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Background Brief:

Why are Vietnamese Split on the War in Ukraine?

July 28, 2022

Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, we have witnessed a split among Vietnamese on how to view this war, some in favor, some against.

Q1. How do you explain this phenomenon? Do you think it is socially significant?

ANSWER: The split in the Vietnamese community over the war in Ukraine is the result of the personal experiences studying, living and working in Russia or the Ukraine. Many Vietnamese formed close personal bonds with their hosts. The majority lived in the Russian Federation and this is reflected in social media discussions. There is a second reason, the Soviet Union/Russian Federation supported Vietnam in its resistance to the United States and is viewed as a reliable friend by many Vietnamese.

Q2. The Vietnam War caused a deep division in the heart of the United States, and its consequences have lasted for decades. Do you think there will be consequences in the hearts of Vietnamese people about the Russo-Ukrainian war?

ANSWER: The most pertinent comparison would be between a divided America and a relatively unified Russia over wars waged by their governments against Vietnam and Ukraine, respectively. The war in Ukraine is likely to be protracted. The people of Vietnam will not be materially affected. They will take their cue from the government. The real challenge will come when the war ends. The Vietnamese government will have to determine how to restore relations with Ukraine and how much to contribute to its reconstruction.

Q3. I met Vietnamese people, living in Ukraine and serving in the Ukrainian army against Russia. These people have a very high fighting spirit; can you explain why they have such spirit?

ANSWER: There are parallels between Vietnam's resistance against America and the Ukrainian resistance against Russia. Vietnamese know that their war resisting the United States would not have succeeded without outside assistance and support, including from the Ukraine. They also know that Vietnam will need outside support should a conflict breakout with China. In other words, they are sympathetic and feel to demonstrate solidarity with the victims of aggression.

Q4. Are you yourself on the side of opposing Russia's aggression against Ukraine? Why do you support or oppose, if any?

ANSWER: I am totally opposed to Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. It was unprovoked and is being executed with unspeakable barbarity against a defenceless civilian population. Putin's war is not just aimed at the Ukraine but other former members of the Soviet Union. In addition, Putin seeks to destabilize Europe and undermine NATO.

I am most concerned that Russia is a nuclear power and because Russia is a dictatorship there are no checks and balances on what Vladimir Putin can do.

Q5. What are your comments about the Vietnamese reaction to the war? It seems to me they support Russia.

ANSWER: I am surprised by the scale of Vietnamese public support for Russia and Putin's propaganda line given that the Vietnamese media, while not taking sides, has presented the basic facts of the conflict. It seems to me that those Vietnamese who support Putin's line are in effect making roughly the same argument China used when it attacked Vietnam in 1979. China argued that it was conducting a "counter-attack in self-defence" due to Vietnamese provocations along the border and that the Hoa peoples were "ostracized and persecuted" so Vietnam had to be taught a lesson. The "Hoa people" in Ukraine are the Russian speaking community in the east.

Q6. Has the Vietnamese government responded to the Russia-Ukraine war properly?

ANSWER: Vietnam put its material interests above international law in responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine because it is almost entirely dependent on Russia for arms and military technology in order to defend itself. For example, Russia provided Vietnam with over 80 percent of arms procurements for the period 1995-2021.

Vietnam is doubly dependent on this legacy because the majority of Vietnam's military-technical specialists speak Russian and are familiar with Russian technology.

The day after Russia invaded Ukraine, Vietnam's first concern was to protect the lives and interests of some 7,000 Vietnamese citizens living in Ukraine. The spokesperson for Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also declared: "Viet Nam is deeply concerned with the armed conflict in Ukraine. We call on all relevant parties to exercise restraint, observe the United Nations Charter and the fundamental principles of international law, avoid the use of force, protect the people, and keep up dialogue to seek a peaceful solution."

Vietnam faced a dilemma when it had to vote on three anti-Russian resolutions put to the United Nations General Assembly. Before the vote, the Russian Ambassador declared that a vote for these resolutions would be viewed as an unfriendly act. Vietnam abstained on the votes to condemn Russian aggression and on the humanitarian consequences of the war. Vietnam voted against the resolution to suspend Russian membership on the UN Human Rights Council. In all three votes Vietnam was in a minority of ASEAN's ten members. However, India voted the same way as Vietnam thus providing some "diplomatic cover."

Vietnam has since maintained a low-profile and a neutral position.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Why are Vietnamese Split on the War in Ukraine?," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, July 28, 2022. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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