KENNEDY’S FOREIGN POLICY IN VIETNAM: A SERIES OF DECISIONS THAT ULTIMATELY LIMITED DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS

Abstract. John F. Kennedy’s political rhetoric, unwavering support for aid-packages and military equipment, and his lack of reliable local partnership in the South Vietnamese government restricted possible diplomatic options in the escalation of the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Kennedy, Vietnam War, diplomacy, 1960s, communism, democracy.

“We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.” –Lyndon B. Johnson [5].

By the 1950s, the tension between the United States and the Soviet Bloc had deepened. Around the world, the ideological differences between Communism and Western democracy incited conflicts and power struggles through proxy fights. These proxy wars, including the Paraguayan Civil War, Korean War, and Algerian War, heightened the global tension and forced regional countries to align themselves with either the Soviet Union or the United States. This intensification of international frictions promoted the necessity for a novel American foreign policy to defeat the Soviet Regime. Kennedy’s previous failure to impede Soviet presence in the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis further augmented the strategic significance of Vietnam. His political rhetoric, unwavering support for aid-packages and military equipment, and his lack of reliable local partnership in the South Vietnamese government restricted possible diplomatic options.

John F. Kennedy: Ideology and Personal Image Before Presidency

Kennedy presented himself as a pragmatic idealist. Ideologically, he fell into the liberal wing of the Senate democrats. Kennedy consistently believed in the containment of communism [7]. In his mind, communism was a significant threat to Western societies. Although his record as a domestic lawmaker was hardly impressive, Kennedy was invested in foreign policy [14]. As a United States Senator, he repeatedly criticized the foreign policy of his predecessor, General Eisenhower, for being too passive in maintaining the balance of power [20]. Even before Kennedy ran for president, he regarded Vietnam as a significant and necessary political conflict with communism. In an address at the Vietnam Luncheon in 1956, Kennedy further developed his diplomatic theory of Vietnam [8]. He compared the American diplomatic policy in the world at the time as a “volunteer fire department.” As he noted, a fire department “rarely prevents fires” [8]. As the metaphor makes clear, Kennedy hoped to go on the offensive against the Soviet Union. He saw communism as a long-term adversary and was determined to constrain it more ardenty than his predecessor. Kennedy was willing to sacrifice significantly for a worthy gain.

He later expounded the infamous domino theory, according to which, Vietnam represented “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike.” If, according to this theory, the “Red Tide of communism overflowed into Vietnam,” the region would succumb to Soviet interest. Therefore, he concluded, “America’s stake in Vietnam, in her strength and in her security, is a very selfish one” [8]. This domino theory indicated that the downfall of Vietnam would lead many others to be exposed to Communism. Though lacking any
concrete evidence, his general proposition received
the attention and support from the general public and
congressional hardliners. His domino theory largely
influenced the direction of American diplomacy on
communism; the policy shifted from managing com-
munism as an adversary to pursuing the containment
of communism internationally.

Before Vietnam: Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis

Kennedy encountered multiple diplomatic chal-
lenges, including the Pigs of Bay and the Cuban Mis-
sile Crisis. These two political predicaments further
restricted Kennedy’s strategic imperative and inflat-
ed the gravity of Vietnam.

The Bay of Pigs, an operation under Kennedy in-
tended to overthrow the Cuban government in 1961,
failed disastrously and became a public humiliation
for the Kennedy administration. During this event,
Kennedy exposed his inability to conduct inter-agen-
cy cooperation and his negligence in incorporating
U.S Allies in decision making [25]. His boldness di-
minished the moral superiority and legal structure
of the United States [25, 315]. Though the Bay of
Pigs was programmed by the CIA in the Eisenhower
Administration, Kennedy’s lack of follow through
and his lack of familiarity with government struc-
ture contributed to the ultimate failure of this mis-
sion [25, 314]. Kennedy himself did not question
the plan of invasion; his cabinet, including the State
Department, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of
Defense raised no objection to this plan. Inadequate
debate regarding the Bay of Pigs essentially led to
the failure of the mission. The plan underestimated
Castro’s power and alienated an historical ally of
the United States. Castro consolidated his power further
and communism prevailed over democracy in Cuba.
The strategic blunder inadvertently promoted the
growth of communism in Cuba.

The consequence of the previous political interven-
tion emerged during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Essen-
tially, the Soviets exploited Kennedy’s recklessness in
the Bay of Pigs. Following the alienation of the Cuban
government, Khrushchev was able to reach an agree-
ment with Castro to implement Soviet missiles as an
effective deterrent to the United States [16]. Kennedy
was therefore partially responsible for the commence-
ment of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Moreover, Kennedy
dealt with the Cuban Missile Crisis dubiously. He mis-
understood Khrushchev’s military intention. Kenne-
dy thought Khrushchev’s missile deployment in Cuba
was an act of probing created by personal contempt
[24]. However, Khrushchev’s actual intention was to
restrict the possibility of an American solicited missile
attack on the Soviet Union and balance the strength
of American missiles [22]. Furthermore, in a highly
fluid situation, during which any miscommunication
could possibly have led to nuclear warfare, Kennedy
chose to backchannel the Soviets. Kennedy elected
secret dealings for political purposes and misled the
American public into believing that such a crisis could
be managed [24]. Though the Cuban Missile Crisis is
considered a significant success of the Kennedy Ad-
ministration, the crisis could have been prevented or
mitigated through direct foreign protocols. Neverthe-
less, the apparent threat in the Cuban Missile Crisis
impugned Kennedy’s political image and the safety
of the American public. The threatening signals from
communism forced Kennedy to contest and eradicate
communism even further.

Both incidents proved the Soviet Union a valiant
opponent on the global stage; the Cuban Missile Cri-
sis and Bay of Pigs revealed immense Soviet influence
globally. Kennedy’s previous dealings with the Soviet
Union failed to protect the prestige of the American
government. Hence, Kennedy elevated the signifi-
cance of Vietnam and converted Vietnam into another
front to challenge the spread of communism.

Vietnam: An Oppressive History of Colonial Rule

Due to immense opposition to the colonial rule
of the French government, a potent insurgency
arose in the 1950s. In this period, the Soviet Union
sought to challenge the United States globally, both
ideologically and geo-politically. Many states neigh-
boring Vietnam, such as China, fell into the Soviet bloc [21]. This continuing surrender of influence in Indo-China worried many in Washington; widespread McCarthyism, for example, symbolized the increasing anxiety of U.S. policymakers regarding the loss of influence in Asian areas [19]. Eventually, the United States bolstered the position of the French government, not to suppress the Vietnamese people, but to engage the Soviet Union firmly in a geopolitical scenario. This insurgency, namely the Viet Minh (then Viet Cong), was led by Ho Chi Minh, a known communist operative. The rising of communism in North Vietnam raised grave concerns for the American government; many viewed the Viet Minh or Viet Cong as a geopolitical success for the Soviet bloc [4]. In 1955, the Geneva Conference eventually divided Vietnam in two. The north was largely controlled by communism. In the south, the American government bolstered the existing government to halt the spread of communism [27]. Even though Vietnam was geologically divided, nationalist sentiment was prevalent. The South Vietnamese people eventually chose Ngo Dinh Diem as their leader. He repudiated communism and colonialism [28]. On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh communized and indoctrinated the north, fabricating a communist state [28].

**Expansion of Vietnam Involvement**

In 1961, when Kennedy became President, he firmly endorsed Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of South Vietnam. Diem, himself a devoted Catholic, seemed to be an ideal figure to propagate a new democracy and to defeat the dissemination of communism. Though Diem was reluctant to have U.S. combat troops in South Vietnam, he requested more financial aid, increased military advisors, and more equipment for his increasing troops [6, 251]. Later that year, General Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, facilitated the process and suggested that the President ought to commit eight thousand combat troops to South Vietnam, disguised as logistic legions [6, 252]. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff denied General Taylor’s suggestion, critiquing his plan as inadequate. The concerns of the Pentagon turned out to be purely logistical; they believed stationing some 200,000 men was reasonable to combat Northern Vietnamese forces [6, 253]. The assessment of the Pentagon indicated rather strenuous warfare. Kennedy pushed back; he concurred with approving aid but rejected positioning of combat troops due to his fear of escalating war in Vietnam [6]. Nevertheless, Kennedy wanted to protect the prestige of the American government and to triumph in the Vietnam efforts. The United States committed over 2.1 billion dollars in economic assistance, not including the cost of increasing military advisors [18]. The commitment of military weapons and aid-packages further confined Kennedy into direct involvement in Vietnam.

Ironically, although Kennedy seemed to show restraint in exercising his power, he set the tone for the Vietnam War. Politically, the Kennedy administration retained its message of diminishing communism. In the case of Vietnam, Kennedy’s rhetoric was somewhat unpragmatic, even concerning. His ideological statements eventually made his policy imperative rather than malleable [15]. His stances, often fused with emotional arguments on moral righteousness of bolstering South Vietnam, made it difficult for him to avoid war. The cabinet pressed Kennedy’s messaging even further. Many high-level officials, such as McNamara, General Taylor, and Vice President Johnson, visited South Vietnam as a way of signaling U.S support. Johnson even went as far as praising Diem as the reincarnation of Winston Churchill in 1961. Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, declared in 1962 that “we are going to win” [6]. Politically, had Kennedy shift his position on Vietnam, he would have devastated his domestic support. Many media supported the Kennedy oratory. One *New York Times* article in 1962 was even subtitled “American Prestige Is Staked on Keeping Communism from Taking Over in a Critical Area Where Battle Is Complex and Difficult” [1]. His polling data revealed the effectiveness of his messaging; Kennedy had an unprecedentedly high approval rating, averaging about 70% [17]. His political
rhetoric might have restricted other possibilities and strategic moves.

In addition to his awkward political stances, Kennedy lacked a reliable partner in South Vietnam. Though Kennedy bolstered Diem publicly, Diem was not a firm supporter of American policies. He often refused to carry out reforms or suggestions from the United States. Also, Diem’s reputation and popularity gradually declined as he demonstrated an inability to administer or reform South Vietnam. His military forces were highly corrupt; officers who expressed loyalty to Diem received higher commissions and postings, regardless of their ability. In the Al Cupac campaign of 1963, South Vietnamese forces were unable to combat the Vietcong, even with the assistance of American advisors [6]. His administration constituted a similar level of corruption; Diem openly favored privileged Catholic candidates loyalist for domestic office. Diem also made no efforts toward economic, social, or political reform [20]. As time progressed, Diem established an ineffective administration to counter North Vietnam [20]. Furthermore, Diem’s priority was to ensure his authority in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese forces fought only for the interest of Diem, not the interest of combating the communists. Diem essentially let the Americans engage in heavy warfare, keeping the rest of his forces to conserve his power and authority [6]. Further, Diem’s public reputation diminished in 1963 due to the continuing suppression of Buddhism by his military forces. Prominent Buddhist leaders and others who detested his policies openly protested against Diem [6, 259]. Declining public support concerned the administration gravely. The possibility of a coup was discussed in the Kennedy Administration. The cabinet was divided over this strategic possibility. General Taylor, Vice President Johnson, John McConé (CIA Director), and Secretary McNamara believed Diem was the only viable option [6, 279]. McNamara also mentioned that he was unaware of any replacements [10]. On the other hand, Governor Harriman, Hillsman, and Ambassador Lodge (Ambassador to Vietnam) considered a coup necessary to mediate the Vietnam situation. Harriman expressed his concerns over Diem’s inability to carry out American policies [10, 64]. Ambassador Lodge conveyed that Diem was unwilling to follow Kennedy’s instructions [6, 288–289]. The Ambassador believed that no further efforts could be made in Vietnam with Diem. As he noted, “war cannot be won under a Diem Administration” [6, 289]. Eventually, the US government consented to a coup, agreeing not to interfere with it on Diem’s behalf. General Minh, who served under Diem, overthrew, and assassinated Diem, leaving the circumstance in South Vietnam even more unpredictable [6, 311].

Other episodes revealed Kennedy’s reluctance. It appeared that Kennedy had not made up his mind on war; he even sanctioned or acknowledged a formal strategic exploration on the withdrawal of the U.S military in Vietnam in 1965 [9]. However, Kennedy elaborated his concerns over cutting troop levels if the military situation in Vietnam worsened [26]. Furthermore, the memorandum only concretely withdrew a thousand U.S. troops, a drop in the bucket compared to sixteen thousandths deployed [23]. The memorandum could simply be a political strategy to deal with political repercussions. Kennedy further elaborated on his concerns about the Vietnam challenge in an interview in 1963: “We can’t expect these countries to do everything the way we want them to do. They have their own interests, their own personalities, their own tradition. We can’t make everyone want to go in our image. In addition, we have ancient struggles between countries. . . . We can’t make the world over, but we can influence the world” [13]. Though Kennedy had appeared adamant in support of combating the expansion of communism, he stressed his concerns over the deployment of military means as an ultimate resolve on the Vietnam issue.

Nevertheless, the enlargement of military presence and aid packages, Kennedy’s resolute elocution
Conclusion:
In the final analysis, the failure to safeguard the prestige of the American government during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Bay of Pigs induced a greater strategic magnitude in Vietnam. Fundamentally, Kennedy utilized Vietnam as another front to challenge the spread of communism. In the end, the inadequacy of regional partnerships between South Vietnam and the U.S government, Kennedy’s substantial commitment of U.S equipment and military advisors, as well as his political rhetoric further contributed to the strategic limitations in the prospect of Vietnam.

Appendix A

Figure 1.

Thich Quang Duc, a prominent Buddhist who chose self-immolation to protest the repressive policy of the Diem Administration. This extreme behavior revealed the aversion toward the Diem regime.


In 1961, President Kennedy met with Gen. Taylor and Secretary McNamara to discuss the Vietnam issue in the Oval Office.

Appendix B


Figure 2.

In 1961, Vice President Lyndon B Johnson met with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem at Independence Palace, Saigon. Lyndon B Johnson supported Diem adamantly and praised Diem as the reincarnation of Sir Winston Churchill.

Appendix C-1

Figure 4.

In January 1966, women and children hid in a muddy stream to escape fierce Viet Cong fire at Bao Trai, 20 miles from Saigon. The living conditions for women and children were horrifying.


Appendix C-2

Figure 5.

An American soldier endeavoring to protect Vietnamese civilians by transporting them elsewhere.


References:


13. “TRANSCRIPT OF NBC BROADCAST WITH CHET HUNTLEY, 9 SEPTEMBER 1963.” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. URL: https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/046/JFKPOF-046–032. Kennedy expresses his concern over the interview with Huntley. He still believes that the Vietnam War is fundamentally the war of South Vietnamese people, not the American people. Though he is restrained in sending in the U.S military, he considers a certain magnitude of intervention necessary.


17. Erskine, Hazel Gaudet. “The Polls: Kennedy as President.” The Public Opinion Quarterly 28, no. 2 (1964): 334–42. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747000. This is a poll by Gallup Poll for President Kennedy over his presidency. Kennedy receives a tremendous amount of approval rating; his average approval rating is about 70%.


24. Pious, Richard M. “The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limits of Crisis Management.” Political Science Quarterly 116, no. 1 (2001): 81–105. URL: https://doi.org/10.2307/2657821. This article critiques Kennedy’s position and handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. This article argues that Kennedy blatantly sacrificed his moral responsibility by not making the term public and making an impression that a crisis could be managed.


26. Selverstone, Marc J. “It’s a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal.” Diplomatic History 34, no. 3 (2010): 485–95. URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/24915895. This article discusses the National Security Memorandum 263 and possible interpretations over the effect of this memo. This article incorporates details and recording to reveal Kennedy and his advisor’s thoughts on the withdrawal of troops in Vietnam.
