

Conflict at the Core of International Relations in History

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Abstract: *International Relations (IR) is a discipline which focuses its primary attention on the most technical aspect of world cooperation and peace. The foundation of a political interrelationship among nations is chiefly designed through intentions, mutual needs, cooperative understanding, and the concerns of safeguarding the sovereign integrity and borders. This leads nations to at one hand implement policies at the congregation of states by means of international regulations and on the intangible non material side, keep relations in place. Whether cordial or not, be it passive or aggressive, International Relations are a dynamic way of keeping the peace in the international order. This paper takes a different and a historic approach through study of some of the defining events in the domain of International relations with a special focus on the events of cold war.*

Keywords: International Relations, Political, Cooperative understanding, Policies, International order, Cold War, Conflict Core

1. Methodology

Doctrinal research has been used where a wide range of data has been collected from primary and secondary sources, analysed and interpreted in the light of the chosen topic. Historical research method has been intensively applied where the facts of a particular phase of modern history have been used in the light of understanding International Relations and the conflicts associated with them.

Vietnam War – The Shifting of Power

Vietnam War was a fierce and long drawn battle that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. It was a conflict of political ideologies and made Vietnam the centre stage of the Cold War drama that was being played out between the power blocs of United States and Soviet Union.

2. Background

Vietnam, a nation in Southeast Asia on the eastern edge of the Indochinese peninsula, had been under French colonial rule since the 19th century. Ho Chi Minh—inspired by Chinese and Soviet communism—formed the Viet Minh, or the League for the Independence of Vietnam – to bring the country out of colonial domination. After the WW2, Japan moved out of Vietnam and it was now under the occupation of French Emperor Bao Dai. When the Viet Minh tried to get control, France backed the Emperor in his struggle. The First Indochina war occurred between December 1946 and July 1954 for a period of seven years. The conflict involved the French Union supported by Bao Dai's Vietnamese national Army against Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, dedicated to fighting for the cause of Vietnamese independence. France's motivations to remaining in Indochina include how they didn't want to lose out on their prized colonial possessions, they didn't want to be known as a European power that would cave to the demands of an indigenous population like the Vietnamese, they also were subject to competition amongst the other European powers that were on a colonial spree portrayed as a civilizing mission for the world community. Another reason why France remained committed to the cause of putting up a fight was to retain Vietnam as a colony for how it would put forth a message in a time where the world was witnessing a wave of

decolonization fostered by a rise in nationalism post the Second World War. The United States supported this for a more strategic reason considering it was engaging with the erstwhile Soviet Union in a Cold War, and French control over Vietnam would ideologically symbolize a capitalist influence in the Asian region. Furthermore, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh had communist affiliations which would by virtue of lead to proliferation of Soviet influence in the region. The United States was also privy to Asian nationalist movements and feared pan Asiatic anti-western movements and hence gave France a free hand in the war.

A subsequent treaty was signed with a division of Vietnam into North and South and a provision for elections towards unification in 1956 were made.

Escalation of Conflict

In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem became the President of South Vietnam, and he was firmly opposed to any unification with the North. On the international front, cold war between US and Soviet Union intensified and President Eisenhower in United States was firmly strict with countries in the Soviet Front. He gave assistance to Diem who with the help of American military aid hunted down the Vietnamese communists, whom he called Vietcong.

Opposition was rising against his policies and actions within South Vietnam itself and a National Liberation Front –NLF was formed, although it was not a communist association wholly. President John F.Kennedy was highly suspicious of the situation in Vietnam and his 'Domino Theory' went on as if one south east Asian country would fall into the communist bloc, then the other neighbouring countries would also follow the same, collapsing as dominoes one after the other. By 1962, there was a huge US military presence in South Vietnam.

Next there was assassination of Diem and his brother in a coup by some of his own generals and this led to instability in South Vietnam, during which the new American President Johnson committed even more forces to secure the territory. There were reportedly many bombing incidents and the American engagement kept increasing in the area, with bombings just not in Vietnam but also in the surrounding regions of Laos- with the intention of destroying the Ho Chi

Minh Trail through which communists from North had been supporting agitation in south.

Public opinion in US started becoming increasingly Anti War as military intervention kept on increasing with attacks and counter attacks. There was a huge toll of American soldiers as well. Between July 1966 and December 1973, more than 503,000 U.S. military personnel deserted, and a robust anti-war movement among American forces spawned violent protests, killings and mass incarcerations of personnel stationed in Vietnam as well as within the United States.

Hanoi's communist regime was growing impatient, and with a good support from Soviet, it was ready to strike at the American forces and the incident came to be known as Tet Offensive – which was a very grim reality and shocked the American conscience. Peace talks had begun reaching a pause with Nixon's coming to power in America. In an attempt to limit the volume of American casualties, he announced a program called Vietnamisation – withdrawing U.S. troops, increasing aerial and artillery bombardment and giving the South Vietnamese the training and weapons needed to effectively control the ground war. New bombings had continued, ravaging the land and surrounding Cambodia as well, there were violations of international peace and order at the same time.

In January 1973, the United States and North Vietnam concluded a final peace agreement, ending open hostilities between the two nations. War between North and South Vietnam continued nonetheless. More than two decades of violent conflict had inflicted a devastating toll on Vietnam's population. Warfare had demolished the country's infrastructure and economy, and reconstruction proceeded slowly. In 1976, Vietnam was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, though sporadic violence continued.

The consequences of the War were far reaching in not only physical loss of lives and injuries to soldiers and civilians alike, but there were deeper impacts on the psychological well being of returning soldiers who were not hailed as heroes in America but rather condemned. America witnessed huge anti war protests throughout the course of the war. The image of US being invincible was shattered and indeed Vietnam laid down a tale of determination and immense courage to fight for a cause. Lastly, this showed how Cold War tensions were not simply a clash of ideologies but rather a greater and deeper crisis that had to be curbed in the light of world peace.

Analysis

The First Indo China War broke out in 1946 and went on for a considerable span of time culminating in the defeat of French forces by the Viet Minh, the nationalist group of Ho Chi Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. The main motivation for France to continue the long drawn battle was to sustain its presence in Indo China, a fear of losing its colonies, and a sense of superiority of asserting European dominance over an Asian colony. Further it aimed to counter the growing force of decolonisation and upholding of nationalist sentiments that had leaped forward post the Second World War. United States had a bigger motive in

supporting France against Vietnamese people, not simply to ensure continuance of colonial dominance of France, but in securing Vietnam within the capitalist influence. They feared the collapse of Vietnam in the clutches of communism would lead to a domino effect leading to a spread of communist regime. This was precisely the main issue of conflict in the Cold War politics.

Indonesian Point

Sukarno was the first President of Indonesia, serving from 1945 to 1967. Sukarno was the leader of the Indonesian struggle for independence from the Dutch Empire. He remained in power till 12th March, 1967.

Suharto's succession to power was a tricky and political genius of mind in what can be termed as a series of incidents. There was growing resentment and criticism of Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and it soon led to public outrages due to the hyperinflation and other economic problems of the country. On September 30, 1965, there was a communist coup in Jakarta that was crushed by the army under the leadership of Suharto. In the following months, Suharto directed a purge of communists and leftists in public life, and a new wave of anti communism as flared in the country. All the Sukarno supporters were soon out of place and this paved the way for Suharto to gain the power.

With Suharto in power, the realm of International involvement began with Indonesia cooperating in the seas, in treaties and conferences.

Analysis

Some recent studies and a report [Vincent Bevins, What the United States Did in Indonesia A trove of recently released documents confirms that Washington's role in the country's 1965 massacre was part of a bigger Cold War strategy, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/the-indonesia-documents-and-the-us-agenda/543534/>] indicate a wider picture in Suharto's communist purges and the violent massacre that happened. The violence on one hand was detested by the world community at large but at the same time it has to be realised that how fundamental such an execution or outright purge was to the contemporary United States post colonial world strategy and how far it helped US in furthering the anti communist cult that it was so dedicated to. The rise of Suharto on the Indonesian soil was a crucial turning point in the theatre of Cold War- with another strong block of non communist state forming within an erstwhile communist country. The decimation of the PKI and Suharto's rise to power constituted a major turning point in the Cold War. The population was huge in the country and its communist party was third largest only after China and Soviet Union. Hence the communist hold on the country was strategic and of much importance to the Communist Bloc in the Cold War era- adding to the irritation and worry of the United States.

It was previously understood that during the bloodshed and the grim realities of 1965- US simply stood by and witnessed the spectacle as a spectator. However according to further studies, it has been conjectured that not only did US witness it without condemning or asserting international

force, it was significantly a part and parcel of the operation, often inciting and strategising for the Indonesian Army to go after the purge and lead to this massacre. Ever since the beginning of Sukarno's regime, American CIA had been strategically involved with disturbances in Indonesia often resulting in killing of innocent civilians in the process and it was all aimed to destabilise the communist rule to weaken the eastern bloc in the bigger power game. That Washington tolerated a death toll of innocents at this scale is justified with its foreign policy of containing communism to which America was so engaged and dedicated as well.

The most disturbing angle to this conflict core was the extermination of a particular group from a country that was soon to have its ripples cast across the political barriers. International Relations in this case is modelled on the aggressive internal policies of a regime and the inability to stop them at one hand and the constant fuelling to carry them forward, and the resultant crisis seeks to provide a lesson in diplomacy – that a neutrality is seldom possible and polarisation of opinions is at the core of crisis.

Myanmar Point – Then and Now

The mass uprising and protests in 1988, in Myanmar were a struggle for establishment of democracy – a demand for democracy by the people. The repressive military government of General Ne Win has shattered the economy with a huge national debt and then taken a decision about withdrawing certain currency notes without proper compensation. Students were agitated the most and launched boycott of the Government policy. Police brutality of the regime further angered the students who wanted democracy. Uprisings began with demand of Ne Win's resignation and demand of democracy. It was a very violent affair.

They were partly successful as it led to the resignation of Ne Win. Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a national icon. The military rule continued but elections were organised election in 1990 which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy swept by securing 81 percent of the seats.

The importance of the struggle lays in the foundation of a people's struggle – a demand for democracy and the bloodshed still signifies the price paid in achieving the same.

In Recent times, February 2021, just before the newly elected Parliament would meet, there was a military takeover in Myanmar. The junta claims echoed with the rival party that there was fraud in the elections but when the Election Commission had asked for proof the said claims could not be substantiated. With the coup d'état, democracy collapsed in Myanmar yet again, attracting widespread condemnation from the international spheres as also from the people who had cherished the democracy in the country. There were widespread demands for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and people wanted the military takeover to cease, appealed for the world community to act as well.

Reactions to this ongoing crisis has been diverse and conflicting - while big nations like United States and United Kingdom have imposed economic sanctions and UN has also condemned it as a regression from democracy, China has resorted a reserved approach and neighbouring countries

have termed it as an internal affair in which no intervention can be made. It is at this point that the relation between IR and Conflict can be analysed, in the following steps-

- 1) First the internal or domestic policy or administration acts as an important force – the shapes the particular country and its administration.
- 2) The domestic policies of the nations and the trends of Governance shape much of the nation's foreign policy and the way it chooses to interact in the international sphere
- 3) The beginning of an issue or conflict or any act that is interpreted in controversial angles, gathering support in favour of it and against it.
- 4) The issue is now interpreted by other nations in their respective perspectives that a world opinion is formed.
- 5) Depending on whether or not the country chooses to modify the conflict core, or persist with its policies, the International Relations and its overtones change.

Korean Crisis

United States could not possibly foresee the situational crisis in Korean peninsula. It has also come to be referred to as one of the biggest failures of US Intelligence services at the same time.

These failures were the result of several factors including the post-WWII dismantling of the wartime intelligence structure, severe pressure to reduce defence budgets, the desire to focus all possible intelligence resources on the Soviet Union, and the failure to question the mistaken assumption that all communist governments acted only at the direction of the Soviet Union. The division of Korea along the 38th parallel into North, to be administered by the Soviet and South to be American administration. The horrors and the casualties of the war doomed the political world and no threat or occupation was perceived by either side, even though the sides fell into antagonistic power blocs of the cold war. U.S. and Soviet occupation forces installed military governments and began the process of creating civilian government institutions, but even in this case Russians advanced in setting up of a strong North Korean administration but on the other hand, US intelligence failed in understanding the culture, language and chaotic political condition of South Korea and eventually remained quite weak.

Tensions began with competing claims to the territory which developed into the Korean War. This was because although Kim in North Korea and Syngman Rhee in South established their own bases of political domination, the biggest question that loomed was the futility of Allied claim to provide for an United Korea. Ideally Americans had poured in support in favour of a non communist Government and Russia and China wanted to set up an united Communist Korea, but both the superpowers wanted to avoid a very close involvement in the area. The problem was handed over to the United Nations which decided to hold organise elections to determine people's will. The unification attempt was less of a promising future to the peninsula and more of an opportune moment in the already worsening cold war situation.

On the issue of elections, Kim rose violently against it as the population of North was very small as compared to the South and did not allow united elections. In the south, UN supervised elections declared majority support for Rhee who rose to become its elected leader now. Later elections were separately conducted in North awarding majority to Kim. US had eventually withdrew its troops from South as Rhee was a ruthless authoritarian in his regime and Kim in north was modelled on Stalin, executing his critics as well. The withdrawal of foreign support and troops meant that the situation was ripe for an armed conflict. North Korea invaded south unalarmed and all of a sudden in 1950 to unify the peninsula under one communist rule. There was a meaningless massacre of lives and finally a peace treaty was achieved with no possible unification of Korea.

The Conflict Core

- 1) In the Korean Crisis we find the conflict core to be internal and a domestic affair of the nation- and the international Relations surrounding it to be shaped consistently by what happened in the internal region.
- 2) The second notable point is that how International Relations – polarised Cold War times have contributed in shaping up of the state of affairs internally.
- 3) This is yet another aspect of conflict in which countries may find itself when Balance of Power is established with the help of polarisation of countries or making allegiances and counter allegiances.
- 4) We have seen how desperately US wanted a non communist state and USSR and China kept helping North Korea in preparing itself militarily for an armed conflict if need be, to sustain communist rule. This shows how a nation's ideological affiliations often drive the conflict core.
- 5) Korean War had brought America at loggerheads with China and Russia- the alliance building game changed into a looming conflict and the newly independent Third World Nations now faced threats. This shows that IR is not only about nations trying to maintain a relationship in the international spheres, but more about how different nations play the power game on the basis of alliance and support system politics.

Suez Crisis

The Suez Canal crisis was a conflict of leadership and a sense of insecurity from the western world. While Egypt had been a part of Non Aligned Movement 'NAM', its leader Gamal Abdal Nasser, was a strong Arab nationalist leader whose vociferous political action was a threat to Israeli government. With a strong Government of Egypt under Nasser not being within the capitalist fold, US retracted a promised financial assistance. In response to this, Nasser made a plan to nationalise the Suez Canal which was earlier in the control of Britain and French companies. He also blocked the Israeli ships from using the canal. This infuriated Britain, France and Israel who launched an attack to get back the canal.

The conflict ended in 9 days with US and the international spheres severely condemning Britain and France's breaches of peace. United Nations and Soviet Union also criticised the move by Britain. It had a disastrous impact on the reputation of Britain as a world power.

Conflict Core

Based on Cold War experiences, certain factors can be identified as crucial to functioning of diplomacy based on International Relations. Among them the chief factor is the interconnection of domestic and international spheres of policymaking. This accounts for the core around which the entire conflict zone develops. Today we find nations issuing statements, making trade and commerce restrictions and often condemning policies of nations they do not support- all of this is primarily shaped on the collective analysis of a majority opinion.

We found condemnation of farmer protests in India not develop into a strong world opinion but in case of military takeover of Myanmar and the junta rule to be severely criticised. The democratic protests at Myanmar has garnered a strong opinion in its favour and that simply fuels the core of International Relations.

Next we have the example of Alexander Navalny who was wrongfully confined by Russian state. People started a pro Navalny protest that once again attracted world opinion and the conflict at the domestic level soon developed into a conflict core to shape further relations at the international front.

Following points are noteworthy –

- 1) Conflict is essentially a dissension and discord between two perspectives or ways of analysing a particular situation.
- 2) Conflict is universal in world politics – nations with their own ideologies interpret the terms and extent of conflict and the ways of resolving them as well.
- 3) Physical proximity of nations – the neighbourhood of a nation plays an important role in determining the reactions to any conflict and the associated assistance or condemnation thereof.
- 4) Conflict can stem out of an internal crisis that indulges some foreign overtones or it can be an outright crisis in the International Relations of a nation as well.
- 5) Resolution of a conflict or its aggravation depends partly on the place of conflict and partly how the IR of that nation works out.
- 6) Conflict is the root cause of war and aggression as well – hence any potential conflict or early stages of it must be identified and resorted to Diplomatic dialogues to attempt at resolving it

3. Conclusion

The core of International Relations centres on conflicts as evident from all these examples of crisis situations that were collectively known as the Cold War era. The entire plot of international crisis during the period of Cold War involved escalation of any crisis based on conflicting interests of nations- when the mutuality and comity of understanding is harmed. Every incident of conflict is precisely a subtle development on part of nations to not be able to reach a compromise and the mutual cooperation that is most important in the sense of preventing such crisis situations.

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