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Question #14: The United States fought a successful limited war in Korea. Why, when faced with an ostensibly similar strategic situation, did the United States fail to achieve its objectives in Vietnam despite mounting a greater effort in both magnitude and duration?

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Introduction

In a time when the Cold War was the focus of the military attention in the world, in which the support provided by the alignment between weaker States and Great Powers was the rule for surviving, some hot spots were in evidence, as in Vietnam. Of course, sometimes this tug-of-war turns to a conflict and, hence, it becomes the opportunity to evidence the advantages of each side. However, the choose of assets and power are meticulously measured, avoiding to bring other great powers to oppose directly in a battlefield. So, a limited war rises, bringing a long struggle and so much costs to all involved. But how far military and politically they are willing to go can be decisive for the aims of this war.

It cannot be analyzed only as a part of a global conflict, like the Cold War, but it is part of a conflict against its domination and to the political aims of the North Vietnam (NV), that drives us to the independence and unification, with a lot of feelings involved. So, the will of the inhabitants of that region could make this war go longer than expected by those who could not realize it. On the other hand, in Korea, it was a war for conquest of land rather than governance, as in Vietnam, because Koreans did not have the governance problems that occurred in Vietnam.

This paper will answer the question: The United States fought a successful war in Korea. Why, when faced with an ostensibly similar strategic situation, did the United States (US) fail to achieve its objectives in Vietnam despite mounting a greater effort in both magnitude and duration? The answer to this question drives us to the nature of this limited war and to a long and costly conflict. The undesired dependence in US forces presence, the South Vietnamese's weak leadership and the disadvantageous terms of The Paris Agreement turned it impossible to achieve the US political goals. Others will say that the US was trying some arrangement for better relations with China and Soviet Union in order to use South Vietnam as a bargain chip. But the reality was

that the misperceptions of the RSV's Government lead them to a collapse, without permitting them to understand what was happening.

The tin could keep the shape of the sandcastle - The undesired dependence in US forces presence

In order to achieve its political goals of keeping communism far from the Southeast Asia, the US was prepared to engage in a new war, as it was done in Korea recently. During the war in Vietnam, it was proved that American people did not buy the cause. No matter the strategy, it was never leading to an end. Plus, the internal suffering with the demand of resources and people were still ineffective; and even the political advisors concluded that recommended the de-escalation of the conflict. It explains how the US tried to "Vietnamize" the war, "de-Americanizing" it.

Despite so many attempts to solve the problem in Vietnam – sometimes acting, others advising – using pacification, good governance, attrition, CORDS or CAPS, it never ends. The enemy seemed having the capability to continue the struggle indefinitely (Krepinevich, 241). It was not possible providing neither a quick victory nor a low-cost strategy (Krepinevich, 241). The nation was overflowing with impatience.

US People was not happy with the war. The hope of a nation whose development created conditions to your people have a happy life with their relatives and friends was contrasted by lots of following wars. It was a period after both World Wars. The illusion that there was no threat anymore was overthrown by American commitment in the Korea War. And, subsequently, by the Vietnam War. During the 1964's election, the commitment of troops was halt, in a clear arrangement to avoid countering the will of the electorate. It was quoted unthinkable (Krepinevich, 133). It is easy to verify how the politicians were worried with people's will. There was a moment

with almost 600.000 US troops in Vietnam. It was also costly, and the outcomes presented were ineffective (Krepinevich, 133). Considering the ratios for counterinsurgency, till 20 troops to 1 insurgent, it demanded the estimated increase till 1 million troops (Krepinevich, 143). The people and its representatives would not feel comfortable with it. But this kind of escalation could be necessary. It would depend on some expert's verdict.

Some experts from the government should evaluate the situation and the President trusted in their opinion. A group called "Wise Men", some senior statesmen, military officers and security policy experts was asked to verify the situation. They came back recognizing the failure of the strategy and the loss of support of the American public and suggested to concentrate on improving the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) and phasing out US forces while seeking a negotiated settlement (Krepinevich, 247). If this strategy was applied since the beginning, the RVNAF would not suffer this absence as much as they would suffer that time. And, of course, neither if the US soldiers had not left. The strong aversion to casualties put the Americans in disadvantage, despite all the readiness and equipment (Krepinevich, 247), and they wanted no more Vietnams (Krepinevich, 251). Now, the only way was let the Vietnamese fight their own war.

Therefore, the Vietnamization became the best alternative, funding it with money, equipment and supporting aid, in order to make the South Vietnamese capable to achieve the American political goals. But was it feasible? It is like the Clausewitz triangle inside the US was kind of disassembled. The following paragraphs will explain how the sandcastle was not able to stand upright without the tin.

Without the tin, could it stand upright? - The South Vietnamese's weak leadership

The best assumed alternative for the US was the way out from its troops from RSV. But how pursuing its own political goals, if their proxies have other goals? The RSV Government was accused of corruption and its main objective was keep themselves in power; there was no interest in win that war if it was not assured, for the members of the government, the power. People in RSV was not so worried about who would win the war. They did not care about. As it was not enough, the leadership in military was very weak.

If, in the US, the Clausewitz triangle was kind of disassembled, in South Vietnam there was “no-angle”. All the support that US could send in money or equipment was not enough to develop leadership or good plans, no matter the period. With the withdrawal of the US soldiers the RVNAF become like an orphan. It was primordial for the US political objectives finishing with those things which make communism look attractive – poverty, ignorance, and lack of basic freedoms (Hazelton, 20). Reforms for good governance were the answer. But since the beginning, the elites in RSV controlled the power and wealth in their hands. They did not have the intention to make the desired reforms that could bring the people’s support to their side in that war. (Hazelton, 4;20). But that time, the demand was a new social order (Stephen, 17). Unfortunately, the main objective of those leaders in the RSV was keeping their status quo. Just winning the war. Without it, was not attractive.

The people’s interest and partiality in this war means a lot. Good governance in RSV always was a worry, even in the highest levels of the US Government. The South Vietnamese people’s apathy showed that they were worn out from the twenty years of war and they did not care about which side would win. If some concern about which side they favored, the sympathy was more to the side of the Vietcong (Krepinevich, 139). Even if a person was not a Vietcong, they could create conditions to favor them, due to their empathy, hiding or feeding them. The

reason to this partiality can be explained by the military's actions in a high number of provinces. The insensibility of the forces brought disaffection and resentment, as it was clearly perceived by President Johnson himself, in his visit to South Vietnam. But still he thought that they could win in the military, due to their favorable disbalance, neglecting, the social or political aspect (Krepinevich, 133). It was a clear mistake to be considered in the following years. Even with the US programs for pacification, for the South Vietnamese, it was hard to believe in a long-term relationship. But the Vietcong used to say that they would stay forever, while those troops would leave soon (Krepinevich, 216). The corruption also contributed so much to disbelief in their leaders. However, it was the base mechanism used by the elites. More money available only could make the rich still more rich and the poorer even poorer (Stephen, 31). They were losing the hearts and minds instead of winning it. No stubborn could realize that, as they did not want the country without the power, why would be interesting get the power without a country to govern?

The military were not worthy to be trusted. The generals were considered "improvisers", without the fundamentals of the military arts (Stephen, 27). So, the replacement for military planning, without US officers, was a problem. Fearing a coup, Thieu preferred be surrounded by foolish, hated and corrupt people in his military and government sphere as well he seemed that never had fully trusted in any other person (Stephen, 23). Hence, the hope for a change in the leadership was low. And the soldiers, that were the representatives of the government policy in the war, were "heaven and earth" and they thought that they were above the ordinary citizenry as soon they joined in the military (Hazelton, 22). It is easy to conclude that people could not expect improvements in the policy.

No war could be sustained without the determination of the people and its army. The lack of inspirational reasons for a better life brought lack of hope and created a concept of pursuing only

your own interests, feeding themselves from the public resources available. The US perceived this and, of course, evaluated as a costly and maybe endless war, in which there was no or just little hope to achieve more objectives, despite all the military capacity, due to the importance of people's support in this counterinsurgency war.

The sandcastle collapsing - disadvantageous terms of the Paris Agreement (PA)

Assuming that there was an unwanted dependence on US troops and South Vietnam was weak in leadership, the Paris agreement was the final blow to the suicide of its own political goals.

The South Vietnam was not satisfied in signing the agreement, such that the President Thiem was almost obligated by the US to do it, under threats of a total cut-off funds (Stephen, 5) He could preempt that it was the beginning of the end. It quoted the withdrawal of troops (PA - Chapter II) and the respect for demilitarized region. As it was part of an insurgent war, the transition from phase 2 to phase 3, with the invasion of South Vietnam, was a matter of time. They were just upstairs while US forces were in the other side of the world. Some violations were probing the US interest in remobilizing its forces, at least its air force, which did not occur (Stephen, 5). So, the NV could prepare themselves to a major offensive. The lack of assets to, at least, peace enforcement, with any inspection group or even a small capacity to react in case of violations gave the freedom of action to the northern enemies.

The hope for US achieving the objectives was waning with the following sequence: first, the lack of presence; after, the lack of leadership in Vietnam. And if there was any hope yet, trusting in some good negotiations, the Paris agreement would put an end.

Counterargument: props work for a sandcastle?

Some others may argue that the US simply gave up from Vietnam, in order to achieve other objectives. It can be based in the aim of a supposed interest in better relations with Soviet Union and China; the lack of interest in the following violations of the Paris Agreement, from NV; and the strange change from a full commitment to a no-commitment policy.

Due to lots of conflicts around the world, for a long time, the US did not want to carry on in so many expenses and deaths. South Vietnam could be as a bargaining chip in this commitment (Stephen, 41). Of course, it would not be ostensible, but it would guarantee some peaceful period and time to leverage the so-desired development. It was very reasonable due to the observed lack of interest in the violations of the north Vietnamese, even with a clear signed agreement (Stephen, 43). Who could believe that a weak state, daring a Great Power, would be unpunished? Besides that, the US committed their prestige on a free South Vietnam, and there was a danger of the first “domino piece” falling. They sacrificed over 50.000 killed, over 200.000 wounded and 150 billion dollars (Stephen, 43). There was so much to be left behind, if there was not such a good agreement.

Rebuttal: it could not bear... a castle cannot be made of sand

Actually, there was still some kind of misperception in the Government of the RSV. This misty of misunderstanding made it impossible to prepare the country against the communist threat.

There was no interest within the government in preparing their own troops to oppose against the communist force. Even after the traumatic circumstances surrounding the signing of the Paris Agreement, there was a complete reliance in the US. It was due to some promises off-the-record from Nixon to Thieu, assuring they could count on US commitment against any grossly violation of the agreement. But Nixon’s resignation had brought a lot of worries again. When President Ford reassured the continuity of the “policy of five presidents”, Thieu used it as a boost

of morale in the government. And the RVN's President was more inclined to listen good news than bad news, without real intention of analyze the real mood in the US and follow its evolution (Stephen, 11). Maybe the difference of cultures contribute to make things more difficult to understand, like how the Congress works and changes its opinion (Stephen, 12). The cost to this negligence is relying in a gamble, with so many risks.

Furthermore, there was a lot of attractive resources, that could increase wealth and power to those elites. The government was focused on problems of post-war reconstruction, after the Paris Agreement. The economic development was the main issue, pinned in the offshore oil resources. The negligence about the military was clear in the goal of demobilize 100.000 men in order to increase food production and to satisfy manpower requirements of the civilian ministries. Later, it was realized that the communist violations of the cease-fire made it impossible (Stephen, 17). The shock of reality was that it doesn't matter so many wealth if soon the power would be switched.

Last, but not least, the desired new social order was a key factor. The enemy was offering things whose credibility of the South Vietnamese leaders became impossible to be reached by the people: not only finally the independence, neither only the unity of the country. Actually, it was recognized that the purity and legitimacy of that total independence still relied on some foreign interference. But a new social order was the desire of that suffering people (Stephen, 38). Something that could not be reached by the governments neither by the military of US or RSV (Stephen, 17). The disunity was in every place and the consequence was that everybody was waiting for the victory of the NV. But not the way it was, in a sudden collapse, that evidenced the "sand walls" of that government (Stephen, 17). The objectives of the US could not be achieved as well as the South Vietnamese elites could not be kept in the power.

Conclusion

When we compare the reasons for which some country fight, avoiding any comparison in the efficiency, which one would be more inspiring? Honor, fear or interest? Certainly, the honor could not be overcome by the interest and it was one of the reasons why it depended so much of the people's will. The north Vietnamese strategy based in giving hope for an independent, united and for a new social order in the new country got some key support to carry on the struggle. Other actors were in a supposed fight against some interest, translated to some ideology or in support of some theory, like the US, or some others were just interested in keeping the power and the status quo, like the government of South Vietnam. The clear support of the people showed who was determined to go far, despite the losses in the path. And maybe they were prepared to consider, like Clausewitz quotes, the defeat as a just momentaneous period for preparation to change the status quo, no matter how long it takes, changing the Mao Zedong's phases according the situation. So, it could be an endless war.

The US failed first because of the undesired dependence in US forces presence in South Vietnam. But it could be fixed with a good support for the RSV government, of course based on good governance and reforms that could inspire people and provide the support for their own armed forces and break the support for the enemies' forces. But when faced with a disadvantageous position, recognizing the failed strategy, the lack of support of their own people and the mess in the RSV's government, the US saw in the Paris Agreement the way to finish this war. But doing it, they gave up of its objectives, in the terms it was signed. Others will say that the US was trying some arrangement for better relations with China and Soviet Union in order to use South Vietnam as a bargain chip. But the reality was that the misperceptions of the RSV's Government lead them

to a collapse, without permitting them to understand what was happening. The sandcastle finally collapsed for good.