

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION AND VIETNAM:
A COALITION THEORY-BASED APPROACH
(CASE 337)

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Introduction and Background

In 1965, the infamous Vietnam War started, involving the US, the communist North Vietnam, and the democratic South Vietnam. This case study focuses on the negotiations between the Nixon administration of the US and the North Vietnamese between the years of 1968 and 1973. The war itself has generated many studies in the social sciences, and serves as one of the most violent wars outside of WWI and WWII. Essentially, this was a war borne out of differences in political ideology. North Vietnam was communist, and thus had the support of both China and the Soviet Union. South Vietnam was democratic, and thus had the support of the US. The war did not end with the South and North Vietnam, however. Due to the geography of the area, both the nations of Cambodia and Laos were involved as well¹. The primary targets in these countries were North Vietnamese troops that were using the Ho Chi Minh trail as strategic supply points for their military. Nixon comes to the forefront here, as both he and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, were the primary decision-makers and negotiators from the US.

This paper will analyze the negotiations taking place between the US and the North Vietnamese towards the end of the war, specifically from 1971 to 1973. We plan to use Coalition theory to analyze the outcomes of the negotiations. The events leading up to 1971 are important as well. Nixon had become president of the US in 1968, and was thus up for reelection in 1972. He inherited the Vietnam War from his predecessor Lyndon Johnson. By 1971, domestic support for the war had diminished significantly, with multiple protests taking place across the US. This prompted Nixon to make his famous “silent majority” speech, where he called for support from the citizens that supported the efforts in Vietnam. However, he was actively pursuing disengagement policies leading up to 1971. The major policy in place was called

¹ These nations were involved insofar as the actual fighting between the US, South Korean and North Korean troops took place within the borders of Cambodia and Laos. The military of these nations were not directly involved in the fight.

“Vietnamization” wherein the thrust was to hand the war back to the South Vietnamese with the US still providing support, but not in the form of military troops. Furthermore, official negotiations were being conducted in Paris, with secret negotiations taking place in congruence between Kissinger and Xuan Thuy. In addition, the South Vietnamese elections were also imminent in 1971, and the US elections were to be held in 1972. Clearly, the US-South Vietnamese alliance was running out of time. Finally, all negotiations conducted so far had resulted in no compromise, with the North Vietnamese stance hardening with every round, even in the face of significant concessions by the US.

Key Players and Interests

As stated earlier, the main parties involved in the negotiations were the US and South Vietnamese alliance versus North Vietnam. However, the North Vietnamese had the support of both the Soviet Union and China. Thus, while there was a formal alliance between the south and the US, there was a more informal alliance between the North, USSR, and China. The Soviet Union was also supplying the North Vietnamese with military hardware, reconnaissance and logistical support. Furthermore, the states of Cambodia and Laos were indirectly involved in that they did not participate in the war, but were invaded by South Vietnam and US forces in order to capture strategic military locations and assets from the North Vietnamese. The major interest for the US and the South was to keep out the North’s military forces². Since this quickly became an ideological and political battle, the other large powers (i.e. the US and the USSR) got involved and thus escalated the problem.

² North Vietnam had attacked the South in order to unify the country under communist rule.

Issues and Bargaining Points

Initially the bargaining positions in 1968, between the North Vietnamese and US, could not have been further apart. The US called for both sides (i.e. the US and North Vietnam) to withdraw their forces, hand over their prisoners and for Hanoi (North Vietnam) to recognize the autonomy of Saigon (South Vietnam). On the other hand, Hanoi wanted a complete stop of US bombing in the North, was unwilling to withdraw its forces from South Vietnam, and wanted the overthrow of the South Vietnam government. By 1971, due to the additional pressures on Washington, coupled with Hanoi's relentless fighting, the US was forced to make concessions on their original proposal. The main change was that Hanoi would no longer be required to give back South Vietnamese territory, and that "a provision calling for the resignation of [the South Vietnamese leader] thirty days before a plebiscite to be held to determine South Vietnam's future."³ Hanoi countered this offer by demanding the US overthrow the South Vietnamese government and that the US pay the North Vietnamese reparations for the damage caused by the war. The overthrow of Saigon was clearly the major point of contention because doing so would render the war (so far) meaningless from the US perspective. As a response to this, the US promised neutrality in the upcoming South Vietnamese elections, but could not agree to an overthrow. Hanoi rejected this offer and started planning an offensive attack to further their control of South Vietnamese territory in early 1972.

In regards to third parties, we have already discussed the roles of China, USSR, Cambodia and Laos. The main position in regards to Laos was the cessation of all hostilities in that nation. The US negotiating policy at this point was to urge both Beijing and Moscow to relinquish their support for Hanoi in order to put pressure on the North Vietnamese. Beijing acquiesced by being less critical of the US vis-à-vis the Laos invasion as compared to the

³ Geipel, pg 101

criticism of the Cambodian invasion earlier. Furthermore, Beijing began to pressure Hanoi towards a compromise.

In 1972, Northern Vietnamese forces began a full-scale assault into South Vietnamese territory. Washington reacted by increasing their bombing of the north. Furthermore, while Hanoi's assault was initially successful, the South Vietnamese army (with US support) eventually pushed them further back. In addition, China decided to remain neutral as far as the Vietnam issue was concerned. Finally, Kissinger visited Moscow in order to undermine Soviet support for Hanoi. His stance was that strained relations between the Soviets and the US could only be relaxed if the Soviets urged Hanoi to relent. These factors coupled together forced Hanoi to reconsider their position.

Just as compromise seemed possible, and when the US and North Vietnamese looked to reach a consensus, the negotiations were again stalled as Saigon refused to abide by the terms of the agreement. This was mainly due to South Vietnam's belief that the US still demanded Hanoi to withdraw their troops from South Vietnam. Furthermore, Saigon had issues with the proposed governance structure and with the DMZ not serving as a border between the two states. This development caused an agreement to not be reached before the presidential elections in the US.

Nixon was re-elected, however, and the US managed to address all of Saigon's concerns with the exception of the North Vietnamese military pullout. Hanoi reacted to Saigon's rejection of the agreement by strengthening their demands. It was at this point (in December 1972) when Nixon ordered extremely severe bombing in North Vietnam. The result was that Hanoi acquiesced to US demands and an agreement was reached. The only remaining issue was the North Vietnam's military presence in the South, but the US threatened to reach an independent agreement with Hanoi if Saigon still rejected the accord.

Coalition Theory

In this section, we will use coalition theory to support the outcome of the negotiations between Washington, Hanoi and Saigon. The reason as to why coalition theory is relevant is because coalitions were in operation on both sides of the Vietnam War, and actions of third parties were the driving force behind reconciliation. Coalitions are defined as “cooperative efforts for the attainment of short-range, issue-specific objectives.”⁴ According to DuPont (1994), “Coalition theories...areas that are addressed fall into roughly three categories: formation, stability and duration, and impact and outcomes.”⁵ Taking each area in turn, we first focus on formation. We understand the Vietnam War to be two distinct coalitions based on political ideology. US and South Vietnam represent the democratic coalition and consequently, North Vietnam, China and USSR represent the communist coalition. The primary motivation for these coalitions to form is to protect their ideologies. The North-South divide of Vietnam (and hence the conflict itself) was on this basis. The US formed a “behavioral alliance” with South Vietnam (given that the US was actively engaged in the war without an existing treaty), whereas the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam were more of an “informal alliance” due to the linkage of political ideology but relative lack of military support. Both groups (under this scenario) are “power-maximizers.” In this case, the goal of each group differs, whereas the North Vietnam group is the aggressor, looking to fold in the South, while the South Vietnam group is the defender, looking for autonomy and preservation of the status quo.

Secondly, in regards to the stability and duration, it is exactly in this area where the outcome is explained. Both coalitions start at a point of high stability, wherein North Vietnam chooses aggressive tactics based on its reliance in the stability of the group. So strong was

⁴ Zartman, (Ed.) pg. 148

⁵ Zartman (Ed.), pg. 149

Hanoi's conviction in the durability of its alliance that it saw no need to negotiate, disregarding favorable terms given its obvious comparative military weakness. By way of contrast, the perception of the democratic coalition seemed weak, given the domestic pressures faces by the US to abandon the South Vietnamese. Furthermore, Vietnamization also proved to be a signal of a weakening coalition, since the US was simultaneously removing troops and letting the South Vietnamese handle a greater share of the military conflict. Since negotiations were not working, the US specifically targeted the durability of the communist coalition in order to gain a better bargaining position. This is evidenced by the multiple approaches Washington made to both Beijing and Moscow, in order to undermine the support base of Hanoi. The US was successful in doing this by altering the payoffs for both Beijing and Moscow. Since Beijing had a more passive role in the war, they were appeased when the US showed a genuine effort to remove their troops from Cambodia and Laos. In the case of Moscow however, the Soviets were more active by providing military hardware to Hanoi. It is evident; then, that the payoff for winning was higher for Moscow as compared to Beijing (this is necessarily true because of the Cold War between the US and the USSR). By directly approaching Moscow, however, the US was able to change the payoff structure for the communist coalition by threatening inaction on their (US and USSR's) bilateral issues. The Soviet Union valued their bilateral concerns with the US higher than Vietnam, and so, in this way, the US was able to isolate North Vietnam and thereby force them into action. One final note of importance here is that once the US was able to sideline support from Beijing and Moscow, its own coalition payoff changed. The perceived payoff for South Vietnam lowered and thus its stability was threatened. The US then altered its payoff structure (through the final amendment to the negotiations) to increase the equity of South Korea, and thus avoid a possible dispersion of its own group.

Finally, in regards to the outcomes, when looking at the negotiations overall, the US had to make significant concessions in order to come to an agreement. While the literature does not speak to Beijing and Moscow's demands vis-à-vis North Vietnam, it does outline that the concessions that were made were necessary in order to achieve results. The major concession here would be allowing Hanoi's troops to stay in South Vietnam, and to create a coalition governmental structure as a compromise. However, besides these two major discrepancies, the US was able to maximize the outcomes in their favor. Hanoi, on the other hand, started with the demand of the reunification of Vietnam under their communist system. This did not happen.

Conclusion

Overall, the Coalition theory is an adequate explanation of the outcomes of the Vietnam War. It is difficult to conclude that were these steps taken earlier, such large concessions did not have to be made. It is remarkable, however, that such polar opposites in policy issues were able to come to an agreement at all. Furthermore, the two issues that this analysis sidelines (but are extremely important) are the actual war (soldier casualties, costs of war, military might and strategy, etc.) and the domestic institutions (such as popular protests, elections, etc.). As mentioned earlier, the bombing by the US (especially in December 1972) had a significant impact on the Vietnamese resolve. This aspect is not easily accounted for by coalition theory, especially since these events are outside of the actual negotiation. Furthermore, domestic institutional events (such as re-election of Thieu and Nixon, US anti-war protests) were also significant since they had an opposite effect on the democratic coalition (i.e. it strengthened their resolve and provided incentives for a fast resolution). What is also interesting to note is that since Hanoi was communist, they would have no reason to keep to some sort of timetable due to cyclical domestic

institutional events, but they could foresee the importance of such events in democracies. Thus, it is rational to suppose that even in wartime situations, communist groups would become blocking coalitions whereas democratic groups would have cyclical incentives toward resolution. We feel that this above outlined issues aside, coalition theory goes a long way towards explaining the outcomes of the Vietnam Negotiations, and brings to the forefront the powerful effects third-parties can have on issues once the incentives are properly aligned.

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