

## 50 YEARS OF VIETNAM WAR – HISTORY

**NEWS:** The year 2025 commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War's end (1955–1975), with April 30 marking the fall of Saigon.

### WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

#### Origins of the Vietnam War

- Colonial Background
  - French Indochina: From the mid-19th century, Vietnam was a French colony.
  - During World War II, France was occupied by Germany and Japan took control of Vietnam.
  - Ho Chi Minh, a committed socialist and nationalist, formed the Viet Minh to fight Japanese forces.
- Post-WWII and First Indochina War

The Viet Minh was a Vietnamese organization, officially known as the League for the Independence of Vietnam, that fought against the Japanese and French for national independence from 1941 to 1954.

- After Japan's defeat, France returned to reclaim Vietnam but armed resistance by Ho Chi Minh.
- Resulted in the First Indochina War (1946–1954).
- The US backed France fearing communist expansion.
- Geneva Accords (1954)
  - After France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu, Geneva Accords signed:
    - Vietnam temporarily divided at the 17th Parallel:
      - North Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh (Communist)

- South Vietnam: Emperor Bao Dai (later Ngo Dinh Diem)
    - Planned elections in 1956 to reunify the country were cancelled by Diem.
- Rise of Diem and US Involvement
  - Ngo Dinh Diem (Catholic in a Buddhist-majority nation) became South Vietnam's leader With US support.
  - Diem refused elections fearing communist victory.
  - US President Eisenhower (1953 – 1961) acknowledged Ho Chi Minh would have won the elections.

## US Involvement & Escalation

- Cold War & Containment Policy
  - Backdrop: The Cold War between the US and USSR discouraged direct war due to *mutually assured destruction* from nuclear arsenals.
  - Instead, they sought influence through *proxy wars*—Vietnam became one such battleground.
  - The US feared the “Domino Effect”: if South Vietnam fell to communism, other Southeast Asian nations (Laos, Cambodia, Thailand) might follow.
- Gulf of Tonkin Incident (1964)
  - Alleged attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats on US Navy vessels.
  - Led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by US Congress:
    - Gave President Lyndon B. Johnson authority to use military force in Vietnam without a formal war declaration.

- My Lai Massacre (1968): US troops killed hundreds of Vietnamese civilians, fueling anti-war protests.
- Tet Offensive (1968)
  - Surprise attack by North Vietnamese & Viet Cong on over 100 cities.
  - Though a military failure for the North, it shocked the US public and eroded support for the war.
  - Forced Johnson to halt escalation and announce he wouldn't seek re-election.

## End of the Vietnam War

- Shift in Public Opinion
  - Tet Offensive (1968) exposed the futility of continued US involvement despite government claims of progress.
  - Widespread anti-war protests erupted across the US, including college campuses (e.g., Kent State shooting).
  - The war lost public and political support in the US.
- Nixon's "Peace with Honor" Strategy
  - Introduced Vietnamization:
    - Gradual withdrawal of US troops.
    - South Vietnamese army to take over ground operations.
  - Despite peace talks, Nixon expanded bombing into Cambodia and Laos.
  - Continued heavy casualties and My Lai Massacre (1968) further discredited US involvement.
- Paris Peace Accords (1973)
  - Signed between US, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and NLF (Viet Cong).

- **Key terms:**
  - Ceasefire and US troop withdrawal.
  - Exchange of prisoners of war.
- However, conflict continued between North and South Vietnam post-US exit.
- **Fall of Saigon (April 30, 1975)**
  - North Vietnamese forces launched a final offensive.
  - The South Vietnamese army collapsed.
  - Saigon captured and renamed Ho Chi Minh City.
  - Vietnam reunited under communist rule in 1976 as the *Socialist Republic of Vietnam*.

### Implications of the Vietnam War

#### Implications for the United States

- **Human & Psychological Costs**
  - 58,000 US soldiers killed, 304,000 wounded.
  - Veterans returned with deep psychological scars.
- **Crisis of Trust in Government**
  - The war eroded public confidence in elected officials.
  - *Pentagon Papers* revealed misleading government narratives.
  - As Karl Marlantes (Vietnam War veteran) stated: "*It made us cynical and distrustful of our institutions.*"
- **Political & Legislative Outcomes**

Vietnam Syndrome refers to the post-Vietnam War era reluctance of the United States to engage in prolonged and costly foreign military interventions, particularly those involving ground troops and unclear

national security interests.

- Led to passage of the War Powers Act (1973) to check presidential war-making powers.
- Rise of the Vietnam Syndrome – American reluctance for future foreign military interventions.
- **Media & Civil Society**
  - First televised war: graphic visuals of violence, napalm victims, and civilian massacres.
  - Fueled massive anti-war protests, including at Kent State University (1970).
  - Shaped new norms for media freedom and government accountability.

### Implications for Vietnam

- **Massive Human & Environmental Damage**
  - Estimated 4 million Vietnamese killed or wounded.
  - 1.3 million civilian deaths in South Vietnam alone.
  - US dropped more bombs on Vietnam than in all of WWII.
  - 5 million acres of farmland destroyed; long-term food shortages.

What is Agent Orange?

- Agent Orange was a herbicidal chemical used by the United States during the Vietnam War (1961–1971).
- It was sprayed to defoliate forests and destroy crops used by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces.
- Composed of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T herbicides, with dioxin (TCDD) as a

contaminant — highly toxic.

- **Agent Orange & Chemical Warfare**

- ~74 million litres of herbicides sprayed.
- Agent Orange exposure led to:
  - Birth defects (spina bifida, cleft palate, etc.).
  - Cancers, neurological disorders across multiple generations.
  - Over 3 million affected, including children.
  - Environmental damage: forests turned barren, croplands ruined.

- **Post-War Repression & Economic Isolation**

- After 1975 reunification:
  - Re-education camps for ~2.5 million Southerners.
  - Widespread discrimination against South Vietnamese
- The US imposed a trade embargo, worsening poverty and delaying recovery.

## Geopolitical and Global Impact

- **Decline of US Global Standing**

- War revealed limits of US military power.
- Challenged the US image as a global superpower.
- Strengthened anti-imperialist movements globally. Lessons in Asymmetrical Warfare
- Demonstrated effectiveness of guerrilla tactics.
- Underscored limitations of superior technology against nationalist resistance.

- **Symbol of Global Solidarity**

- Inspired worldwide anti-war and peace movements.
- Unprecedented global opposition to US policy.

### **Ideological Implications: Communism vs Capitalism**

- **Cold War Symbolism:** The Vietnam War was a proxy conflict in the larger Cold War rivalry.
  - The conflict aligned communist North Vietnam (with Soviet and Chinese support) against US-backed capitalist South Vietnam and its coalition partners.
- **Test of Ideological Resolve:** The US viewed intervention as essential to contain communism (Domino Theory).
  - North Vietnam saw the war as part of an anti-imperialist revolution.
- **Outcome:** Communist ideology triumphed in Vietnam, but Domino Theory failed—other Southeast Asian nations did not fall to communism.
  - Undermined Western narrative of ideological supremacy and triggered global rethinking of foreign intervention policy.



## India's Role and Involvement in the Vietnam War

- **Diplomatic Standpoint**
  - India maintained a principled non-aligned position as founding member of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) but was sympathetic to North Vietnam's anti-colonial struggle.
  - India recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) early on and maintained diplomatic relations.
- **Political Support for Vietnam**
  - Backed Ho Chi Minh's Government: First non-communist country to recognize North Vietnam (1954)
    - Opposed US intervention at UN forums, even at the cost of straining Indo-US relations.
  - Nehru's Stance: Called Vietnam War "neo-colonialism" (1962)



- Allowed Vietnamese diplomats to operate in Delhi despite US pressure

#### About International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC)

- Also known as the International Control Commission (ICC), it was an international force established in 1954 to monitor compliance with the Geneva Accords that ended the First Indochina War.
- The ICSC comprised inspectors from Canada, Poland, and India.
- Operations: The commission operated in various locations throughout Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, investigating compliance and monitoring the enforcement of the peace accords.
- Purpose: To supervise the ceasefire, the withdrawal of French troops, the repatriation of military and civilian prisoners, and the return of refugees to their homes.

- **Role in the Geneva Accords (1954)**

- India played a key role as Chair of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC):
  - Established under the Geneva Accord to monitor the ceasefire and the political settlement.
  - India's Balancing Role: Navigated between Western and Communist blocs in its ICSC leadership.

- **Support to Vietnam**

- India provided moral and political support to Vietnam's struggle for independence and unification.
- Advocated for peaceful resolution and upholding of the Geneva Accords.

- Expressed solidarity with Vietnamese people during US bombings and condemned the use of chemical weapons like Agent Orange.
- **Post-War Relations**
  - India was among the first countries to establish full diplomatic ties with the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1972.
  - Bilateral ties deepened, including cooperation in: Oil exploration; Defense and capacity building; Strategic partnership (from 2007); Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (since 2016).
- **Multilateral Cooperation**
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  - India and Vietnam now collaborate on platforms such as: ASEAN; East Asia Summit; Mekong-Ganga Cooperation; United Nations.
  - Vietnam supports India's candidature for permanent seat at the UNSC and membership in APEC.

#### About Vietnam

- Location: Southeast Asia, on the eastern edge of the Indochinese Peninsula.
- Borders:
  - North: China

- West: Laos and Cambodia
- East and South: South China Sea
- Major Rivers: Red River (north); Mekong River (south)
- Capital: Hanoi
- Major City: Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon)
- Currency: Vietnamese Dong (VND)
- Government: Socialist Republic (One-party communist state)
- Independence: Declared from French colonial rule on 2nd September 1945
- Economy: Mixed economy with a market-oriented reform policy since 1986 (Doi Moi).
- Major Religion: Buddhism (with elements of Confucianism and Taoism)
- Language: Vietnamese (with Latin script)