

Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a devastating conflict fought between North Vietnam, supported by the Soviet Union and China, and South Vietnam, supported by the United States of America. It was fought from 1955 to 1975 and was one of the pivotal moments of the Cold War.

The Vietnam War is an important topic extensively covered under the world history segment of the UPSC Mains exam.

Roots of the Vietnam War

Vietnam had been under French colonial rule since the 19th century. The Japanese overran the country when World War II broke out. With a view to driving out both the Japanese occupiers and the French colonial administration, political leader Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh, in turn, was heavily influenced by Soviet and Chinese communism.

The Japanese withdrew from the country following their defeat in 1945, leaving Emperor Bao Dai as the head of the government, but his position was relatively weak. Seeing an opportunity, the Viet Minh rose up in rebellion and seizing control of North Vietnam and forming the Democratic Republic of Vietnam centred around Hanoi.

Not wanting to lose out on their colonial possession, the French set up a parallel government in the South centred around Saigon. Both Ho Chi Minh, now president of North Vietnam, and Bao wanted a unified Vietnam but with a different model. Bao wanted to cultivate better relations with the Western capitalist states, while Ho wanted a communist state.

The subsequent treaty signed in July 1954 at a Geneva conference split Vietnam along the latitude known as the 17th Parallel (17 degrees north latitude), with Ho in control in the North and Bao in the South. The treaty also called for nationwide elections for reunification to be held in 1956.

But the anti-communist politician Ngo Dinh Diem toppled Bao's government to become the President of the Republic of Vietnam often referred to during the time as South Vietnam.

The Conflict Escalates

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the United States pledged to work against the Soviet Union and its allies wherever and whenever they could in a bid to contain the spread of communism. It was in this regard that President Dwight D. Eisenhower had promised support to South Vietnam.

The American policy was largely driven by the 'Domino theory' which speculated that if one country fell to communist influence then the entire region would follow in its wake.

Diem's security forces, with training received from the CIA, began to crack down on communists and their sympathisers in the south. Resulting in the arrest of more than 100,000 some were executed. It was speculated that not everyone arrested was necessarily a communist and that Diem was using his security forces to remove political opponents. This only served to increase the ranks of the Vietnamese Communists (called the Viet Cong)

With training and equipment from American military and the CIA, Diem's security forces cracked down on Viet Minh sympathizers in the south, whom he derisively called Viet Cong (or Vietnamese Communist), arresting some 100,000 people, many of whom were brutally tortured and executed.

By 1957 the Viet Cong and other opponents of Diem's regime had organised an active resistance directly engaging the South Vietnamese in open combat. Because of their close proximity to the Viet Cong, other democratic opponents of Diem's regime were seen as communist proxies by the American government. In 1961, the new American president John F. Kennedy first US military advisors to assess the situation and later in 1962, the US army itself who numbered 9000 at the time.

The United States Intervenes

Diem was assassinated in November 1963, three weeks before Kennedy was. This and an attack by DRV torpedo boats spurred Kenney's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, in increasing economic and military aid to South Vietnam.

The US commander in Vietnam, William Westmoreland, adopted a policy of attrition which focused on killing more combatants rather than occupying territory. This would fail in the wake of Viet Cong guerilla tactics, who were in turn supported by the Soviet Union and China. The bombing of Viet Cong positions led to massive civilian casualties and an influx of refugees towards South Vietnamese cities putting considerable strain on its resources

By November 1967, the number of American troops in Vietnam was approaching 500,000, and U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded. As the war stretched on, some soldiers came to mistrust the government's reasons for keeping them there, as well as Washington's repeated claims that the war was being won.

This notion was shattered by when the Tet Offensive was launched in 1968. The North Vietnamese army launched a surprise attack on US positions in the South, although the Americans and the South Vietnamese recovered and beat back the offensive, the American public was stunned at the sudden ferocity of the attack. Civilian massacres by US forces such as the one at Mai Lai only fuelled further anti-war sentiments. Johnson in a bid to be reelected suspended bombing campaigns but he still lost to Richard Nixon.

End of Vietnam War

To ease public sentiments against the Vietnam war, Nixon began a gradual withdrawal of US troops but still continued the bombing campaigns of his predecessor. Yet he still continued the peace talks which began in Paris the year before but they were stalled as the North Vietnamese insisted on unconditional US withdrawal.

The final peace agreement between North Vietnam and the United States was concluded in January 1973 but the war between North and South Vietnam continued until Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese forces on April 30 1975. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City

The war devastated Vietnam's population and economy. About 2 million Vietnamese were killed with another 3 million wounded. American dead numbered upto 58,000.

In 1976, Vietnam was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, though sporadic violence continued over the next 15 years, including conflicts with neighbouring China and Cambodia. Under a broad free market policy put in place in 1986, the economy began to improve, boosted by oil export revenues and an influx of foreign capital. Trade and diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. resumed in the 1990s.