



Stabilisation Unit

**Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project:  
Vietnam Case Study**

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**Stabilisation Unit  
February 2018**

*This report has been produced by an independent expert. The views contained within do not necessarily reflect UK government policy.*



### **Author details**

The author is a Senior Lecturer, Defence Studies Department, Kings College London. This case study draws on a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are mainly limited to US Government documents, particularly those dealing with the internal deliberations of the Nixon administration as well as the minutes of meetings at the 1972-1973 Paris peace talks. The secondary sources used include a much wider range, such as general histories of the conflict, as well as more specific diplomatic histories that draw on primary source material from each of the key participants in the conflict (US, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Provisional Revolutionary Government, USSR and China).

### **Background to Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project**

This case study is one of a series commissioned to support the Stabilisation Unit's (SU's) development of an evidence base relating to elite bargains and political deals. The project explores how national and international interventions have and have not been effective in fostering and sustaining political deals and elite bargains; and whether or not these political deals and elite bargains have helped reduce violence, increased local, regional and national stability and contributed to the strengthening of the relevant political settlement. Drawing on the case studies, the SU has developed a series of summary papers that bring together the project's key findings and will underpin the revision of the existing 'UK Approach to Stabilisation' (2014) paper. The project also contributes to the SU's growing engagement and expertise in this area and provides a comprehensive analytical resource for those inside and outside government.



## Executive Summary

This case study focuses on the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, an agreement between the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG), the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the US, to bring an end to the Vietnam War. The Accords have generally been viewed as a failed attempt at ending the conflict, not least as a result of the subsequent 1975 Communist takeover.

The analysis, therefore, contrasts the formalities of a diplomatic process that was based on the assumption that peace – or at least a switch from military to non-military means being used to resolve the underlying political conflict – was a realistic possibility; with the scepticism of the key participants who believed that, at best, any peace agreement would allow for a brief respite before military hostilities erupted once more.

### *The build-up to an agreement*

In the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva Accords that divided Vietnam into the Communist North and Non-Communist South, a military conflict gradually developed involving the North, the South, and Southern Communist insurgents (popularly known as the Viet Cong). The US supported the South from its creation onwards, first sending military aid and advisers, and by 1965, switching to a policy of large-scale military intervention.

By 1968, the war had effectively reached a military stalemate. Despite the heavy losses incurred by the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive that year, they remained a force-in-being, bolstered with men and materiel by the North. Meanwhile, public support for the war dropped significantly in the US, leading the Johnson administration to halt its military escalation and seek a negotiated settlement. Although there had been a number of previous attempts to begin negotiations, it was not until the aftermath of the Tet Offensive that both sides were willing to meet to ‘talk about talks’.

Beginning in 1969, several years of inconclusive talks took place in Paris between representatives of the North, the Viet Cong (renamed the Provisional Revolutionary Government in 1969), the South Vietnamese, and the US. However, it was not until North Vietnam’s failed 1972 Easter Offensive that Hanoi was willing to compromise on its longstanding insistence that South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu be removed from office. As a result, in the course of secret meetings between North Vietnamese and American officials, and with the reluctant acquiescence of Thieu, a peace agreement was drafted over the course of the Autumn of 1972 and signed in Paris in January 1973.

### *The limited role of external actors*

Although peace in Vietnam was in the interests of the great powers – the US, USSR and China – who viewed the conflict as an irritant, the political interests of the local actors – North Vietnam/Provisional Revolutionary Government and South Vietnam – were fundamentally incompatible with each other and took precedence over those of the great powers. Indeed, despite the ostensibly enormous power and influence of external powers to bring about conflict resolution, local actors did not move from their antagonistic positions.

For instance, South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu was fundamentally opposed to a peace agreement that left his regime potentially exposed to Communist subversion. He employed numerous methods to undermine peace both before and after the Paris agreement was signed. Meanwhile, during a period of military weakness following the failed 1972 Easter Offensive, the Communists hoped that the agreement would provide an opportunity to win a political victory to achieve the same goal that was then militarily unattainable. But due to Thieu’s ongoing anti-Communist activities, it was recognised that a political victory was increasingly unlikely. Communist leaders, therefore, hedged their bets and renewed preparations for a military solution.



Consequently, apart from a limited number of local and temporary ceasefires, conflict continued despite the 1973 peace agreement. As the prospect of Communist inclusion in South Vietnamese politics faded, and once the military balance shifted in its favour, Hanoi chose to undertake a large-scale military offensive to re-unify the country under a Communist government. In April 1975, South Vietnam was finally conquered and ceased to exist.

*The durability of the agreement*

In the aftermath of the conquest of South Vietnam, there were many debates, especially in the US, about why the war was lost. Blame was attributed to the US Congress for placing restrictions on military aid to the South, to the South Vietnamese leadership and military for their incompetence and corruption, to the skill of the North's military system, and so forth. Underpinning these debates were a number of 'what-ifs'. If the US Congress had not placed restrictions on military action, then perhaps US B-52 bombers could have destroyed the North Vietnamese military. If the South Vietnamese had not been so incompetent, then perhaps they could have defeated the numerically inferior force that invaded the country in 1975. These 'what-if' questions relate directly to the durability of the Paris Peace agreement in the sense that had different actions been taken by different actors, then perhaps the agreement would have lasted longer than it did, if not indefinitely.

Ultimately, however, the agreement failed because rather than resolve the underlying political dispute in order to bring about a lasting peace, it merely sought to freeze the conflict in place pending future negotiation. When these future negotiations failed to advance, largely due to Thieu's intransigence, and as the North recovered its military strength after the 1972 Easter Offensive debacle, any prospect that peace would be maintained was undermined. To the extent that the prospect of renewed American intervention in the conflict was a factor in dissuading the North from renewing its efforts to capture the South, this almost certainly was a more important consideration with regards to Hanoi's preferred strategy and tactics rather than to the end-state that it was striving to achieve.



## Part I: Mapping the Context of Armed Violence

At the end of World War II, Vietnamese rebels (the Viet Minh) led by Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, overthrew the Japanese forces, who had themselves overthrown the French colonial government, and proclaimed an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in September 1945. In 1946, French forces overthrew the DRV as part of an effort to regain their former colonial possessions in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). Despite France's initial success in reinstating colonial rule, the Viet Minh gradually re-emerged as a significant military threat. The French authorities countered this growing threat in three ways. First, they increased their own military presence in Indochina. Second, France provided Vietnam with a limited form of independence, creating the State of Vietnam under the Emperor Bao Dai. Third, they sought to recast the war as a Cold War conflict rather than one of nationalist self-determination.

At first, the US was reluctant to become involved. However, following recognition of the Viet Minh in 1950 by the Soviet Union and the newly established People's Republic of China, and with the onset of the Korean War, US policymakers increasingly characterised the Vietnamese independence struggle as one connected with an expansionistic Kremlin-led Communist bloc. By 1954, the US funded 80 percent of the French war effort. However, despite this aid, French efforts to defeat the Viet Minh were not only unsuccessful, but damaging to France: the war was utilising more military and economic resources than France, still rebuilding after World War II, could devote to it.

Even before its military defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, Paris had decided in principle to seek a negotiated end to the war and withdraw from the region. The same month, an international conference was convened in Geneva to discuss the future of French Indochina, among other issues. Although their recent military victory should have given the Viet Minh a strong bargaining position, they were forced to compromise due to strong pressure from the Soviets and Chinese, both of whom were wary of possible US intervention. Also, despite their military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French military still retained a substantial military presence in Indochina. Instead of remaining unified, which was the aim of the Viet Minh, Indochina was broken up into an independent Laos and Cambodia, with Vietnam split along a demarcation line running along 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The division of Vietnam was to be temporary, pending a national election scheduled for 1956 that would unify the country. In the meantime, the Communist DRV controlled the north, with a non-Communist government in the south.

As French forces withdrew, the US took it upon itself the task of supporting the south. Crucially, the US chose not to abide by the Geneva agreement to hold a national election fearing a landslide victory by Ho Chi Minh. In 1955, the south formally became the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN) and the anti-Communist Catholic politician Ngo Dinh Diem became its first President. At first, despite the decision not to hold a national election, the DRV was willing, albeit reluctantly, to accept the status quo – although it sponsored Communist political agitation in the South. However, a crackdown by Diem on Communists in the South, as well as other political opponents, led to a growing armed resistance by the end of the 1950s. It was this crackdown that would have important implications nearly two decades later when Communist leaders feared that the anti-Communist government in the South was fundamentally unwilling to co-exist peacefully with members of a Communist political opposition, and would use force to persecute them.

In 1960, this armed opposition formed the National Liberation Front (NLF), more popularly known as the Viet Cong, and was supported by the North. Although dominated by the Communist party, the NLF included a broad range of non-Communist groups that were also opposed to the Saigon regime. Questions remain about the extent to which the NLF was a tool of North Vietnam, or had its own agenda that usually coincided but occasionally deviated from Hanoi. Perhaps the best way of



describing the relationship is to say that the interests of the Southern Communists, and the NLF more generally, often forced policymakers in Hanoi to take a harder line than they might have otherwise taken, particularly with respect to the means employed to overthrow the South's government and to unify the country. In many ways, therefore, it was the southern communists who manipulated the policy of North Vietnam, rather than the other way around.

To counter the Viet Cong, the US increased its military assistance to the South Vietnamese. Under President John F. Kennedy, the number of military advisers rose to 16,000, which also included the deployment of Special Forces. Unfortunately for Washington, the Diem regime it was supporting was, in reality, a corrupt, Catholic-run dictatorship that had little popular support among the Buddhist majority. Following a crackdown on the Buddhists in the summer 1963, opposition to Diem continued to build and he was overthrown in a military coup in November.

For the next two years, South Vietnam was in a state of political turmoil, and one military coup followed another. Having formerly been run by an unpopular politician, South Vietnam was now being run by generals who had little public support.<sup>1</sup> In essence, therefore, the state effectively transformed from a political dictatorship to a military dictatorship. With a lack of stable central authority due to infighting among the generals, the war against the Viet Cong continued to be lost by the South Vietnamese military as more territory was controlled by the Communists. To avert a southern collapse, the Americans continued sending more advisers.

With political chaos in South Vietnam and a losing war, by late 1964 and early 1965, US policymakers were obliged to decide whether to abandon the South, or to 'Americanise' the war by dispatching hundreds of thousands of US troops, with the aim of defeating the Viet Cong and giving the South sufficient breathing space to stabilise. The Lyndon B. Johnson administration chose the latter. It justified this decision by referring to the Munich Analogy and the Domino Theory: the Munich analogy, which referred to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's 'appeasement' of Adolf Hitler in 1938, asserted that it was necessary to use military means early to stop the aggression of expansionist adversaries; and the Domino Theory posited that the loss of one nation to Communism would lead to the loss of others. Thus, North Vietnam was not only classed as an expansionist adversary, but it was also inferred that a Communist victory in Vietnam would lead to further losses throughout Southeast Asia. Both contentions were highly debatable, yet they dominated the Johnson administration's decision-making on Vietnam.

The administration's 1965 decision to 'Americanise' the war was facilitated by the legal sanction that Congress had already granted to it when it passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Following an incident in early August 1964 in which it was claimed that two US destroyers were the victims of an unprovoked attack by the North Vietnamese, Congress approved the Resolution, authorising Johnson to take any measures he believed were necessary to retaliate and affirmed that, "The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia."<sup>2</sup>

Between 1965 through 1968, the US bombed North Vietnam in an effort to cease its support for the Viet Cong, and sent hundreds of thousands of ground troops, as quickly as they could be logistically

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<sup>1</sup> After the November 1963 coup, the 'military establishment' which effectively ran South Vietnam underwent various name changes. Initially known as the Military Revolutionary Council, in the years thereafter it was alternatively referred to as the National Leadership Council, the Congress of the Armed Forces, and the Armed Forces Council. Formally, however, beginning in 1967, the country was run by a 'democratically-elected' president. The ex-general Nguyen van Thieu was 'elected' in the 1967 election and re-elected in the 1971 election. However, despite attempting to convey an appearance of democratic legitimacy, both elections were rigged. See: Michaels, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Text of Joint Resolution, August 7, Department of State Bulletin, 24 August 1964.



sustained, to defeat the Communist forces in the South. These actions by the Americans effectively escalated the conflict to an unprecedented level. In contrast to their earlier policy of limiting their support for North Vietnam, both the Soviets and Chinese provided significant economic and military assistance to compensate for losses the North incurred during the conflict. North Vietnam was particularly adept at exploiting Sino-Soviet rivalry to obtain a maximum level of support from each. This support not only helped the North withstand the US bombing and continue its support to the Viet Cong, but it also allowed them to build a large conventional military. In the South, the effect of the large-scale American presence was to exacerbate inflation, increase corruption, and generate anti-American sentiment. It also served to further de-legitimise the image of the Southern government among its population and make it less willing to reform.

At the height of US involvement, some 550,000 US troops were based in South Vietnam. Yet despite optimistic announcements by US officials that victory over the Communist forces was imminent, this did not reflect reality. When the Communist forces launched a nation-wide offensive in January 1968 (the Tet Offensive), illusions of an imminent victory evaporated and public support for the war declined, even though the offensive decimated the Viet Cong militarily and failed to spark a more general uprising. Largely reflecting American elite concerns, epitomised by a March 1968 meeting of the so-called 'Wise Men' – a group of elder statesmen – as well as growing public disenchantment, Johnson announced that the US would disengage from Vietnam rather than continue to escalate the war. It was at this point that formal peace negotiations began.<sup>3</sup>

## Part II: Antecedents of an Elite Bargain

With the American escalation of the war in 1965, numerous diplomatic efforts to achieve conflict resolution existed alongside the military campaign. However, despite the veneer of seeking peace, the dominant interest of the key parties was to postpone substantive peace talks until there was a major breakthrough in the military situation. In July 1965, President Johnson told reporters, 'We are ready now, as we have always been, to move from the battlefield to the conference table'. As he also noted, 'Fifteen efforts have been made to start these discussions with the help of 40 nations throughout the world, but there has been no answer'.<sup>4</sup> These efforts included peace feelers by intermediaries, such as the Canadian diplomat Blair J. Seaborn in 1964 and 1965, in which overtures were made directly and indirectly to the North Vietnamese conveying the desire to begin peace talks, but they did not include conveying any substantive negotiating position other than to offer the prospect of talks.

UN Secretary General U Thant also attempted to persuade Hanoi to negotiate. However, at this point, US officials rejected a North Vietnamese suggestion for negotiations in Rangoon. Johnson also tried to combine bombing halts with offering peace feelers, but the North Vietnamese were unwilling to take up this offer. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese publicly clung to their 'Four Points' policy objective: 1) the US must withdraw from Indochina, 2) the South Vietnamese people should determine their own affairs, 3) the status of South Vietnam would be characterised by 'peace and neutrality', and 4) Vietnam should be reunified.

In May 1965, however, the North Vietnamese passed a message to the Americans, via the French Foreign Ministry, that the Four Points should be considered subjects for negotiation, rather than preconditions for negotiations. A US representative subsequently met with a North Vietnamese diplomat but was told that US air attacks had to stop before negotiations could begin. For US

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<sup>3</sup> The information presented in this general historical overview is mainly drawn from: Brigham, 1998; Gaiduk, 1996; Hess, 2009; Karnow, 1997; Prados, 2009; Young, 1991; Zhai, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Prados, p. 144.



officials, there was a preference to be seen negotiating from a position of strength rather than weakness. Consequently, this offer was rejected. As can be seen from this pattern, in some cases the US offered to negotiate but had these offers rejected. In other cases, the North Vietnamese offered to negotiate, but the Americans then rejected the offer. Despite many such efforts which occurred over the course of 1964-1968, neither side was willing to come to the bargaining table.<sup>5</sup> A further problem that became evident in 1968 once negotiations did begin, was that merely having two parties talking to each other (the US and North Vietnam) was insufficient. Instead, it was necessary that all four relevant parties (the US, North Vietnam, the Viet Cong and South Vietnamese) had to be involved, which, as will be shown, complicated both the process and the outcomes of the negotiations.

### **Peace Negotiations Begin**

The changing military situation was the most important factor that led to progress in starting the process of formal negotiations. After the Tet Offensive, the US and South Vietnam had been militarily successful both at blunting a Communist uprising in the South and inflicting massive losses on the Viet Cong. Nevertheless, the domestic political repercussions in the US were so grave that Johnson supported more active efforts at disengagement and negotiations to end the war. For the Communist forces, Tet was a massive setback. After 1968, the Southern insurgents would never regain the strength they had prior to Tet, although, bolstered by reinforcements from the North, they remained a powerful force nevertheless. In the aftermath of Tet, the larger Viet Cong units and main headquarters were forced to relocate to 'base camps' in Cambodia and Laos, where they could regroup and continue the fight. However, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong leadership recognised that no immediate military victory was possible. It would take years before sufficient military strength could be developed to attempt to overthrow the Saigon regime, and this would only be possible if the US withdrew its forces.

Therefore, while limited military activities continued, diplomacy became a more important tool to side-step what was effectively a military stalemate, thereby allowing the Communist forces to continue to make progress in achieving their ultimate political objectives.<sup>6</sup> Diplomacy would be employed both to legitimise the Viet Cong and thereby weaken the legitimacy of South Vietnam, but also as a political tool to reduce American public support for the war. Moreover, reducing public support would facilitate a US military withdrawal, thereby making the military problem considerably easier down the road for a reconstituted Viet Cong insurgency supported by North Vietnam to conquer the South. It was set against this backdrop that both sides came to Paris in 1968 to begin formal negotiations.

It is important to distinguish here between formal negotiations, which began in 1968, and secret negotiations that began later in the autumn of 1969. Over the next several years, diplomacy would proceed along these two tracks: on the one hand, there were the formal negotiations in which little was achieved, and on the other, there were secret negotiations that achieved little until the Autumn of 1972 – following the failure of the North Vietnamese 'Easter Offensive' – when Hanoi dropped some of its demands that had previously deadlocked the negotiations. From October 1972 through to January 1973, it was in the secret negotiations that serious discussions occurred that paved the way for the Paris Peace Accords. As this chronology indicates, the decision in 1968 to pursue a diplomatic track should not be confused with a sense of urgency to bring the conflict to an end. Before any negotiations could even begin, three crucial procedural problems had to be addressed: where to meet, who would meet, and how they would meet.

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<sup>5</sup> See Ashmore and Baggs, 1968; Goodman, 1978; Herring, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Asselin, 2002; Brigham, 1998; Guan, 2004.



## Peace talks: where, who and how?

The location for the proposed talks proved to be the first hurdle. From the end of March until early May 1968 there was a drawn-out exchange between the US and North Vietnamese on this issue. Although President Johnson had stated that US officials would meet with the North Vietnamese 'anywhere, anytime', this was not entirely true. At first, the Americans proposed Geneva, where the 1954 talks had been held. Hanoi rejected this on the grounds that it had 'unhappy memories', precisely because the 1954 Geneva talks had resulted in the division of Vietnam. It then suggested Phnom Penh due to its convenience. Washington rejected this suggestion because of the strong Viet Cong presence in Cambodia. Instead, it offered five other capitals in Southeast and South Asia, including New Delhi, which was favoured by Saigon. Hanoi again rejected these options and proposed Warsaw. US officials rejected this as Poland was a communist country that actively supported Hanoi and would likely restrict the movements of the non-communist press. The US then countered by proposing nine capitals, all of which were again rejected. Ultimately, after weeks of bargaining, Paris was chosen as the site to hold the talks.<sup>7</sup>

Having cleared this hurdle, another one immediately emerged. The question of who would be invited to the talks also proved problematic. One option was for a bilateral meeting between the representatives of the US and North Vietnam, thereby excluding both the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. Neither North Vietnam nor the Viet Cong recognised the legitimacy of South Vietnam, and neither the US nor the South Vietnamese recognised the legitimacy of the Viet Cong. However, as the US purpose in Vietnam was to bolster the independence of South Vietnam, it could not be seen to be negotiating on its behalf. For the Americans, participation by the South Vietnamese was essential. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese insisted that the Viet Cong participate since they were being held up as an indigenous and independent Southern insurgency supported by the North, rather than as a mere pawn of Hanoi. As Kissinger later observed, 'In every revolutionary conflict, the acceptance of the guerrillas as a negotiating partner has proved to be the single most important obstacle to negotiations, for it obliges the government to recognise the legal status of the enemy determined to overthrow it'.<sup>8</sup> Had the conference been referred to as 'four party talks', then this would have legitimised the Viet Cong as being equal to the South Vietnamese. Eventually, it was decided that all four parties would be included, and simply to label them as 'our side' and 'your side', thereby avoiding the contentious issue of legitimacy.<sup>9</sup>

While discussions about *who* would meet were ongoing, additional discussions about *how* a meeting might be held took place.<sup>10</sup> These discussions were centred on questions about the shape of the conference table, how many tables there should be, and how different individuals would be seated. The discussions became known as the 'battle of the tables' and would last for months. Meanwhile, fighting continued to rage and Richard Nixon won the November 1968 US presidential election.

From the start, it was recognised that a triangular table would imply that North Vietnam was outnumbered two-to-one. Therefore, the Americans initially proposed a two-sided table. The North Vietnamese countered by suggesting a round table. Whereas the Americans supported the idea of a round table on the basis that people sitting at the table would not have any position, the South Vietnamese then protested that a round table meant that everyone was equal. Thus, the Viet Cong would have been viewed as equal to the South Vietnamese government. Later the benefits and drawbacks of an oval table were debated but the idea eventually was rejected, as were a 'flattened ellipse', a 'broken diamond' and a parallelogram.

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<sup>7</sup> Harriman, 1979; Kissinger, 2003, FRUS Jan–Aug 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Kissinger, 2003, 52

<sup>9</sup> Harriman, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Harriman, 1979; FRUS, Sep 1968–Jan 1969; Kissinger, 2003.



South Vietnam pushed for two separate rectangular tables and remained intransigent on this issue, such that President Johnson eventually grew tired of Saigon's obstruction and wrote to South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu expressing his frustration. The deadlock was finally broken by a Soviet diplomat. Anxious to get the negotiations moving ahead, the Soviets pressured the North Vietnamese to compromise and accept two half round tables with a space between them but without 'nameplates, flags or markings'. According to Kissinger, the Soviet motive was 'transparent'. If the deadlock continued into the new administration, which was viewed as tougher, the US would then escalate its military activities, including bombing the North, and then claim any future North Vietnamese compromise as a victory. Therefore, it was to North Vietnam's benefit that it compromise while Johnson was still president.<sup>11</sup> By the time this 'battle of the tables' had been resolved, the inauguration of Nixon was only one week away. As a result, any opportunity to negotiate a peace deal/settlement in 1968 was wasted due to the emphasis on form rather than substance.

### Part III – Key features of the elite bargain

Once the procedural issues had been agreed in order to allow the formal negotiations to begin, each of the sides disagreed on substantive matters and the talks remained deadlocked throughout the Autumn of 1972. As during the mid-to-late 1960s, this deadlock was largely due to the subordination of diplomacy in favour of achieving a military breakthrough. For instance, following the US-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1970, the North Vietnamese and Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) walked out of the Paris talks.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, there was little interest in compromising on core principles until the military balance had shifted. The US position called for a mutual withdrawal of all external (US and North Vietnamese) forces, albeit with the North Vietnamese completing their withdrawal six months before the US withdrawal began. The Communist position was that the US begin an unconditional unilateral withdrawal and the overthrow of the Thieu regime as preconditions for any further settlement negotiations. As these two official positions were fundamentally opposed, with neither side willing to be seen to compromise, the secret talks grew in importance. Henry Kissinger, then National Security Adviser to President Nixon, was the lead US official pursuing these secret talks, rather than diplomats from the State Department. In due course, Kissinger would not only negotiate directly with the North Vietnamese, but would also work with Hanoi's allies – Moscow and Beijing – to put pressure on North Vietnam to compromise.<sup>13</sup>

#### Washington's Perspective Shifts

At this point in the war, the US leadership increasingly viewed the Vietnam conflict as an 'irritant' in their 'more important' relations with the USSR and China. Thus, the US wanted to settle the Vietnam conflict as soon as possible. Kissinger favoured a linkage approach to help break the deadlock. While trying to improve US relations with the Soviet Union, for instance, he linked Vietnam to progress on arms control. The same also occurred in Kissinger's negotiations with the Chinese as he sought to broker a normalisation of relations. A key message that Kissinger conveyed to both the Soviets and Chinese was that the primary US interest was to get out of Vietnam without appearing to be humiliated. As such, there had to be a 'decent interval' between the point at which the Americans withdrew and the South collapsed. Once the US withdrew from Vietnam, Washington would be less concerned if the Vietnamese resumed conflict and the non-Communist South Vietnamese government was overthrown. However, the US would not depose South Vietnamese President Thieu

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<sup>11</sup> Kissinger, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> In 1969, the National Liberation Front, better known as the 'Viet Cong', were relabelled the Provisional Revolutionary Government to provide them with greater legitimacy and stature.

<sup>13</sup> Karnow, 1997; Kissinger, 2003.



on their own -- something that North Vietnam and the Viet Cong had insisted on as a precondition for a settlement.<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that an assumption held by many senior US officials, including Kissinger, was that South Vietnam was unlikely to be able to survive for more than a couple of years after the US withdrew its forces. US intelligence analysts debated the timing of a renewed North Vietnamese push to capture the South but not its inevitability.<sup>15</sup>

During this period, another important consideration for US policymakers was that the Nixon administration had committed itself to a unilateral military withdrawal. American troop numbers were falling and the longer the negotiations lasted, the fewer American troops would remain in South Vietnam, thereby reducing Washington's bargaining leverage. From Kissinger's perspective, the sooner an agreement could be reached the better.<sup>16</sup>

With the improvement of US-Soviet and US-Chinese relations, epitomised in the latter case by Nixon's historic visit to China in February 1972, North Vietnamese leaders became increasingly concerned that their allies would reduce their support for Hanoi. And with a US election in November 1972, Hanoi felt that time was running out to force a settlement on favourable terms. They concluded that a large-scale attack by North Vietnamese regular forces could destroy the South Vietnamese army, or at least weaken it to such an extent that a popular rebellion could overthrow it.<sup>17</sup> At this stage of the war, the US only had 50,000 military personnel remaining in South Vietnam, compared to 550,000 in 1969. When the North Vietnamese launched their attack at the end of March 1972 (the Easter Offensive), they initially made substantial progress. The South Vietnamese military was routed in many places and it was only the failure of the North's logistics system to support further gains in the South, combined with the intervention of US airpower, that stopped the North's advance and allowed the South to retake some of its lost territory.<sup>18</sup>

### The North Reassesses Its Policy

The failure of the North Vietnamese offensive led to a change in strategy by the Politburo in Hanoi. Such was the scale of losses suffered by the North's forces, both in men and materiel, they were no longer able to continue offensive operations, and it would take them *several years* to recover militarily. Rather than promoting a general uprising in the South in the short term, the North adjusted its strategy so that the main objective was the withdrawal of the US from the war.<sup>19</sup> This necessitated a more flexible approach to the ongoing negotiations.

Beginning in August, the North Vietnamese representative at the secret talks in Paris, Le Duc Tho, offered a proposal to Kissinger calling for the establishment of a coalition government that would include elements of the existing regime as well as the PRG. This offer was rejected by the Americans who resisted the idea of a coalition government. Then in October 1972, Le Duc Tho, made a further concession by dropping Hanoi's demands that Thieu be removed from power and that a coalition government be formed in Saigon. In exchange, the North demanded withdrawal of the remaining US forces, an exchange of prisoners of war, and an in-place ceasefire that would legitimise the presence of some 150,000 Communist troops still occupying areas of South Vietnam. Although this deal was generally acceptable to the US, it was strongly opposed by South Vietnam. President Thieu effectively

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<sup>14</sup> Berman, 2001; Kimball, 1998; Kimball, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Michaels, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Berman, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Asselin, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Veith, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Asselin, 2002; Guan, 2004.



rejected the deal that Kissinger had negotiated with Le Duc Tho and insisted that major revisions be incorporated.<sup>20</sup>

Curiously, Kissinger was unaware of the extent to which Thieu would oppose the deal he had negotiated on the South's behalf, despite the fact that the deal was principally meant to provide a face-saving exit for the US rather than to secure the long-term viability of South Vietnam. This opposition created a paradox for US policymakers, namely that they agreed with their adversary and disagreed with their ally. While Kissinger may have felt that Thieu could be dictated to, this was simply not the case. A further complication was the November 1972 US election. The North Vietnamese wanted to sign a peace agreement before the election, fearing that a Nixon victory would embolden the Americans to make further demands. Hanoi feared that with four more years in the White House, Nixon could potentially expand the war again.<sup>21</sup> Nixon, however, was unwilling to force the South to sign up to an agreement they did not want. After his election victory, therefore, Kissinger was ordered by Nixon to return to the negotiating table to extract additional concessions from the North Vietnamese, particularly with respect to the status of the demilitarised zone.

During meetings in early December, the North Vietnamese refused to alter their position. Consequently, Nixon ordered B-52 strikes against North Vietnam, including Hanoi.<sup>22</sup> Labelled the 'Christmas bombings', the level of destruction was considerable, generating a significant public backlash both domestically and internationally. Indeed, later in 1973, Congress imposed restrictions on Nixon's use of airpower in Indochina, fearing a repeat of the Christmas bombings. The bombings also worked to the disadvantage of the South Vietnamese. Having taken a significant political risk in ordering the bombing, Nixon was not going to tolerate South Vietnamese intransigence in the negotiations. After the bombing, Thieu would not be permitted to place any additional roadblocks without triggering a negative reaction from Washington.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the US military pressure, North Vietnam's Soviet and Chinese allies both tried to persuade Hanoi to be flexible in the negotiations. These allies still supported Hanoi's political goal of reunification with the South but differed on the ways and means of achieving this. In their view, there was little to gain by humiliating the US. Moreover, they felt that once the remaining US forces withdrew, the longer no conflict occurred, the harder it would be for the US to re-intervene.<sup>24</sup>

### Reaching an Agreement

In order to persuade Thieu to support the Paris Accords, Nixon offered both sticks and carrots. In private letters to Thieu, Nixon provided assurance that the US would respond with military force if the North Vietnamese violated the Paris Peace Accords in a major way. It has been argued that for Thieu the real 'peace agreement' was not the one signed in Paris but the secret assurances provided by Nixon. In other words, it was US B-52s based in the region that acted as a deterrent, rather than any North Vietnamese change of policy that prevented it from conquering the South. In addition, Nixon promised to use the interval before a US withdrawal to deliver massive amounts of military equipment, known as Operation Enhance Plus. On the other hand, if Thieu did not agree to the terms being offered, the US would cut funding; South Vietnam would be left on its own; and the US would not come to its aid.<sup>25</sup> At this point, Nixon was under pressure both from the US public and Congress, as well as from Kissinger and the American negotiators. Having spent months negotiating the text of

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<sup>20</sup> Asselin, 2002; Kissinger, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Asselin, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Kissinger, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Young, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Asselin, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Hung and Schechter, 1986; Young, 1991.



the settlement, US officials had grown tired and unwilling to accept further obstruction by Thieu. In short, Thieu was being told to take the deal or face the prospect of the US leaving.

Among the key provisions of the final version of the Paris agreement was the withdrawal of the remaining US forces in 60 days; the release of prisoners of war; and an agreement to legitimise the presence of some 150,000 Communist troops based in South Vietnam. After many months of negotiations, one final hurdle had to be overcome before the 'four party' peace agreement could finally be signed. Due to the lack of official recognition by the South Vietnamese of the PRG, and vice versa, they refused to sign the final document until it was arranged for the US and South Vietnam to sign on one page and the North Vietnamese and PRG to sign on a different page. This arrangement allowed the US and South Vietnam to refer to the 'four party' agreement as being 'two-sided'. By contrast, the Communists claimed that it was 'four-sided' because four parties 'of equal standing' had signed it. After the agreement was signed, the South would claim that they had still not recognised or legitimised the PRG.

This continued reluctance to provide a future political role for the PRG in South Vietnam's political system is generally regarded as constituting the key weakness of the Paris Accords. So long as the main political differences were deferred, the resumption of conflict was probably inevitable. Nevertheless, for all its weaknesses, the agreement was finally initialled and signed by all sides in January 1973.<sup>26</sup>

## Part IV – The sustainability of the elite bargain

The agreement to 'end the war and restore the peace' contained nine sections with a total of 23 articles. Although each of these articles would be the subject of dispute between the North Vietnamese, PRG and South Vietnamese, there was nevertheless an effort to appear to adhere to the agreement, or at least to delegitimise the actions of the other side by claiming a violation. Due to the large number of violations committed by each of the parties, it might plausibly be claimed that the Paris Peace Accords did little to stop the conflict, but instead provided a breathing space that allowed the North to reconstitute their forces and prepare for another large-scale invasion of the South. However, as will be shown, this claim is partially but not wholly substantiated, mainly because of the need to distinguish between ends and means. The North's goal to achieve a reunification of Vietnam under its control never wavered. Instead, the North, at least in the first months after the agreement was signed, hoped to be able to achieve a political victory in the South that would not require a military invasion. It was the belief that such a political victory was beyond their reach that led them to switch to the military option.

Chapter Four of the Accords, which dealt with 'The Exercise of the South Vietnamese People's Right to Self-Determination', discussed a process (although perhaps the term 'aspiration' is more appropriate), to arrive at a political settlement. Article 12 required the South Vietnamese government and PRG 'to do their utmost' to establish a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord (NCNRC). This political construct was devised as a means of bringing the three main political factions in South Vietnam – the anti-communists, the non-communist opposition, and the communists – together to pave the way for general and local elections. Formation of the NCNRC proved to be impossible, largely due to the unwillingness of Thieu to support this process. In fact, he did everything to sabotage it, not least because he viewed the NCNRC as a means to oust him from power. As of early 1973, Communist forces controlled roughly ten percent of the population and 20 percent of the territory of South Vietnam. Meanwhile, there was widespread support for Vietnamese

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<sup>26</sup> The text of the agreement can be found online at:  
[http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/10/12/656ccc0d-31ef-42a6-a3e9-ce5ee7d4fc80/publishable\\_en.pdf](http://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/10/12/656ccc0d-31ef-42a6-a3e9-ce5ee7d4fc80/publishable_en.pdf)



neutrality. Consequently, support for the anti-communists led by Thieu was probably insufficient to achieve a political victory in any future election.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, formal negotiations between Saigon and the PRG did occur during this period. Beginning in mid-March 1973, representatives of the two sides met outside Paris at La Celle-St. Cloud. Article 12 of the Paris Accords called on both of the Southern parties to reach agreement on internal political matters. Among other issues, the future of the NCNRC was supposed to be discussed. These talks continued for the next 13 months but the only agreement between the two sides that was occasionally reached was limited to the agenda of the meeting rather than anything more substantive. The PRG proposed a bottom-up reform of South Vietnamese governance. Beginning with the legalisation of the Communist Party, the NCNRC would then begin forming at the hamlet and village level. Once local committees were established, an election would be conducted for the National Assembly. This would then be followed by the writing of a new constitution that would seek to reduce the power of the presidency and increase the power of the legislature.

The reason for adopting this government reform programme was that the PRG feared that it would be unable to win the necessary votes for the presidency in the short-term, but that it could play a crucial role in the parliament. Over the longer term they expected to increase their political presence and eventually dominate the South Vietnamese government, leading to a reunification with the North. Needless to say, these proposals were unacceptable to Thieu. But rather than reject negotiations outright, he argued that only after the North Vietnamese withdrew their forces from the South would he be willing to consent to elections. He also argued that before any amendments to the South Vietnamese constitution could be made, a referendum would be necessary. As the PRG refused to accept the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese constitution, they were unwilling to support a referendum. Another ploy Thieu used to embarrass the PRG was to call for early elections. As the government retained a much stronger administrative apparatus than the PRG, at least at this early stage, Thieu recognised that the PRG would try to delay elections until they had built up their own administrative base. Thieu would then use the PRG's delaying tactics for propaganda purposes.<sup>28</sup>

### **Additional mechanisms – with minimal impact**

To enforce the agreement, several additional mechanisms were established. Chapter Six of the Accords created the Four Party Joint Military Commission (JMC), the Two Party Joint Military Commission, and the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS). The Four Party JMC was responsible for arranging the exchange of prisoners of war (POWs), and observing the withdrawal of the remaining US forces. The Two Party JMC consisted of representatives from the South Vietnamese government and PRG. Its role was to discuss the return of political prisoners and observe the reduction of forces. Finally, the ICCS, consisting of roughly 250 observers each from Canada, Hungary, Poland and Indonesia, was designed to enforce all of the provisions when the local actors disagreed. It also monitored ceasefire violations.

Unfortunately, none of these mechanisms were effective. For a start, when PRG officials, who were to be attached to the Joint Military Commission, arrived at Tan San Nhut airport where the commission was based, they were met by South Vietnamese immigration officials who requested they fill out embarkation forms. As these forms were only required by foreigners, this formality was intended to make the PRG appear as foreigners, thereby denying them recognition as South Vietnamese. When the PRG officials refused, they were obliged to remain on the plane until the US Ambassador intervened on their behalf. Once permitted to leave the plane, the PRG delegates were

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<sup>27</sup> Porter, 1975.

<sup>28</sup> Brigham, 1998; Porter, 1975.



subject to further harassment, including isolation under armed guard and substandard accommodation. Outside Tan San Nhut, the PRG delegates were attacked by government-sponsored rioters. By engaging in this type of activity, the South Vietnamese ensured that the JMC would not be able to function.<sup>29</sup>

The ICCS also proved to be ineffective, albeit for slightly different reasons. This body was designed to contain observers from four nations, two of which (Canada and Indonesia) were more aligned with South Vietnam, and the other two (Hungary and Poland) were aligned with North Vietnam and the PRG. According to its charter, the ICCS was intended to investigate violations of the ceasefire. Yet due to its principle of unanimity to pursue an investigation in the first place, the Poles and Hungarians, in particular, often vetoed proposals that were likely to find evidence of Communist violations. The same was also probably true of the Indonesian observers on the anti-communist side, whereas the Canadians were probably the most even-handed. Frustrated at their lack of effectiveness, the Canadian observers nicknamed the ICCS 'I Can't Control Shit'. They would later withdraw from the ICCS in protest, to be replaced by the pro-US Iranians. The South Vietnamese were also able to hinder investigations into violations that they may have been responsible for instigating since it was the South Vietnamese military that provided security and logistical support to the ICCS.<sup>30</sup>

North Vietnam's leadership would switch from using political means to overthrow the Saigon regime to using military means. This shift was due to several factors, and enough documentary evidence has become available from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in recent years to piece together a chronology of the key decisions of the Politburo. At the time of the Accords, the 'North firsters' remained the dominant voice. For this faction, the main priority was to rebuild the North's economy and use political and diplomatic means to undermine Thieu. For these 'doves' the primary and immediate objective for the Communist-controlled territory in the South was consolidation rather than expansion. The belief was that by creating a safe and secure Communist base, the Saigon authorities could be gradually undermined. Moreover, if peace was achieved, then it was expected that South Vietnamese military power would decrease. Precisely for this reason, observance of the cease-fire was a precondition for success, and therefore the Communists had a strong incentive to adhere to it. However, as the size and scale of attacks by Saigon on areas of the South controlled by the Communists rose in the early months after the agreement came into force, the 'hawkish' voices in the Politburo grew louder.<sup>31</sup>

### **A process undermined**

Even before the Paris Accords were signed, Thieu employed several methods to undermine the prospect of a future political reconciliation in the South. Already in late 1972, Thieu recognised that an international peace settlement was on the horizon, and afterwards his own position would be at risk, mainly from the non-communist opposition. He therefore began attacking this opposition, including arresting some of their leading political figures on trumped up charges, closing down the opposition press, and changing the law so that opposition politicians would be hard-pressed to be legally allowed to participate in elections. The result of this attack on the non-communist opposition was to guarantee the dominance of the anti-Communist New Democratic Party. Furthermore, fearing that a future political agreement would necessitate the release of political prisoners, Thieu utilised his control over the legal system to reclassify political prisoners as normal prisoners, usually claiming that they had committed petty crimes. This effort not only to imprison opposition figures, but then keep them in prison after the Accords, created a great deal of tension with the PRG and North Vietnamese, and merely served to inspire 'hawks' in the Politburo to press for a military solution.

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<sup>29</sup> Porter, 1975; Lipsman and Weiss, 1985.

<sup>30</sup> Lipsman and Weiss, 1985.

<sup>31</sup> Asselin, 2002; Brigham, 1998; Nguyen, 2012; Veith, 2012.



Thieu also rejected a plan proposed by the South Vietnamese General Tran Van Don to form a 'peace government' in which he would remain as president but would delegate the power to negotiate an internal settlement to a neutralist politician.<sup>32</sup>

In many respects, Thieu violated both the letter and spirit of the Paris agreement. This was observable in his blatant reiteration of his longstanding policy of 'Four Nos': no negotiating with the enemy, no communist activity in South Vietnam, no coalition government, and no surrender of territory. Maintaining this policy was in direct opposition to the Paris Accords. For instance, by issuing instructions not to negotiate with the enemy, the functioning of the Joint Military Commissions was made impossible. And whereas Article 11 of the Accords required 'all' parties to ensure 'freedom of political activities', this was invalidated by the reference to 'no communist activity'. Similarly, the policy of 'no coalition government' meant that the NCNRC would not be supported. Finally, the PRG control of 20 percent of South Vietnam was viewed as illegitimate and therefore could be legitimately recaptured.<sup>33</sup>

As the number of ceasefire violations mounted in the months after the Paris agreement took effect, there was a further diplomatic attempt to have each of the parties live up to the Accords. In late May-early June 1973, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho returned to Paris for a series of meetings. As occurred during the negotiations the previous autumn, Kissinger found himself more sympathetic to the North Vietnamese than to the South Vietnamese. As before, Thieu continued to obstruct any form of cooperation with the Communists. The main result of these meetings was therefore limited to reiterating the provisions of the Paris Accords with some minor alterations to the text that urged greater speed in achieving reconciliation. There was also an attempt in these negotiations to support a bottom-up ceasefire in which local commanders of both sides would meet to discuss tacit accommodations to avert conflict. Although Thieu agreed for a reference to this to be included in the communique, he nevertheless scuttled any new local ceasefire agreements by redefining what was meant by 'local commanders'. Rather than low-level commanders in charge of hamlets and villages, 'local commanders' were defined as South Vietnam's four corps-level commanders,<sup>34</sup> each of whom were in charge of several provinces.

Even before these renewed Paris negotiations began, the North's leaders were switching to a more 'hawkish' stance and were beginning planning and preparations for a military invasion of the South. The First Secretary of the Politburo, Le Duan, argued that due to the South's violations of the ceasefire and their attacks on Communist-held territory, there was a risk that unless some military action was taken to stop them, all of the Communists' earlier hard-fought gains would need to be abandoned. In April 1973, the North Vietnamese General Staff created a planning cell to begin drafting plans to conquer the South over a two-year period. A month later, the Politburo decided that the political struggle should be replaced by a military campaign as the best means to reunify the country.<sup>35</sup> This change in the North's policy was the result of several considerations.

First, the Politburo felt that political struggle would not succeed with Thieu in power as he showed little willingness to give up power. And with Thieu remaining in power, the talks with the PRG at La Celle-St. Cloud looked as though they would remain deadlocked indefinitely. In many respects, Thieu appeared to have weathered the storm, and opportunities to wage a political struggle against him were disappearing. Thieu's actions against his political opponents, especially the non-communist opposition, made it increasingly difficult for the communist party to potentially align with this centrist movement and to gradually increase its hold on political power.

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<sup>32</sup> Young, 1991; Lipsman and Weiss, 1985.

<sup>33</sup> Lipsman and Weiss, 1985.

<sup>34</sup> FRUS, Jan 1973–Jul 1975; Kissinger, 2003; Porter, 1975.

<sup>35</sup> Nguyen, 2012; Veith, 2012.



Second, the South Vietnamese continued to nibble away at areas controlled by the Communist forces. One of the unintended consequences of the large-scale shipments of US war materiel in late 1972-early 1973 was that the South Vietnamese army were emboldened to take offensive action while the balance of forces remained favourable.<sup>36</sup> These military offensives led the PRG to demand assistance from Hanoi lest the areas in South Vietnam they controlled were overrun. The Politburo had initially instructed the PRG to adhere to the ceasefire terms and avoid military confrontation with the South Vietnamese army. However, the Southern communist leaders, remembering the period of the mid-to-late 1950s when a similar instruction from Hanoi had led to the persecution of the Communist party, feared that a similar disaster would befall them unless they took action to defend themselves. Thus, in many areas of South Vietnam, particularly where communications links with Hanoi were weakest, local commanders disobeyed orders from the North, and continued to fight against the Southern forces.

These actions led to a dilemma for the Politburo. If it did nothing to support the PRG, then it would lose whatever influence it had over them. Already the PRG leadership had demonstrated its ability to win international approval. For instance, in August 1973, at a conference of non-aligned nations, 72 of 75 countries participating recognised the PRG as the 'third government' of Vietnam. Fearing a loss of control over the Southern insurgents, they chose to back them militarily, albeit providing less support than that which the PRG demanded. PRG leaders had wanted Hanoi to wage an immediate all-out military campaign against Saigon, but the North's leaders rejected this on the grounds that the military balance was not yet favourable. Therefore, the North's military support was sufficient to allow the PRG to defend the areas under its control, and even to make minor territorial gains, but not to facilitate any larger scale action. At this point, there was also still some concern in Hanoi that any major territorial gains by the PRG would provide Washington an excuse to return to bombing the North in retaliation.<sup>37</sup> It wasn't until late 1974, after Ford replaced Nixon, that the North's leaders would be convinced that the US would refrain from re-entering the Vietnam conflict. Prior to this period, they remained concerned that the Congressional limitations put in place in the summer of 1973 on the US military's ability to wage war in Indochina would be insufficient to stop Nixon from bombing the North.<sup>38</sup>

Third, Hanoi was increasingly concerned that time might work against the North in a number of ways. Specifically, there was a belief that with closer economic ties with Japan and China, the South would recover economically, and thereby make any political or military struggle that much more difficult the longer the North put it off.

Fourth, the means to wage a military struggle were slowly becoming available again. After the decimation of its forces in 1972, the North's efforts to reconstitute its military were still in their early stages. However, significant progress had been made and more would be forthcoming throughout 1973 and 1974 as Hanoi procured more military aid from its allies. Already the North's commanders were learning their lessons from the failed Easter Offensive, and were reorganising their military system to be able to more successfully wage a combined arms campaign. Had the acquisition of these military means not been conceivable at this point, the military option would have been off the table as a matter of course. Of critical importance to the North's ability to effectively project its military power into the South was the ability to transport troops, equipment and fuel. To this end, the North Vietnamese took advantage of the lack of US airpower to improve the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' that led from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia into the western flank of South Vietnam. During the 1960s and early 1970s, this logistics network remained both primitive and under attack by

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<sup>36</sup> Herrington, 1983; LeGro, 1981.

<sup>37</sup> Brigham, 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Michaels, 2015.



US aircraft. After the Paris agreement, however, and without the US attacks on it, the trail was transformed from a jungle path into a two-lane highway. The North Vietnamese also built oil pipelines into the South to be able to support large-scale conventional operations. Though the popular image of the Vietnam conflict is of a guerrilla war, by the 1970s it had transformed primarily into a conventional contest between two regular armies.<sup>39</sup>

Once the Politburo reached its May 1973 decision to seek a military solution to reunify the country, they set the path that would eventually lead to the conquest of the South in April 1975. It can, of course, be argued that the North could have changed its policy once again back to that of a political struggle. But this was highly unlikely as long as Thieu remained in power and the South continued to oppose any attempt for political reform that would potentially benefit the Communists. One immediate requirement of the decision to revert back to a policy of military struggle was acquiring the means to do so. Therefore, in parallel to military planning, the North Vietnamese sought Soviet economic and military aid, without which it may have been impossible for the North to strengthen its forces sufficiently for a major military campaign. The Soviet motivation in supporting Hanoi at this point had more to do with jockeying for influence with China, rather than seeking a resumption of hostilities.

### Ongoing war

Throughout 1973-1974, the war between Saigon's forces and the Communists continued apace. The South Vietnamese lost more soldiers in those two years than at any prior point in the war as Thieu continued to devise new means of waging war against the Communists. For instance, in the Spring 1974, Saigon waged a 'rice war' in an attempt to starve the Communist forces into submission. Thieu placed restrictions on the transport of rice between villages; buyers other than those who were government-approved were outlawed. This action proved to be self-defeating as the result was wide-scale starvation and increasing political unrest in the South's urban centres, including large demonstrations in Saigon. Interestingly, the 'rice war' against the Communists may have had a more self-serving motive for Thieu and the top South Vietnamese leadership. Whereas the South Vietnamese people complained about starvation, US officials wrote optimistic intelligence assessments on the future of South Vietnam's economy on the grounds that Saigon had a rice 'surplus' which they were exporting.<sup>40</sup>

Several additional developments, each with their own second- and third-order effects, would further weaken the Saigon regime in 1974 and convince Hanoi that a military campaign would succeed in overthrowing Thieu. The global economic inflation that resulted from the 1973 oil embargo had major repercussions for the South Vietnamese economy in 1974. The purchasing power of the salaries of the South's soldiers had decreased to such an extent that they were unable to feed their families. The result was that the families of Southern soldiers began to live with the soldiers themselves, thereby reducing the mobility of Southern units. Only a handful of elite military units that constituted the central reserve – the Airborne, Marines, and Rangers – were able to act as a 'fire brigade' to counter attacks by Communist forces. As this reserve became depleted, Northern commanders grew more confident that the South would be unable to halt a massive offensive throughout the country.<sup>41</sup>

A second development was the resignation of President Nixon in August 1974. His replacement, Gerald Ford, was not respected or feared in the same way Nixon had been. Hanoi may have feared that the 'madman' Nixon might bomb the North if pushed too far, but they did not have the same

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<sup>39</sup> LeGro, 1981; Snapp 1977; Veith, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Michaels, 2015; Young, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Veith, 2012.



concern about Ford. This change of administration in Washington led the Communist forces in the South to increasingly push forward to test the American reaction. The lack of US response led them to believe that Ford would not come to the South's aid if they escalated their military actions.

A third development was the Congressional limits on military aid to the South. US military and economic aid declined significantly in 1974 and was set to decline even further in 1975. In part, this was due to the economic consequences of the oil embargo on the American economy, but it also reflected public disenchantment with continued US involvement in a conflict that had supposedly ended. Moreover, Thieu's suppression of dissidents had become a political embarrassment. As US military aid declined, the morale of Southern leaders decreased whereas the North's confidence increased. Unlike in 1973 when the South's forces were well-supplied and had high ammunition expenditure rates, by 1974 they were increasingly forced to conserve ammunition, as well as other basic military supplies such as fuel and medicine. By limiting ammunition, fuel and medicine, the South's forces became less able and willing to engage in offensive operations. The South's forces were also operating without the benefit of significant air support. Despite having the fourth largest air force in the world, the US aid cutbacks to South Vietnam had limited the supply of essential spare parts and maintenance. The result was that the Communists did not have to contend with an adversary that had sufficient airpower to compensate for the weaknesses in its ground forces.<sup>42</sup>

As a result of these developments, the Politburo believed that the South was finally weak enough to be defeated by military action. On 8 October 1974, they approved the General Staff's plan for a two-year campaign to 'liberate' the South. In the first phase of this plan, set for 1975, the South's forces would be smashed. This would then allow for a successful 'general uprising' in 1976. As it transpired, the South's forces were weaker than the North anticipated. Once the North's offensive began in earnest in March 1975, the South was defeated by the end of April. Interestingly, the mainstream view of US, French and other international officials was that the North Vietnamese would avoid capturing Saigon, but instead would use the leverage gained by their military successes to replace Thieu with a care-taker government run by the non-Communist opposition. Soviet officials, in particular, were concerned that the capture of Saigon would be 'humiliating' for the US, which might in turn have a negative impact on détente. Moscow therefore urged Hanoi to avoid this but their request was rejected. Similarly, US and French officials believed that as the Ford administration had already accepted in principle the loss of South Vietnam, that there was no reason for Hanoi to humiliate the US by capturing Saigon, and therefore abandon any prospect of economic aid.<sup>43</sup> In the end, however, the Communist forces captured Saigon, and would suffer enormous costs due to US efforts to economically isolate the country rather than to normalise relations with it.

## Conclusion

As a result of the 1975 Communist takeover, many historians viewed the Paris Peace Accords as a self-evident failure of diplomacy. As has been argued in this case study, the view of the agreement as a failed one was also well-established at the time, particularly by the local actors. From 1973-1975, the agreement remained formally in place even though both sides violated its letter and spirit. In this sense, the agreement was flawed in its conception since the underlying conflict was never resolved – at best it was *somewhat* frozen. As was recognised by most observers at the time, including by one of the key architects of the Accords, Henry Kissinger, the ultimate victory of the Communists over the South was more or less assured. The only questions were the means they would employ to achieve that victory (political or military) and the timing. This was also understood by Nguyen van Thieu, which was why he took measures he deemed appropriate to sustain his regime from what was

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<sup>42</sup> Karnow, 1997; LeGro, 1981; Veith, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Michaels, 2015.



perceived to be an inevitable defeat. Yet these measures merely served to invigorate the hardliners in Hanoi to gain approval for a resumption of large-scale military operations.

The legacy of the Paris Agreement can be appreciated on at least two levels. In terms of ‘lessons learned’, there seems to have been some subsequent utilisation of this case by American members of the talks, although this was mainly about lessons related to process rather than outcomes. Most notably, Richard Holbrooke referred to the Paris negotiations analogy in the course of his efforts to bring peace in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>44</sup> The second aspect of the legacy has to do with the competing narratives of American failure in Vietnam. These can be divided into two main schools of thought. The first school, advocated by Nixon, Kissinger and other supporters of the administration’s view, was that the Paris Agreement could have brought peace to the country had not North Vietnam fundamentally violated it by invading the South in 1975. The second school, advocated by critics of the Nixon administration, includes two diametrically opposed strands. On one side, critics argue that the Paris agreement sold out South Vietnam, mainly because it allowed the Communist forces to retain large forces in the South. This theme has particular resonance among right wing critics as well as South Vietnamese exiles. On the other, critics contend that it was the harsh policies of the South Vietnamese that led the North to abandon the agreement and conquer the South.

Within the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, there were also competing narratives after the war that had to do with legitimising the role of the Hanoi Politburo and de-legitimising the role of the PRG in bringing the war to a conclusion. Whilst these narratives have mainly been about enhancing or undermining legitimacy, revising the historical record and interpretations, protecting reputations, and so forth, its legacy for diplomatic interventions more generally has been minimal, not least for as this case highlights the limited ability of great power intervention to achieve conflict resolution. It also highlights the ability of local actors to manipulate the great powers – a lesson that the great powers themselves have not been keen to dwell on.

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<sup>44</sup> Holbrooke, 1998.



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