

Lecture 10 – Lecture Notes – The Vietnam War (1955 to 1975) - History of International Politics (East Asia focus)

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NOTE: The following lecture notes are largely based on the class textbook – Warren Cohen (2000), 'East Asia at the Center – Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World', New York: Columbia University Press.

Lecture Title: The Vietnam War (1955 to 1975)

World War Two had dealt a blow to the prestige and honor of Europe's colonial powers, despite the fact that they were on the winning side at the war's end. Feeling like junior players when compared to the USSR and the USA, the British, the French, and the Dutch, all **resolved to** restore their status as major powers and to reclaim valuable interests by retaking the East Asian colonies that they had been **dislodged** from by the Japanese in the 1942 to 1945 period. Despite this, at the war end in September 1945, the European powers remained committed to retaking their colonial possessions in areas such as **French Indochina** (including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), and British Malaya (the Malay Peninsula and Singapore – a large part of modern Malaysia). For the French, a major consideration was the **restoration** of French honor and imperial glory after a humiliating defeat and then occupation by Nazi Germany during World War Two. They were also pressured into action by powerful French elites with interests in Indochina. Consideration for the negative **domino effect** of an independent Indochina on the French Empire in Africa, particularly North Africa, was another key element in Paris' determination to retake Indochina. The task of regaining these territories however would be much more difficult than expected and would soon become **entangled** in the wider struggle between communist and non-communist forces. Much had changed since the 1930s, and recently **liberated** countries such as Vietnam were unwilling to give up their **hard-won** freedom without a fight. In Indonesia (led by **Sukarno** who had **collaborated** with the Japanese) and in Vietnam (led by **Ho Chi Minh** who had fought against the Japanese) for example, nationalists and communists who had played a central role in the liberation of their countries declared their independence from their former colonial masters.

In southern Vietnam, the French ignored **Viet Minh** officials (members of a popularly supported communist and pro-independence organization) and put French government officials in their place. As Cohen contends, '*the determination of the Europeans to restore the **status quo ante underestimated** the determination of the nationalist leaders to maintain their independence*' (Cohen, 2001: 363).

French **intransigence** over Indochina (including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos)

resulted in a much more brutal and protracted conflict with tragic results for the people of the region. Even before the Second World War had ended, the French **wartime** leader Charles de Gaulle had stated that (in January 1944) that Indochina would not be permitted to become independent. He did suggest however that the colony would be able to enjoy a higher level of **political autonomy** within the French Empire. The French, though weakened by the world war, had considerably more resources and personnel than the Dutch and were determined to keep their global empire together **at all costs**. From the US perspective, despite earlier positive relations between the communist Vietnamese forces and Washington, there was a strong belief, particularly within the US military, that French control of Vietnam would be better for American strategic interests than communist control of the country. The Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh had also been educated in Moscow, and the US feared the allegiances that he might make and the strategies that he could adopt for possible communist expansion in South-east Asia. An initial American commitment to end imperialism after the Second World War thus gradually became less important than the greater perceived threat posed by communism. Ho and his forces thus could not count on American assistance. As Cohen observes, '*In Indochina, where the leading nationalist was also the leading communist [Ho Chi Minh], the Americans first muted their criticism of French imperialism, then supported it, and ultimately replaced it*' (Cohen, 2001: 368). The nationalist-led KMT Chinese government, who were at that time engaged in the final stage of a bitter civil war with Mao's communists (1946-1950), also viewed Ho and his forces as a threat and an ideological enemy. Chiang Kai-shek also signed a treaty with Paris, and agreed to the French re-occupation of Vietnam after World War Two. The situation therefore appeared at first favorable to the French as they planned their return to ruling French Indochina. Major French forces gradually began to reoccupy Vietnam in the months after World War Two. By March 1946, they had formally commenced their re-taking of the country. By the end of 1946, the French had ousted the Viet Minh communists from their positions of power, and had re-occupied and controlled most of the country. In the other former Indochina territories, Cambodia and Laos, the French negotiated an agreement with the rulers of those countries whereby the Cambodians and the Laotians would receive greater autonomy in return for the agreed presence and supervision of a French governor in their respective countries. Diplomatically and politically isolated, Ho Chi Minh had accepted an agreement in March 1946 in which France seemed to recognize Vietnam as a sovereign state in return for Vietnam becoming a member nation of an Indochinese **federation** that would remain a part of the French Empire. Following this vague understanding, the Viet Minh permitted French soldiers to be stationed in Hanoi in northern Vietnam. Under an agreement drafted by the major Allied powers, nationalist KMT Chinese troops had temporarily occupied the area immediately after the war to fill the power vacuum left by Japan's defeat. The British army had held control of southern Vietnam in preparation for France's later return.

Within a matter of months after March 1946 however, the Vietnamese realized that the French were planning to try and completely re-control the country as colonial masters. This was unacceptable to the recently liberated Vietnamese. By the end of 1946, the French and the Vietnamese were engaged in a full-scale colonial conflict (see **the First Indochina War from December 1946 to August 1954**). One of the tragedies of Vietnam's **legitimate** call for independence was that it was **caught up** in the worsening global struggle between communist and non-communist forces. As the

war against France **raged on**, the French installed a puppet regime in the southern city of Saigon (Vietnam's largest city) under the former Vietnamese emperor **Bao Dai**, in 1949 (see the State of Vietnam (centered in South Vietnam) from 1949 to 1955). In **geopolitical** terms, by this stage, Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists had been defeated in the Chinese civil war, and Mao Zedong had declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China (the PRC) in 1949. The Chinese communists could now dedicate more time to send aid and assistance to the Vietnamese communists fighting the French south of China's border.

Escalation over Vietnam

Two key developments in the early 1950s contributed to making South-east Asia and countries such as Vietnam a more important component in the Cold War. In the first place, the Korean War and the victory of Mao Zedong's communist forces in the Chinese Civil War resulted in the new People's Republic of China (PRC) sending arms, advisors, and financial assistance to Ho Chi Minh's forces in Vietnam. Secondly, while Moscow was eager to see communism spread throughout the world, South-east Asia was far away from the nearest Soviet territory and as such, in the second half of the 1940s, it was not regarded as a major security issue by the Soviet Union. The distance between South-east Asia and the USSR also made it difficult for Moscow to supply their fellow communists in Vietnam (and elsewhere in the region) with military hardware and equipment. The death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953 however, four months before the Korean War ended, witnessed a change in leadership within the Soviet Union. Stalin's successors were committed to the idea of the Soviet Union more actively assisting communist movements in poor 'Third World' states throughout the world. This renewed ideological commitment in both the PRC and the USSR played a crucial role in helping Ho Chi Minh's communist forces to continue their long war against the United States from 1955 to 1975. This was particularly true in terms of Chinese aid, **personnel**, and **materiel**, which were sent across the border to Vietnam. For example, in the years from 1950 to 1970, the PRC provided the Vietnamese communists with over 20 billion US dollars worth of aid and materiel. The Chinese were responsible for about seventy-five per cent of all the foreign aid given to Ho Chi Minh's regime. The Soviet Union provided most of the rest.

In the weeks and months after Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the Viet Minh escalated their war against the French. By the early 1950s, France was desperately struggling to maintain the fight against Ho's forces. Essential American aid and assistance to the French after the late 1940s was **the only thing that stood between continuing the war and defeat** by the Vietnamese communists. Before the Korean War (1950 – 1953), US aid to France was cunningly **siphoned** from **congressional** funding **earmarked** for Chiang Kai-shek and his nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) forces in their war against the communists in China. Beijing's involvement in the Korean War in late 1950 and its **recognition** of Ho Chi Minh's '**Democratic Republic of Vietnam**' as the only **legitimate** government in Vietnam in January 1950 convinced Washington of the importance of Vietnam in the fight against communism. The USSR also recognized Ho's regime in the same month.

After 1950 therefore, the Americans **wholeheartedly** sent materiel, money, and

advisors to the French in their war against the communists. This amounted to some eighty per cent of all the money and materiel used by France in their colonial and anti-communist war. Despite this, by the early 1950s, Paris knew that their situation was **hopeless** and sought a way out of the conflict. The Americans however were not eager to see Vietnam fall to communist rule and urged the French to keep fighting.

When the Korean War ended in July 1953, there was a fear in China and the Soviet Union that the Americans would concentrate their efforts on Indochina and replace the French military and administrative presence in Vietnam, and thus deny Ho Chi Minh a complete victory, and total control over the country. To prevent this, Beijing and Moscow proposed an international peace conference through which France and the Vietnamese communists could reach a peaceful end to the conflict and allow the French an honorable exit from Vietnam, without the need for US military **intervention**. The issue of post-colonial Indochina dominated discussions at **the Geneva Conference** in Switzerland in May 1954. Post-conflict Korea was also discussed. A key development prior to the conference had been **the Battle of Dien Bien Phu** (March 13th to May 7th 1954). Seeking to improve their negotiation position before the upcoming Geneva talks, both the French and the Viet Minh tried to make military gains by inflicting losses upon the communists (in the case of the French) or taking control of as much territory as possible (in the case of the Viet Minh). French military planners chose the area of Dien Bien Phu for two reasons. Firstly, the French believed that due to its strategic location west of Hanoi and deep in the mountains of northwestern Vietnam, the French army could draw the Viet Minh into a direct confrontation in which the communists could be dealt a crushing defeat. Secondly, a strong French military presence in Dien Bien Phu would also serve to cut off vital supply routes between Hanoi in northern Vietnam, the center of communist power, and neighboring Laos. In pursuit of these objectives, the French amassed their forces around a collection of major French military bases in Dien Bien Phu, and waited for the Vietnamese communists to fight them in a direct confrontation. The Viet Minh however took the French by complete surprise. In a major **feat** of **ingenuity** and determination, Ho's forces succeeded in **hauling** tons of artillery and other equipment through deep jungle and up the steep hills that surrounded the French military bases in the area. Now under siege by the communists, the French army was **bombarded** day and night for months by Viet Minh artillery fire and devastating attacks upon their bases. On May 7th 1954, the French military bases at Dien Bien Phu were finally **over-run** by the Viet Minh. It was **a crushing defeat** for France. The battle marked the end of France's one hundred and fifty year involvement in Vietnamese affairs. The Geneva Conference represented France's final exit.

Washington was very concerned about the **implications** of Dien Bien Phu for its containment of communism in East Asia. The Americans refused to sign the final accord of the conference, which promised Ho Chi Minh and his communist government immediate control of Vietnam north of **the 17th parallel** in central Vietnam. It also declared that **nationwide** elections would be held in 1956 through which all the people of Vietnam north and south could vote on and agree on a new national government (see **the Geneva Accords of 1954**). Ho had accepted this arrangement even though it was not ideal in terms of his desired to completely control all of Vietnam, north and south. The Soviets and the Chinese however convinced him to wait until 1956. The Viet Minh also feared American intervention in Vietnam, and were **weary** and **bloodied** after eight years of war against France. Ho therefore

decided to wait and to accept the accords.

Washington however had no intention of providing the communists with an opportunity to democratically take control of all of Vietnam after 1956. Instead, the American strategy was to make the 17th parallel a type of de-facto border between the communist North Vietnam and a non-communist South Vietnam (similar to what had happened on the Korean peninsula). In the south, Washington implemented measures to create a **viable** nationalist government in the south with Saigon as the capital. This **regime**, the US hoped, would be a **bulwark** against the spread of communism in the country. In the 1950s, with the Second World War **still fresh in their memory**, the American self-perception was very **idealistic**. To many Americans, the USA was the home and the defender of freedom, and the world's greatest democracy. Communism, they believed, represented everything that the United States was against. As with Japan, Washington believed that it could make South Vietnam a model of freedom, democracy, and prosperity in South-east Asia. After the Korean War ended in July 1953, the focus quickly shifted to Vietnam. The country was, by the mid-1950s, the main battleground of the Cold War in East Asia. In September 1954, the US used its power and influence to help establish the **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)**, a security alliance dedicated to halting the spread of communism in the region. Oddly, SEATO only actually had just two South-east Asia states as members, the Philippines and Thailand. The other members were the US, the UK, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, France, and New Zealand.

Washington favored the well-known Catholic nationalist **Ngo Dinh Diem** as a suitable candidate to lead an anti-communist and pro-American regime in southern Vietnam. **To this end**, Washington provided hundreds of political and military advisers and millions of dollars to help set up a new government with its capital in Saigon. The USA also refused to permit a nationwide election in 1956 as agreed by the participants at the Geneva Conference in 1954. Instead they choose to ignore it after American intelligence sources estimated that if elections were held, Ho Chi Minh and the communists would win at least eighty per cent of the national vote. As Cohen observes, '*the principle of free elections lost its attractiveness in Washington when the likely victor was communist.*' (Cohen, 2000: 392). In October 1955, the '**Republic of Vietnam**' (also known as '**South Vietnam**') was established after a **rigged election** in southern Vietnam. Diem and his supporters had supervised the election. After initial successes in bringing stability to South Vietnam, the American-sponsored Diem government increasingly became more and more unpopular, and isolated from Vietnam's intelligentsia, Buddhists, and its rural population. Buddhists made up about 70% of the population, and Buddhist religious leaders were often active in political protests and **agitation**. Vietnamese Catholics, made up about 10% of the population, and were often perceived as a mostly urban elite who had being closely linked to and **privileged** by the French during **the colonial era**. As a consequence of their **privilege**, Vietnamese Catholics tended to make up the wealthiest class in Vietnam, particularly in the area of landownership. They also held a **disproportionate** number of powerful positions in Vietnamese society. Poor southern Vietnamese **peasants** were more attracted to the land reforms promised by Ho Chi Minh and the communists in the north. Diem, a **devout** urban Catholic with close ties to Vietnam's rich rather than its poor was viewed as a distant figure, and as a ruler who favored the wealthy landowners over the poor peasantry. Buddhists also

looked upon Diem as a leader who gave preference to his fellow Catholics, particularly in his choice of government officials. Diem also refused to remove anti-Buddhist legislation, which had remained from the French colonial era, from South Vietnam's legal system.

In the countryside, **the Saigon regime** implemented a disastrous '**strategic-hamlet program**' program in 1961 aimed at preventing the spread of communism in areas outside the cities and the urban centers. Washington and Saigon hoped to isolate the Vietnamese peasantry from the rising influence of the southern communist **Viet Cong (VC)** (the National Liberation Front), which had succeeded the earlier Viet Minh. The program forced millions of rural Vietnamese peasants and villagers to leave their **ancestral** homes and family **burial grounds** and into **fortified** 'strategic hamlets'. The campaign was a near complete failure. It was deeply unpopular amongst Vietnam's rural population and only increased support for the Viet Cong and Ho Chi Minh's government in Hanoi. Money earmarked for the program was also often siphoned into the pockets of corrupt Saigon regime administrators. As a result, many of the strategic hamlets lacked essential resources and were in fact poorly protected. The program became an easy target for the Viet Cong, who tried to undermine it militarily and politically. The Vietnamese **intelligentsia** also came to despise Diem and his government. This was due to his use of force and his **secret police** to eliminate **free speech** and any protests critical of his rule. By the early 1960s, it was apparent that the deeply unpopular Diem regime was in trouble, and that it only had the support of the urban Catholic Vietnamese minority. Violent communist-led and non-communist rebellions against his government had begun. When Buddhist activists participated in street demonstrations against the Diem regime, the Saigon regime responded in ruthless fashion. International public opinion was outraged by media coverage of the demonstrations (see the **self-immolation** of the Buddhist monk, **Thich Quang Due**, in June 1963). In this environment, the Viet Cong increased its popularity in southern Vietnam. It also benefitted from a constant supply of financial, political, and military assistance from communist-controlled North Vietnam. Washington decided that Diem needed to be replaced before the government of 'South Vietnam' collapsed.

In November 1963, Diem was assassinated in a military coup that Washington secretly supported. The American **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)**, who originally had protected the unpopular ruler, provided a group of South Vietnamese generals with money with which to **overthrow** Diem and his family. The coup leaders had agreed to allow Diem to leave Vietnam but then broke their promise during the coup and killed Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, another leading figure in the regime. The head of the military coup, General **Nguyen Van Thieu**, became the new leader of the Saigon-based government (from 1963 to 1975). The 1960s were years that saw a ruthless and **dogged determination** by the United States and the Saigon government to do whatever was necessary to defeat the communist threat in South Vietnam and to keep the northern communists behind the 17th parallel.

One major mistake made by the Americans was their belief that they could win an **unconventional guerrilla** war by adopting the methods and strategies of a **conventional** war. Growing increasingly frustrated by the slow progress of the war, the US military and the South Vietnamese army (the Army of the Republic of Viet

Nam, referred to as **ARVN**), engaged in a ruthless **counter-insurgency** campaign aimed at **neutralizing** and killing as many **suspected** communists as possible (see **Operation Phoenix** or **the Phoenix Program**). The Viet Cong **irregular guerilla army** and the regular North Vietnamese army (the **Vietnamese People's Army (VPA)**) however seemed capable of suffering massive casualties in comparison to the US Army who increasingly were getting **bogged down** in an unwinnable war. The US suffered about 58,000 deaths during the war but the Vietnamese communists suffered over one million deaths, about twenty dead Vietnamese **combatants** for every American soldier. These figures do not include all the innocent Vietnamese civilians who died in the war, estimated to be at least another one to two million people.

The US army and ARVN forces used **napalm** bombs (slow burning petroleum jelly which sticks to the skin), and chemical **defoliants** (see **Agent Orange**) to destroy **vegetation** and the dense jungle forests, which the Vietnamese communists used to hide themselves from US and ARVN aircraft and their ground forces. The devastating effects of 'Agent Orange' are still apparent in Vietnam today. The Viet Cong's vast and complex **tunnel system** as well as their ability to cross the border into Cambodia, Laos, and northern Vietnam however made comprehensively defeating the communists an extremely difficult task. From a figure of 12,000 US 'military advisers' in 1962, the American military presence had risen to 500,000 in 1967 after **the Gulf of Tonkin Incident** in 1964 (which saw a major escalation in direct US intervention in Vietnam). As a consequence, the US death toll in the war also rose dramatically. The war was extensively covered by the American and international media who aired TV pictures and newspapers of the true **unsanitized** story of war, and of the suffering of the Vietnamese people in particular (see the photo of '**General Nguyen Ngoc Loan** executing a Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon' in February 1968, the **My Lai massacre** of March 1968, the napalm bombing photo of a young girl, **Phan Thi Kim Phuc** in June 1972). This contributed greatly to the Vietnam War's growing unpopularity back home in the United States and around the world. Alongside the Viet Cong, the US and the ARVN had to fight against regular North Vietnamese army soldiers who increased their presence and military capabilities in southern Vietnam via the so-called '**Ho Chi Minh Trail**' (a network of roads and trails that connected North Vietnam to South Vietnam via Laos and Cambodia). The communists were also greatly helped by aid, finance, and advisors from China and the Soviet Union. USSR-made surface to air missiles and Chinese and Soviet anti-aircraft personnel shot down dozens of American planes that flew on highly **destructive** bombing raids over North Vietnam. By the mid to late 1960s, it was becoming clear to Washington that Vietnam was not Korea and that the war could continue **indefinitely**.

One event in particular clearly illustrated this **dilemma** for the US government, and for the US public who watched the war progress via television and newspapers back home in America. On the morning of January 30th 1968, the Vietnamese communists took the US army and the southern Vietnamese regime by complete surprise when they launched major attacks upon American and Saigon regime military bases, buildings, and symbols of power across all of South Vietnam. Four of its five major cities were attacked alongside numerous other rural and **provincial** centers. The US had expected the communists to honor a cease-fire during the Tet or the lunar New Year celebrations in Vietnam. During the so-called **Tet Offensive**, the Viet Cong scored a major **psychological** blow against the US when they succeeded in entering the grounds of the US embassy in Saigon and placing it under siege for up to six

hours before the communist attackers were all killed. While the Tet Offensive was **ultimately** a military defeat for the Viet Cong, it was a psychological success for the communists because it highlighted to the American public that the Vietnam War was going nowhere for Washington. It also publicly displayed the brave determination of the communists to keep fighting and to strike hard despite a massive US effort to destroy them on the ground and via **devastating** bombing raids. The Tet Offensive provided **stark evidence** that the war in Vietnam was a war without end and that the communist enemy was more **resilient** and committed than the Americans appreciated.

Following January 1968, the will of the American people in particular to continue the war decreased dramatically. Anti-war protests in the US (and internationally), which had started in 1964 after **the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, erupted on university campuses and city centers throughout the United States. Popular anti-war sentiment was also apparent within political circles, and amongst American celebrities (see Robert Kennedy, Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, and **the Kent State shootings** of May 1970 for example). The US government also began to realize that the war was unwinnable. Washington however persisted in conducting the war for another five years in the hope that they could win **concessions** from the Vietnamese communists in exchange for an American withdrawal from South Vietnam (the last US troops left Vietnam in March 1973). As a result, thousands of young American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fighters and civilians died in the war before it finally ended in April 1975. Negotiations between the USA and North Vietnam to end the war had begun in May 1968, five months after the Tet Offensive. In October 1968, Washington and Hanoi negotiated an agreement (with Soviet assistance) to end the war but this was turned down by the Saigon regime. Before he became President, **Richard Nixon** and his supporters gained politically by assuring the anti-communist regime that they would receive a better deal if they waited until after the US Presidential elections in late 1968. The war was therefore prolonged.

By the late 1960s, the Americans gradually began to decrease the number of US troops in southern Vietnam and to slowly withdraw their forces from an unpopular war. In order to reduce the number of US deaths in the war and thus lessen anti-war sentiment at home in the United States, Washington focused more and more on air power and **aerial bombardment** to pressure the North Vietnamese government in Hanoi. Under President **Richard Nixon** (from 1969 to 1974), the US government adopted a policy known as '**Vietnamization**' aimed at preventing further American **casualties**. This policy involved US ground forces gradually being decreased, Saigon regime forces being strengthened, and the US air force resuming its earlier bombing campaigns against North Vietnam (see **Operation Rolling Thunder** from 1965 to 1968). **Controversially**, the American aerial bombardment of communist forces and supply lines was extended in support of South Vietnamese anti-communist forces into Laos and Cambodia. Hundreds of thousands of innocent Laotians and Cambodians died as a result of massive American bombing of large areas of their country (see **Operation Menu** and **Operation Freedom Deal**). The bombing also did terrible damage to the landscape and **infrastructure** of these countries. Incredibly, the United States dropped more bombs on Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos than they had throughout the Second World War. There was 1000 pounds (453kg) of bombs for every man, woman, and child in Vietnam.

In March 1970, the **neutralist** Cambodian government in Phnom Penh was

overthrown in a coup d'état carried by military officers, led by the anti-communist **Lon Nol**, who were pro-American. In May 1970, US forces began to secretly **penetrate** into Cambodia (officially a neutral state) for the purpose of **wiping out** and destroying Vietnamese communist bases there. The military coup d'état and the US **incursions** into parts of Cambodia resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent Cambodians and a serious **destabilization** of their political system. The American military's presence in Cambodia (and Laos) resulted in a rise in support for local communist movements in those countries (see **the Cambodian Civil War** from October 1970 to April 1975). In the chaos caused by the knock-on effects of the Vietnam War, the radical communist **Khmer Rouge** rose to power in Cambodia. Under the leadership of the **notorious** Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (from 1975 to 1979) murdered up to two million of their own countrymen and countrywomen in their goal of creating a **utopian** communist state. In February 1971, the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies also made a disastrous attempt to destroy Vietnamese communist bases in Laos, actions that later benefitted the **Pathet Lao** communists in terms of their support from the Laotian people. By the early 1970s, it was even more apparent to Washington that the war against communism in Indochina was making no progress and that the USA needed to withdraw its forces as soon as it possibly could.

After **rounds** of secret talks since the late 1960s, President Richard Nixon negotiated an agreement that was acceptable to China, the Soviet Union, and the Saigon regime. When a North Vietnamese attempt to invade South Vietnam failed in March 1972, the Vietnamese communists finally **relented** to pressure from Moscow and Beijing to end the conflict with the United States. One should note that at this stage in the war, China was desperate to improve relations with Washington following **the Sino-Soviet split** (from 1960 to 1989) and **the Cultural Revolution** (from 1966 to 1976) both of which left China domestically unstable and isolated on the world stage. By the late 1960s and the early 1970s therefore, the Chinese were eager to mend relations with Washington by persuading the North Vietnamese communists to accept offers to end the Vietnam War. We will discuss the Sino-Soviet split in more detail later. In October 1972, the Vietnamese communists therefore accepted a deal that was not a complete victory for them but would at least see the Americans leaving Vietnam (see the **Paris Peace Accords** of January 1973). In the remaining months of 1972 however, the war and a massive aerial bombardment of North Vietnam continued as President Nixon sought to pressure Hanoi into accepting a favorable peace deal and also to convince the Saigon regime that Washington would not abandon them after US withdrawal (see **Operations Linebacker I and II**). The Operation Linebacker II campaign (also known as the Christmas bombings) witnessed the heaviest bombardment of North Vietnam by the Americans since the war began in 1955, and since full-scale US involvement in 1964.

After the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, nearly twenty years of US military involvement in Vietnam came to an end. By March 1973, the last American troops had left the country. After the US withdrawal from Vietnam, the **emboldened** Vietnamese communists and the **dejected** anti-communist Saigon regime continued to fight one another for control of 'South Vietnam'. Saigon still received support from Washington but **the Watergate scandal** (June 1972 to August 1974) and President Nixon's subsequent resignation from office in August 1974 witnessed a major fall in the United States' commitment and assistance to the Saigon government. By the

middle of 1974, Saigon's military forces could no longer successfully defend South Vietnam against increasing numbers of communist attacks. The drop in American aid and support resulted in a weakening in Saigon's ability to remain supplied of arms and weaponry. The morale of the ARVN also dropped dramatically. Thousands of anti-communists soldiers deserted from the army. In March 1975, the Vietnamese communists launched a major attack on South Vietnam. Hanoi expected that it would take at least two years to topple the Saigon regime. In the face of a renewed communist attack however, the **demoralized** ARVN panicked and **disintegrated**. On this occasion, Washington refused to directly intervene and prevent South Vietnam from falling into communist hands. On April 30th 1975, Saigon fell and all of Vietnam was under communist control. The Vietnam War was over. In honor of their leader who died in 1969, the communists renamed Saigon '**Ho Chi Minh City**.' As the Americans feared, the communist victory in Vietnam was followed shortly afterwards by the communist Khmer Rouge taking power in Cambodia and the communist Pathet Lao taking control of Laos. Communism however did not expand beyond these countries. As Cohen observes, '*After a war of thirty years, the Vietnamese revolution had **triumphed** over the French, the Americans, and all internal opposition. Where once the French tricolor had flown, three independent states now stood, united by their leaders' shared **allegiance** to the **doctrines** of **Marx** and **Lenin***' (Cohen, 2000:395).

By the mid-1970s and the end of the Vietnam War, the Cold War in East Asia was **virtually** over. After decades of conflict, war-torn countries such as South Korea and the states of South-east Asia focused on **reconstruction** and rebuilding their societies. Cambodia was to suffer terribly until 1979 under the ruthless Khmer Rouge regime, and then due to the Cambodian-Vietnamese War (1977 to 1989). Former allies, Vietnam (now regarded as a Soviet proxy state in the region) and the Chinese (who fell out with the Soviets in the 1960s) went to war with each other in 1979 (see **the Sino-Vietnamese War**). China and the United States had become friends after 1972 (see **President Nixon's visit to China in 1972**). With the exception of the still tense Korean Peninsula, there was no major communist expansion after the mid-1970s or no major threat to US strategic interests in the region. In the waters of East Asia and in countries such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, Washington was still regarded as the **predominant** power in the region. Under the protection of the US giant, East Asian non-communist governments largely depended on the American military to maintain peace and stability in the region, while they concentrated on economic growth and prosperity.

KEY POINTS:

- After more than three decades of fighting first the Japanese, then the French, and finally the Americans, Vietnam, north and south, was an independent and sovereign country.
- Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam had been left devastated by the war. Millions of people had died, large areas of farmland were polluted, and many suffered and still suffer as a result of the effects of 'Agent Orange' and landmines. In the late 1970s, over one million Vietnamese left their country by boat (see the Vietnamese boat people).

- Despite a determined effort over twenty years, the spending of over 200 billion US dollars, and the loss of over 58,000 soldiers, the United States failed to secure its objectives in Vietnam, a third world state. The Vietnam War also created deep divisions within American society and undermined America's confidence in its use of direct military power. For nearly twenty years after Vietnam, the US avoided directly intervening in a military conflict. The cruelty of the war also undermined Washington's claim to **moral superiority** and leadership of **the free world** in its fight against communism.
- By the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Cold War in East Asia was, for the most part, over. Communism did not successfully expand beyond Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.