



## THE FACTOR OF IDEOLOGY IN US FOREIGN POLICY IN INDOCHINA (1945 – 1954): THE CASE OF VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

After World War II, international relations underwent many important changes, especially the competition between the US and the Soviet Union. In Indochina, since the declaration of independence (September 2, 1945), Vietnam has been deeply affected by the policies of major countries, including the US. When examining the history of the formation of US policy towards Vietnam, it is necessary to consider the influence of ideological factors. Based on the historical and logical method, this article will clarify the ideological factor in the process of forming and implementing US policy towards Vietnam in the period 1945 - 1954. The results show that the opposition between the two ideologies has dominated and deeply impacted the formation of US policy towards Vietnam.

**Keywords:** US, Vietnam, Indochina, ideology

### 1. Introduction

Ideology is an important factor affecting the foreign policy-making process of a country. After World War II, international relations witnessed a great difference between communist ideology and capitalist ideology. The US, as a superpower, held a central position in the capitalist system. At the same time, the Soviet Union also played a nuclear role in the socialist bloc. The US-Soviet competition deeply influenced the political situation of the world and regions in the form of gathering forces and proxy conflicts between the two opposing blocs.

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In Indochina, Vietnam was a country following the socialist ideology based on Marxism. In 1945, the August Revolution succeeded, Vietnam gained independence and changed the political correlation in Southeast Asia. This event aroused deep concern from the United States. To prevent communism in Vietnam, the US mobilized and deployed many political, security and economic tools. This article will analyze the ideological motives in the process of planning and implementing US policy towards Indochina, focusing on Vietnam in the period 1945 - 1954. Thereby, it contributes to explaining the interweaving of ideological factors and power calculations in US policy, supplementing the basis for studying the behavior of superpowers in the international order in the early period after World War II.

## 2. Literature Review

Some research works on US foreign policy are the book series “The Dynamics of World Power: Documentary History of United States Foreign Policy”, which presented the process of planning and implementing US foreign policy in the 20th century [15]. Stephen D. Krasner with the book “Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investment and U.S. Foreign Policy” analyzed the relationship between national interests and ideology in US foreign policy planning [9]. J. McCormick, with the book “America's Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After” [12], clarified the world role of the US with historical roots since 1895. The works “The Monroe Doctrine: The Cornerstone of America Foreign Policy” [14] and “America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy” explained the change in the direction of US policy through historical periods [1]. Some studies on US foreign policy focus on the actors involved in the policy-making process. The authors of the book “American Foreign Policy: Pattern and Process” analyzed the principles, values and roles of the President and government agencies in the foreign policy-making process [29]. The book “Making American Foreign Policy” by Ole R. Holsti clarifies the cognitive process of actors involved in foreign policy planning and implementation [6]. The book “American Foreign Policy and Process” also presents the US foreign policy-making process with key actors such as the President, Congress and political parties [11].

Some works outline the factor of ideology in the US-Vietnam relationship, but are integrated into US foreign policy. The work “The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-Making in Vietnam” shows the calculations and internal conflicts within the US government when it got involved in Vietnam [4]. The work “The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships” by W. C. Gibbons mentions how the Truman and Eisenhower administrations handled the Vietnam issue [3]. George C. Herring, in his work “America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975” emphasizes the anti-communist ideology, regional strategic calculations and internal political factors that motivated the US to get involved in the Vietnam War [5]. Michael H. Hunt's “Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy” emphasizes the “liberal” value of American ideology, considering it the main driving force in determining policy [7]. Thus, studies on

American foreign policy have briefly mentioned the issue of ideology in relations with Vietnam. However, it can be affirmed that there has not been a general research work on the ideological factor in American policy towards Vietnam in the period 1945 – 1954. Therefore, this article aims to provide a comprehensive view of the above issue.

### **3. Material and Methods**

Based on original materials and official documents of the US Government, the article inherits and analyzes published scientific works. In the article, the author uses the historical method to clarify the ideological opposition process in US foreign policy planning; the system analysis method to examine ideology as a component in the structure of US foreign policy towards Vietnam, linked to political, economic, security and strategic factors; the logical method to evaluate the dominance of ideological factors in US policy towards Vietnam in the period of 1945-1954.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1. Ideology in the process of planning and implementing US foreign policy towards Vietnam in the period 1945 – 1950**

The US has been interested in Indochina since 1940. The US policy towards Indochina during World War II was contradictory. On the one hand, the US reassured France about their colonies, on the other hand, the US supported Indochina's independence. However, President Roosevelt believed that there should be a short-term UN trusteeship regime so that countries could have the right to self-determination. But this intention was opposed by Britain. Therefore, Roosevelt left open the issue of Indochina to be resolved after the war ended [21, p.293].

In August 1945, the Vietnamese people successfully revolted. On September 2, 1945, President Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence, freeing it from Japanese-French domination. In that context, the United States perceived the spread of communism in Vietnam as a threat which led to a reorientation in American foreign policy thinking. This adjustment was placed in the context of US-Soviet relations. After World War II, competition between the United States and the Soviet Union became increasingly fierce. American leaders believed that: "*The world situation needs to be built based on America's core values and shaped by the country's historical experience*" [9, p.124], the Soviet Union's policy was to expand communism and weaken capitalist countries, and therefore the Soviet Union's actions constituted a serious threat to the United States [10]. Therefore, when the war ended, the Truman administration did not support the international trusteeship plan in Indochina because it could weaken the European countries. The US needed a French ally in Europe and also in the Far East. Therefore, the US ignored calls to recognize Vietnam's independence, and in October 1945, the US even declared that it did not oppose the re-establishment of French control in Indochina [3, p.21].

On February 9, 1946, Soviet leader J. Stalin declared that the outbreak of World War II was an inevitable result of the unstable development of monopoly capitalism [15; p.191]. Immediately, the US State Department asked G.F. Kennan, acting US ambassador to the Soviet Union, to report on the Soviet Union's policy. On February 22, 1946, Kennan reported: The Soviet Union believes that it is living in a hostile "*capitalist encirclement*". Therefore, there will be intervention by capitalist countries against the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Soviet Union needs to increase its strength, weaken capitalist countries, and weaken the power of Western countries in the colonies. Kennan concluded that: "*The United States is facing a fanatical political force that believes that there can be no long-term peaceful coexistence with the United States*" [22, p.709]. Therefore, "*the US could initiate a policy of containment to deal with the Soviet Union when they showed signs of violating its interests*" [8, p.581].

With the above report, Kennan formed a US policy focusing on containing the Soviet expansion into regions, including Indochina. On April 10, 1946, the French occupation of Indochina was basically completed. In December 1946, France and Vietnam entered a full-scale war. During the period 1945-1946, President Ho Chi Minh wrote a number of letters to the US government, but they were ignored. Due to the influence of the past association with the international communist movement, the US did not support President Ho Chi Minh.

On March 12, 1947, speaking before Congress, President Truman emphasized that the world was in a choice between democracy and communism. Therefore: "*The policy of the United States must be to support free peoples who are resisting the efforts of armed minorities or external pressures*" [18, pp.178–179]. The Truman Doctrine was born to contain Soviet communism. The US National Security Council (NSC) further emphasized that the goals and actions of the Soviet Union demonstrated ambitions for global hegemony, and this was harmful to the United States [23]. On that basis, although Vietnam was not on the list of top concerns of the United States, in 1947, US officials concluded that Ho Chi Minh's "communist connections" could serve the goals of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the United States gradually supported and secretly provided aid to France [17, p.160].

The Soviet Union's successful nuclear test and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (in 1949) made the US believe that "the communist threat had reached a dangerous level". When the Chinese army approached the border of Vietnam, the US assessed: "*Communism is advancing strongly in Asia. Indochina, especially Vietnam, is the place most directly at risk. If Indochina falls into the hands of the communists, it will lead to the collapse of other countries in Southeast Asia. At that time, strategic materials and important transportation routes will also fall into the hands of the communists*" [5, p.11]. Immediately, on October 6, 1949, the US Congress passed the Mutual Defense Assistance Program to expand the containment policy to the Far East, preventing the expansion of communism in Asia [4, p.34].

On December 30, 1949, the US National Security Council issued a report NSC48/2 warning that if Southeast Asia fell to communism, the US would suffer a serious political defeat, with widespread repercussions throughout the world, especially in the Middle East and Australia [4, pp.37–38]. Therefore, the US had to prevent the spread of

communism. In particular, it was necessary to focus on Vietnam. It was necessary to persuade France to cooperate with Bao Dai and other nationalist leaders [19]. The report showed a tendency for the US to expand its involvement in Indochina, especially in Vietnam.

#### **4.2. Ideology in US foreign policy towards Vietnam in the period 1950 - 1954**

In January 1950, the Soviet Union and China officially established diplomatic relations with Vietnam. In February 1950, the Soviet Union and China signed the Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance, which made the US concerned that the Soviet-Chinese alliance could push the US out of Asia. Therefore, the NSC64 report on February 27, 1950, emphasized that Indochina was a key area for the defense of Southeast Asia. To protect US interests, all feasible measures should be taken [4, p.83]. In February 1950, the US recognized the Bao Dai government diplomatically and established an embassy in Saigon, approving a plan to support Bao Dai economically and technically. On April 24, 1950, the United States officially intervened in Indochina when President Truman approved the NSC64 report [24, pp.745–747]. To fight communism, the United States chose to support France: *“The United States Government assessed the situation as so serious that it was necessary to provide economic aid and military equipment to the Indochinese Federation as well as to France”* [4, p.42]. In May 1950, the United States provided France with \$10 million in aid and sent the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) to Vietnam to review French aid requests, support training of Vietnamese soldiers, and provide strategic advice [24, pp.711–715].

On June 26, 1950, the Korean War broke out, an event that made the US conclude that *“all communist movements, regardless of location, are equally dangerous... This shows that even areas that were not considered vital can become essential if threatened by hostile military power”* [4, p.54]. These factors led to a shift in US policy, from opposing the Soviet Union to containing communism worldwide. The war in Indochina, especially in Vietnam, was seen by the US as part of its policy of containing communism. President Ho Chi Minh’s efforts to drive the French out of Indochina were seen by the US as a manifestation of communist “aggression” in Southeast Asia. Therefore, defending Indochina became strategically important [3]. In 1951, President Truman declared: *“The loss of these countries would be a terrible defeat for the ideals of freedom”* [26]. Therefore, the United States continued to increase aid to France. In 1951, the United States provided \$133 million in aid [19, pp.426–428]. In June 1952, President Truman approved the NSC124/2 report, essentially completing policy planning for Indochina. The report emphasized that French efforts in Indochina were crucial to protecting the security of the “free world” in the Far East. American interests in the Far East would be seriously threatened if Southeast Asia fell into communist hands [20, pp. 522–525].

In January 1953, after taking office, President Eisenhower took a more assertive anti-communist stance. The US believed that the communists in Vietnam were a tool of international communism and that the collapse of Indochina would lead to the loss of all of Southeast Asia, with serious consequences for the US. Therefore, Eisenhower pledged to continue supporting France. In mid-1953, as France's military situation became

increasingly unfavorable, the US persuaded France to abandon negotiations and urged a military victory [4, p.385]. The perception of the communist threat in Southeast Asia was further reinforced by the “Domino doctrine” proposed by President Eisenhower in April 1954: “...the potential consequences of losing (Indochina) are completely incalculable to the free world” [27, p.383]. To prevent communist domination in Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese communists had to be defeated [25, p.971]. Therefore, the US increased its support for France, with 1.063 billion dollars in 1954. Total US aid to France by 1954 reached 2.6 billion dollars, aid to the Bao Dai government reached 126 million dollars [4, p.77].

On May 7, 1954, Vietnam won the Dien Bien Phu victory, shaking up the political situation in Indochina. On May 12, 1954, President Eisenhower instructed the US representative at the Geneva Conference that the US participated in the conference to support countries in the region not to be annexed into the communist bloc. But the US would not ratify any agreement that could weaken the current legitimate governments of Indochina or put French forces in Indochina in danger [16, p.43].

On July 21, 1954, the Geneva Agreement was signed. Accordingly, Vietnam would be temporarily divided into two regions. The agreement prohibited the introduction of foreign troops, military personnel and weapons into Vietnam; it strictly prohibited the establishment of military bases under the control of a foreign country in the assembly area. The United States refused to participate in the final declaration and affirmed: All peoples have the right to determine their own future, and the United States will not participate in any arrangement that might hinder that right of self-determination [16, p.52].

On August 12, 1954, the report “Assessment of US Policy in the Far East” (NSC 5429) stated that the consequence of the Geneva Conference was that the communists had gained a “pioneering foothold” in Vietnam, which could be used to increase pressure on other regions. Therefore, the US needed to make efforts to defeat communist aggression and influence, and maintain friendly, non-communist governments in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam [20]. In line with this report, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was established on September 8, 1954. Through SEATO, the US was determined to prevent the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia and planned to turn South Vietnam into a key stronghold [4, p.181]. To carry out this intention, the US made efforts to establish a non-communist government in South Vietnam. On June 18, 1954, Bao Dai appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister. On August 18, 1954, US Secretary of State Dulles announced that the US would now support the Diem government [16, p.15]. On October 23, 1954, President Eisenhower sent a letter to Ngo Dinh Diem, pledging direct aid to support the Ngo Dinh Diem government in its ability to resist plots to overthrow it or acts of aggression by military force [27, p.949]. This letter represented a strategic shift, laying the foundation for increasingly deep US involvement in South Vietnam.

## 5. Conclusion

After World War II, US foreign policy makers oriented their views and actions based on the perception of the “expansion” of international communism, while also linking it to

specific developments in Indochina, especially in Vietnam. From the US perspective, Vietnam was seen as a part of the “communist world”, so in the period 1945–1954, Vietnam gradually became the focus of the US strategy to contain communism in Southeast Asia. This policy was placed within the overall US global strategy associated with the “containment doctrine” and later the “Domino doctrine”. Under the influence of ideological factors, US policy towards Vietnam shifted from indirect intervention through support for France to direct involvement in South Vietnam. That shift not only represented an escalation in US foreign policy but also laid the foundation for Washington's gradual replacement of France's role in Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Accords.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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