

general. The only thing that all three have in common is that they are at complete variance with the American assumptions that led us into the war. These three conclusions are: 1) The immediate balance of power has been virtually unaffected by the war; 2) the future balance of power has probably been strengthened; and 3) a possible decline of American concern with the more

basic world problems and an undoubted lessening in some countries of the desire for close cooperation with the United States may be dangerous long-range effects of the war. Such consequences may, indeed, seriously threaten the prospects for the development of a viable world community over the decades ahead. But we shall have to reserve judgment for the present. □

## The Effect on the Balance of Power, Part II

# AN EROSION OF MUTUAL TRUST

By Theo Sommer

“Europeans fear that the ‘Vietnamization of Vietnam’ might be followed by the ‘Europeanization of Europe,’” writes the political editor of *Die Zeit*.

In 1972 there are not many Europeans left who still care to remember that ten, even seven, years ago they supported America's war effort in Vietnam. It is not the fashion nowadays to remember. But there was undeniably a great deal of support, and I was one of the supporters. Late in 1965 I published an article on Lyndon Johnson's intervention in Indochina, embarrassingly entitled “The Necessary War.” The argument was deceptively simple: successful aggression begets more aggression, so no aggressor must go unchecked. In the Forties and Fifties the containment of Russian Communism in Europe had been the main task. In the Sixties and Seventies priority would have to be accorded to containing Chinese Communism in Asia. If the Americans did not stand up for Saigon, they could not very well be expected to stand up for Berlin.

All this was conventional wisdom at the time. Like a lot of conventional wisdom, it turned out to be quite wrong—for the simple reason that it rested on a number of fallacious assumptions. *Fallacy number one* relates to the nature of the conflict. Vietnam was not a war instigated from outside, fanned by Moscow or Peking; it was not the beginning of a major Chinese thrust southward by armed revolution. It was originally a civil war fostered by a regime in Hanoi that happened to be both nationalist and Communist and could, by dint of the latter, count on a minimum of aid from Russia and China.

*Fallacy number two* derives from this. It seemed logical to transfer the imperative of containment from the Old World to Southeast Asia. But Indochina was not Western Europe. American efforts alone never had a chance of succeeding in fortifying and holding the line—

basically because there was no commensurate effort on the part of the Vietnamese. It was a hopeless task to promote democratic reform while prosecuting a war and even more hopeless to promote the retarded process of Vietnamese nation building by waging an all-out military campaign.

*Fallacy number three* has to do with the strategic philosophy underlying the U.S. operation. Escalation was wrong for two reasons. First, piecemeal deployment of American troops never offered any prospect for decisive success on the battlefield because every increment of U.S. war-fighting capability could be countered by an



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increase in the enemy's fighting strength. Second, as George Ball wisely observed early on, once the United States had actively committed itself to direct conflict with Hanoi, it could not be certain of controlling the scope and extent of escalation. By the same token, the brazen idea that a country such as Vietnam could be reduced from the air was all wrong from the very outset. Anyone who had experienced aerial bombardment during the Second World War or had read the U.S. bombing surveys on Germany and Japan knew that it was not only vile but bound to be ineffective, even counterproductive.

*Fallacy number four* is intimately connected with number three. Long before Lyndon Johnson ordered the suspension of air attacks against North Vietnam, it was glaringly apparent that the instruments of war were no longer proportionate to the aims of war. Anyone who ever visited Vietnam—as I did twice during the Sixties—must have wondered whether laying the country waste in a process of step-by-step vandalization could ever add up to peace, or even pacification. The war, the longer it ran on, blighted all the honorable motives that had ever been adduced or produced in its justification.

The Vietnamese gamble was a moral one so long as a successful outcome appeared to be a reasonable likelihood. It became immoral, a kind of reckless shooting craps with destiny, when nagging doubts first hardened into the certainty that in the end there could be only different degrees of failure and no such thing as success in any meaningful sense of the term.

I did not see all this back in 1965; but I did in 1968. By then it was clear that America had climbed on a tiger's back and that dismounting would prove to be a highly painful exercise. The curious thing is that the Vietnam War had outlived itself long before its formal conclusion became visible. The Cold War backdrop of confrontation, against which Dean Rusk had originally projected the conflict, suddenly dissolved when Richard Nixon ushered in his era of negotiations with Moscow and Peking. What earlier had looked like an entracte of global contention abruptly shrank into regional insignificance—another Biafra rather than a second Korea. Anyone killed in action between Cape Camau and Vinh Linh after Henry Kissinger's first trip to Peking died for better terms of surrender, not for victory.

Where has the war led the world? Astonishingly

enough, the community of nations finds itself in pretty much the same spot it was in before the conflict started. There is a kind of competitive *détente* among all the principal actors on the world stage, with some limping behind, others nosily and noisily pushing forward.

The Vietnam War has prevented nothing, but it did delay some major international developments by seven or eight years—especially the formation of the new triangular (or perhaps, if one includes Japan and Western Europe, pentagonal) pattern of present-day world politics. It coincided in France with the heyday of Gaullist obstruction to the speedy integration of Europe and in Russia with the obsessive fear of ideological subversion that in 1968 led to military intervention in Czechoslovakia. In fact, the war may have contributed to some of these phenomena. At any rate, it compounded all of them.

But the world community suffered another loss, and this is perhaps the most momentous outcome of the Vietnam War: America has become unsure of her own purpose. Thus her allies have become doubtful of America's dedication to what used to be known as the "common cause." There is no denying the fact that the same allies who were originally impressed by America's steadfast commitment to Vietnam soon started losing confidence in America's judgment. And the result was an erosion of mutual trust within the Atlantic Alliance.

The war taught the United States that there are no triumphs at bargain prices. Will the Americans now be tempted to eschew any commitment at normal rates? Europeans fear that the "Vietnamization of Vietnam" might be followed by the "Europeanization of Europe." In other words, that Washington may leave them in the lurch. I am not one of those who share this apprehension. America's involvement in Vietnam, I have come to learn, was an uncalled-for tragedy; but I still believe that America's commitment to Europe is a prerequisite to her survival. In my view a great deal of compassion for the Americans is in order. They made a mistake by going into Vietnam, but they did not commit a crime. And, hopefully, America is capable of recovering from and learning from her mistakes. □



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