

# Neutrality and Vietnam. *By Amitai Etzioni*

**S**ECRETARY of Defense Robert S. McNamara's latest swing through South Vietnam could, at least temporarily, help boost the stock of General Nguyen Khanh's regime. But it has not eliminated the factors in the conflict there which make genuine neutrality, a neutrality that is not merely a thin cover for U.S. retreat and Communist take-over, appear attractive. And, in my view, the only condition under which neutralization can be achieved—*i.e.*, that it be in the interest of all the major powers concerned—now seems to exist.

There are two important reasons for the Soviet Union to be interested in establishing neutrality. First, if the present Communist drive in South Vietnam succeeds, the pro-Peking factions in the Communist parties of the underdeveloped world—and particularly those in Asia—will see it as a decisive triumph of the Chinese over the Soviet position. A Viet Cong victory would inevitably be viewed as a validation of the Chinese claim that “wars of national liberation” can indeed be fought without courting the danger of nuclear war. Soviet influence in

the international Communist movement could not then help but decline.

Secondly, by helping to implement genuine neutrality, the Soviets could proclaim that they prevented a dangerous confrontation with U.S. power, a confrontation which, if Peking's counsel had been followed, would have been ineluctable. A Moscow-supported neutralization in South Vietnam could thus provide an impressive ideological victory over Peking.

With the prospect of increased American pressure looming large, China too might accept neutrality in South Vietnam. It seems bent on devoting the next 10 years to building up both its economic and

military power, and is hardly likely to opt for a risky, expensive military adventure. China's agriculture is in a mess, its industrialization plan is behind schedule, and the country is experiencing a general decline in morale. In addition, Peking has yet to test a single atomic weapon, and most experts now estimate it will not be capable of delivering nuclear bombs—the *sine qua non* for big-power status—within the next decade.

Of course, the most equitable plan would include North Vietnam in any proposed neutral zone. This would also make it easier for President Johnson to sell the plan in the United States, and would provide a better precedent for neutralizing other areas of East-West conflict. But the North Vietnamese are extremely unlikely to consider even discussing General de Gaulle's proposal for neutralizing the whole area. They are too confident of winning the war in South Vietnam, of Peking's support and, in the event of Washington's initiating war-like actions against them, of Moscow's backing. Moreover, neutralization of North Vietnam would mean a loss of influence and face for China, and no genuine neutralization can be achieved without Mao Tse-tung's blessings.

Nevertheless, China's bellicose talk covers up a far from daring

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foreign policy. Peking has refrained from invading Taiwan, attempting to annex Hong Kong, or driving into India after collapsing India's defenses. Similarly, it has not tried to occupy the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu.

Instead, Chinese policy seems aimed at establishing weak, friendly or neutralist governments on its borders, with the object of safeguarding its flanks and also leaving the door open for a more expansionist policy at a later day. Thus China has improved its relations with Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Ceylon, Burma, and Cambodia. It has also raised its standing with many Western countries, including Britain, France and Canada, as well as its industrialized neighbors, Japan and Australia.

Under these circumstances, a neutral South Vietnam (or Laos) would be no more "exposed" to outside aggression than neutral Cambodia, Nepal, Burma, or Afghanistan. It should be remembered, too, that one factor which protects the neutrality of these countries is the prospect of U.S. forces being deployed against an aggressor. Such a deterrent should be introduced into South Vietnam as well: We should make it clear that if neutrality is agreed to in South Vietnam or Laos and then breached, we shall come to their assistance with all the means we deem fit. (For psychological effect, I favor maintaining a "remote deterrence" force ready for deployment, at least during the transition period.)

**B**UT WHAT about indirect aggression? Wouldn't the Chinese and North Vietnamese continue to ship military supplies to the Viet Cong and thereby enable it to accomplish a take-over from within? This seems a remote possibility. Arms shipments from the North are even now quite small. The bulk of the Viet Cong's arsenal consists of American weapons captured from the South Vietnamese,

home-made equipment, and weapons taken over from the French during the Indochinese War.

As for covert arms shipments of any magnitude, they are almost invariably detected—as they were in Palestine in 1947, in Guatemala in 1954, and in Venezuela in 1963. To further increase the visibility of such shipments, however, I would propose positioning a UN Observer Force, composed of units from nations in the region, on the borders between North and South Vietnam and on the borders which separate Laos from North Vietnam and China. Not that this Force could actually prevent arms shipments across borders; but it could serve to inform world opinion of which side has violated the neutrality plan.

Still, it is fair to ask why the Chinese should now abide by a plan similar to the unsuccessful one drawn up in Geneva in 1954. The answer lies, in part, in Peking's fear of American tactical nuclear weapons. Americans tend not to pay much attention to occasional testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, or to an article in a military magazine which explores the use of such weapons in a confrontation with China. Seen through the Chinese Communists' paranoid eyes, however, such things look a good deal different.

The Chinese appear confident that if they were attacked Moscow would have to support them or else lose the confidence of the other Communist countries as well as its global power status. But if China attempted to annex a negotiated neutralized zone, at once violating a plan the Soviet Union favors and becoming embroiled in a fight with the U.S., it would almost surely be on its own. This is one of the principal reasons the Chinese have followed a cautious policy while bitterly complaining of the Soviets' refusal to give them nuclear backing. It also helps explain why Peking has not openly come to the aid of the Viet Cong, despite massive Ameri-

can help to the South Vietnamese government; and why it has been so slow and circumspect in encouraging pro-Communist forces in Laos, though the field has been left wide open to them.

To be sure, there is one "catch" to neutralization. Once it goes into effect, it is virtually certain that revolutionary governments will be established in both South Vietnam and Laos—particularly if all foreign powers truly refrain from intervention. But if these two countries are not annexed to China, as Burma is not, or as Yugoslavia is not annexed to the Soviet bloc, or as Afghanistan is not annexed to either, then it might well be possible for them to develop more economically and politically stable governments. It seems safe to say that a neutral Laos and a neutral South Vietnam will show no more taste for being swallowed up by the Communists than has Belgrade, Rangoon or Kabul.

Granted, even with neutralization the situation will still be a far cry from what we would like. And certainly it involves some risks, but at this late hour it seems the best way out of a difficult situation. Compared with alternative plans now being discussed in Washington, neutralization is fraught with the least danger of provoking a nuclear war, has the least chance of pushing Peking back into Moscow's arms, and seems least likely to force the United States into any direct confrontation.

Current suggestions to blockade or bomb North Vietnam, even if supplemented by South Vietnamese raids, will not necessarily lead to a military victory. At best, such actions might serve to increase the other side's interest in neutralizing the area; at worst, it could involve the U.S.—perhaps before November—in another Korea. Genuine neutralization, on the other hand, offers the twin virtues of making it possible to gain time and avert disaster.