The Vietnam War as a Guide to Future American Policy in Asia

Richard A. Falk

Abstract: There is a long list of arguments that the American government and media use to justify the position of American militarism and intervention in Vietnam. They range from the necessity for containment of China to upholding the integrity of SEATO, and even to upholding the credibility of American commitments. Similarly there are three very contrasting interpretations on the status American involvement in the Vietnam War. These three interpretations are that the Vietnam War has been a success, an immeasurable failure, or a qualified failure. The latter of these arguments includes the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, which outlines three guidelines for future American involvement in Asia so that the mistakes that were made in American policy with regard to Vietnam would be prevented in the future. However, this article proposes a fourth interpretation of the Vietnam War. This interpretation does not comment on the relative success or failure of the United States in the Vietnam War, because it argues instead that American involvement in Vietnam is wholly unjustified. This fourth position opposes American militarism in Vietnam on political and moral grounds, and argues that a position of non-intervention would follow better with historic trends in Asia as well as American traditional values of self-determination.

Since 1950 five American presidents have supported a series of policies designed to maintain a pro-West, anti-Communist government in control of South Vietnam. The persistence of such policies exhibits remarkable continuity, given the great difficulties encountered in pursuing this objective. There have been many efforts to explain the origins and durability of this American commitment. None has proved entirely satisfactory. It seems clear that the impetus for the policy had at least three principal foundations:

- The containment of the world Communist movement;
- The more specific containment of mainland China;
- The containment of revolutionary nationalism.

But such goals can be pursued in a variety of ways, and it remains unclear why over the years the United States was prepared to make such immense sacrifices in blood and treasure and prestige for such negligible, and at best, illusive returns.

On a higher level of abstraction there was the recollection that policies of appeasement - what might be the “lesson of Munich” - had not prevented World War II. Prominent American policy-makers in the period during which the buildup of a military commitment to defend the Saigon regime was made seemed to accept as wisdom the idea that the international Communist movement was monolithic and committed to world conquest and that the choice was between “standing up to aggression” and provoking World War III. Such a notion of “containment” or “holding the line,” arising out or reaction to Stalinism and persisting into the 1960’s, long after the death of Stalin, and the evidence of a deep Sino-Soviet split, was accompanied by an image
of “falling dominoes,” that is, if South Vietnam falls to Communism, then the rest of Indochina, then Thailand, then the Malay peninsula would also fall in almost inevitable succession. Therefore, although the stakes in Vietnam, if taken in isolation might appear small and remote, a large commitment was nevertheless justified it has been argued, because of these larger concerns—namely, the geo-political stability of South Asia and the implementation of the world-order prohibition against a Communist aggressor as a precedent.

Such reasoning is abstract and ideological, and does not fit too well the concrete facts of conflict in Asia, and especially not in Vietnam. When the original economic commitment to the French was made in 1950 the struggle for Indochina was a typical anti-colonial war of independence of the sort that developed in Asia and Africa after World War II. True, the leadership of the Vietnamese independence movement has a Communist background and might be suspected of bringing a liberated Indochina within the Communist orbit of influence. But true also, the pro-colonial Vietnamese were politically isolated in their own country and without any capacity to govern effectively or humanely; as a result the anti-colonial movement in Vietnam developed into a broad united front effort that by the end of the first Indochina War in 1954 had attracted support from many non-Communist elements in the population and Ho Chi Minh had emerged as a national leader of immense stature, commanding respect and allegiance from all segments of Vietnamese society.

In subsequent years the United States involvement—shaped and facilitated by the divided-zone solution adopted at the Geneva Conference of 1954—deepened and became increasingly associated with the techniques of counter-insurgency warfare. The American objective since 1954 has remained constant: a non-Communist South Vietnam as a permanent sovereign state.

Since the Nixon presidency, the tactics of American involvement have emphasized the replacement of American combat forces by Vietnamese combat forces—so-called “Vietnamization”—reinforced by fantastic levels of air support and accompanied by the spread of the zone of violence to Cambodia and the intensification of the America military involvement in Laos. The Vietnam War remains unresolved as of late 1970, negotiations in Paris are stalled on two issues:

- Refusal by the American government to make a commitment to total withdrawal by a definite time;
- An American unwillingness to accept a provisional government for South Vietnam that represents a fair coalition of contending forces.

American support for these principles would probably lead rapidly to peace in South Vietnam and to the likely emergence of a government in Saigon that was neutralist in foreign policy and reformist in domestic affairs, in other words, to an ideological compromise between the goals of the United States and of the National Liberation Front. As well, reunification of Vietnam would be put off for a number of years and the longer-term future of South Vietnam would be allowed to reflect internal forces of national self-determination. The balance of these internal forces would and should lead during a period of several years to the emergence of a pro-NLF government, but one that governed by coalition politics and was quite autonomous in dealing with North Vietnam.
On the basis of the background it seems possible to speculate about what lessons American policy-makers have learned from the long and anguished experience of the Vietnam involvement. Future American policy toward Asia is likely to be guided by which of several interpretations of the Vietnamese experience proves dominant. Already much attention has been given in American intellectual circles to the question “beyond Vietnam” and there are a variety of strenuous efforts being made to present the most influential statement of guidelines for the future. An examination of this debate seems especially important as all of the positions being seriously considered carry forward into the future the mistakes of policy and perspective that prompted the Vietnam involvement.

Before discussing these lines of interpretation, it is necessary to take account of a major caveat in relation to the analysis. Both the debate on “the lessons of Vietnam” and my analysis of it proceed on the assumption that there is a good faith connection between the course of governmental policy and the persuasiveness of alternative lines of argument. With respect to matters bearing on both interventionary diplomacy and national security planning, I have become increasingly skeptical about this connection. In my judgment, the debate may even function to obscure the real bases of national policy and operate as a mystification; that is, the explication of a rationale serves to confuse and distract public opinion rather than to enlighten it. Anyone who has followed closely the evolving annual American debate on the deployment of an ABM system has seen that the rationale is expendable, but the policy is not. As I have already indicated, the American involvement in the Vietnam War has seemed to have the same quality.

Such a hypothesis is implausible without some fuller explanation of why the real bases of policy must remain obscure and tend to be excluded from explicit mention. This is a complicated question that can only be superficially discussed in this setting. It would appear that policy-makers are carrying out a set of policies that contradict popularly held attitudes about why America uses military power in foreign affairs. These attitudes center around a self-righteous conception that whereas other governments have interests, the United States only has responsibilities. As a result it is an unwritten rule that no responsible defense or criticism of U.S. foreign policy positions takes account of self-interested economic motivations and pressures. Only radicals of the right or left, by definition outside the policy-making elite, give some attention to issues of economic self-interest or, as the left puts it, the dynamics of economic imperialism.

Similarly, it is not considered reasonable to attribute foreign policy positions to the pressures or momentum of domestic political forces. Yet, in the Vietnam setting there is considerable evidence of a bureaucratic momentum that carried forward the policies independent of any rational assessment of their merit. The extent to which the government is itself an unwitting (and perhaps unknowing) captive of the military-industrial complex is part of the problem that is almost always excluded from “responsible” discussions on the future of American policy in Asia. The relevance of the bureaucratization and militarization of American national security policy planning efforts are treated like intellectual ghosts.

---

Such matters must be kept in mind. The influence of these economic and governmental forces on policy-making may very well be decisive in the years ahead. If so, the dialectics of intellectual debate are misleading as the outcome of the debate depends on considerations other than degrees of evidence and persuasiveness. Indeed the actual situation may be the reverse—namely, that argument will be appropriated that seems best calculated to uphold a pre-selected policy. Surely during the Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon period of Vietnam involvement, the official search has been for a plausible defense of the interventionary policy rather than for an assessment of its plausibility. Thus, the various lines of explanation relating to deterring wars of national liberation, containing China, upholding the SEATO commitment, avoiding a bloodbath in South Vietnam, insisting that no solution may be imposed on South Vietnam, protecting the honor of the United States, upholding the credibility of its commitments, and so have been relied upon, dropped, revived with no particular qualms so long as the rationale of the moment seemed to develop the best case—given the present context of the war and the criticism of it—for maintaining the policy.

Thus the policy debate is a puppet show of sorts and it may be dangerous to challenge it on its own grounds, because it tends to lend credence to the seriousness of the overall inquiry by acting as if evidence and reasoning are likely to shape future American policy in Asia. Nevertheless, it seems important to explicate the debate, demonstrate why the contending positions are inadequate, and why a position so far excluded from serious attention provides a better guideline for future American policy in Asia.4

Several kinds of uncertainties could influence the course and explanation of American policy in Asia. These uncertainties may in the end make the present debate seem very time-bound.

1) The way in which the Vietnam War will end remains obscure; thus, it is unclear whether the outcome of the war will be generally understood as an American victory, a stalemate or compromise, an NLF victory, or indeed whether there will be any American consensus at all. The actualities of the domestic balance of forces in Vietnam make it already clear that the NLF and North Vietnam have scored an extraordinary success against overwhelming odds, although at a very high cost to themselves in death and destruction. But it remains impossible to tell whether the war will eventually end because the Saigon regime collapses, because domestic dissent in America causes a rapid and total withdrawal, or conversely, because the U.S. launches some kind of desperate reescalation, or even because changes in the political climate induce a negotiated compromise at Paris. Future American policy in Asia will depend heavily on how the final outcome in Vietnam is actually perceived by policy-makers.

2) The presentation of American foreign policy during the 1970’s will depend heavily on the domestic and foreign stances of a number of key countries, especially Japan, China, the Soviet Union, and India. Whether Japan turns out to be a partner or a rival of the United States remains in some doubt. There are already indications that Japan’s continuing economic growth is beginning to hurt the American economy, and some respected analysts expect a revival of fierce economic competition and even trade wars between the U.S. and Japan in the 1970’s. Similarly, whether the Soviet Union decides to remain largely aloof from Asian politics is likely to influence U.S. choices in very definite ways. Whether China remains preoccupied with domestic  

4 I intend to develop this linkage between domestic political forces and the course of foreign policy in subsequent writing.
concerns, or reaches an accord with either the Soviet Union or the United States or both, or whether China engages in a avowedly expansionist foreign policy is likely to shape the U.S. response. Finally, whether India is reasonably successful with a moderate government and remains nonaligned is likely to be important. These kinds of uncertainties are accentuated by their interactive character—China’s response to Japan may influence the Soviet relationship to India, and so on. Also these uncertainties and complications will be effected by what goes on in other regions of the world. A revolutionary surge in Latin America or Soviet pressure in Europe or the Middle East may lead to an American withdrawal from Asia, especially if Japan assumes the American role as surety for the political status quo on the Asian rimland.

Even more important than these external contingencies, are the uncertainties of the future course of domestic politics in the United States. It now appears that domestic social and economic forces are likely to determine the overall orientation of American government, including its foreign policy. In other words, imperialists, isolationists, or world order advocates are likely to be swept into power by reference to issues of employment, inflation, campus unrest, crime control, and even pornography. The substance of foreign policy positions has little independent salience for the American voter at present. Such a situation may change, but that is not likely to be soon.

3) It is even more difficult to assess the consequences for American foreign policy of the increasing significance of ecological strains. Serious forms of environmental decay, population pressure, and resource shortages are almost certain to emerge as the decade proceeds. But it is not clear whether this deepening ecological crisis will lead to more moderate forms of political competition or will induce recourse to desperate political strategies by those governments under the greatest pressure from over-population, poverty, urban crowding, or mass unemployment. The recent upsurge of interest in environmental matters in the United States may lead in the years ahead to a lessening of national concern about maintaining influence in Asia and may even induce a partial reversion to isolationism, especially if the costs of maintaining clear air and clean water are mostly deducted from the defense budget rather than from the welfare budget.

Although their impact cannot now be anticipated in any useful way, these three sets of uncertainties are of great political significance, and it is important to bear them in mind in order to underscore the speculative character of the argument and to encourage a willingness to revise one’s sense of the future when appropriate.

The Three Lessions of Vietnam

Despite these imponderables, three different interpretations dominate the Vietnam debate at the present time: that the war has been

Position 1: A Qualified Success;

Position 2: A Failure of Proportion;

Position 3: A Qualified Failure of Tactics.
Position 1—that the war has been a qualified success—is the view of most professional military men and the American Right. They see American involvement in Vietnam as a proper exercise of military power, but feel that the effort has been compromised by Presidential insistence on pursuing limited ends by limited means. They criticize Washington for seeking “settlement” rather than “victory,” and join the Left in condemning President Johnson for his failure to declare war on North Vietnam. They argue that the armed forces have had to fight the war with one hand tied behind their backs, pointing to the refusal to authorize bombing the dikes in North Vietnam, restrictions on targets in Hanoi and Haiphong, and the failure to impose a blockage on shipping to North Vietnam.

Even though victory has been sought by all means at our disposal, this view does not regard the Vietnam War as a failure. In a characteristic statement, Colonel William C. Moore of Bolling Air Force Base, writing in the Air University Review, argues “there is reason to believe that Ho Chi Minh would never have initiated action in Vietnam had he vaguely suspected that U.S. determination would escalate the war to its current magnitude. There is also reason to believe that this lesson has not been lost on other would-be aggressors.” Such an interpretation of the lesson of Vietnam relies on two assumptions: first, that the Vietnam War was similar to the Korean War in which the United States may also have shrunk back from the complete execution of its mission, but in which it at least displayed a willingness to defend a non-Communist society against attack by a Communist aggressor. According to Position 1, the Vietnam War is not a civil war, but a war of conquest by one country against another, and the NLF is a mere agent of Hanoi whose role is to pretend that the war is a civil war and thereby discourage an effective response in defense. Thus Position 1 accepts fully the image of the war develop during the Johnson Presidency by Rusk and Rostow. The implication for the future is that the United States is not about to be fooled into treating Communist-led insurgencies any differently than outright Communist aggression against a friendly state.

The second assumption of Colonel Moore’s assessment of the Vietnam War has an even greater implication for the future because it purports to find in the experience of Vietnam a demonstration that deterrence works in the counter-insurgency setting as well as it has worked in the nuclear setting. In Colonel Moore’s words, “This willingness to escalate is the key to deterring future aggression at the lower end of the spectrum of war. This, I think, is why history will be kind to President Johnson and Secretary of State Rusk because if we continue to stand firm in Vietnam as they advocate, then the world will have made incalculable progress toward eliminating was as the curse of mankind.” Thus the key to the future is the American willingness to escalate the conflict to high levels of destructivity—so high, in fact, that no right-minded revolutionary would ever initiate a war if confronted by such a prospect. Position 1 is critical of Johnson’s war diplomacy only insofar as it failed to carry the logic of escalation to higher levels on the battlefield and at home.

This interpretation also claims that the American decision to fight in Vietnam gained time for other anti-Communist regimes in Asia to build up their capacities for internal security and national defense, assuming that the American effort in Vietnam created a shield that held back the flow of revolutionary forces across the continent of Asia. More extravagant exponents of this line of interpretation even contend, on the most slender evidence, that the Indonesian generals

---

6 Ibid, p. 63.
would not have reacted so boldly and successfully to the Communist bid for power in Djakarta in October 1965, had not the American presence in Vietnam stiffened their resolve.

Advocates of Position 1 tend to admire the Dominican intervention of 1965, where massive force was used and results quickly achieved with little loss of life. The domestic furor over the Dominican intervention disappeared quickly, mainly as a consequence of its success and brevity. Sophisticated adherents to Position 1 admire the Soviet intervention of August 1968 in Czechoslovakia for similar reasons. This model of overwhelming capability (rather than the slow escalation of capability as in Vietnam) is likely to influence the doctrine and future proposals of those who favor interventionary diplomacy.

The second position—that the war is a failure of proportion—is widely held among moderate and influential Americans, especially among civilians of a liberal cast of mind. They feel that the Vietnam War became a mistake at the time President Johnson decided to bomb North Vietnam and to introduce large numbers of American ground combat forces. Position 2 also, by and large, rejects the notion that war was caused by aggression of one state against another, but views Vietnam instead as an international civil war with both sides receiving considerable outside support. One of the most revealing formulations of this position is found in Townsend Hoopes’ book, *The Limits of Intervention*. Mr. Hoopes, who served in the Pentagon from January 1965 to February 1969, first as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and then as Under Secretary of the Air Force, explains the failure of Vietnam as a result of a loss of a sense of proportion by the men at the top. He builds a convincing insider’s case that Johnson and his principal advisers were locked into a rigid and ideological view of the war and hence were unable to moderate the objective to conform with the costs in blood, dollars, and domestic cohesion. Writing of the situation prevailing in Washington late in 1967, just a few months before Johnson’s withdrawal speech of March 31, 1968, Mr. Hoopes writes that “The incredible disparity between the outpouring of national blood and treasure and the intrinsic U.S. interests at stake in Vietnam was by this time widely understood and deplored at levels just below the top of the government. But the President and the tight group of advisers around him gave no sign of having achieved a sense of proportion.”

Such a view of the lesson of Vietnam had no quarrel with the effort to defend Saigon or to defeat the NLF, but urged that the effort be abandoned if it could not be made to succeed within a reasonable time and at a reasonable cost. Many members of government during the Kennedy period who originally supported America’s role in Vietnam came later to hold similar views, concluding either that the war was weakening our ability to uphold more significant interests in Europe and the Middle East, or that the disproportionate costs resulting from the Vietnam War deprived the country of the energies and resources that were desperately needed to solve America’s own domestic problems.

Former Ambassador Edwin Reischauer, a respected figure among liberal groups, has carried this kind of analysis to a more general level of interpretation: “The ‘central lesson’ of Vietnam—at least as the American public perceives it—is already quite obvious…the limited ability of the United States to control at a reasonable cost the course of events in a nationally-aroused less-developed nation…I believe,” Reischauer adds, “that we are moving away from the application to Asia of the ‘balance of power’ and ‘power vacuum’ concepts of the cold war, and the process we no doubt will greatly downgrade out strategic interests in most of the less-developed world.”

According to Reischauer, the means used in Vietnam were disproportionate.

---

to the end pursued, and, in general, a country like the United States cannot effectively use its military power to control the outcome of Vietnam-type struggles.

David Mozingo takes this argument one step further, recognizing the need for a perspective on Asia that is suited to the special historical and political conditions prevailing there, a perspective that might even suggest the end of a rigid policy of containment of China. “Since the Korean War,” he argues, “United States policy in Asia has been modeled after the containment doctrine so successfully applied in Europe after 1947…Washington has seen the problem of Chinese power in Asia in much the same light as that posed by Soviet power in Europe and has behaved as if both threats could be contained by basically the same kind of responses.”

Professor Mozingo argues as follows on the essential difference between Asia and Europe: “In Asia, the containment doctrine has been applied in an area where a nation-state system is only beginning to emerge amidst unpredictable upheavals of a kind that characterized Europe three centuries earlier…The kinds of American technical and economic power that could help restore the historic vitality of the European system would seem at best to have only partial relevance to the Asian situation.”

Such a view of the Vietnam experience supports a policy that emphasizes a much more specific, less abstract, appreciation of how to relate American economic, military, and political power to a series of particular struggles for control going on in various Asian countries.

Among the lessons drawn from Vietnam is the futility—perhaps worse than futility—of aiding a foreign regime that lacks the capacity to govern its society and the conclusion that certain types of intervention, if carried too far, help produce results that are the opposite of the goals of the intervenor. The American failure in Vietnam is partly laid to ignorance about Vietnamese realities and partly to exaggerated confidence in the ability of massive military intervention to fulfill political objectives. This is essentially the view of Stanley Hoffmann. Again, as with Hoopes, the search is for an effective foreign policy, combined here with a sense of proportion and an awareness of the inherent limits imposed on American policy. But like Colonel Moore’s interpretation, this liberal critique does not repudiate American objectives in Vietnam. The main guideline for the future, according to Professor Samuel Huntington who served as the head of Humphrey’s Vietnam task force during the 1968 Presidential campaign, is to keep Vietnam-type involvements in the future “reasonably limited, discreet, and covert.”

The third and currently dominant interpretation of the Vietnam war—that it is a qualified failure of tactics—is the one favored by President Nixon and important foreign advisers such as Henry Kissinger, William Rogers, and Melvin Laird. The Nixon Doctrine, announced at Guam on July 25, 1969, is an explicit effort to avoid repeating the mistakes of Vietnam, as these leaders understand them, without renouncing the basic mission of American policy. The Nixon Administration is critical of the Vietnam effort to the extent that it believes the same ends could have been achieved at lesser cost in American blood and treasure, and, as a result, with less strain on American society. In his November 3, 1969 address on Vietnam, President Nixon explained the Nixon Doctrine as embodying “three principles as guidelines for future American policy toward Asia”:

---

12 Ibid, p. 255.
First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments; Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security:

Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense. 13

The “central thesis” of the doctrine, according to the President is “...that the United States will participate in the defense and development of allies and friends, but that America cannot—and will not—conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world. We will help where it makes a real difference and is considered in our interest.” 14 Thus the Nixon Doctrine backs a step away from the world order absolutism of Johnsonian diplomacy and instead advocates specific assessments of each potential interventionary situation in terms of its strategic importance to the United States and the ability of America to control the outcome. 15 It is difficult, however, to extract much sense on concrete policy from the rhetoric of Nixon’s State of the World Message to Congress: “The fostering of self-reliance is the new purpose and direction of American involvement in Asia.” 16

In practical terms such a position remains ill-defined and midway between those of Colonel Moore and Mr. Hoopes: uphold all treaty commitments, give all allied regimes our help and advice, but get fully involved in a direct military way only when vital interests are at stake and when the military instrument can be used effectively, which means successfully, quickly, and without losing too many American lives. “Vietnamization” as one expression of the Nixon Doctrine, leaves the main burden of ground combat to Saigon’s armed forces, without any reduction in logistic support from the air via B-52 strikes and long-distance artillery support. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker is reported to have said that the policy of Vietnamization involves only changing the color of the bodies. Another expression of the Nixon Doctrine seems to be an escalation of American involvement in Laos, increasing our covert role in training and financing government forces and engaging in saturation bombing of contested areas, thereby causing a new flow of Asian refugees and thereby depriving the Pathet Lao of its population base.

These three positions identify the present boundaries of serious political debate in the United States. It is likely that the early seventies will witness a struggle for ascendancy between the advocates of the liberal view (Position 2) and the advocates of the Nixon Doctrine (Position 3). Extending the doctrine of deterrence to counterinsurgency situations (Position 1) could gain support if the political forces behind George Wallace and Barry Goldwater gained greater influence as “a third force” in American politics of significantly increased their already strong influence with the Agnew-Mitchell wing of the Nixon Administration.

---

14 Ibid.
Position 1 accepts “victory” as the proper goal of the American involvement in Vietnam and regards the means used as appropriate to the end of defeating the insurgency in South Vietnam, whether that insurgency is viewed as a species of civil war or as an agency of North Vietnamese aggression. In contrast, Position 2 shifted away from victory as a goal and moved toward the advocacy of some kind of mutual withdrawal of foreign forces and toward some effort to reach a settlement by non-military means once it became evident that the means required for the more ambitious goal were so costly in lives, dollars, and domestic support. Position 3 specifies the goal of the involvement as obtaining conditions of self-determination of South Vietnam and its present governing regime, a position that seems to imply an outcome of the war that is close to total victory; however, there is a certain ambiguity as to whether the real goals are not more modest than the proclaimed goals. In any event, Position 3 regards the means used to have been unnecessarily costly, given the goals of the involvement, and accepts, at least in theory, the desirability of a non-military outcome through a negotiated settlement of the war.

Position 1 seems to interpret Vietnam as a qualified success and to favor, if anything, a less constrained military effort in the future to defeat any Communist-led insurgencies that may erupt on the Asian mainland in the 1970’s. As with the strategic doctrine, the deterrence of insurgent challenges rests on the possession of a credible capability and on a willingness to respond with overwhelming military force to any relevant challenge.

Position 2 is much less tied to an overall doctrine, views the post-Kennedy phases of the Vietnam involvement as a clear mistake, and argues for a much greater emphasis on non-military responses to insurgent challenges. This position also seeks to restrict overt intervention to situations in which its impact can be swift and effective. Position 2, therefore, depends on having a fairly secure regime in power in the country that is the scene of the struggle. It also emphasizes keeping a sense of proportion throughout such an involvement, either by way of a ceiling on the magnitude of the commitment or by way of a willingness to liquidate an unsuccessful commitment.

Position 3 is midway between the first two positions in tone and apparent emphasis. It develops a more globalist strategy, emphasizing that the U.S. has far-flung treaty relations with Asian countries and that it is important to the overall preeminence of the United States in world affairs and to the continuing need to resist Communist pressures everywhere in the world that these commitments be honored. The merits of the particular case are thus tied to a global strategy, but there is an effort to shift more of the burdens of response to the local government. What this means in those cases where the government cannot meet these burdens, as was surely the case in Vietnam all along, is very unclear. What happens under Position 3 when self-reliance fails? The prevailing response to this question may well determine the central line of American foreign policy in Asia throughout the 1970’s. Both Positions 2 and 3 look toward Japan as a more active partner in the development of a common Asian policy. President Nixon’s decision to return Okinawa to Japan by 1972 arises out of this hope for sharing the geopolitical burdens of the region with Japan in the mid- and late seventies.

What is most surprising about these three positions is the extent to which they accept the premises of an American counter-revolutionary posture toward political conflict in Asia. To be clear, however, this espousal of counterrevolutionary doctrine is applicable only in situations that appear to be revolutionary. Where there is no formidable radical challenge on the domestic scene, as in India or Japan, the American preference is clearly for moderate democracy, indeed the kind of political orientation that the United States imposed upon Japan during the military occupation after World War II. However, where an Asian society is beset by struggle between a
rightist incumbent regime and a leftist insurgent challenger, then American policy throws its support, sometimes strongly, to the counterrevolutionary side. As a result, there has been virtually no disposition to question the American decision to support the repressive and reactionary Saigon regime provided that support could have led to victory in Vietnam at a reasonable cost. In fact, the last four American presidents have been in agreement on the political wisdom of the decision to help Saigon prevail in its effort to create a strong anti-Communist state in South Vietnam, thereby defying both the military results of the first Indo-China War and the explicit provisions on the reunification of Vietnam embodied in the Geneva Accords of 1954. Positions 1 to 3 also share an acceptance, although to varying degrees, of the basic postulates of “the domino theory.” Position 2 is least inclined to endorse the image of falling dominoes, and some of its adherents (such as Donald Zagoria)\textsuperscript{17} indeed argue that the prospects for Communism need to be assessed on a country-by-country basis, and the success or failure of Communism in Vietnam or Laos will not necessarily have much impact upon the prospect for revolution in other Asian countries.

McGeorge Bundy, a belated convert to Position 2 (after an earlier allegiance to a moderate form of Position 1) gave up on the war because its burden was too great on American society. Nevertheless he took pains to reaffirm the wisdom of the original undertaking: “I remind you also, if you stand on the other side, that my argument against escalation and against an indefinite continuation of our present course has been based not on moral outrage or political hostility to the objective, but rather on the simple and practical ground that escalation will not work and that a continuation of our present course is unacceptable.”\textsuperscript{18} Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has said: “The tragedy of Vietnam is the tragedy of the overextension and misapplication of valid principles. The original insights of collective security and liberal evangelism were generous and wise.” Actually, adherents of Position 2, while sharply dissenting from the Vietnam policies of both Johnson and Nixon, still maintain the spirit of an earlier statement by McGeorge Bundy, made at a time when he was rallying support for Johnson’s air war against North Vietnam: “There are wild men in the wings, but on the main stage even the argument on Vietnam turns on tactics, not fundamentals.”\textsuperscript{19}

Unfortunately, from my perspective, these so-called wild men still remain in the wings, if anything further removed from the center of the political stage, for positions 1, 2, and 3 all affirm the continuing wisdom of two American objectives in Asia: first, to prevent Chinese expansion, if necessary by military means, and second, to prevent any anti-Communist regime, however repressive, reactionary, or isolated from popular support from being toppled by internal revolutionary forces, whether or not abetted by outside help.

\textit{The Excluded Fourth Position}

There is another interpretation which has been largely excluded from the public dialogue thus far. It repudiates our present objectives in Vietnam on moral and political grounds. It holds, first, there is no reason to believe that China has expansive military aims in Asia; second, even if China were militarily expansive, it would not be desirable or necessary for the United States to defend China’s victims; and third, there is neither occasion nor justification for aiding repressive

\textsuperscript{17} See Ping-Ti Ho and Tang Tsou, (eds.), \textit{China in Crises}, Chicago, 1968, Vol. II.


governments merely because they follow anti-Communist policies. I favor this fourth position for several reasons. There is no evidence that China needs containing by an American military presence in Asia. Of course, countries in the shadow of a dominant state tend to fall under the influence of that state whenever it is effectively governed. This process is universal and has deep historical roots in Asia. But there are important countervailing forces.

First, China is preoccupied with its own domestic politics and with principal foreign struggles against the Soviet Union and Formosa.

Second, many of the countries surrounding China have struggled at great sacrifice to achieve independence, and their search for domestic autonomy is much stronger than any common ideological sentiment that might tempt Asian Communist regimes to subordinate their independence to Peking.

Third, China’s foreign policy may often have been crude and ill-conceived, but it has rarely exhibited any intention to rely on military force to expand its influence beyond its boundaries; its uses of force against India, Tibet, and the Soviet Union have been to support its claims to disputed territory, and its entry into the Korean War seemed mainly motivated by a reasonable concern about danger to its industrial heartland.

The evidence thus suggests that the American effort to contain China in Asia is a determination to contend with a paper tiger. More significantly, the multifaceted conflicts in Asia, and elsewhere in the Third World, cannot be comprehended in abstract or ideological terms. Asia is undergoing a two-phase revolution that began as a struggle against colonialism and will continue for at least another decade. The first phase is concerned with the struggle to reacquire national control over the apparatus of government by defeating foreign rule. This struggle is largely completed. In most parts of Asia the colonial system has collapsed and foreigners have been removed from power. But in most Asian countries, including South Vietnam, the native groups allied with the colonial system have held onto political power, stifling social progress and economic reform. Thailand, although never formally a colony, continues to be governed by a traditional elite that is ill-inclined to initiate the reforms needed to relieve the mass of its population from ancient forms of inequality and exploitation.

After formal independence is won, the second phase of these national revolutions involves continuation of the struggle against the residues of the colonial system, including the more informal patterns of domination that result from large American donations of military equipment, foreign aid, covert “presence” (i.e. CIA), and political and economic advice. Most governments in Asia today are composed of conservative forces that hold onto their positions of power and privilege with the aid of such donations and advice, usually at the expense of their own people. Therefore, the second phase of the revolutionary struggle involves wresting political control from traditional ruling classes and instituting a mass-based program of land reform, education, public hygiene, social equality, radical consciousness, and economic development. In most of Asia, aside from India, the United States is allied with regimes that are trying to hold back this second surge of the revolutionary energy that has swept across the Third World to crush the colonial system.
Position 4 accepts this analysis of political conflict in Asia and adjusts American policy accordingly. First of all, it seeks accommodation with China through a flexible compromise of outstanding issues, including the future of Formosa. What is implied here is the removal of the American military presence from the area, especially the withdrawal of the Seventh Fleet and the elimination of our military bases on Formosa. Such a course would leave the outcome of the Chinese civil war, which has not yet been fully resolved, to the contending forces on both sides. It would encourage the possibility of negotiations between Peking and Taipei as to the governance of Formosa, perhaps allowing for semi-autonomous status within the Chinese Peoples Republic, with guarantees of a measure of economic and political independence for the island.

An American accommodation with China would help the United States handle an increasingly competitive economic relationship with Japan in the 1970’s and give Washington more bargaining power in relation to the Soviet Union. More importantly, accommodation with China could make it possible to proceed more rapidly with arms control and disarmament, to denuclearize world politics, and to resist pressures to proliferate weapons of mass destruction to additional countries.

Position 4 entails the total abandonment of America’s counterrevolutionary foreign policy in Asia. This would mean renouncing all treaty relations with governments that are repressing their own populations and holding back the forces of self-determination. Clearly such a revision of policy would require the renunciation of American treaty obligations to promote the security of the regimes now governing South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, South Korea, Formosa, Thailand and the Philippines. The only commitment that should be reaffirmed is our obligation under the UN Charter to resist overt military aggression of the Korea-type. Position 4 would also imply an end of large-scale military assistance and covert interference in the affairs of Asian countries. Civil strife is likely to occur in several Asian countries and displace present governments, but to the extent that it tends to reflect the true balance of political forces within these national societies, it would be beneficial for the welfare of the population and for the stability of the country and the region. At present, several regimes are being maintained in power only through a combination of domestic oppression and American support.

There seems virtually no prospect for adoption, or even discussion, of Position 4 during the 1970’s unless major shifts in American political life occur. Only extraordinary domestic pressure, fueled perhaps by economic troubles at home and foreign policy setbacks abroad is likely to produce a change of leadership and change of world outlook in America.

Yet in historic retrospect, it is important to appreciate that Position 4 once was close to being our foreign policy. Its rejection by today’s American leaders is not an inevitable outcome of American foreign policy in Asia after World War II. Franklin Roosevelt was opposed to restoring the French colonial administration in Indochina at the end of the war. If Indochina had been allowed to become independent after the Japanese left, then Ho Chi Minh would clearly have emerged as the leader of a united Vietnam, and perhaps of a united Indochina. In his initial Proclamation of Independence of September 25, 1945, Ho Chi Minh explicitly referred to the French and American Revolutions as the main sources of inspiration for the Vietnamese struggle for national independence. The Communist response to Ho in the West was not altogether enthusiastic—the Soviet Union withheld recognition from Ho Chi Minh’s Republic of Vietnam and in 1947, Maurice Thorez, the French Communist leader who was then Vice-Premier of France actually countersigned the order for French military action against the newly-proclaimed Republic. As O.E. Clubb points out: “In 1945 and 1946 the Ho Chi Minh government looked
mainly to the United States and Nationalist China for foreign political support.\textsuperscript{20} In the period since World War II anti-colonialism probably would have been a better guideline for American foreign policy in Asia than anti-Communism. And even now it makes better sense. It would work better because it accords more closely with historic trends in Asia, with the dynamics of national self-determination in most non-Communist Asian countries, and because it flows more naturally out of America’s own heritage and proudest tradition. But to recall our earlier discussion, the whole idea of debate may well be irrelevant, or virtually so. The policy may be merely continuing evidence of the potency of economic and bureaucratic pressures. In this eventuality, those who wield power and are sensitive to the parameters of acceptable variation, are correct to ignore lines of argument that would have to be rejected. But also correct are those who say that no amount of working within the system can secure a humane and rational foreign policy for the United States because its basic orientation is set by those who would maintain an empire abroad for the benefit of its rulers at home. And indeed it appears to be the case that those who stand outside the debate—the adherents of Position 4—are dissociated from any political base that might be used to gain lawful access to power in the near future. It is their dissociation from power, and not the poverty of their analysis, that explains the irrelevance of their plea for an end to empire and the diplomacy of counterrevolution.

Eric A. Belgrad’s Comments

These comments are not specifically directed to American foreign policy with regard to Asia, but rather to the general question of the premises of foreign policy as it will be pursued in the 1970’s. Most particularly I would like to begin by asking a number of questions to which Professor Falk might possibly reply. First of all, is our entire experience in Vietnam—particularly since 1965—representative of American diplomacy toward the under-developed areas of the world? Or instead, should this particular experience be seen as representing an extraordinary set of circumstances which we not faced previously and to which we responded in an extraordinary manner, that is to say, a manner in which we would not be likely to respond again in the future? Is this, as Herbert Butterfield would say, a unique, pathological kind of situation to which we made a unique, pathological kind of reply? My own idea on this question is that indeed this is the case. In my view, the entire massive military intervention of the United States in Vietnam was more conditioned by the will of the Johnson administration than by the general popular will, or for that matter, the persuasion of American diplomats. Having dispensed with the Johnson administration, and with its persistently willful response which to the greatest failure of the American interventionism, the Nixon administration will make no such commitment to intervention as was made in 1965. Certainly, I would question whether “containment” as applied to Asia is still a viable policy or is identified by American policymakers as a viable policy. The fact of the matter is that the Nixon doctrine, to which Professor Falk referred in some detail, clearly seems to imply that the “fight against Communism” is an old fight, which is not to be repeated over and over again, and that the doctrine of containment as applied to China represents an exercise in futility, when it takes the form of massive American military intervention in those areas which are identified as being threatened by “Communist” subversion, either internal or external. Hence, I would question whether we should not regard Vietnam as an experience to be taken outside of the line of general continuity of American foreign policy. If this form of containment policy is no longer the accepted standard of American response to challenges labeled as “Communist,” the determination of the direction of foreign policy and of expectations to be achieved thereby will be formed in terms of traditional views, and most particularly the criterion of well-defined national self-interest will presumably be the dominating factor in guiding such foreign policy.

One somewhat tangential point to which I would like to respond is the question of ecology and foreign policy which Dr. Falk has discussed at some length. I wonder whether this ecological concern which Professor Falk expressed represents the beginning of an abiding American interest which will over-shadow all of our traditional concerns with the rest of the world. I suspect that this may be just one more fad which will run its course of public exposure and vanish, as all other fads have vanished in the past. My own view is that this ecological concern, as important as it is, obviously cannot maintain the kind of dynamic militancy which marks it now at its inception. Popular interest in this concern is bound to abate, and more traditional interests will regain their accustomed prominence; whereas the rhetoric of ecology will remain with us for some time, the substance of policy will again address itself to the essentials of defense and foreign policy. If we were to look at the question of identification of national self-interest, we would come rapidly to the conclusion that the Nixon doctrine indeed seems to address itself not to ideological concerns, nor to the establishment of a new version of a blockade of Chinese expansionism in Asia, but rather to the identification of active American
interests from point to point along the Asiatic mainland; furthermore this identification is in
terms of the quality and quantity of American response where these interests may be challenged.
It is all too facile to dismiss the Nixon doctrine as a rather shabby political trick when it may be
in fact one more point in the evolution of a continuity in foreign policy based upon the
recognition that confrontation with communism no longer is feasible or desirable as the sole
rationale for global intervention. On the basis of the espousal of these new limits to the exercise
of American military power, American foreign policy may abandon its ideological basis of the
past twenty-two years and turn to a greater degree of realism as expressed purely in terms of
national interest. In fact one might very well say that the Nixon doctrine isn’t a doctrine at all but
rather it is the application of Dr. Kissinger’s insights in the needs of realistic foreign policy, an
approach in which I have a good deal of confidence. Therefore, I would argue that the American
position with regard to Asia in the 1970’s must be based upon flexibility both as to the
identification of American national interests in the area, taking as a basic premise that there
probably are no major American national interests which require massive intervention of the
Asiatic mainland.

My criticism of Professor Falk’s paper is that there is a necessity to avoid tautological,
ideologically-premised positions with regard to American foreign policy. I feel that the extended
criticism of intervention on the Asiatic mainland is in fact akin to beating a dead horse. The
trauma of Vietnam has been lived through. No purpose is served by forecasting a bleak future on
the basis of a deviation from realism in foreign policy. The evidence at hand is that the lesson
has been learned; now we must carefully avoid the other extreme, a sort of political neo-
isolationism in which the very idea of any kind of intervention, political, military, or economic is
regarded as sinful or immoral.