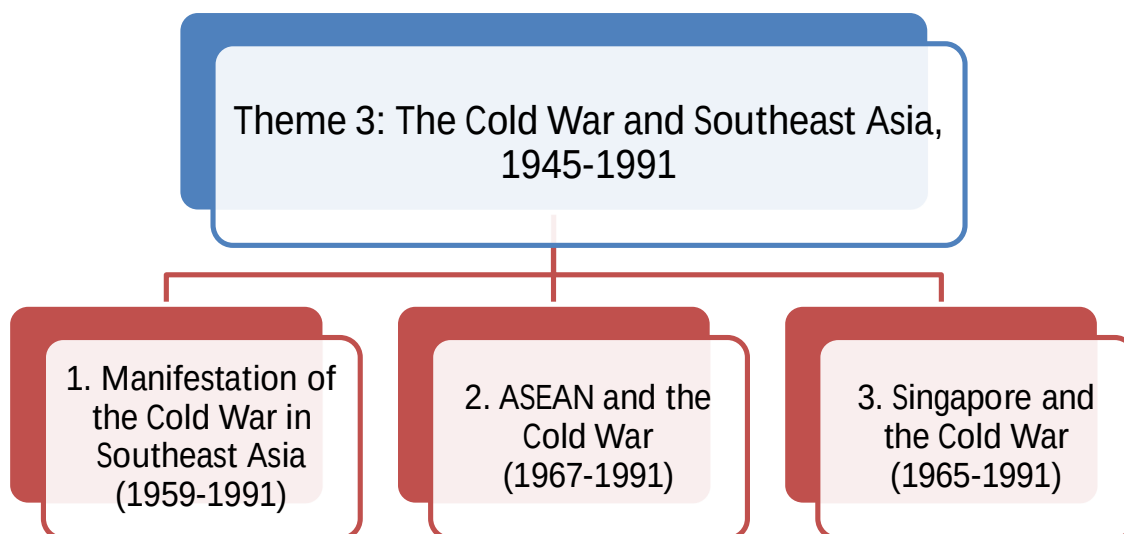




H1 History
(8838/01)

Theme III:
The Cold War and Southeast Asia

Theme III	THE COLD WAR AND SOUTHEAST ASIA (1945–1991)	
	How did the Cold War play out in Southeast Asia? What role did Southeast Asia play in the Cold War?	
OVERVIEW	MAKING CONNECTIONS	
In this theme, students will examine how the Cold War shaped developments in Southeast Asia through selected case studies on regional Cold War conflicts and Southeast Asian actors' responses to Cold War developments. They will analyse the causes of the outbreak of Cold War conflicts in Southeast Asia. In particular, they will examine how the involvement of forces external to Southeast Asia influenced regional developments and Southeast Asian actors' responses to the development of the Cold War. They will understand that while Southeast Asian countries were not always able to directly influence Cold War developments in the region, they were able to actively respond to Cold War developments as they sought to achieve national and/or regional objectives.	Today, Southeast Asia has transformed into a stable and economically vibrant region that is well-integrated with the international system. The USA and China continue to be key external actors in the region with significant security and economic interests in their relations with Southeast Asian countries. The study of this theme provides students with the essential historical context to understand changes and continuities in the role of major powers in the region and Southeast Asian countries' responses to their involvement. The agency of the region, as reflected in the interactions between the global Cold War and local realities, continues to be an important lens to understand developments in a region that is located at the crossroads of major powers.	
CONCEPTS (Students understand:)	CONTENT (Students study:)	LEARNING OUTCOMES (Students are able to:)
Historical Concepts - accounts - chronology - evidence - historical empathy - cause and effect - change and continuity Content Concepts - Cold War - cooperation - security - sovereignty - diplomacy	Manifestation of the Cold War in Southeast Asia - Factors shaping the Second Indochina War (1959–1975) - Cold War developments - role of North and South Vietnam - role of the USA, the USSR and China - Factors shaping the Third Indochina War (1978–1991) - historical animosities and Cold War developments - role of Vietnam and Cambodia - role of China, the USSR and the USA <i>* Questions set will not require students to compare the Second and Third Indochina Wars.</i>	- evaluate the factors that shaped the development of Cold War conflicts in Southeast Asia - evaluate ASEAN's responses to the development of the Cold War in Southeast Asia - evaluate Singapore's responses to the development of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.





Theme 3: The Cold War and Southeast Asia, 1945 – 1991
Topic 1: Manifestation of the Cold War in Southeast Asia

The Second Indochina War (1959 - 1975)

- 1. Background and Context**
- 2. The Second Indochina War (Vietnam War)**
- 3. Role of North and South Vietnam, the US, USSR and China**



1. Background and context

Overview

Vietnam underwent a long and continuous experience of wars against various opponents for many decades since WW2. Vietnam was a French protectorate since 1887 until WW2 when the Japanese occupied and exercised authority over Vietnam. During this period, the Vietnamese built arms and forces with the aid of Allied intelligence to weaken the Japanese. Later, the return of the French in Vietnam following Japanese withdrawal at the end of WW2 was met with strong local resistance to a continuation of colonial rule. This conflict between the French and Vietnamese was known as the First Indochina War.

After the First Indochina War ended in 1954, Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel as concluded in the Geneva Peace Conference; to demarcate territories for the communist North led by Ho Chi Minh, and the U.S. backed local ruling body in the South. However, the ceasefire in 1954 was short-lived and expansionistic ambitions from the communist North soon ensued along with the South's refusal to partake in nationwide elections in 1956 as advised by the 1954 Geneva Accords. This escalated into the Vietnam War and involved various parties in an increasingly bipolar world, divided by the Cold War. While the North was powered by local Vietnamese, USSR, and Chinese communist forces, the South was primarily armed by the U.S. and supporters of the old Vietnamese aristocratic regime.

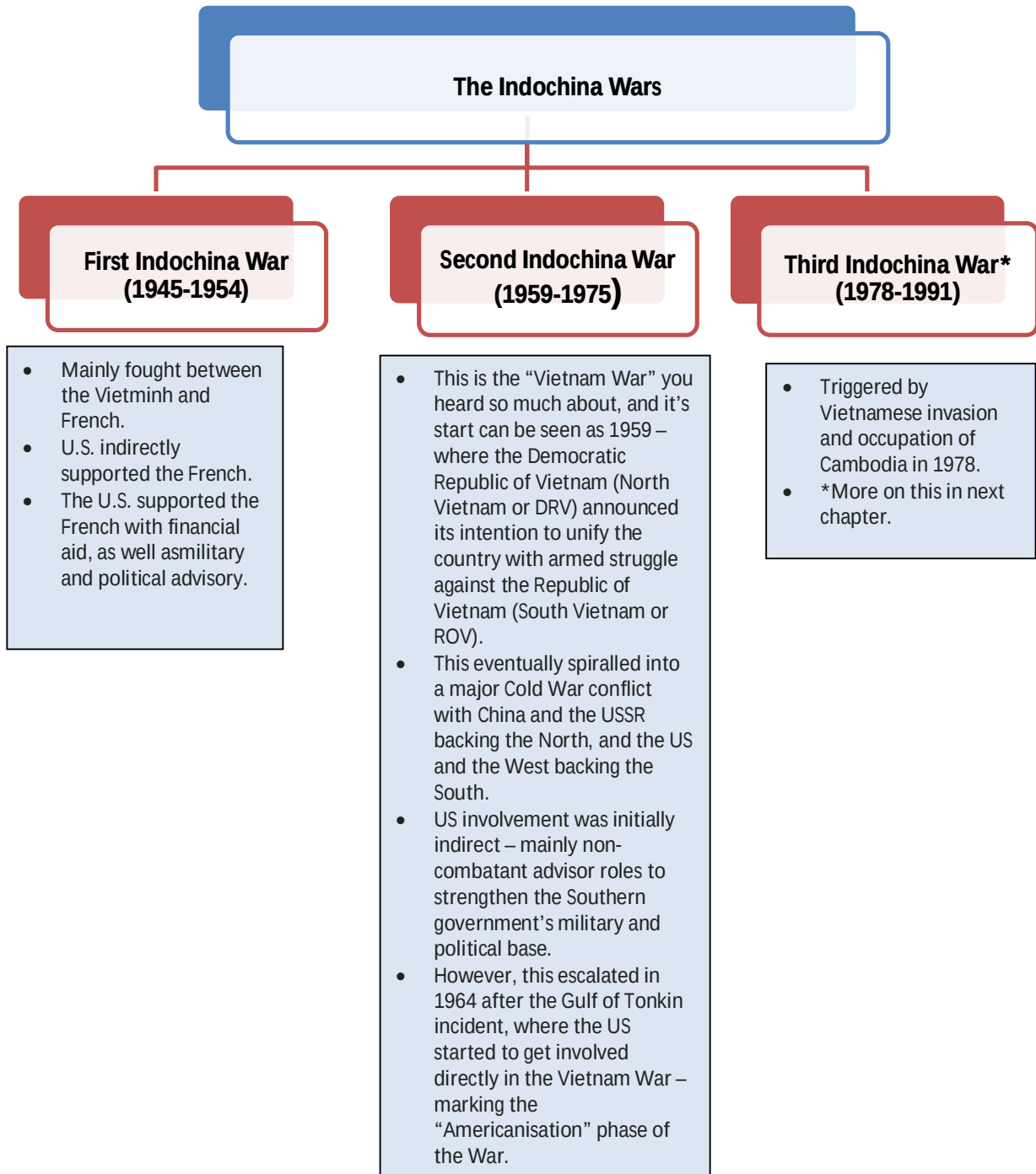
The Vietnam War left lasting legacies to all involved parties in its conclusion. On the one hand, the Vietnam War was a resounding failure for the U.S. in many aspects as communist forces ended the war with their defeat of U.S. forces and conquer of Saigon. Beyond the billions spent, the U.S. lost the lives of American soldiers with many other survivors suffering the psychological trauma of war. U.S. participation in the war also raised many questions over the morality of its leadership and overseas troops that leaves a permanent scar in U.S. history. Its superpower position in the global arena also became increasingly scrutinised at home and abroad.

On the other hand, the Vietnam War also had significant effects to the communist bloc. Both China and USSR experienced losses in terms of casualties and finance, while their relationship underwent considerable strain. The Vietnam War aggravated the Sino-Soviet split, with Vietnam placed in a tenuous position during and after the war ended. Although the USSR would gain an ally in Vietnam, it came at the cost of weakening the solidarity of the communist bloc.

Yet, beneath the dominant historical narrative of superpower roles in this conflict, millions of Vietnamese lives were lost. Worse still, a large proportion of casualties were unarmed civilians who perished under heavy U.S. bombings or unwarranted military purges of local Vietnamese villages. After more than 2 decades of war, Vietnam's reunification as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam finally came in 1976; with irreversible costs to all involved parties.



The 3 Indochina Wars: 1945 – 1954, 1954 – 1964, 1964 – 1974





First Indochina War (1945 – 1954)

The First Indochina War was the war between the local Vietnamese resistance against the return of the French when the latter tried to reclaim Indochina after WW2. This conflict lasted during 1945 to 1954.

In the closing stages of the Japanese Occupation, the Japanese pressured Bao Dai, the reigning emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, to declare independence from the French and become the head of a new government in Vietnam. This occurred in March 1945. Between this time and formal Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Ho Chi Minh-led communist party, Viet Minh, recognized this as an opportunity to be a legitimate participant in Vietnamese governance and focused on generating popular support. Upon Japanese withdrawal, and impending French-Allied occupation at the conclusion of WW2, the Viet Minh seized the chance to stage an insurrection known as the 1945 August Revolution.

Having successfully achieved popularity, and controlling strategic cities in the North as well as seize administrative positions in the fragile government, Ho Chi Minh then pressured Bao Dai to abdicate and confer Ho with the legitimacy and power over the governance of Vietnam. Choosing to keep Bao Dai in his government as Supreme Advisor, Ho Chi Minh managed to assume a position of credibility in the eyes of the locals by receiving the mandate from the dethroned emperor. Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence was then made in September 1945 at Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square to rapturous applause by the thousands in attendance. However, Bao Dai soon grew disillusioned with his token position and unrest in Vietnam and left the country.

Meanwhile, the French were able to establish administrative and military bases in South Vietnam due to haphazard organization and support for the Viet Minh in the region. They also attempted to achieve some form of legitimacy over the populace of South Vietnam by forming a new government with the support of the old aristocracy and anti-communists in 1949. The self-exiled former emperor, Bao Dai, was thus invited to return and become the government's head of state. This was known as the "Bao Dai Solution." Bao Dai would later offer Ngo Dinh Diem, a former official in the Vietnamese imperial service, to be his premier / prime minister in early 1954.

The battle for Vietnam therefore ensued following these developments – with Ho and the Communist Viet Minh in control in the North and the French and their anti-Communist government in the South.

The U.S. supported the French against Ho Chi Minh in Indochina's fight for independence after WW2 *because* they were worried that the whole of Indochina (and maybe beyond) would fall to communism without the political presence and influence of the West and U.S. in the region.





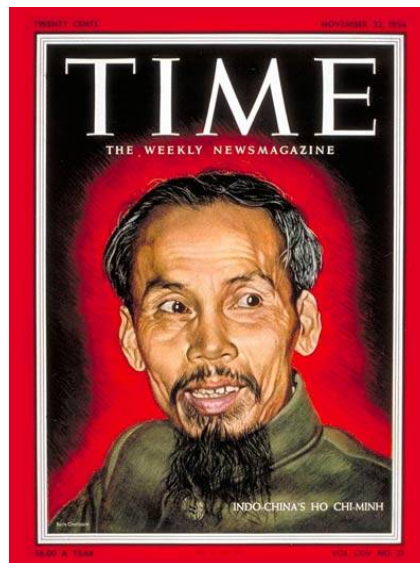
1954 Geneva Peace Conference & Accords

Yet, despite significant US support for the French to re-establish control over their former territories in Vietnam, the French were defeated by Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The 1954 Geneva Peace Conference was supposed to resolve the issue of Vietnamese independence, but it failed to do so. Instead, Vietnam ended up being split into 2 - the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) led by Ho Chi Minh in the North, and the Republic of Vietnam (ROV) led by Ngo Dinh Diem in the South.

The USSR and China only recognized the DRV based in Hanoi in the North, while the French, British, and U.S. only recognized the pro-West ROV based in Saigon in the South. These parties as well as delegates from both governments in Vietnam were present for the conference. Although the conference began on 26 April, concerns regarding Vietnam were only given proper attention from 8 May, and negotiations regarding the country lasted till 21 July 1954 when the Geneva Accords were issued as per the following:

- The 17th parallel will be the line of ceasefire in Vietnam, provisionally dividing the country into two.
- All North (Viet Minh) and South (French) forces are required to regroup on their corresponding sides.
- Neither side cannot seek military alliances nor reinforcements from foreign parties.
- These accords were issued *in view of an (unsigned) Final Declaration for peaceful reunification of the country within two years (1956) pending elections and a chosen president.*





Reactions to the Accords

Party	Reactions	Reason
USSR & PRC	Accepted and Signed	• The USSR and PRC agreed because they feared that the U.S. would intervene militarily in Vietnam should the accords be overtly in the DRV's favour. • Having just experienced the Korean War conflict, they were not keen on renewing military engagements with the U.S. again.
North Vietnam / DRV	Accepted and Signed	• The DRV agreed because they were under heavy pressure from USSR and PRC to agree to it. • However, the DRV were upset with the division of Vietnam on the 17th parallel because it denied them with the spoils of the First Indochina War. • With the defeat of the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh had ostensibly controlled two-thirds of Vietnam. • The division on the 17th parallel restored the territorial balance between North and South. Ho Chi Minh was particularly unhappy because he had expected Vietnamese reunification in the Communists' favour.
South Vietnam / ROV	Rejected	• Although the Geneva Accords gave South Vietnam recovered territories, South Vietnam were against the idea of holding nationwide elections for 3 reasons. • They knew that the DRV had popular support and would the defeat of South Vietnam was very possible. • They claimed that fair elections is not possible in the hostile environment created by DRV and Viet Cong • The U.S. advised them against accepting the accords.
U.S.	"Acknowledged" the ceasefire but did not sign/accept	• While the U.S. were widely known to be upset by the accords, they claimed that they were not bound by the accords as they had not been directly involved with the First Indochina War • The U.S. were afraid that elections in 2 years would mean a likelihood of communist triumph for the DRV since the latter enjoyed popular local support on the ground. • Nevertheless, Eisenhower accepted that elections represented a rite of passage for independent countries and did not want the U.S. to be seen as prolonging colonialism in Southeast Asia. • However, the U.S. were keen and optimistic that the government in South Vietnam, with U.S. guidance, can make progress and expand their support base in the South to mount a genuine challenge in the pending elections. Within a year, the United States had helped establish a new anti-communist government led by Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam and



		began giving it financial and military assistance, the first fateful steps toward even greater U.S. involvement in Vietnam.
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The Conflict (Re)Commences (1955-1959)

The Geneva Accords left the issue of Vietnamese reunification unresolved, so it is no surprise that war soon flared up again in Vietnam.

- **North Vietnam**

The DRV delayed a withdrawal of their troops while a local guerilla force was formed in the South, the Viet Cong or National Liberation Front (NLF), with aims to topple the South's government and forces.

The DRV was also growing from strength to strength, consolidating military organization in the North with substantial supplies and aid from China. Thousands of PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) members were reported to also have undergone training in China as well as USSR.

At the same time, Ho Chi Minh's use of propaganda in rallying support from peasants were known to have been highly successful, with many locals believing in the nationalist cause for liberation. Their Viet Cong guerilla counterparts based in South Vietnam also played crucial roles in fostering local dissent, and even rebellions, against the U.S. backed Southern (ROV) government.

Eventually, in 1959, the DRV announced its intention to unify the country with armed struggle against the South. Clever military tactics as well as popular support among locals facilitated the North Vietnamese's gradual advancements into Southern territories by the early 1960s, causing panic among U.S. military advisors.

- **South Vietnam**

In the South, Ngo Dinh Diem's political aspirations and relative competence became an appealing proposition to be the face for the U.S.' anti-communist cause in South Vietnam, in contrast to Bao Dai's general disinterest. In 1955, as premier, Diem declared the South's refusal, on U.S. advisory, to participate in a Vietnam-wide elections in 1956 as initially planned by the 1954 Geneva Accords. Diem cited that the DRV's aggressive tactics and the presence of the Viet Cong did not facilitate a fair elections process.

Instead, Diem authorized elections restricted within South Vietnam, employed fraudulent methods to depose Bao Dai, and declared himself as the new president of South Vietnam following the results of the elections. While the U.S. had intended for the outcome, they criticized the fraudulent process for being excessive and unnecessary.

With the appointment of a seemingly competent new leader, South Vietnam underwent a massive political, economic, and military restructuring process under U.S. guidance.



2. The Second Indochina War (Vietnam War)

Eve of the Vietnam War (1959 - 1963)

Tensions escalated between the DRV and ROV, and regular skirmishes across the 17th parallel resumed between the North and South.

On the US front, after the conclusion of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, US President Kennedy and the U.S. were determined to maintain a hardline stance towards Communism in the bipolar competition of the Cold War. It was decided that this policy was to be carried out in Vietnam as well, especially with the escalation of advances from the North and the weakening of South Vietnam.

Therefore, JFK amplified economic and military aid to the Diem regime to resuscitate a defense against communism in Southeast Asia. By the end of 1963, Vietnam had accumulated more than 16,000 U.S. military advisers, some authorized to take part in combat along the U.S. equipped Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).



However, the ROV's Diem, as president, was abusing his authority, persecuting his opponents and becoming increasingly unpopular in the South. In view of Diem's lack of local support, as well as his political and military incompetence, the U.S decided that it had enough of him. In November 1963, the CIA backed a military coup by the ARVN in the South, removing and assassinating Diem, replacing him with General Doung Van Minh, and starting off a series of unstable and short-lived military governments in the ROV.

"Americanisation" of the war

a) Gulf of Tonkin Incident (August 1964)

The Gulf of Tonkin refers to a body of water in North Vietnam and South China. The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, on 2 August 1964, refers to the Vietnamese torpedo attack on U.S. destroyer *Maddox*, which was carrying out espionage activities in the area. On 4 August, the U.S. reported that *Maddox* and another U.S. destroyer were again under North Vietnamese attack (this second attack was later discovered to be false).

In retaliation, President Lyndon Johnson (who replaced Kennedy after he was assassinated) immediately authorized retaliation against North Vietnam with air strikes and the next day held a congressional hearing; accusing North Vietnam of





unwarranted aggression without proper explanation for the sequence of events that took place.

Johnson followed this up with the submission of a resolution to the Senate. This resolution was known to be the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and granted him presidential authority to take “all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

This event was the start of direct U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, yet it took place in highly dubious circumstances. In fact, it was unclear whether US forces were actually attacked! (The North Vietnamese always denied it.) And in subsequent years the incident was often seen as just a convenient excuse engineered by Johnson and the US to give them a reason to directly send US combat forces into Vietnam.

b) Draft Lottery (1964)

Conscription in the U.S is known as the Draft. It involves the deployment of men, between the ages of 18-25, registered in the draft to fill vacancies in the U.S. armed forces should volunteers be lacking. This is also known in the U.S. as the Selective Service System. It has been in place since 1917.

However, with the development of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the draft became a source of controversy as young men were reluctant to go fight in Vietnam. Almost 30% of eligible men in 1964 attempted exemption and deferment (compared to lower percentages in previous years such as 9% in 1944), while many students publicly demonstrated their disapproval of the draft and Vietnam War by burning their draft lottery cards in mass gatherings.

c) Operation Rolling Thunder (March 1965 – October 1968)



Having just won the 1964 U.S. presidential elections in November, Johnson became more emboldened to undertake increased aggression in Vietnam upon the advice of U.S. military aides. His authorization of Operation Rolling Thunder in February 1965 commenced a 3-year prolonged air bombing of North Vietnam from March 1965 to October 1968. Beyond minimizing

U.S. casualties in damaging the DRV's bases, other objectives of this operation was to



demoralize the war efforts of the DRV by demonstrating U.S. military power, and dissuade the DRV's support to their Viet Cong comrades in South Vietnam by destroying their transportation and supply routes. Despite the extensive resources devoted to this operation, the effectiveness of this prolonged air-raid remains debatable.

Tensions in the Communist Bloc

Not all was well in the Communist camp either, as increasingly the Sino-Soviet split and rivalry came to affect the Communist support for the DRV in the Vietnam War as well.

a) Khrushchev & Détente (1956 – 1964)

Khrushchev was initially content with the DRV taking the initiative in Vietnam. A lack of involvement in Vietnam would allow the Soviets to maintain the policy of peaceful coexistence and détente with the West and U.S. despite obvious gains for the communist bloc should the DRV succeed. USSR was also fearful that a situation similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis could arise if both superpowers were to engage militarily in Vietnam, and took careful measures to avoid it.

Khrushchev often emphasized publicly for a peaceful reunification of Vietnam that was to be achieved without external intervention. This foreign policy approach thus enabled him to

- a) stand in public support with the DRV,
- b) maintain distance towards the Vietnam War with minimal aid,
- c) leave China to bear the bulk of costs in the Vietnamese communist movement, as well as
- d) maintain cordial international relations with the West and U.S.

Khrushchev's relative non-action regarding the situation in Vietnam nevertheless opened himself up to criticism from Soviet politicians, the PRC, and other members of the communist bloc; particularly in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

b) Change of USSR political leadership (October 1964)



The restructure of USSR government into a "collective leadership" in 1964 was a development that contributed to greater decisiveness regarding the situation in Vietnam, despite acknowledged concerns of aggravating relations with the West and U.S. should the USSR intervene militarily. The new leadership entailed the removal of Khrushchev and the appointment of Leonid Brezhnev as First Secretary while Alexei Kosygin replaced



Khrushchev as Chairman of the Council of Ministers.

Responding to U.S. escalation in Vietnam following the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the USSR became more ready to support the DRV beyond Soviet propaganda. Nevertheless, USSR involvement in Vietnam was very calculated and still hinged on being cordial with the U.S. Open communication between the two superpowers was maintained as the Vietnam conflict ensued.

While Soviet aid to Vietnam during this period increased, USSR involvement remained limited to a non-combatant capacity during 1964 – 1967.

c) Beginnings of the Sino-Soviet Split (c. 1956 onwards)

The origins of the Sino-Soviet Split (which you have already studied) can be summarized as an ideological disagreement over two issues that later escalated as a rivalry for international leadership within the communist bloc.



1. Mao criticized Khrushchev's foreign policy of détente with the West and U.S. While Khrushchev was inclined towards maintaining peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West and U.S., Mao criticized this as a betrayal of Marxism-Leninism, Communist principles, and Stalin's legacy. Mao was particularly displeased with Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's achievements and legacy in Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" of April 1956.
2. Mao accused the USSR of prioritizing Soviet interests above others in the latter's leadership of the global communist world. Mao's criticism stemmed from his disillusionment with the Soviet's frequent disapproval of PRC's economic and political



decisions at home as well as abroad. After further evidence of USSR's lack of support for China in the latter's clashes with Taiwan, Tibet, and India, Mao was convinced that the Soviet leadership was capitulating to the capitalist U.S. and West by avoiding confrontation. The aftermath of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis therefore provided a platform for the PRC to assume a more influential role in the communist world order.

d) Chinese support for DRV (1964 – 1969)

With the USSR initially persisting with its policy of relative non-involvement in the Vietnam War, the PRC seized the initiative of escalating their aid to their North Vietnamese counterparts. A particular condition of this military alliance between the PRC and DRV during the Sino-Soviet split was that the DRV should not accept aid from USSR. This was the PRC's way of ensuring that they retained a greater influence over Vietnam and assumed a leadership role in the Vietnam conflict, rather than the passive USSR.

On the one hand, the cooperation between the PRC and DRV was facilitated by their close geography. On the other hand, the historical origins of Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh's political affiliations in China also played its part in the strategic consolidation of the Sino-Vietnamese communist bloc.

In 1965 Beijing sent several thousand engineering troops across the border, to assist in building and repairing roads, railways, airstrips and critical defence infrastructure. Between 1965 and 1971 more than 320,000 Chinese troops were deployed in North Vietnam. The peak year for this was 1967, when there were around 170,000 Chinese in the DRV. Their work on military installations naturally meant that Chinese troops were susceptible to heavy American bombing; an estimated 1,000 Chinese were killed in the North in the 1960s. Beijing also supplied Hanoi with large amounts of military equipment, including trucks, tanks and artillery.

In attempting to preserve North Vietnamese reliance on the PRC during the Sino-Soviet Split, it was even reported that the PRC often deliberately delayed the Soviet supply of resources to the DRV via the overland China route.

e) USSR's escalated intervention and support for DRV (c. 1967)

The major shift in Chinese vs Soviet support for the DRV came after 1967, as a consequence of the worsening Sino-Soviet split. Prior to this point, direct support for the DRV mostly came from China. After this point, as Vietnam increasingly leaned toward the Soviet camp in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, Sino-Vietnamese relations became strained, and the Soviets replaced the Chinese as the main backer of the DRV.

Promises and delivery of extensive USSR military aid in the form of advisors and weaponry soon dwarfed the numbers the PRC initially provided to the DRV. The willing acceptance of a Soviet alliance that undermined PRC authority in Vietnam was thus followed by a strain in Sino-Vietnamese relations and the withdrawal of Chinese resources in Vietnam.



By the late 1960s more than three-quarters of the military and technical equipment received by North Vietnam was coming from Moscow. This arsenal included 2,000 tanks, 7,000 artillery guns, over 5,000 anti-aircraft guns and 158 surface-to-air rocket launchers.

f) Sino-US Rapprochement (Late 1968)

The U.S. initially anticipated that an escalation of warfare in Vietnam would bring about closer cooperation between the Soviets and Chinese. However, the reverse occurred due to the Sino-Soviet split. The perception that the Soviet Union was China's most dangerous enemy gradually came to dominate Beijing's strategic thinking. Starting in late 1968, Mao thus began to reconsider the role the United States could play in China's security needs.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were indications that the United States and the People's Republic of China were considering rapprochement. The escalating war in Vietnam led U.S. officials to look for ways to improve relations with Communist governments in Asia in the hopes that such a policy might lessen future conflict, undermine alliances between Communist countries, diplomatically isolate North Vietnam, and increase U.S. leverage against the Soviet Union.

g) China Withdrawal of Support for DRV (c. 1969)

As a result of continued disagreements with the USSR in the context of the Sino-Soviet split, as well as disappointment with their North Vietnamese comrades for their increased reliance and alliance with the Soviets in the Vietnam War, the PRC gradually withdrew their support from the conflict.

People Power and U.S. Disillusionment

As the Vietnam War dragged on, US casualties mounted, and US public disillusionment over the war grew. Americans increasingly questioned the purpose of the US getting involved in a seemingly never-ending war in a faraway land, and starting doubting whether the US government was telling them the truth about Vietnam and what was going on there. The turning point of all this, and of the Vietnam War, came in 1968, where US public opinion decisively turned against their involvement in Vietnam.

a) Tet Offensive (January 1968)

The PAVN and Viet Cong coordinated a fierce attack on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam on 31 January 1968 with about 70,000 men. This series of attack was known as the Tet Offensive. This attack was planned to encourage local rebellion among Vietnamese in the South against the U.S. backed government, as well as dissuade continued U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.



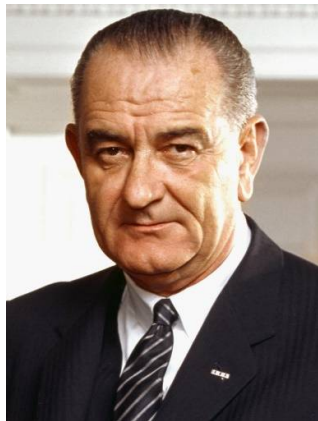
The PAVN and Viet Cong suffered a tactical defeat and heavy casualties, but scored a major strategic and psychological victory. Although the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces managed to evade significant military damage, news of the Tet Offensive dismayed the American public – as the US government had been trying to persuade the US public for months that the North were losing and about to be defeated. So this giant offensive pretty much exposed that as wishful thinking! It also further informed the U.S. of the lack of civilian support for the government of South Vietnam.



The Tet Offensive marked one of the turning points of the Vietnam War – as while the NVA/Viet Cong actually lost militarily, the huge offensive stunned the US public and further eroded public support for the war in Vietnam (they basically felt that they were sending their young men to die in a neverending and pointless war), fuelling anti-war peace movements through the USA. Thus, it became a major political/psychological/propaganda victory for the North.

In some ways, the Tet Offensive marked the start of the process that eventually led to the humiliating withdrawal of the US from the region.

b) Withdrawal of Johnson's Candidacy (November 1968)



U.S. President Johnson was facing increasing pressures to stop American involvement in the conflict. Although Johnson received popular public support back home when he acted upon the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, 4 years on, public sentiments had changed drastically. As the 1968 presidential election loomed, Johnson faced forceful pressures from political opponents as well as the public to commence withdrawal of the U.S. from the conflict. While Johnson publicly announced a halt to the bombings, he did not decide to withdraw the U.S. from the conflict. Instead, Johnson withdrew from the presidential race altogether and in effect placed the responsibility of Vietnam into the hands of the incoming president.

c) Nixon Doctrine and “Vietnamisation” (January 1969)

The new President was Richard Nixon, and “*Vietnamisation*” was the term used by him to describe his new policy towards South Vietnam in the later stages of the Vietnam War. As the



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term implies, “Vietnamisation” was Nixon’s desired policy to let South Vietnam to take a greater responsibility for the war while America gradually withdrew and lessened its commitment. (See how it went from the “Americanisation” of the war to the “Vietnamisation” of the war in the span of a few years!)

In June 1969, Nixon announced that 25,000 US troops were to be withdrawn. However, this still left 515,000 US troops in South Vietnam. In December 1969, Nixon announced a further 60,000 men were to leave South Vietnam.

d) My Lai Massacre – A 1968 Secret unravels in November 1969



The My Lai Massacre of 1968 refers to an infamous event in U.S. history and the Vietnam War. In an attempt to purge villages in the South for Viet Cong, the U.S. military indiscriminately massacred between 100 – 500 locals, among whom were women, children, and the elderly. This mission was kept a secret, but the occurrence at My Lai came to public light in November 1969 when a US soldier, Paul Meadlo, was interviewed on television and admitted his involvement in the incident. The revealing of this military crime on national television added to the fervent disapproval of continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam from the American public as well as international observer, turning US public opinion even further against the Vietnam War.

e) Nixon’s Secret Bombings (March 1969)

Worsening the situation from prior events, in March 1969, President Richard Nixon authorized secret bombing raids in Cambodia, a move that escalated opposition to the Vietnam War across the United States. Nixon believed North Vietnam was transporting troops and supplies to the Viet Cong in the South through neighboring Cambodia via what came to be known as the “Ho Chi Minh Trail”. He hoped that bombing supply routes in Cambodia would weaken the United States' enemies.



The bombing of Cambodia lasted until August 1973. While the exact number of Cambodian casualties remains unknown, most experts estimate that 100,000 Cambodians lost their lives, with an additional two million people becoming homeless. Enhancing the destruction, in April 1970, President Nixon ordered United States troops to occupy parts of Cambodia. Nixon claimed that the soldiers were protecting the United States' withdrawal from South Vietnam.

f) US 26th Amendment (March 1971)

The long debate over lowering the voting age in America from 21 to 18 began during World War II and intensified during the Vietnam War, when young men denied the right to vote were being conscripted to fight for their country. Amid increasing support for a Constitutional amendment, Congress passed the 26th Amendment in March 1971; the states promptly ratified it, and President Richard M. Nixon signed it into law that July.

g) Public Discovery of Pentagon Papers (1971)

The Pentagon Papers was the name given to a study of U.S. military and political involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967, commissioned by the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1967, meant for top U.S. officials.

However, one of the researchers, Daniel Ellsberg, secretly leaked the report and in March 1971 gave the copy to local newspapers, which published its contents. The contents revealed the number of U.S. troops that have been sent, including the number of casualties, amount of funds, and the frequency of attacks upon Vietnam. Although the government tried to block the publications on the grounds of national security, the attempt failed. A national and international uproar soon ensued over how the Pentagon Papers revealed, among other things, that President Johnson's administration had systematically lied about the Vietnam War and US involvement in it, not only to the public but also to Congress.

The Closing Stages

As the US gradually withdrew from Vietnam as part of its new policy of "Vietnamisation", the South Vietnamese themselves and the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), increasingly shouldered the burden of fighting against the PAVN and Viet Cong. Yet, it soon emerged that the ARVN, without US support, was largely incapable of effectively fighting the PAVN and Viet Cong.

a) Operation Lam Son 719 (Feb – March 1971)

Operation Lam Son was an offensive carried out by the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) into Laos, in an attempt to cut/disrupt the Ho Chi Minh trail there by which the PAVN supplied the Viet Cong in the South. It was meant as a test of the ARVN's ability to operate effectively by itself, as part of the US policy of Vietnamisation to let the ARVN shoulder the burden of defending their own country, with the US only providing logistical and aerial support.



However, due to PAVN and the Viet Cong's (VC) intelligence and preparation beforehand, and the general incompetency and poor execution by the ARVN leadership, the operation largely flopped, and demonstrated that the ARVN still had a long way to go before it could effectively engage the PAVN.

b) Nguyen Hue Offensive (March 1972)

1972 was recognized by the DRV as an opportune time to obtain further strategic victories in the Vietnam War. Already aware that the South were already severely weakened militarily and politically by this stage, the DRV intended to launch a significant offensive in 1972 to influence the U.S. presidential elections as well as improve its negotiating position in Paris for the upcoming Peace Conference.

Confident of victory, this military offensive was not guerilla in orientation and was a full-scale invasion of South Vietnam with tanks and heavy artillery. However, a combination of U.S. airpower and surprising resilience from the remaining forces of the ARVN in South Vietnam managed to halt this massive attack. It also resulted in the US responding with "Operation Linebacker," a massive air bombing campaign that blunted the North's drive in the South as well as inflicting significant damage in the North.

Losses were estimated to be 40,000 killed and 60,000 wounded/missing for the North Vietnamese while the ARVN and U.S. suffered 10,000 casualties with 36,500 wounded/missing.

In retrospect, this NVA offensive was unnecessary as the U.S. and ARVN only had secure control of about 10% of South Vietnam prior to this ambitious invasion, and plans were already made for full U.S. withdrawal.

c) Paris Peace Accords (January 1973)

Once Nixon decided upon the gradual withdrawal of US forces in Vietnam, negotiations began in secret for a peace agreement to end the war and establish peace in Vietnam. The culminated in the Paris Peace Accords signed in January 1973 by the governments of the DRV (North Vietnam); the ROV (South Vietnam); the United States; and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG), which represented the Viet Cong.

The Paris Agreement removed the remaining US forces from Vietnam, and marked the end of US commitment to the war. The agreement did not last at all – it was immediately and frequently broken by both North and South Vietnamese forces, with no official response from the United States. Open fighting soon broke out again in March 1973, and subsequently North Vietnamese offensives substantially enlarged their territory by the end of the year.



d) War Powers Resolution (November 1973)

The War Powers Resolution was adopted near the end of the Vietnam War in 1973, when dissatisfaction with the war was high. It was perhaps a belated indictment of Nixon as well as prior U.S. presidents for their indiscriminate acts of war, with close to unlimited powers of military authority. Nixon vetoed the resolution, only for the House and Senate to override the decision and enforce the resolution. This resolution remains in effect today.

The War Powers Resolution was passed by Congress as a check on the President's war powers. It requires that the President, upon ordering any military forces into combat without a declaration of war, formally notify Congress of the action within 48 hours. In addition, the combat action must be ended within 60 days, unless Congress authorizes a longer commitment. Congress can order immediate removal of forces by adopting a concurrent resolution (a resolution expressing the sentiments of both houses and not subject to Presidential approval).

e) Watergate Scandal (June 1972 – August 1974) and Nixon's resignation (August 1974)



The Watergate Scandal is a source of controversy in American political history that still remains unclear to this day. In summary, however, the Watergate Scandal refers to a break-in of the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate complex, near the White House.

Although the purpose and objective of this break-in remains unclear, the Watergate Scandal was fiercely linked to Nixon by the

public as well as his political rivals. This incident coincided with the height of the Vietnam War. It was uncovered later that Nixon had attempted to cover-up the break-in by paying-off the perpetrators to maintain their silence as it was very close to the November 1972 elections. Nixon weathered the storm and was able to get re-elected.

However, in May 1973, the Senate Watergate Committee began nationally televised hearings into the growing scandal, and it was exposed that the burglary had concrete links to the White House. Also revealed was that Nixon's phone conversations in the president's office had been taped since 1971. Although Nixon attempted to block the recovery of these tapes on the count of presidential privilege, he failed. Amidst the peak of this controversy, Nixon reluctantly resigned in August 1974.

f) Fall of Saigon and the North's final attack (April 1975)

The fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) effectively marked the end of the Vietnam War.



Once U.S. forces had left South Vietnam after the Paris Peace accords, the advance of the North into the South became unstoppable. As the forces of the North got nearer to Saigon in the PAVN-led **Spring Offensive** (sometimes called the “Ho Chi Minh campaign”) in early 1975, what remained of the South Vietnamese Army started to disintegrate.

The President of the ROV and Commander-in-Chief of the ARVN, General Nguyen Van Thieu, had already fled to Taiwan. His replacement, General Duong Van Minh, was instructed to find a peaceful solution to the war – an impossible task, as the North had no reason to want to negotiate on the brink of its total victory.



North Vietnamese tanks soon entered Saigon and smashed down the gates at the Presidential Palace to accept the surrender of General Minh. By the end of April 30th, South Vietnam was wholly under the control of North Vietnam who swiftly announced the creation of a united

Vietnam.

This marked the end of the Vietnam War and the start of a transition period to the formal reunification of Vietnam under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Although Ho Chi Minh had first declared independence in 1945 and led the war against the French and U.S., he never lived to realize his dream of reunification between the North and South as he died in 1969 and was replaced by Le Duan. To commemorate his leadership and significance in the war and legacy in Vietnamese history, the city of Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City by the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam.



3. Role of North and South Vietnam, the US, USSR and China

North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, DRV)

The North's objectives in the war were always very clear – that of reunification and freeing Vietnam from foreign control. And it is these objectives which guided its role in the Vietnam War throughout. From its initial declaration of war in 1959, to its creation of the Viet Cong (NLF) in 1960, its obtaining of external support from first China and later the USSR, and finally its major offensives – the Tet Offensive in 1968, the Nguyen Hue Offensive in 1972 and the Spring Offensive in 1975, the goal was always the defeat of the South, the removal of the US and the reunification of the country.

a) Decolonisation and Reunification

Vietnam has a very long history of being under foreign control. Between 2 c. BCE to 10 c. CE, Vietnam fell under the political sphere and authority of the Chinese kingdom, barring few relatively short periods of autonomy. French colonialism over Indochina then began in 1887, before the Japanese invasion in WW2.

Therefore, by the time the French returned following Japanese withdrawal at the end of WW2, many Vietnamese were strongly opposed to having any outsider intervene in their country's state of affairs. Having undergone such a long history of being subordinated, many Vietnamese wanted independence. In fact, many Vietnamese believed their independence was already achieved when an enormous crowd witnessed Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence in 1945 at Hanoi's Ba Dinh Square.

Having already been successful in defeating the French when they tried to re-establish control over Vietnam during the First Indochina War, the Vietnamese considered U.S. involvement in Vietnam as a continuation of this war against the West, who were seen to be persistently seeking control and preserving the divide between the North and South.

Although South Vietnam was governed by local officials, it was well-known that their operations were facilitated and directed by the U.S. Therefore, foreign involvement in Vietnam and the overt measures to retain and expand a pro-U.S. government from the South represented a threat to Vietnamese independence and barrier to unification ideals.

b) Popularity of Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Viet Minh/DRV

Many Vietnamese were also disillusioned with the traditional monarch who were considered puppets of French and Japanese imperialists. The monarch was widely seen to be in full collaboration with the imperialists who kept them in power and facilitated the extravagant lifestyles of the aristocracy throughout the various wars while the ordinary Vietnamese suffered.



Therefore, a communist revolution led by Ho Chi Minh greatly appealed to the masses. The idea of communism - parity among the people combined with independence from colonialists - was a strong factor in fuelling the North's determination throughout the Vietnam War.

Ho Chi Minh himself was also highly popular as a nationalist leader in Vietnam. His travels exposed him to different interpretations of communist ideology, and in the process he also gained many allies and political and military connections. His travels were motivated by a search for ideological and political alternatives to French colonialism, as he championed independence for Vietnam and Indochina. In 1941, he and other local nationalists formed the League for the Independence of Vietnam, also known as the Viet Minh.

When the Japanese occupied Indochina, the French forces were rendered subordinate and followed Japanese orders. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, was a force of resistance against the Japanese during the occupation. Viet Minh anti-colonial efforts, as well as the popularity of Ho Chi Minh as leader of an independence movement for Vietnam, were critical factors in developing local support and in the eventual victory for the North.

c) External Support

Although support from any external party was welcome, the DRV were adamant that any adherence to an alliance agreement will hinge on the best interests of the DRV. This was clearly demonstrated in Ho Chi Minh's alliance with both USSR and PRC (and how this shifted) amidst the tensions of the Sino-Soviet Split.

Initially, the DRV relied more on the PRC as this was to its benefit due to the geographical proximity to each other and the heavy support they provided them against the US. However, after the Sino-Soviet split and with Sino-US rapprochement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, China became one of the big threats to the DRV, thus it shifted its allegiances toward the USSR in an attempt to counter China.

United States

The US role in Vietnam started since the First Indochina War of 1946-1954, and gradually increased from there - from its provision of military advisors and economic aid to the Diem regime in the South from 1955 to 1963, to its direct involvement in the war from 1964 after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, to its "Rolling Thunder" bombing campaign in the North from 1965-1968, and to the peak of its involvement in 1968.

The turning point for US involvement came with the Tet offensive of 1968, after which Nixon began a process of "Vietnamisation" and gradual withdrawal of US troops from 1969 onward, allowing the South Vietnamese to bear the chief burden for their own defence. By 1973, most US troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam.



Throughout all this though, the US involvement was largely shaped by its ideological concerns in the Cold War context, as well as by public opinion at home and also the fear of getting trapped in an endless war in Vietnam.

a) Ideological Concerns and the Cold War

The U.S. wanted to contain the ideological appeal of communism from spreading to Southeast Asia. Vietnam was seen as a strategic factor for the success of U.S. containment policy in Southeast Asia.

The continued theme of communist expansion in Asia in the form of Vietnam would signal an ideological victory for communism, the communist bloc, and particularly the USSR within the context of the Cold War competition. From Post WW2 to the onset of the Vietnam War, the world witnessed the expansion of the Communist bloc. From USSR to the Sovietisation of Eastern Europe, then China, followed by North Korea.

If Vietnam fell to communism, the U.S. feared that other countries there would follow (Domino Theory), and their position in Southeast Asia would increasingly diminish.

Placing these concerns in the context of the U.S. ideological victory over USSR following the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the U.S. were optimistic of their chances in advancing their position in Vietnam as well.

b) Quagmire Theory and the Commitment Trap

The Quagmire Theory's interpretation of the Vietnam War was formed in the mid-1960s amidst growing scrutiny over U.S. involvement, and this view is considered Orthodox, or traditional, in the historical assessment of U.S. involvement in the Cold War.

Some historians refer to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War as a "Quagmire" that just kept sucking them in further a little bit at a time; a military and diplomatic dilemma that entrenched the U.S. into the conflict due to miscalculations and misunderstanding of Vietnamese politics and military intelligence.

Although the First Indochina War was a direct confrontation between the local DRV and French Union, the U.S. had been indirectly involved in Vietnam to a great extent over a long duration. Yet, the strength and dominance of DRV from the onset of the First Indochina War and consequently throughout the decade thereafter was apparent, despite extensive U.S. political, financial, and military aid to the French as well as the government in South Vietnam.

This continued development was a source of humiliation for the U.S. presidents Eisenhower, JFK, Johnson, as well as Nixon who served office during the Vietnam War. Domestic pressure came from political rivals as well as military advisers who strongly believed that American military resources were far superior to Vietnamese guerillas, and that increased deployment



of manpower and weaponry would guarantee victory in Vietnam. Anything less than a U.S. victory would be deemed as a failure.

The gradual escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam can be seen as a result of American refusal to admit defeat and lose credibility in the eyes of the public and international observers, thus they just kept increasing the resources they committed bit by bit in an attempt to stave off defeat, yet in doing so just ended up being dragged into a never-ending conflict more and more.

The Quagmire Theory therefore refers to a continued, yet misplaced, faith in American military superiority as well as American ideals of democracy in Vietnam that intensified U.S. entanglement and humiliation as the conflict developed, dragging them into a 'commitment trap' there.

c) **Domino Theory in Southeast Asia**

In relation to the Domino Theory, a non-communist Vietnam was deemed key to maintaining a Southeast Asian region that can cooperate with the West and U.S. in trade and international affairs in the long term.

Southeast Asia was still undergoing the gradual process of decolonisation in post WW2 with a strong presence of Western powers that were influencing the local development of democratic political structures. These political structures were in its stage of infancy and the U.S. deemed these newly independent states as still vulnerable to Communism as the Vietnam War ensued. If one of these countries fell to communism, the U.S. feared that other countries there would follow (Domino Theory), hence maintaining a strong political and strategic presence in Southeast Asia was a significant motivation for continued US involvement in Vietnam as well.

South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam, ROV)

South Vietnam's role in the Vietnam war is much smaller than that of the North, given that historically, the ROV was largely seen as a puppet state propped up by the US for its Cold War objectives, with little agency of its own.

There were attempts by assorted ROV leaders (such as Diem) to consolidate their political power and offer a real alternative to the Communist North, but at the end of the day this was often half-hearted and none of the regimes that ruled the South, whether it was Diem or the subsequent military generals like Duong Vna Minh and Nguyen Van Thieu, had any real popular legitimacy or support. The poor performance of the ARVN when it had to operate without substantial US support (such as during Operation Lam Son) is proof of this general lack of morale and motivation to fight for the South.



a) Preservation of Old Order

The multiple changes in ROV leadership casts doubt over whether locals in South Vietnam had a real or coherent motivation to preserve a non-communist state. At best, it was just a power struggle amongst ambitious locals with connections to the old aristocratic/monarchic order or military leaders of South Vietnam.

The French, Japanese, as well as the U.S. were similar in that they were all external powers that each dictated and controlled affairs in South Vietnam by explicitly directing the decisions of local Vietnamese authorities, be it the ruling monarch or the local government of South Vietnam.

In the context of the Vietnam War, the motivation for local politicians in South Vietnam was mainly the survival of a non-communist state and government, which would maintain the status of a privileged few. This would mean close collaboration with the U.S. forces who wielded their strongest form of defense against the far more popular North, as they had little coherent ideology or appeal of their own.

USSR

The USSR's role in the Vietnam War is an interesting one.. Initially, the USSR was a relatively distant observer and was content with the DRV taking the initiative in Vietnam. It supplied military aid and economic support, but otherwise it was China that had the leading role in supporting the DRV in the early to mid-1960s. It was only in the late 1960s (ie. 1967 onward), that the Soviets started taking on a more active role in supporting the DRV as a result of the Sino-Soviet split and the DRV leaning more and more toward the Soviet side in this split.

a) Détente and Peaceful Coexistence

The lack of involvement in Vietnam (initially) allowed the Soviets to maintain the policy of détente and peaceful coexistence with the West and U.S. despite obvious gains for the communist bloc should the DRV succeed. USSR was also fearful that a situation similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis could arise if both superpowers were to engage militarily in Vietnam, and took careful measures to avoid it.

Throughout the early stages of the Vietnam War until 1964, USSR often made public appeals for a peaceful reunification of Vietnam that was to be achieved without external intervention.

As it was known that the DRV had a much more dominant hold of Vietnam and would likely win eventually; public appeals for Vietnam's peaceful reunification means that the USSR was able to achieve all the following benefits without detriment to itself.

- stand in public support with the DRV
- maintain distance towards the Vietnam war with minimal aid
- leave China to bear the bulk of costs in the Vietnamese communist movement



- improve international relations with the West and U.S.

b) Initial Soviet-Vietnamese Ideological Differences

The Soviets were also initially reluctant to render substantial help to the DRV. Although gaining a communist ally in Southeast Asia would indicate a major victory in the Cold War, the Soviets had major ideological disagreements with the form of Communism that the DRV were seeking to establish in Vietnam. Soviet officials would often voice their disagreements with Vietnamese delegates over their ideological beliefs.

- In finding communist allies, the Soviets believed in expanding a communist bloc with Russia as its administrative center. However, the DRV had an inherently nationalist cause that was predominant in its war for liberation. A Vietnamese ally that prioritized serving its own country over the collective cause of the communist bloc represented a potential problem for the USSR. Evidence of this was already becoming apparent as the DRV continued its expansionist plans aggressively despite Soviet disagreement.
- Vietnam was unfavourable to coexist peacefully with the West whereas the USSR had begun to have a more flexible standpoint regarding maintaining cordial relations with the West and U.S. during the Cold War.
- To both of these ends, Vietnam therefore had more in common with China than with the USSR. These were also similar reasons for the Sino-Soviet split.

c) Rivalry for Leadership of Communist World

As the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident unfolded, the USSR became reluctant participants of the Vietnam War. USSR dreaded the increased aggression of both the DRV and the U.S. They knew that should all-out warfare ensue directly between the two, the USSR would be forced to take a more active role rather than continue its policy of non-involvement. Otherwise, the USSR would face criticism from other communist republics such as the PRC and lose its credibility in the socialist camp and the global Communist world.

d) Sino-Soviet Split

The Sino-Soviet split completely changed the USSR's calculations in the Vietnam War. As fissures began to develop and worsen between the USSR and PRC, gaining an ally in Southeast Asia began to assume a greater significance.

Vietnam also started leaning more and more toward the Soviet side in the Sino-Soviet split, and ideologically also started identifying more with the Soviet brand of Marxism-Leninism than the PRC's Maoism. As a result, having Vietnam as an ally became to the Soviets as a strategic doorway for the spread of Communist ideology to other Southeast Asian states, and also to counter Chinese influence in the region.



e) Renewed Ambition in Cold War Rivalry in Southeast Asia

Greater military participation and financial aid from USSR in supporting the DRV from 1967 onwards thus fuelled the pursuit of multiple objectives:

- Strengthen their relationship with a Communist ally in the Southeast Asian state of Vietnam to compensate the deteriorating alliance with the PRC.
- Strengthen their strategic position in Southeast Asia through the expansion of Communist influence, using Vietnam as a political base. From a Soviet standpoint, this could exert enough presence to avoid a Southeast Asia that is strongly pro-U.S. or anti-Soviet.
- Counter Chinese influence in the Southeast Asia region in the context of the Sino-Soviet split.

Nevertheless, amidst this increased Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, do recall that the DRV themselves were generally more inclined to prioritise their own strategic interests first and foremost, rather than subordinate themselves to a broader communist cause.

China (PRC)

The Chinese role in the Vietnam War took the exact opposite trajectory as that of the Soviets. Initially, they were a strong ally to the DRV, and throughout most of the early-mid 1960s they were their chief supporters in terms of military and economic aid. However, as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, traditional Sino-Vietnamese animosities started coming to the fore, with the Vietnamese becoming increasingly suspicious of their big neighbour to the North and opting instead to side with the Soviet camp more and more.

a) Historical Animosity between China and Vietnam

The historical connections between Vietnam and China spans many centuries, and the relations between them were often tumultuous, with a long history of Chinese dynasties attempting to dominate and subjugate Vietnam.

In the context of the Cold War, however, their geographical proximity and common Communist ideology meant that initially at least, differences were put aside in pursuit of the common cause against the US and South Vietnam.

b) Rivalry for Leadership of Communist World

With the USSR initially persisting with non-involvement in the Vietnam War, the PRC seized the initiative of escalating their aid to their North Vietnamese counterparts.

On the one hand, the cooperation between the PRC and Viet Minh was facilitated by their close geography. On the other hand, the historical origins of Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh's political



affiliations in China also played its part in the strategic consolidation of the Sino-Vietnamese communist bloc.

More significantly the PRC and DRV shared a consensus on 2 issues that made for a convenient alliance within the communist bloc in the bipolar world order, at least initially.

- First, the PRC were sympathetic to the DRV's communist cause for Vietnamese national liberation. The DRV did not receive a similar understanding from the USSR regarding this version of Communism. Thus, the PRC was more forthcoming than the Soviets in rendering aid to the DRV.
- Second, this meant that the PRC were more willing to provide their North Vietnamese comrades with military advisers, weaponry, and troops. In contrast, the USSR were cautious of military aggression in fear of direct U.S. military involvement and escalation of general war in the region, and repeatedly appealed for a peaceful reunification process.

A particular condition of this military alliance between the PRC and DRV during the Sino-Soviet split was that the DRV should not accept aid from USSR. This was the PRC's way of ensuring that they retained a greater influence over Vietnam and assumed a leadership role in the Vietnam conflict, rather than the passive USSR.

However, Sino-Vietnamese relations would later be strained due to Vietnam's leanings towards the Soviet camp during the Sino-Soviet split. In the early stages of the Sino-Soviet split, during 1956 – 1964, the PRC continued to render massive aid towards the DRV while the USSR remained cautious and reluctant to participate despite the growth of PRC influence in Vietnam, but this soon changed...

c) Sino-Soviet Split

The deepening Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s placed North Vietnam in a very difficult position as its war against the South required much assistance from both. Choosing a side in the split would result in the withdrawal of support from the other.

Although Ho Chi Minh attempted to maintain cordial relations with both throughout, his political stance would change. Initially, the DRV leaned towards China's brand of communism, but this changed with Sino-US rapprochement, and old fears of Chinese domination of the region came to the fore, leading the DRV to lean more and more toward the Soviet camp.

The USSR's increased military and logistical support for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the latter half of 1960s also led to a stronger allegiance toward the USSR; straining Sino-Vietnamese relations. USSR military aid in the form of advisors and weaponry soon dwarfed the numbers the PRC initially provided to the DRV by the late 1960s. The willing acceptance of a Soviet alliance that undermined PRC authority in Vietnam was thus followed by a strain in Sino-Vietnamese relations and the withdrawal of Chinese resources in Vietnam.



d) Sino-US Rapprochement

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, indications that the United States and the People's Republic of China were considering rapprochement became clear. ("Rapprochement" refers to the establishment or resumption of harmonious relations).

The perception that the Soviet Union was China's most dangerous enemy, militarily (Sino-Soviet Border Clash) as well as ideologically (Sino-Soviet Split), gradually came to dominate Beijing's strategic thinking. Starting in late 1968, Mao thus began to reconsider the role the United States could play in China's security needs, and also reconsider his support for the Vietnamese (who were leaning closer and closer to the USSR by this point.)

Meanwhile, the escalating war in Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet split also led U.S. officials to look for ways to improve relations with China in the hopes that such a policy might undermine alliances between Communist countries, diplomatically isolate North Vietnam, increase U.S leverage against the Soviet Union and also help extricate it from the Vietnam War.



Theme 3: The Cold War and Southeast Asia, 1945 – 1991
Topic 1: Manifestation of the Cold War in Southeast Asia

The Third Indochina War (1978 - 1991)

- 1. Background and Context**
- 2. The Third Indochina War (Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia)**
- 3. Role of Vietnam, Cambodia, China, USSR, USA and ASEAN**



1. Background and Context

- **Overview**

- o The Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia (Kampuchea) from 1978-1991, also known as the Third Indochina War, is arguably the second most serious, most important, and most complex of the Cold War conflicts in Southeast Asia after independence (with the first being the Second Indochina War that you learnt about in the last Chapter heh). It is the only time in modern Southeast Asian history where one Southeast Asian state invaded and occupied another, and was also the biggest crisis ASEAN faced in its history.



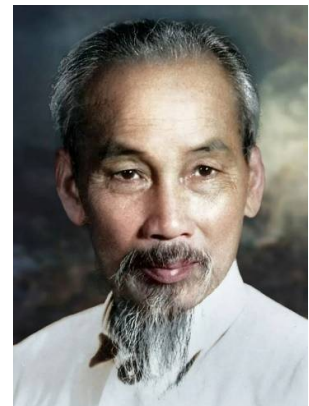
- o It is a complex mix of traditional historical animosities between Vietnam and Cambodia, tinged with racial and ethnic undertones, coupled with territorial and border incursions, mixed in with ideological differences, the Cold War, the Sino-Soviet split, together with regional organisations like ASEAN and external powers like the US, Chinese and Soviets all thrown in for good measure.
- o So how do we make sense of this conflict? To do so, we must first have a sense of how this conflict fits into the broader context of the Indochina wars in the region that you have already learnt about!

- **The Three Indochina Wars**

- o Broadly speaking, there were three major wars fought in the region of Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) in the second half of the 20th century.

- **First Indochina War (Decolonization from France) (1945-1954)**

- The First Indochina War was the one that was mentioned in the background to the last chapter. Broadly speaking, it was the anticolonial war for independence waged by Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh after World War 2. It ended with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and with the signing of the Geneva Accords of 1954 that split Vietnam into a North and South Vietnam.





▪ **Second Indochina War (Vietnam War) (1959-1975)**

- The Second Indochina War was the one you learnt about in the last Chapter. This was the infamous Vietnam War between the communist North (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or DRV) backed by the Chinese and the Soviets, and the anti-communist South (the Republic of Vietnam or ROV) backed by the USA. It was marked by the direct involvement of the Americans from 1964 onward, and it ended with the final American withdrawal and defeat of the South in 1975 with the fall of Saigon.



▪ **Third Indochina War (Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia) (1978-1991)**

- The Third Indochina War is the one we are learning about now. This was the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in December 1978, followed by a Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia that lasted all the way till 1991. This invasion triggered a major crisis in the region that brought in ASEAN, the Chinese, the Soviets and the USA.



• **The Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979)**



o To further understand the background to the Third Indochina War, we must also examine the different regimes in the region in the late 1970s.

o You are already familiar with what happened to Vietnam in 1975 from the previous chapter – ie. the Communist North (DRV) won the Vietnam War, reunified the country and created the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. However, you are likely less familiar with what happened to Cambodia.



- o Alongside the Communist victory in Vietnam in April 1975, Cambodia and Laos also fell to Communist regimes in April and December 1975 respectively - with the Khmer Rouge emerging victorious in Cambodia and the Pathet Laos in Laos.
- o The Communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, led by Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan, subsequently established a new state – Democratic Kampuchea, and imposed a radical system that attempted to turn Cambodia into a classless society by depopulating cities and forcing the urban population into agricultural communes in the countryside.
- o Foreigners (like the Vietnamese) were targeted, foreign influences were purged, schools, hospitals, and factories were closed, banking, finance, and currency were abolished, all religions were outlawed, all private property confiscated and people were sent to collective farms in the countryside where forced labour was widespread. (TLDR – *They forced everyone to become farmers in labour camps and killed everyone who disagreed.*)
- o If this sounds like a very bad idea to you – you're right! The Khmer Rouge's attempts to radically transform the country resulted in the infamous Cambodian genocide from 1975 and 1979 - in which an estimated 1.5 to 3 million people died (out of a population of 8 million), and Pol Pot became known as one of the worst mass murderers of the 20th century.



- **Historical Animosities and Ethnic Tensions**

- o Now that we have established some background knowledge on the Indochina wars and also the kind of regime that the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia was, we can start to discuss the actual conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia itself.
- o Vietnam and Cambodia, just as with many other Southeast Asian countries, had a long history of animosities and rivalry with each other that dates back centuries.
- o Vietnam, as the larger, more populous and much more powerful state, has always had a sense of ethnic superiority and a patronizing attitude towards the other Indochinese



territories of Cambodia and Laos. Historically the sense of ethnic superiority has translated directly into Vietnamese perception of its right to intervene and hence its expansionist behaviour in the region.

- o The border between Vietnam and Cambodia serves as the frontier between the Sinic (Chinese) and Indian cultures, and so an ethnic-cultural divide lies at the heart of this Vietnamese superiority complex, in which the Vietnamese see themselves as *'civilizers'* of the barbarous Cambodian people, whose barbarous customs include *'wearing robes without slits up the sides, using loincloths, eating with the fingers and greeting from a kneeling position rather than from an upright one.'*
- o Beyond ethnicity, geographically, sandwiched by the two larger powers of Vietnam and Thailand, Cambodia was also the weak pawn stuck between two much greater powers – the Thais and Viets, who have both regularly tussled over and invaded Cambodia for centuries.
- o As such, there was a long history of Vietnamese incursions and expansion southwards into Cambodia since the 17th century, where the Ngueyn lords, as part of the *'nam tien'* or *'march to the south'*, gradually started conquering Cambodian territories. This further escalated in the 19th century, where the Nguyen dynasty under Emperor Minh Mang aggressively expanded into Cambodia, annexing the remnants of the Champa Kingdoms there by the 1830s and establishing Vietnamese hegemony.
- o Large scale forced *'Vietnamization'* of Cambodia took place under Minh Mang, as the Vietnamese attempted to forcibly change the cultural habits of the Cambodians and erase Khmer culture, replacing their *'barbarian'* habits with Confucian Sino-Vietnamese customs and traditions.
- o This trend of Vietnamese dominance in the region continued during French colonisation, when the French treated Hanoi as the colonial headquarters for their Indochinese territories. Later on, the decisive victory of Ho Chi Mihn and the Vietminh over the French yet again consolidated the leadership position of Vietnam among the three Indochinese territories.





- **Ideological Rivalry and Great Power Politics**

- o There was also a very heavy element of ideological rivalry and great power politics behind the Third Indochina War. You might be wondering....both Vietnam and Cambodia are Communist! Why is there ideological rivalry and power politics between them?
- o And the reason for that is something we already covered extensively – the Sino-Soviet split! Vietnam and Cambodia subscribe to different versions of Communism, and were on different sides of the Sino-Soviet rivalry for leadership of the Communist world in the 1970s and 1980s.



- **The Sino-Soviet Split**

- Beginning in the late 1950s, under Mao and Khrushchev, the two great Communist powers – the Soviet Union and China, had already started drifting apart. There were fundamental differences to each country's brand of Communism, with the Soviet Union's Marxist-Leninist brand of Communism focusing on the urban proletariat (workers) as the bulwark of revolution in direct contrast to China's Maoist principles of the rural peasantry as the vehicle of revolution. These differences soon spilled over to foreign policy – with both the Chinese and Soviets tussling for leadership of the Communist world.
- Mao viewed Khrushchev's 'de-stalinisation' and 'peaceful co-existence' speech of 1956 as 'revisionist' and a betrayal of true Communist (and Stalinist) principles, and also viewed Khrushchev as weak in the way he capitulated to the US during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Khrushchev and later Brezhnev on the other hand, had a dim view of the excesses of Mao's Great Leap Forward of 1958 and Cultural Revolution of 1966, viewing them as dangerous and radical. (It also didn't help that Khrushchev and Mao absolutely despised each other on a personal level.)
- Regular denouncements of each other were commonplace by the 1960s, as the two sides regularly accused the other of deviant and





revisionist behaviour. The two great Communist powers even fought a border war with each other in 1969 over Damansky island in Heilongjiang.

- Things reached such a stage that by the 1970s, China viewed the Soviets (not the US) as the greatest threat to them! Mao thus sought to mend ties with the United States to counter the Soviets (as the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend), resulting in a secret visit to China by Henry Kissinger in 1971, which in turn paved the way for US President Richard Nixon's official visit to China in 1972 that kickstarted Sino-US rapprochement.

▪ **Cambodia's alignment with China**

- Cambodia has always enjoyed close relations with the Chinese, even before the Khmer Rouge takeover. Cambodia's first post-independence leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, officially maintained a 'neutralist' foreign policy in the Cold War, but in reality was closer to the Communist bloc and especially with Communist China – with which Cambodia had close diplomatic relations.
- These close relations were further strengthened when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. The Khmer Rouge's brand of Communism, with its focus on the rural peasantry rather than the urban proletariat as the bulwark of revolution, its emphasis on the countryside and agriculture, promotion of collectivisation and communal living and eating etc, was much closer to Maoist ideology than to Soviet Marxism-Leninism.
- Furthermore, Pol Pot also saw the Chinese as a natural counterweight to Vietnamese attempts to dominate the region. You will recall that there was a long history of Vietnamese hegemony in the Indochina region and numerous attempts to subjugate the Cambodians, thus it is not surprisingly that the Cambodians will look toward the Chinese to help them against Vietnamese domination.
- The Chinese, on the other hand, saw Cambodia as a useful pawn in the Sino-Soviet rivalry. With Vietnam's increasingly close ties with the USSR, the Chinese were wary of being encircled by the USSR and its allies (the Soviet Union is the North of China and Vietnam is to the South). As such, fostering close ties with the Khmer Rouge in





Cambodia was a way of breaking through the perceived Soviet encirclement.

▪ **Vietnam's alignment with the USSR**

- Initially, in the 1960s during the Vietnam War against the US, Communist North Vietnam enjoyed close ties with the Chinese as part of Communist

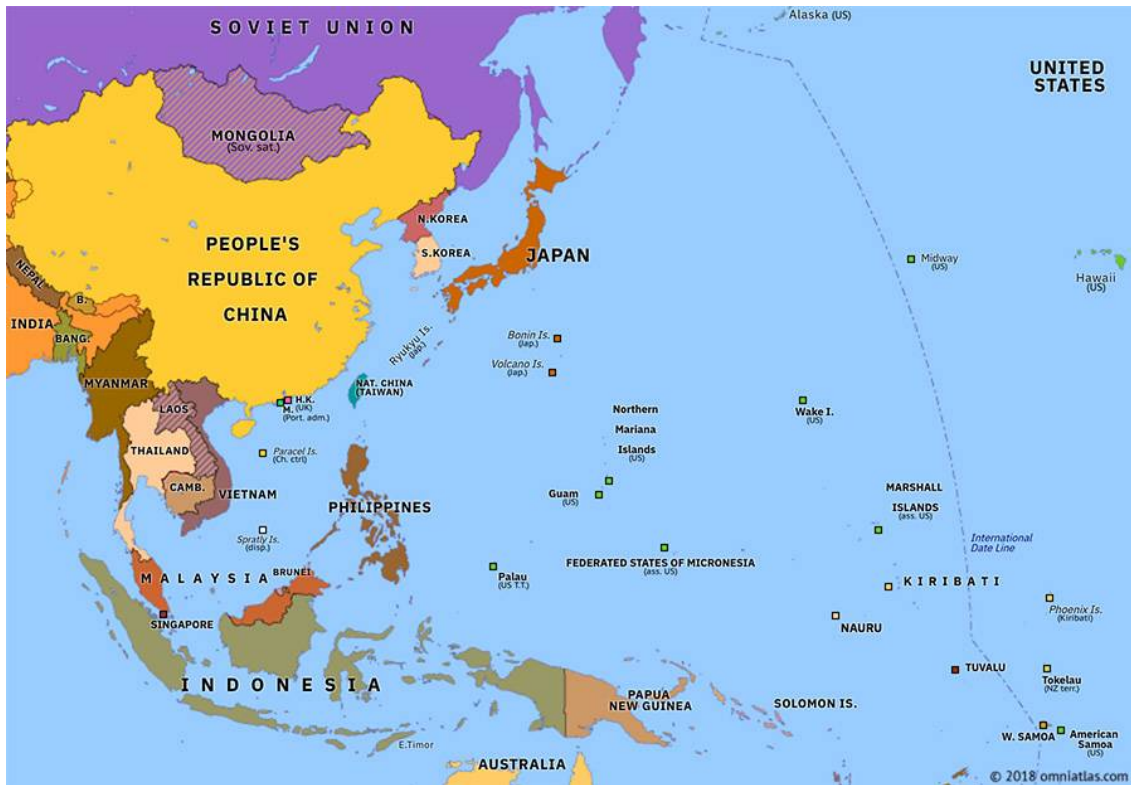


solidarity against the Western bloc in the Cold War context. China sent substantial amounts of aid and equipment and weaponry to Ho Chi Minh's DRV (North Vietnam) in their fight against the ROV (South Vietnam) and their US allies in the Vietnam War, as we already learnt in the previous chapter.

- However, things soon soured between them by the late 1960s, as Vietnam started drawing closer to the Soviets instead and started seeing China as a threat instead. China's rapprochement with the US in 1972 was viewed as a huge betrayal to Vietnam – as Le Duan (the leader of the North after Ho's death in 1969) suspected that Beijing had abandoned Vietnam's cause in a secret deal with Washington over Indochina. This ended a friendship between the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist Parties that had held strong till now.
- Furthermore, China and Vietnam were also never natural allies. For much of their history, the two were enemies – as the various Chinese dynasties in the past have always attempted to subjugate Vietnam, while the PRC also had no wish for a powerful unified Vietnam on its southern border despite aiding them in their fight against the French and the Americans.
- Vietnam's brand of Communism was also much closer to the Marxist-Leninism of the Soviets than to Maoism, and this was yet another conflicting ideological point between them.
- As relations with China deteriorated, Vietnam started aligning itself more and more with the USSR and the Eastern European bloc, who supported them through the ending stages of the Vietnam war from 1969-1975.
- Vietnamese resentment and fear of China only grew after 1975. As the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia grew closer to China, Vietnam feared getting encircled to its West (Cambodia) and North (China), thus drew itself closer to the USSR in an attempt to counterbalance the Chinese giant to their north.



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2. The Third Indochina War (Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia)

- Now that we have a sense of the background and context behind the conflict, we can turn our attention to the immediate causes and events leading up to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia itself, then the Vietnamese occupation and its Cambodian puppet regime, and the effects of all this on regional stability in Southeast Asia.
- **Fears of Vietnamese Hegemony**
 - With North Vietnam defeating the South in April 1975 and reunifying the country, along with the Khmer Rouge's triumph also in April 1975 in the Cambodian Civil War and the Pathet Laos victory in Laos in December 1975, all of Indochina had finally fallen to Communism.
 - The Communist Party of Vietnam, as the largest, most established and most powerful in the region, saw a unique opportunity to unite Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in some kind of Communist Indochinese federation under their leadership. This turned out to be wishful thinking however, as any hope of a Hanoi-centered 'special relationship' amongst the three Indochinese states was quickly dashed when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia quickly saw Vietnam more as a threat than an ally.
 - Although the North Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge had previously fought side by side, Cambodia continued to view Vietnam with great suspicion, because they believed the Vietnamese had never given up their dream of achieving Vietnamese hegemony over the region.
- **Border Incursions by Cambodia (1975-1978)**



◦ Relations between Vietnam and Cambodia soured barely a day after the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. In the first major clash between the two former allies, the Kampuchean Revolutionary Army (KRA) invaded the Vietnamese island of Phú Quốc on 1 May 1975, claiming it was historically part of Kampuchea's territory. On 10 May 1975, the KRA continued its border incursion by attacking the Thổ Chu Islands. The Vietnam military understandably retaliated, pushing

the Cambodians back and also capturing the Kampuchean island of Koh Poulo Wai.

- Following these incidents, both sides attempted to improve diplomatic relations with a series of congratulatory messages and exchange visits. In April 1976, Le Duan sent a message to congratulate Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan on their 'election' as premier and president of Kampuchea, while Cambodia also reciprocated by congratulating Vietnam in July 1976 on reunifying the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.



- o However, underneath the pleasantries, tensions continued to simmer as neither side really trusted each other. The Vietnamese leadership was highly suspicious of Cambodia's close ties to the Chinese, and as the chief Communist power in Southeast Asia who led successful revolutions against the French and Americans, they felt that they had the right to lead the Cambodians and Laotians. The Cambodian leadership, on the other hand, had developed a fear and hatred of the Vietnamese as a result of Vietnam's historical dominance over their country, and was deeply suspicious that the Vietnamese were trying to dominate Indochina by infiltrating the communist parties of Kampuchea and Laos with Vietnamese-trained cadres.
- o Under the cloud of these suspicions, the Kampuchean Revolutionary Army (KRA) continued to plot border incursions into Vietnam, somehow being deluded enough to think that they could actually defeat the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). (The Vietnamese outnumbered them at least 10-1, had many times more tanks and planes, and were battle hardened after years of the Vietnam War.)
- o More border attacks by Cambodia on Vietnam followed – in April 1977 against the Vietnamese provinces of An Giang and Châu Đốc, and in September 1977, in the Đồng Tháp and Tây Ninh provinces. Angered by the assaults, the Vietnamese launched a large retaliatory strike deep into Kampuchea in December 1977 and quickly overran the Cambodian forces. By the end of December, both countries had suspended diplomatic relations with each other and started preparing for war and seeking outside assistance. (Cambodia turned to China; Vietnam strengthened its ties to USSR.)
- o Things calmed down slightly in January, as the Vietnamese pulled back and China attempted to mediate between Cambodia and Vietnam. However, the talks went nowhere, and more border clashes happened again in June 1978.
- o By this point, Le Duan and the Vietnamese leadership had concluded that further attempts to talk to Pol Pot and the Cambodians were pointless. The Khmer Rouge was a proxy of China, and had to be removed by military force.

- **Discriminatory Policies against Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia**

- o As all these border clashes were going on, we must not forget that the Cambodian genocide was ongoing within Cambodia itself, which further inflamed the situation. The Khmer Rouge's brand of Communism is an interesting blend of Maoist ideology mixed with xenophobic Khmer nationalism, and so in addition to his radical policies to depopulate cities and send people to the countryside, Pol Pot was also busy trying to purge the country of all foreign (especially Vietnamese) influences.





- o There was already plenty of anti-Vietnamese sentiment even before the Khmer Rouge took power – owing to the historical context of the region discussed previously. For instance, the Khmer Republic under Lon Nol from 1970-1975 conducted multiple pogroms against local Vietnamese Khmer as well as foreign Vietnamese residents, while the spillover of Vietnamese fighters from the Vietnamese–American War further aggravated anti-Vietnamese sentiments.
- o Once in power, the Khmer Rouge explicitly targeted the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Cham minority and even their partially Khmer offspring. Some historians estimate that nearly 100% of Cambodians with Vietnamese ethnicity were killed during the Cambodian Genocide in the name of 'purification.'
- o The same attitude extended to within the Khmer Rouge itself, where hostility to the Vietnamese Communists was aplenty, reinforced by the experience of being used and subordinated by them during the Vietnam war. Senior Khmer Rouge figures of non-Khmer (and especially Vietnamese) ethnicity were also removed from the leadership despite extensive revolutionary experience and were often killed, to the extent that by the time of the Vietnamese invasion most Khmer Rouge with Vietnamese ancestry or ties had already fled or defected to the Vietnamese side.

- **Soviet – Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (1978)**

- o One final piece of the puzzle had to be put in place before Vietnam could launch its invasion, and that was to secure Soviet support in the event that China joined the conflict. This was achieved through the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 3 November 1978, where both countries promised to consult with and support each other if either party



was attacked. This cemented the alliance between both countries, and was a clear attempt by the Vietnamese to deter China from getting involved in response to its imminent invasion of Cambodia. China, predictably, denounced the treaty as a Soviet attempt to encircle it.

- o By this point, the Soviets were heavily supplying the Vietnamese with weapons and military hardware, and the Chinese were doing the same for the Cambodians. The Sino-Soviet rivalry was in full swing in a proxy war in Southeast Asia.

- **The Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia (1978-1979)**

- o The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on 25 December 1978, where the PAVN launched a massive assault across the border backed by artillery and air power.
- o The outcome was predictable, and anti-climactic. Despite the Chinese military assistance, the KRA were completely swept aside by the PAVN. Within 2 weeks, on 6



January 1979, the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh had fallen to the Vietnamese forces. By spring, Vietnamese forces had reached the Thai border.



- o Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership and forces, with much of their political and military structures routed by the Vietnamese invasion, were forced to flee to the countryside and to neighbouring Thailand.

- **Vietnamese Occupation and Installation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) (1979)**

- o After they overran Phnom Penh, the Vietnamese installed a puppet regime in Cambodia – the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). This regime consisted of former Khmer Rouge defectors, survivors of the Cambodian genocide, as well as Cambodian communists aligned with Vietnam.
- o It was led initially by Heng Samrin, and later by Hun Sen from 1985 onward, and was a one-party state dominated by the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP).
- o This puppet government enjoyed little international recognition – pretty much only Vietnam itself and its Soviet bloc allies recognised it. The rest of the world, led by ASEAN, the US and China, still recognised the old Democratic Kampuchea (DK) government as the legitimate government of Cambodia.
- o Nonetheless, despite being puppets of the Vietnamese, the PRK was welcomed in some quarters since it put an end to Pol Pot's reign of terror and moved away from the radical communism of the Khmer Rouge regime.



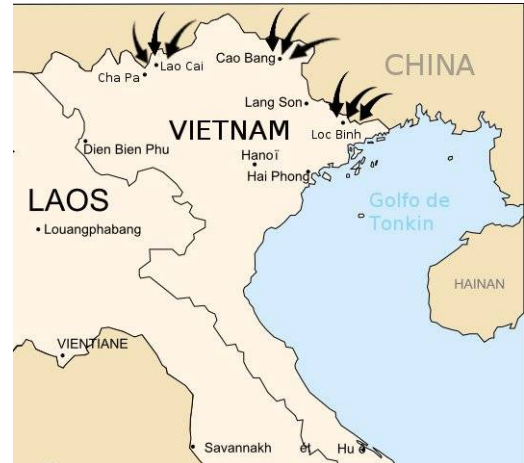
- **Impact on Regional Stability (1979-1985)**

- o The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia had a severe impact on regional stability in Southeast Asia. This was the first time ever that a Southeast Asian state had launched a full-scale invasion and occupation of another since independence. Worse, with the links that the conflict had to the Sino-Soviet rivalry and the Cold War, it meant that the region was now turning into a proxy battleground for the great powers yet again.



▪ **Chinese Invasion of Vietnam (1979)**

- Matters turned even worse in February 1979, when China decided to launch an invasion into Northern Vietnam on 17th February 1979. The stated objective of Beijing's attack was 'to teach Hanoi a lesson.'
- However, although the conflict was bitter and costly to both sides, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) withdrew within a few weeks (by March 1979) without forcing any concessions from Vietnam, and Vietnam continued to occupy Cambodia until 1989.
- The Chinese invasion achieved little, except to further sour Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Soviet relations and make Vietnam even more reliant on the Soviet bloc. The continued Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia remained one of the biggest problems in Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese relations throughout the 1980s.



▪ **ASEAN's Response (1979-1980)**



- The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was a major crisis for the region, arguably the biggest since the end of the Vietnam War, and very much a worst-case scenario for ASEAN.
 - It was also a huge test of ASEAN's credibility as a regional organisation, as Vietnam had violated two of ASEAN's fundamental security norms: (1) non-interference in domestic affairs of other states and (2) non-aggression / non-force used to resolve political disputes.
- As such, despite Vietnam not being a member of ASEAN at that point in time, ASEAN could not ignore the blatant violation of its principles that Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia represented, and also the very real threat of Southeast Asia turning into a proxy battleground for great powers once again.
- The foreign ministers of the ASEAN countries (then consisting of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines) met quickly after the invasion in January 1979 in Bangkok, and called for the 'immediate and total withdrawal of the foreign forces from Kampuchean territory.' When China conducted its punitive invasion



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into Vietnam, ASEAN also immediately called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from both Vietnam and Kampuchea.

- From 1979 to 1980, ASEAN applied political and diplomatic pressure on Vietnam and its client government of Kampuchea – the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). ASEAN focused its diplomatic efforts on international forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to deny the new People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) international recognition and access to international aid from the West and Japan.



▪ **United Nations International Conference on Kampuchea (UN-ICK) (1981)**

- One of ASEAN's signature achievements in response to the invasion was to get the UN General Assembly to hold a special conference on Cambodia in July 1981, against the vehement objections of the Communist bloc.
- The UN-ICK's final declaration internationally legitimised ASEAN's position and formula for resolving the Cambodian crisis. It called for a ceasefire and withdrawal of Vietnamese forces under the supervision of a UN peacekeeping force. This would be followed by UN supervised elections to allow Cambodians to exercise their right to self-determination. This ICK declaration became the basis of later ASEAN and UN terms for a settlement of the crisis.
- However, although 92 countries attended the meeting and it seemed a remarkable success for ASEAN diplomacy and enhanced ASEAN's international standing on the surface, it is also questionable what the conference actually achieved.
- Vietnam, the USSR and most of the Communist bloc boycotted the meeting as the UN continued to recognize the old DK (ie. the Khmer Rouge) as the legitimate Kampuchean government (instead of the puppet PRK government Vietnam installed).
- China, US and ASEAN on the other hand refused to recognise the puppet PRK and blocked representation from the PRK government at the conference.
- As such, while outwardly successful, it did also show that without the cooperation of great powers, ASEAN could not really steer events in the direction it wanted either.



▪ **Resistance Forces – the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) (1982)**



- On the ground, China, US and ASEAN sponsored anti-Vietnamese Khmer resistance forces operating in western Cambodia.
 - One of the biggest problems however, was that the main resistance force and the legitimate government of Kampuchea that they were recognising and backing, Democratic Kampuchea, was basically the Khmer Rouge! And if you recall, this was Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan and gang – ie. the bunch of dudes that literally just conducted a genocide!
 - As such, even though the Khmer Rouge was the largest and most combat effective resistance group, in an attempt to make the government that they were backing more palatable, ASEAN, China and the US also brought on board two other resistance factions – the royalist forces of Norodom Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by Sihanouk's longtime foe Son Sann.
 - Together, these 3 resistance factions formed the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). As you might imagine however, this was an uneasy alliance at best.
 - Furthermore, this was a very thorny issue for ASEAN too. It needed the Khmer Rouge as it was the most effective resistance to the Vietnamese occupation, but at the same time, ASEAN certainly did not want the Khmer Rouge to return to power in any form!
- **The Kuantan Declaration (1980) and Internal Disagreements**
- On the surface, the various ASEAN countries were excellent at presenting a united front to the world on the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, as seen from their unity of purpose at international forums like the UN-ICK, and the diplomatic and political pressure they exerted on Vietnam.



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- However, the face of ASEAN's external solidarity concealed divisions and internal disagreements beneath. This could be seen through the Kuantan Declaration of March 1980.
- Malaysia (PM Hussein Onn) and Indonesia (President Suharto) signed the Declaration, which was rooted in ZOPFAN (you will hear more about this in the ASEAN sections later on) and the idea of the neutralisation of Southeast Asia. To Malaysia and Indonesia, the priority was to keep the great powers (especially the Chinese and Soviets) out of Southeast Asia as they were the bigger threat, not Vietnam.
- As such, Malaysia and Indonesia were willing to hear Vietnam out and recognise that it has legitimate security interests and a sphere of influence over Cambodia, provided that it kept itself free from Soviet and Chinese influence. (Basically, this means that they were willing to tolerate and negotiate with Vietnam and its PRK puppet government in Cambodia as long as they kept the great powers out of the equation.)
- The Kuantan Declaration did not become an ASEAN position as ASEAN operates on the basis of consensus decision making, and there was no consensus here as Thailand and Singapore strenuously objected to Malaysia and Indonesia's position and took a much more hardline stance against Vietnam.
 - o Thailand because of its proximity to Vietnam and Cambodia, which made them at the frontlines of any threat from Communist Vietnam.
 - o Singapore's because of its own small size and vulnerability, which made them particularly sensitive to unilateral invasions of other states, especially by Communist powers.
- As such, to Thailand and Singapore, Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia was not to be tolerated at all regardless of the reason, and ASEAN should not recognise the PRK and should stick strictly to the UN-ICK declaration.
- Thus, the Kuantan Declaration revealed that the political cohesion of ASEAN was perhaps just on the surface.



- **Stalemate (mid-1980s)**

- o The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia dragged on in a stalemate throughout most of the mid-1980s. As long as the Sino-Soviet rivalry persisted, it was difficult to see a solution to the conflict.
 - Vietnam and the Soviets backed the puppet PRK regime and did not recognise the CGDK factions as legitimate.
 - ASEAN, China and the US, on the other hand, refused to recognise the puppet PRK regime and continued to back the CGDK as the legitimate government of Cambodia.
 - o Vietnam, despite Soviet aid, was getting bled dry by political isolation and economic sanctions and wanted out of Cambodia. However, it wanted to do so in a way that would protect its interests in Cambodia and the region and ensure its security against China.
 - o ASEAN desperately wanted a solution to the crisis, but lacked consensus on how to achieve it, especially when their formal stance was that the PRK was Vietnam's puppet, and ASEAN would negotiate only with Vietnam and not the PRK. Vietnam, on the other hand, wanted ASEAN to negotiate with the PRK as that to them was the government of Cambodia.
- On the other hand – all 3 great powers benefited from the continuation of conflict in their own way!

- o China was more than happy to see Vietnam 'bled dry.' Supporting the CGDK and the Khmer Rouge in a guerilla war helped to drain the Vietnamese and USSR. Furthermore, the conflict also provided China with an



- o opportunity to improve relations with ASEAN states, especially Thailand, by engaging with them against Vietnam and acting as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region.
- o The Soviets desired to exploit declining US power in SEA and gain inter-communist primacy. Supporting Vietnam allowed it to secure a strategic foothold in SEA, extending USSR military power into the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf and formed the cornerstone of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance against their mutual enemies, China and US.
- o The US had lesser interests than China and the USSR in this conflict, but were more than happy to watch the Chinese and the Soviets at loggerheads with each other. It also saw this as an opportunity to cement its relationship with China against USSR.



- Given all this, it's no surprise that the conflict dragged on until something major changed in the international geopolitical climate...

- **Improving International and Regional Climate (late 1980s)**

- o The conflict only started to move toward a resolution in the late 1980s, when the international and regional political climates were experiencing a major shift with the ending of the Cold War.



- o In 1988, the USSR (Mikhail Gorbachev) and China (Deng Xiaoping) held direct talks on Kampuchea

to mend Sino-Soviet ties and resolve this huge stumbling block in their relations with each other. This comes as Gorbachev was trying to reform the Soviet economy and improves ties with the West and China. (Recall Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' in foreign policy!) Next, in 1989, at a Sino-Soviet summit meeting in May, Gorbachev and Deng agreed to a basis for national reconciliation in Cambodia, with internationally supervised elections and the convening of an international conference. It was this removal of the Sino-Soviet rivalry from the Cambodian conflict that arguably had the greatest significance in bringing it to an end – given that one of the most major stumbling blocks to its resolution was the Sino-Soviet rivalry.

- o Also by 1988, Vietnam was increasing its pace of withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. This was because it was getting pressured by the Soviets to do so, but also because it was struggling economically at home and was embarking on its Doi Moi reforms to restructure its economy in the late 1980s. To do so effectively, it needed outside help – especially for Japan, US and the West to stop their economic sanctions. And the only way to get them to do that was to resolve the Cambodian issue.
- o Thailand's foreign policy stance toward Vietnam also shifted dramatically, as they embarked on a 'New Look Policy' towards Vietnam in 1988, with the new PM Chatichai Choonhaven (representing the emerging business interests and intellectual elites) declaring that Indochina should be turned from a 'battlefield to a trading market'. He viewed that as USSR power declined, Vietnam was no longer a real threat to the region. He even shocked his ASEAN counterparts by inviting the PRK premier Hun Sen to Bangkok – in effect a recognition of the PRK regime.



- **Role of ASEAN and External Powers in Resolving the Third Indochina War**

- **The Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIMs) (1988 & 1989)**

- Indonesia was always the one who did not view Vietnam as a big threat and was more willing to talk with them. From 1984 onwards, Indonesia opened a separate dialogue with Hanoi that supplemented the ASEAN approach in a kind of 'dual track' diplomacy to find a solution to the conflict, performing an interlocutor role between ASEAN and Vietnam.
 - After years of trying, Indonesia finally stumbled on a breakthrough in 1987 where their foreign minister Mochtar and his Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Co Thach proposed having "informal" meetings between the different Cambodian factions. In these "informal" meetings, the various factions could negotiate to end the conflict without ASEAN having to recognise the PRK or Vietnam having to recognise the CGDK.
 - The other ASEAN countries reluctantly agreed to this, and the first Jakarta Informal Meetings was held in July 1988, followed by the second one in February 1989. While they failed to reach agreement on the fate of the Khmer Rouge, postwar governance and power-sharing among the Kampuchean factions, they did however contribute to the diplomatic process by bringing the different factions – such as Prince Sihanouk (CGDK) and Premier Hun Sen (PRK) closer together.



- **Paris Peace Settlement (1991)**



- With the failure of the JIMs, the resolution of the conflict once again shifted from ASEAN to the international level and into the hands of external powers. The first Paris Peace Conference on Cambodia in August 1989 failed to make



much headway, but the second one in 1991 did, producing the Paris Peace Settlement of October 1991.

- All the various factions signed the Paris agreement in October 1991, bringing an end to 13 years of war and occupation in Cambodia.
- The reason for this eventual success was again largely down to the changes in international climate in the late 1980s and early 1990s previously mentioned. With the ending of the Cold War and the mending of the Sino-Soviet split, there was great power consensus between the Soviets, Chinese and the US in seeking a solution to the conflict. Absent great power rivalry, the permanent 5 members of the UN Security Council produced a framework agreement for a settlement of the Cambodian issue and to let the Cambodian people decide their own future.
- The Paris agreement also established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), in accordance with the UN Security Council's Resolution 745 of February 1992, with a mandate to supervise and administer Cambodia until a Cambodian government was democratically elected.
- Eventually, UNTAC paved the way towards the elections of May 1993. Over 4.2 million people, nearly 90 per cent of the registered voters, cast their ballots to elect a Constituent Assembly, in elections that were reasonably free and fair. Prince Ranariddh (Sihanouk's son) and his FUNCINPEC Party was the top vote recipient with a 45.5% vote, followed by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (renamed from the KPRP).
- Hun Sen and the CCP initially refused to accept the results of the election, but eventually agreed to a deal brokered by Prince Sihanouk and approved by the UN to form a coalition with Ranariddh as first prime minister and Hun Sen as second prime minister.
- After decades of war, Cambodia was at finally at peace.



3. Role of Vietnam, Cambodia, China, USSR, USA and ASEAN

- **Role of Vietnam**

- o The reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was the primary protagonist of the conflict, and as such its role in it bears scrutiny. The actual Vietnamese invasion itself is barely of note given how quickly it was over and how one-sided it was, but the reasons behind why Vietnam did what it did is interesting for us here.
- o **Sino-Soviet Rivalry**
 - One of the central themes of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia is the Sino-Soviet rivalry. This has already been covered extensively, but suffice it to say that Vietnam and Cambodia fell on different sides of the Sino-Soviet split, with Vietnam choosing to side with the Soviets and Cambodia the Chinese. Furthermore, as a result of the Vietnamese fallout with the Chinese in the latter stages of the Vietnam War, they increasingly saw China as the primary threat to them. This was also why the Vietnamese made sure to secure an alliance with the USSR (the Soviet – Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation) prior to their invasion of Cambodia – as it was the Chinese they feared, not the Cambodians.
 - The centrality of the Sino-Soviet rivalry to the conflict was also why the conflict was stalemated through much of the 1980s and Vietnam was stuck with its occupation of Cambodia and the puppet regime it installed even though the diplomatic isolation and economic embargos it suffered was bleeding it dry.
 - It was also why the military and diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict only bore fruit as the Sino-Soviet rivalry waned in the late 1980s, with both Gorbachev and Deng seeking to mend ties with each other. It was only when relations between Vietnam, the USSR and China started changing for the better that a political solution could be found to expedite the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia and facilitate a transition to peace.
- o **Political competition with Khmer Rouge for influence and dominance**
 - Beyond the Sino-Soviet split, there was also a local contest for influence between the Vietnamese Communists and the Cambodian Communists. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV or Lao Dong), clearly saw itself as the big brother and leader of the Communist movements in the region, given its long history and its resistance against the Japanese, French and then the Americans. They thus expected the 'lesser' Communist parties in Laos and Cambodia etc to take Vietnam's lead, and this was something which the Khmer Rouge obviously resented.
- o **Historical Animositities**
 - Underpinning all of this as well was the traditional animosities between the Vietnamese and Cambodians in the region, dating back to the time of the old Vietnamese dynasties and the Khmer Kingdoms in the region. These historical



animosities further fed into the sense of Vietnamese superiority and desire for hegemony in the region, fuelling the conflict.

- **Role of Cambodia**

- Just as with Vietnam, Cambodia, the other main party in this conflict and the country that got invaded and occupied, bears some examination. The reasons behind Cambodia's role and considerations in the conflict are similar with that of Vietnam – given that they were on the opposite sides of the Sino-Soviet split.
- **Sino-Soviet Rivalry**
 - The Sino-Soviet rivalry was also a key reason for why Cambodia chose to repeatedly provoke Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge's alliance with China gave it a false sense of security in the region, which was probably what led them to launch the assorted border raids and incursions from 1975-1978.
 - Similarly, the Sino-Soviet rivalry was also why the CGDK (Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea) – the main resistance against the Vietnamese occupation and its puppet PRK regime, was heavily backed by China, as China saw it as an opportunity to both bleed Vietnam and also foster closer ties with ASEAN countries and the US.
- **Political competition with Khmer Rouge for influence and dominance**
 - Beyond the Sino-Soviet split, there was also the local contest for influence between the Vietnamese Communists and the Cambodian Communists. The Khmer Rouge has always resented the Vietnamese Communists and disliked their attempts to establish hegemony over the other Communist groups in the region, and this likely fed into their decisions to purge the Vietnamese Communists in Cambodia prior to the conflict, as well as launch border raids into Vietnam to try to 'reclaim' Kampuchean territory on the very next day of the DRV's triumph over the South.
- **Historical Animosities**
 - Underpinning all of this as well was again the traditional animosities between the Vietnamese and Cambodians in the region, dating back to the time of the old Vietnamese dynasties and how they repeatedly tried to dominate/subjugate the Khmer kingdom. These historical animosities further fed into the sense of Cambodian grievances against Vietnam, fuelling the conflict.

- **Role of USSR**

- The Soviet Union was Vietnam's main backer, and provider of military and economic aid and diplomatic support throughout the Third Indochina War. The reasons it did so are many, and its role also gradually evolved over time.
- **Sino-Soviet Rivalry and Sino-US Rapprochement**
 - As has already been mentioned, the Sino-Soviet rivalry was the key reason for why the Soviets chose to back Vietnam. Since the later stages of the Vietnam



War in the late 1960s, the DRV had already been growing closer and closer to the USSR as a result of its increased wariness with China and its intentions. The Soviets were more than happy to exploit this, especially after the Sino-US rapprochement in 1972 meant that the Soviets now had both the US and the Chinese against them!

- Vietnam was thus seen as a valuable ally, a springboard towards Soviet influence in the region, as well as a means to 'surround' China from both sides in the context of the Sino-Soviet split. This was why the Soviets and the Vietnamese signed the Treaty of Friendship that cemented their alliance, as it was to their mutual benefit at that point in time.
- As Cold War tensions waned in the late 1980s with Gorbachev's rise and his 'New Thinking' in foreign policy, the Soviets were also the ones applying pressure on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia and find a means to end the occupation. By that time, the Soviet and Vietnamese economy were both in dire straits, and they desperately needed rapprochement with both the West and China. And in order to get that, they had to find a way to resolve the Third Indochina War.

- **Role of China**

- o China was the other big external player in the Third Indochina War, as they were Cambodia's primary backer. Similar to the Soviets, the reasons it did so are many, and its role also evolved over time.
- o **Sino-Soviet Rivalry and Sino-US Rapprochement**
 - Just as with the Soviets, the Sino-Soviet rivalry and Sino-US rapprochement were the key reasons for why China chose to provide military, economic and diplomatic support to the Khmer Rouge regime in their conflict/rivalry with Vietnam. After Chinese relations with Vietnam soured in the later stages of the Vietnam war, and also with Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and Sino-US rapprochement, supporting Cambodia became seen as a way for China to project its influence in the Southeast Asia region against Vietnam and the USSR.
 - Furthermore, Cambodia, since even before the Khmer Rouge, has had close ties with China (prior to the Khmer Rouge regime, the Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk frequented Beijing and was a good friend of Mao). As such, it was quite natural for the Chinese to choose to back the Cambodians at that point in time.
 - Similar to the Soviets, as Cold War tensions waned in the late 1980s, China's Deng Xiaoping was also instrumental in pressuring the Khmer Rouge and CGDK to find a resolution to the conflict. This was in the context of Deng's 'Reform and Opening Up' in the 1980s, where China was also embarking on its own series of reforms and changing its perspective on the world, and it was to its benefit to find a solution to the Third Indochina War and seek rapprochement with the Soviets then.



- **Role of USA**

- o The USA, compared to the Chinese and the Soviets, had a much smaller role in the Third Indochina War. Due to Sino-US rapprochement, the US sided with China and ASEAN in backing the Khmer Rouge and later the CGDK against the Vietnamese occupation and its puppet PRK regime. It did so through economic sanctions against Vietnam, and through diplomatic support for resolutions by China and ASEAN on Cambodia at the United Nations.
- o Otherwise, they largely preferred to remain on the sidelines, as they were more than happy to watch the Chinese and Soviets at loggerheads with each other due to this conflict, and they had larger Cold War priorities in Europe and the rest of the world then (recall Reagan and his Reagan Doctrine!)
- o Nonetheless, they did play a role in helping push the conflict to a resolution eventually in the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991.

- **Role of USA**

- o ASEAN is the final big player in the Third Indochina War, and they were mentioned quite a bit in the previous section as we went through the causes and course of the conflict. However, as we will be touching on ASEAN extensively in the next chapter of this theme, we'll leave further analysis of ASEAN's role and response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia to the next chapter.