Soviet forces.¹¹⁰ At the same time Karmal was offered residence in the Soviet Union and in May 1986 he was replaced by the more sophisticated and flexible Najibullah. Najibullah was prepared to accept a victory could not be won over the insurgents by the Afghan regime. Instead he gambled on mix of co-optation and compromise, his policy of national reconciliation. In the meantime Soviet tactics were adapted to Gorbachev's decree to limit casualties and concentrate efforts on building up the capabilities of the Afghan forces to hold their own after the withdrawal. Increased effort was concentrated on exploiting tribal divisions and bribe or simply hiring local militias; joint government/militia operations thus became a new and important feature of the war. While counter-insurgency techniques were refined and developed, the political underpinnings of the war had been removed. In December 1986 talks between Soviet and Afghan delegations were opened in Geneva to create some basis for Soviet withdrawal, while Najibullah's policy of national reconciliation sought to heal divisions within the PDPA and provide an umbrella for deals and understandings with insurgent and neutral leaders. Nevertheless negotiations were only finally concluded in April 1988. They envisaged complete withdrawal of all but advisers by 15 February 1989. On this same date, Lieutenant General Boris Gromov, last commander of the Soviet Forces, walked over the Friendship Bridge back onto Soviet soil; the 40th army had come home.¹¹¹

From the outset of the invasion, Soviet cooperation with the Afghan army was a disappointment. They considered the Afghans a liability rather than of good assistance. The invasion and the subsequent fighting against the insurgents provided the Soviets with valuable military experience and opportunities to test many new weapons. Just the task of planning the invasion, mobilizing the personnel assembling the supplies, organizing the communications system, and carrying out the operation must have been a valuable educational experience for the Soviet military machine.¹¹² The Kremlin conceived a quick military victory the only possible way out. But when

¹¹⁰ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 18.

¹¹¹ Galeotti, *The Soviet Union's Last War*, 19.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, 178



different political Afghan factions collided against the invader and fought heavily against Soviet troops it became evident to the Kremlin a quick victory was not realizable. Firstly due to the Soviet's lack of economic resources to provide their troops with unlimited garment and other facilities. And second the resentment of the Mujahedeen was too strong to cope with in a short period. As with the upsurge in Czechoslovakia and Hungary which were of very short duration, the Soviets believed the same would be the case with the invasion in Afghanistan. However, this turned out a to be great misconception. The Afghan rebels on their part did not achieve any progress during the Soviet occupation. The only thing they were partly responsible for was the final withdrawal of Soviet troops after ten years of misery, which was followed by a period of more distress, impoverishment, and civil war.



Fig 6. Soviet tanks withdrawing from Afghanistan

8. Media Coverage and Glasnost

The invasion never affected its home-front as much as did the Vietnam War to United States. At first Soviet citizens did not receive many news facts on the situation in Afghanistan. Soviet media depicted the invasion in a positive manner, and made it look like the Soviets did a good job. The dead and wounded were not discussed in the newspapers, let alone on communist television. In this way the media gave the appearance Soviet troops were not really involved in the heavy



fighting with the Mujahedeen. An American professor who visited the Soviet Union in the fall of 1981 reported that Soviet citizens told him the war was unpopular among important segments of the population:

“Because the regime doesn’t share information about the actual level of casualties, rumors circulate wildly within the Soviet Union, and it may be that there is an exaggerated notion of what the losses are in Afghanistan. ... The rumors that circulate are not only that there are Soviet soldiers dying in Afghanistan- which is an unpopular idea among their people- but there are also ugly rumors of the way in which the soldiers die, ... the way the soldiers are mutilated”.¹¹³

Therefore anyone reading the Soviet press got a rather strange view of the War in Afghanistan. Usually only rebel casualties were mentioned, not Soviet ones. Soviet publications seldom admitted that Soviet soldiers were engaged in actual combat. Most articles depicted soldiers as instructors of the Afghan army, who carried out exercises, while Afghans did the fighting.¹¹⁴ Among many others, also Captain Aleksandr Lukyanets, expressed his disenchantment with the Soviet press

“I remember I came back from a battle one day. It was a hard battle, with much bloodshed... That evening, I read the newspaper reporting how we and the Afghans planted trees together as happy friends. There was not a single word about the war. I felt deeply offended.”¹¹⁵

Propaganda in the press was not abandoned until Gorbachev’s *Glasnost* policy in 1985. Now for the first time people were confronted with the harsh realities of war, despite Soviet troops already having left Afghanistan in this phase of the war. Return of the war veterans was even responsible for the emerging of the veterans’ own press with newspapers like *Probratin*. Journalists became very critical of propaganda reports, public polls showed the disgust with the war and letters sent

¹¹³ Comment by Professor Robert Lagvold, transcript of Public Broadcasting System, “MacNeil-Leher Report,” “Afghanistan: War Continues,” October 16, 1981, p. 6. In Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 177.

¹¹⁴ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan – The communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion and the Consequences*, (Westview Press / Boulder Colorado, 1984), 160.

¹¹⁵ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union’s Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 141.



by ordinary citizens were published in newspapers which showed their affection with the veterans and soldiers in country.



Fig 7. Until Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnost policy, *Pravda* was the only official source to get informed about events occurring in Afghanistan.

Conclusion: the Soviet Union

As a concluding argument, the discussed aspects are shortly summarized.

Economy: In economic respects, the invasion of Afghanistan was one of the main reasons the Soviet Union could not keep the communist regime under control, let alone protect the latter from being constantly attacked by rebels. Ongoing economic disorder within domestic spheres during the 1970s placed a heavy burden on the Russian military apparatus. This meant not only the number of troops which could be deployed by the Kremlin was very limited, but soldiers were also ill-equipped and frankly sent to war unprepared. Brezhnev regarded the invasion in Afghanistan as only a minor concern in Soviet foreign politics during the 1970's. Compared to U.S. military costs, Soviet aid in military respects was just a pittance. It would take the Soviets until Gorbachev took office as General Secretary of the communist party in 1985 before events in Afghanistan were seriously reevaluated. Soviet economic policy was deeply examined and Gorbachev concluded there was no need for spending more money on a 'bleeding wound' as he called the war. Besides, the use of an enormous arsenal of the most technologically advanced weaponry did not bear fruit. Though the invasion granted the Soviet Union access to valuable minerals, especially natural gas, the costs of war were too high to recover from.

Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (geopolitics): Another reason for a failure in Afghanistan were foreign politics. As a communist superpower, a slight disturbance within the Eastern European orbit or in a border state were enough reason for the Soviet Union to intervene in some sort of manner. Within the Cold War context, this meant political interaction between Moscow and the political leaders of the nations which had recently converted to communism. Border states were followed by the Russian hawk's eye. When a 1978 coup in Afghanistan ended with the establishment of a communist regime, close connections with the Kremlin were a logical result. As with the Eastern European satellite states, politics were not safeguarded from the threat of Soviet force. When Moscow decided to tighten its relation with the communist Afghan regime, this not only meant exchanging political advice and economic aid, but foremost supervision by a delegation of the KGB settled in Kabul. Political reform by the new regime was met with an



upsurge led by the Mujahedeen rebels, who existed of mountain nomads and different fanatical Islamic factions. The Mujahedeen were a tough fighting-machine and within the mountainous areas of Afghanistan, Soviet forces were unable to get a good grip on their opponent. The Afghan environment turned out too much of an obstacle for Soviet forces, despite the availability of modern weaponry. A rapid sequence of General Secretaries of the communist party was of no help either, because every time a new Soviet leader took office renewed politics were conducted which meant Afghanistan was shifted off and on the political agenda, because other domestic and economic issues were considered by the Kremlin to deserve more attention. When Gorbachev in 1989 insisted on a withdrawal of all Soviet troops and ambassadors this decision was not only a result of Soviet's new policies of glasnost and perestroika. It was also a desperate expression from a politician who realized the Soviet empire soon could be ruined when it would remain on Afghanistan's mountainous soil. Though there was no instalment of an anti-communist movement, the Soviets were neither able to install a firm communist regime under Moscow's strict auspices.

Domestic Politics: The most unfortunate victims of the war were the indigenous and the veterans. Although the different political factions found a mutual adversary in the Soviet troops, they were not the hardest hit. The Soviet army which contained over almost two third of Central Asians and other Slav minorities who were deployed by the Kremlin to fight the Mujahedeen, were obviously the most vulnerable to the use of heavy artillery provided by the United States and Pakistan. Also heavy casualties were inflicted on the Mujahedeen rebels, although from a Soviet perspective this obviously was no loss, but rather a victorious outcome.

Prestige: The Kremlin's image in the rest of the world, especially the Third World crumbled slowly. NATO allies but also non-aligned countries overtly criticized Soviet acts in Afghanistan. Though there were no signs the Kremlin felt encumbered by the ongoing denunciation, the lost battles against the Mujahedeen made many Third World leaders realize the Soviet Union was not the cherished patron they were hoping for. Through its former invasions in Eastern Europe the Soviet Union had acquired a reputation for being determined, and ruthless. Withdrawal from



Afghanistan created an image of weakness; it might even encouraged other client states to rebel against Moscow's control.

Ideology: If not demonstrated during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution or the Prague Spring of 1968, the Soviet Union's call for socialism in the Third World must definitely have lost its value with the ridiculous way Moscow tried to uphold the Afghan communist regime. How could Soviet leaders preach an abolishment of imperialism, if their own acts were obviously imperialist? Among many other invasions, the decision to remain in Kabul, proved communism was no less imperialist, than were former western policies overseas for the past decades. Therefore the Third World could not be blamed for their growing distrust of the western world and also communist ideology.

Détente: International relations with the United States however, could not be directly addressed to a Soviet failure. Indeed, Détente was already faltering before Soviet troops set foot on Afghan soil. At first ties with the United States were improving during the 1970s, but with U.S. hostages held in Iran and other disputes over oil and trade in the Middle Eastern region, no actual progress was made concerning Soviet-U.S. relations. Analyzing the Kremlin's political conduct, it seemed rapprochement to the West was no top priority (anymore).

Military Objectives: Between 13,000 and 15,000 Soviet combatants were killed in Afghanistan. As said earlier, the Kremlin did not regard the invasion in Afghanistan a top priority and refused to extend the amount of Soviet troops when the Soviet Union threatened to lose the war unlike was done by the Americans in Vietnam.¹¹⁶ Also it had to cope with insurgency from different factions with non-similar interests. Now the Mujahedeen and other rebel movements did have a mutual adversary namely an outside invader. Despite dramatic deployment of the most advanced weaponry the Soviets were not able to suppress the rebels. In fact, every new Soviet attack caused a harsher reaction by the rebels and made the latter even more determined to stand united against the invader. Militarily the Soviet Union was also limited by its own economic resources which denied it further deployment of more troops.

¹¹⁶ Geoffrey Jukes, *The Soviet Armed Forces and the Afghan War* (Presidio, 1993), 34.



Media Coverage and Glasnost: As for media coverage of the war, Soviet citizens only became aware of all the horror and misery of the war with the returning of the first group of veterans in 1983-84. From 1985 onwards, the new Glasnost policy imposed by Mikhail Gorbachev opened up a whole new can of opportunities for Soviet media. From this moment more and more casualties were reported in Russian newspapers and on television broadcasts. All these realities of war sparked an outrageous reaction among Soviet citizens, including party members. Pressure put on the Kremlin by the media for a withdrawal kept rising and it seemed Gorbachev indeed was sensitive for the negative news which spread the world.

Epilogue

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was a filthy, trivial war. An expression of imperial arrogance, swept up into the whirlwind of politics of the dying years of the Soviet Union, leaving behind destitute veterans, the wounded and bereaved. The Afghans perceived less sensitive to the large-scale and modern warfare than the Kremlin had expected. Galeotti attributed this to the weakness of the central authority. Differences in social structures and internal political strife were other underlying problems the Kremlin had overlooked after deciding to invade Afghanistan. A great risk of engaging with the Afghan regime was that the Soviets linked their fates with a regime lacking a real social base in this overwhelmingly rural, Islamic, even medieval nation.¹¹⁷ The longer the over 112,000 Soviet troops remained in the Afghan latitudes, the more the Soviets tried to impose their will upon the Afghan government. This only raised the rebels resistance. Therefore the Kremlin used its political force and diplomacy to install a government to its own contentment. The whole operation in Afghanistan turned out to be an enormous disappointment for the Soviets. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan was in fact an unnecessary act. Resources quickly drained after the country fell into deep economic disarray during the 1970s and competition with the United States on technology and ideological respects placed the Soviets in an undesired position of a semi runner-up of the Americans. Regarding Afghanistan, the decision by the Kremlin to go in and stand firm by the communist regime was probably not the

¹¹⁷ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan – The Soviet Union's Last War*, (Frank Cass London, 1995), 6.



most sensible choice. Given the miserable financial status of the Soviet Union, its tense relation with the United States, the Kremlin would have been wiser had the reiterated request for military support by the Afghan regime been answered only with the deployment of some political and military advisers, which was the case at first, but later escalated completely. As in earlier stages of the Cold War, Moscow proved again unable to turn a military conflict to its own advancement. But why did the Soviet Union really fail in Afghanistan? Although eight aspects are elaborated, economy, foreign politics, military objectives and to a lesser extent, prestige, are most responsible for the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. Had the Soviets not profited from the rise in world oil-prices of the Arab states and become the West's largest client to import its consumer goods, the Kremlin would probably have been more careful to deploy a large number of its troops and sign trade treaties with the Afghan regime. The same goes for the Moscow's military objectives. The Soviets considered their military apparatus superior compared to the military uses of the Mujahedeen rebels, which may have blurred the Kremlin's view of warfare with an indigenous people consisting of harsh guerrilla rebels, who were not even slightly intimidated by the Soviets deployment of the most advanced and technological weaponry to suppress them. And then there was also the prestigious aspect which was taken too seriously by the Kremlin and rather was an obstacle for the Soviet Union to control the other socialist states. With the emergence of a new socialist state, the Soviet Union felt obliged to pay its attention to this state, which not only meant more alienation from its own domestic and foreign politics, but also caused condemnation from NATO allied states. Naturally, the other elements also bear responsibility for the Soviet's failure. However, these aspects were of indirect influence, whereas economy, foreign politics, military objectives and prestige were crucial and significant for the final outcome, because if Moscow would have dealt with these elements differently, as described above, the Soviet Union could have been avoiding a humiliating defeat and the scorn of the West and its allies.

Afghanistan turned out to be the last military undertaking by the Soviet Union. Though a chance the Soviet empire would still be intact if the invasion had not taken place is at least very doubtful. The Soviet Union's fundament already crumbled, and it seemed the Afghan invasion only accelerated its downfall. Of course, there were many problems the Soviet Union's leaders had to cope with during their reign, still their own incapacibilities to lead a nation out of war were



responsible for a failure which could have been avoided if the Kremlin had not responded to Afghanistan's request for military support as it had done. Too many contradictions in Soviet politics were at present. What struck the most perhaps were the fact economic resources during the 1970s and early 1980s were almost completely dedicated to warfare, while the dramatic events occurred in Afghanistan were hardly noticed by the Soviet leaders. How did so much carelessness become a synonym for Moscow's policies towards the Afghan war?

The consequences were, not surprisingly, disastrous for both the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. The first stood on the verge of collapse, while the latter was drawn into another civil war fought by the same Mujahedeen who had just recently forced the Soviet troops to retreat. The invasion had only worsened both the Afghan and Soviet situation. After the civil war, Afghanistan was able to at least slightly recover from over a decade of warfare and misery. For the Kremlin however it was already too late. Within two years after its withdrawal not only the ten year long occupation of Afghanistan, but also the Soviet Union itself could be added as a new chapter to Russia's historical accounts. Perhaps this was even the most ironic part of all. Who would believe a poor, fractioned, and occupied Central Asian state would survive the world's most powerful communist state? It is almost too ridiculous to be true, and yet it happened.



Statistics

Besides the unwinnable arms race, the Soviet Union fought against a harsh rebel movement aided by the United States, and to lesser extent Pakistan. The table (1.) below show the amount of American aid to the Mujahedeen rebels in U.S. dollars.

Table 1.

U.S. aid to Afghan insurgents (Reagan administration)	Amount
1984	\$400,000,000
1985	\$250,000,000
1986	\$470,000.000
1987	\$630,000,000
1988	\$40,000,000

Although many Soviet citizens were not aware of its governments occupation of a bordering country until the war was almost over, the poll below show a large part of the Soviet society did not have positive feelings about the Kremlin's involvement in Afghanistan. The Afghantsy on the other hand, were rather more enthusiastic. This positive attitude might be explained by the situation the Afghantsy were living in. They had fought against the Mujahedeen in the vast Afghan deserts because it was their duty. Admitting that the war was national shame would be an insult to their own command. (Table 2.)



Table 2.

Kosmomol'skaya Pravda poll on Soviet involvement in Afghanistan		
Assessment	Afghantsy	Non-Afghantsy
It was our intentionalist duty	35%	10%
'intentionalist duty' is clearly discredited	19	30
A difficult, but necessary action	19	19
I am proud of the Afghantsy	17	6
It is our national shame	17	46

Source: Kosmomol'skaya Pravda (21 Dec. 1989) . NB. Figures add up to over 100 per cent, since some gave more than one answer.

Afghantsy = Russian veteran of the Afghan war



Chapter 3

Conclusion: the Boolean Method

After analyzing two Cold War conflicts it should be clear all discussed elements interact with each other and are in their own way responsible for the failure of both conflicts. Yet, the eight elements were of different importance for both the United States and the Soviet Union. Although both conflicts were not equally long because Vietnam took Washington almost twenty five years of work and Afghanistan gave the Kremlin a headache for ten years, it is nonetheless reasonable to make a comparison between both conflicts because the same variables could be addressed to both the United States and the Soviet Union and both conflicts took place in a Cold War period.

Throughout the Cold War, both superpowers had faced the risk that they could be dragged into conflicts by allies they could not control. Engagement in Soviet Central Asia and Southeast Asia eventually led to an unsatisfactory outcome for both superpowers. The price paid by the Americans for their prolonged stay in South Vietnam was much greater than it anticipated. Like the Soviet Union, Washington learned that conventional military superiority was no guarantee of success against guerrilla forces. Though U.S. and Soviet engagement in a Third World conflict is of excellent use for the application of a comparative analysis due to its similar outcome, the discussed variables are not equally valuable for both countries. The outcome of conflict may have been the same for both countries, namely a shameful loss or at least no victory caused by a failure to accomplish their objectives. However, a deeper examination show that both conflicts were not as similar as the discussed variables may suggest.

The analyzed variables can be forged into a Boolean table. This table determines whether a variable attributes to the failure (O) or not. The truth table directly shows the influential variables. To keep everything well-ordered only three digits are used. (1) = influential, (0,5) = important, and (0) = non influential or unimportant. Though it is desirable to only use 1 and 0, this is rather too abstract, because the analyzed variables overlap and are all in some way responsible for the failure. Nonetheless, a distinction has been made between the variables, otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish the important from the non-important variables. The variables and their value for both the United States and the Soviet Union are placed in one Boolean table. Because the comparison is based on the analysis of the United States, 1.a. is given to Vietnam and 1.b. to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.



To simplify matters, the Boolean method is applied to the analysis. It is fair to state four variables were for a large part responsible for a failure in both Vietnam and Afghanistan. These variables are *Economy*, *Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance*, *Prestige* and, *Military Objectives*. The remaining variables have a differentiation of value. This means their contribution to the failure was not equal for both conflicts. Thus based on the digits in the table it can be said the contribution of the letters A, B, C, D and G were undisputable responsible for a failure (O).

	1.a. United States in Vietnam 1954-1973	1.b. Soviet Union in Afghanistan 1979-1989	Similar variables
A. Economy	1	1	<i>Economy</i>
B. Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance	1	1	<i>Foreign Politics</i>
C. Domestic Politics	1	0,5	
D. Prestige	1	1	<i>Prestige</i>
E. Ideology	0,5	0,5	
F. Détente	0,5	0	
G. Military Objectives	1	1	<i>Military Objectives</i>
H. Media Coverage	0,5	0	
Outcome			Failure (O)



United States

$$O = ABCDefGh$$

The combination of present and absent variables for the United States shows Economy (A), Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (B), Domestic Politics (C), Prestige (D) and Military Objectives (G) were responsible for a failure in Vietnam, whereas Ideology (e), Détente (f), and Media Coverage (h) were not of significant influence. Although in a pure Boolean setting e, f and h would be considered absolutely absent for the cause of failure, the setting for this thesis is somewhat more difficult. The equation can be viewed as A, B, C, D and G as secure indicators for the outcome (O). The remainder digits, e, f and h were influential but not decisive indicators to contribute to the outcome. Though the latter digits may not have been of enough significance to be applied to the equation, it must be emphasized the digits are yet too important to completely abandon from the Boolean table.

Soviet Union

$$O = ABcDefGh$$

For the Soviet Union a different combination can be derived from the Boolean table. Noticeably Economy (A), Foreign Politics and Strategic Significance (B), Prestige (D) and Military Objectives (G) were responsible for the Kremlin's failure in Afghanistan. Here is a first difference from the U.S. equation which has Domestic Politics (C) as one of its secure indicators. A second difference can be encountered with Ideology (E), Détente (F), and Media Coverage (H). Here it is noticeable these indicators are not applied to the equation but had an impact on the outcome. For example, Détente (0,5-0), according to the analysis on the United States in Vietnam was slightly more important for the outcome for the United States than in it was for the failing outcome for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

When putting both the American and Soviet combination together the following equation can be made. For the United States; ABCDefGh and for the Soviet Union, ABcDefGh. The reduced and final combination existing of the similar elements give a combination of *ABDefGh*.



(U.S.) (USSR)
ABCDefGh + ABcDefGh
ABDefGh

Present = ABDG

Absent = efh

As a concluding argument, the most significant indicators are briefly summarized.

(A)Economy: As can be seen in the Boolean table economy was an important aspect for both failures. This can be best explained by the fact both nations disposed of a superior economy over their opponents Vietnam and Afghanistan. In both cases the responsible administration believed their financial resources were vast enough to outnumber the adversary in any possible financial and technological way. Yet, the biggest mistake both the U.S. and Soviet administration made is that they had underestimated the financial backing the adversary received from their own allies. Noteworthy is that the adversary of the United States, the NLF was supported by the Kremlin, whereas the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan was supported by Washington.

(B)Foreign politics: Both nations managed a post-war foreign policy in which control was a key word. The Americans were anxious about world domination by communism, whereas the Kremlin wanted to keep its empire intact and tried to control its borders and support other non-Soviet communist nations as North Korea and Cuba. Because both nations tended to stay loyal to their commitment in Vietnam and Afghanistan, foreign politics could no longer be disconnected from the situation overseas. With every new political step or policy, Vietnam and Afghanistan had to be taken into consideration when policymakers made their decisions. The stubborn commitment of both nations made the prevention of a failure even harder because Washington and the Kremlin were very reluctant to make concessions with the adversary or its allies.

(D)Prestige: Washington was very confident about its political, economic and military strength. U.S. policymakers knew the United States was the leader of the world. The conclusion of the



Second World War created a single military and economic superpower: the United States. Championing freedom, democracy and the pursuit of happiness, these American ideals were projected on the rest of the world. America could not afford to lose its prestigious image towards its allies and enemies. With military power and economic and humanitarian aid in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, America tried to concrete an image of a superpower to the outside world. U.S. ideology in principal consisted of capitalist and democratic values. In many non-western countries America tried to subordinate local governments and other political institutions in advance of their own values. Examples are Southern-Vietnam, Somalia and Afghanistan. Many American Cold War politicians and advisers however did not considered U.S. interference - in mostly third world countries - as an extensive form of imperialism. Conversely politicians, advisers and natives of the occupied countries did. For many decades during the Cold War era the Americans asserted that scientific and technological knowledge was necessary to acquire military and mental advantage over the Soviet Union and the communist world including China and Cuba.

The Kremlin in its turn realized the Soviet Union was a powerful empire, but probably hardly comparable with the United States in strength. Because both nations were unable to analyze each other's strengths and weaknesses, it seemed both administrations wanted to show their military, economic and political abilities overseas at the costs of a foreign and poor people.

(G)Military Objectives: Both nations were overconfident about their military capabilities. Both the United States and the Soviet Union believed its modern and technological advanced weaponry was sufficient to bring down the guerrilla opposition. This turned out to be a huge miscalculation because the use of U.S. and Soviet artillery was in many respects hardly usable in the remote Southeast Asian jungles and the vast Afghan deserts. Thus the renunciation of conventional warfare was a turning point for the both the United States and Afghanistan, because deployment of chemical weaponry as Agent Orange only hardened the opposition of the Vietnamese and Afghan guerrillas.

The combination also shows the absence variables e, f and h. These three variables added to the combination because they can be found at both the U.S and Soviet side as absent factors. E(e), f



and h are essential for the right imposition of the combination. However, the elements may have been required for the righteousness of the combination, yet they are of no significance for the outcome. Another way of saying this, is that e,f and h have no influence on the outcome. As far as ideology is concerned, for both the United States and the Soviet Union it was no decisive factor contributing to the outcome. The same goes for Détente and although media coverage of the war did spark a national debate in both nations and even anti-war movements, the outcome of the war would have been the same. A failure in Vietnam for the United States and a failure for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.



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