

Broad framing assignment

Scenario: Counterinsurgency operations against Khmer Rouge in 1980s

In 1979, Vietnam launched an invasion against the Khmer Rouge (KR) as a retaliation for its provocations and to end the brutal regime. After the fall of Phnom Penh, KR persisted by fighting a low intensity war against Vietnam and committing terrorism against both Cambodian and Vietnamese people. After capturing Phnom Penh, the Politburo had to decide whether to pull off the troops or fight against Khmer insurgents. For more details about the context, see Appendix.

Thesis

In this paper, based on historical information and analyses, we will analyze Vietnamese leaders' motivation and intentions based on how close their choice to broad framing or narrow framing. I argue that Le Duan and his generals chose war in favor of a short-term gain and were probably suffered from cognitive biases.

Choice architecture¹

Considering the year of 1979, right after the fall of Phnom Penh. This is a summary of what Vietnam was facing when dealing with KR.

	Wage war	Pull troops out
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Risk of a Chinese invasion (80%)- Gain immediate supports from Soviet Union (100%)- Chance of wiping out KR and achieve regional hegemony by installing a pro-Hanoi regime (65%)- Loses supports and aids from capitalist countries (80%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Resumed foreign aids from non-Soviet countries (70%)- Chance to negotiate for normalization with the West and China (10%)
Domestic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Wars and higher spending in military will damage the economy. (loses approx. 10% of national wealth)- Increase patriotism sentiment inside of country, which lead to greater political support from the public and the military generals (90%-100%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Fear of KR's revival and continuous sabotage (35%)- Reduce military spending (100%) and have a chance of recovering economy (60%)

(The numbers are only estimations)

Choice analyses

After weighing the two choices on international and domestic level, pulling the troops out of Cambodia seems to be a more reasonable choice, both long-term and short-term and across different categories of economy, military and diplomacy, it is a better choice overall. However, waging the war against the KR eliminates risks and help Vietnam get more secured and immediate “rewards” (Soviet aids, political supports, regional hegemony). That being said, if Vietnamese leaders make the choice using broad

¹ #risk: I assessed the risks and uncertainties in the table. Here, we can see that the war outcome itself is an uncertainty, and other possibilities like Chinese invasion are risks.

framing, they should have pulled the troops out right after capture Phnom Penh, otherwise, they would have continued the wars against KR insurgents.

Biases

In the decision making process, there are a few biases and cognitive factors that might drive the results in another direction. These biases tend to matter more in narrow framing context and lead to a sub-optimal choice. I will analyze potential biases that clouded Vietnamese leaders.

1/Discounting (tendency to prioritize near results, or seeing near future gains as less significant)²

In the choice analysis, we can see that continuing counterinsurgency operations in Cambodia benefit the near future than the long-term, overall benefit of staying neutral in Cambodia affairs. Le Duan, Vietnam's paramount leader at the time, was probably looking to solidify his rule amidst years of economic failures more than considering a better long-term choice in the future (see Appendix 2b, 2d).

2/Sunk cost³

In modern warfare, sunk cost is a major cognitive bias that affects political leaders. In war scenarios, sunk cost is the reluctance of pulling out the troops or ceasing military operations after committing efforts in the war.

Vietnam had already committed in a full-scale in Cambodia and damaged its diplomatic positions and relationships. Coupled with strong supports from the Soviet bloc, Vietnamese leaders decided to drag on the war. Also, having sunk in the wars for so long, Vietnam had to make sure that Hun Sen's regime survive to somewhat recover the damage caused by the war effort.

3/Optimism bias and risk aversive bias

Vietnamese leaders might also had suffered from optimism bias. The Politburo miscalculated that they would destroy KR in a few weeks and gained international supports for their “righteous” act (see Appendix 2e).

From historical analysis, it was suggested that Le Duan and his aides probably had suffered from risk aversive biases as well. They wanted to took out the KR completely in fear of its potential revival and a two-pronged attack from China and Cambodia. Also, they probably preferred a more secure choice like supports from Soviet Union over a chance of getting aids from non-aligned countries such as Japan and Scandinavian countries.

Conclusion

In the historical reality, the Vietnamese government chose to wage war against the Khmer Rouge and utterly overthrew the Kampuchea government. Perhaps, the Vietnamese government, in the interest of securing borders and internal stability, chose a strategy that is more of narrow framing rather than broad

² #discounting: how discounting makes the short-term choice going to war more attractive to Vietnamese leaders. Furthermore, Le Duan was old and his rule only lasted for a few more years before retiring or death, thus he chose a short-term gain for his benefits.

³ #sunkcost: how sunk cost may have affected the decision, based on historical analyses

framing. Through these analyses and actual historical context, we see how broad framing in politics is mainly about maximizing strategic, overall utility while narrow framing is more closely tied with personal and constituents' interests⁴. Given that the Communist government prioritized political survival at the time, the choice is understandable.

Appendix

Summary:

About the context of the war, Vietnam is a war-torn country trying to recover after 20 years of fighting in the Vietnam war. However, reunification process was not going well and failures in economic management led to losses in public supports. Furthermore, Vietnam is isolated due to strict sanctions imposed by the US and worsened relationship with China. For more details, see Appendix.

1/Explanation about the war: the counterinsurgency operations in Cambodia post-1979

When people talk about the 1979 war, they often think about Vietnam's invasion to topple Khmer Rouge but ignore the long and costly counterinsurgency efforts post 1979. Vietnam's invasion began on December 21st 1978 and fall of Phnom Penh was on January 7th 1979, which is a mere 18 days military operation to capture Phnom Penh and oust Khmer Rouge. This paper discuss about the occupation of Cambodia and counterinsurgency operations, which arguably damaged Vietnam on the long term.

2/War context:

a)Sino-Soviet split:

In the Communist bloc, China and Soviet Union have been contesting for power and Vietnam became the battlefield of will between these two nations. In 1978, Vietnam signed a treaty with Soviet Union for a greater political cooperation, and angered China in the process. Sino-Vietnam border wars from 1979 to 1988 is a display of Sino-Soviet contest for power and influence in Vietnam.

b)Post-75 Vietnam:

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam is unified under Communist rule. However, the reunification process was not simple. The government had to deal with social, economic, political legacies from the previous regime and recover the economy after 30 years of warring. In the second Five Years Plan (1976-1981), Vietnam's economy was staggered because of economic mismanagements and the social, political situation in Southern Vietnam was not stable. These reasons contribute to Le Duan's decision to wage war against Khmer Rouge to solidify his power.

c)Worsened relationship with other ASEAN members and neutral countries

As soon as the People's Army of Vietnam captured Phnom Penh, ASEAN members immediately condemned Vietnam for the aggressive act. Some of the countries were fearing of Vietnam was striving for regional hegemony, and thus took a very hostile stance against Vietnam.

⁴ #broadframing: how broadframing is used in politics. Although Vietnam is an authoritarian country, the Politburo is a collective decision making body, which is still being affected by interest groups.

d) Political, leadership factors they may pushed Vietnam into the war

After ending the war, Vietnam's highest decision making body is mostly composed with revolutionaries, military generals and hardliners. Therefore, they are more likely to advocate for wars and their voices would have more weight compared to other reformists like Nguyen Van Linh. It is only after 1986 when Nguyen Van Linh assumed the party's leadership position and Le Duan's health had worsened, Vietnam began to pull troops out of Cambodia.

e) Miscalculations of Vietnamese leaders

Prior to the invasion in 1978, the Politburo miscalculated the international support for the war since Khmer Rouge was committing acts against humanities in both Cambodia and Vietnam. For this reason, I believe that Vietnamese leaders may have assessed the diplomacy toll lower than the reality.

Militarily, Vietnam's leaders expected to destroy Khmer Rouge in only a few weeks. In the reality, Khmer Rouge waged a low-intensity war and was backed by China, which prolonged the war for more than 10 years.

3/Other data:

*Foreign aids to Vietnam:

China:

Aid from China, reportedly close to US\$300 million in 1977 and 1978, dropped to zero in 1979, and Vietnamese recovery in coal production was profoundly affected by the accompanying loss of ethnic Chinese workers.

Soviet Union:

During the Chinese invasion in February 1979, the Soviet Union provided \$1.4 billion worth of military aid to Vietnam, a figure that peaked at \$1.7 billion in the period between 1981 and 1985. Then, to help Vietnam implement its third Five Year Plan (1981–1985), the Soviet Union provided a sum of \$5.4 billion to the Vietnamese Government for its expenditures; economic aid ultimately reached \$1.8 billion annually. The Soviet Union also provided 90 percent of Vietnam's demand for raw materials and 70 percent of its grain imports.

Japan:

In 1979 Japan suspended its Official Development Assistance funds (a mixture of grants and low-interest loans amounting to US\$135 million) and made renewal contingent upon Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia.