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Vainly trying to end a war: Britain and Vietnam

The prime feature of Britain's diplomacy in the post-war period was the "special relationship" with the United States, according to research carried out by Nicholas Tarling.* In face of the other great super-power, the Soviet Union, Britain needed an American security guarantee, and it sought to avoid clashes with its essential ally. It also hoped, more ambitiously, to influence it. Leftists at the time argued that the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, could have had more influence if he had spoken out against President Johnson's policies. But that was unlikely, though he was certainly not going to contribute troops.

The President was fighting within narrow limits, imposed by international factors, but also by his unwillingness to risk the domestic impact of a wider war. Mobilisation of patriotic sentiments might force him into risky actions that in turn could lead to an open confrontation with Communist China or the Soviet Union. A widening of the war might also prevent the achievement of his domestic "Great Society" programmes.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam [North Vietnam] was determined to unify the long disunited country, while the US supported the Republic of Vietnam [South Vietnam]. The British Foreign Office had no answers on Vietnam that could be helpful. Leading officials thought that the "war" was unwinnable, and that Britain should help to get the US out without loss of face. But, beset by fiscal and economic problems, in which US help might be needed, the Labour Government was cautious about raising the issue with the President.

Wilson turned increasingly to the Russians, whom he thought he knew. Khrushchev's successors revived Russian interest in Vietnam, and Wilson believed that Britain could exercise some influence on them by pointing to its influence with the US. In turn he could, he hoped, persuade them to

influence the DRV, and so provide the US with a prospect for negotiating the end of the war. At the same time, that would demonstrate to critics at home that his government was trying to end the struggle, and persuade others that Britain was still playing a world role, even if it was no longer a world power.

The Russians were, however, unwilling or unable to do much to help. One reason was the attitude of the PRC. Mao's China had taken up the cause of the revolutionary struggle, and the "Bloc" disintegrated. But that did not make it easier for the Soviet Union to pursue a policy that differed completely from China's. The competition of the two powers for the leadership of world communism was as conducive to extremism as their earlier cooperation had been, if not more. The Russians could not be seen to be letting the North Vietnamese down while the Chinese were supporting them, and that they continued to do.

Was Britain's way with LBJ – not all the way, but some – doomed to frustration? The politicians tried to reconcile misgivings and opposition at home with their overall reliance on the US. Their efforts were unlikely to succeed, but it is understandable that they should have been made, and hard to conclude that they should not have been.

**The full study is published in a book authored by Nicholas Tarling: *The British and the Vietnam War: Their Way with LBJ*. Singapore: NUS Press (2017).*

