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Raymond Aron

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Between the Lines of Questionable Battles

By **Raymond Aron**

Raymond Aron (1905-1983) was, among other things, Professor at the Collège de France and a member of the Académie des sciences morales et politiques. He was the author of reference books on International relations, including *Paix et guerres entre les nations* (*Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*), Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1962.

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This article was published in *Politique étrangère* in 1979, the year the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) was founded. In it, Raymond Aron reviews important events of the previous decade, such as the Vietnam War. He particularly reflects on the place of law, morality, force and national interest in international relations. Related topics, like the right to intervene and the responsibility to protect, are implicitly included in this article.

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The French in 1954 and the Americans in 1973 withdrew from the three countries in the Indochina peninsula, now subject to parties that claim to follow the same ideology. And the wars continue, either between armies, or between an army and guerrilla forces. The withdrawal of the Western powers did not enable the people to decide on self-determination, on their desire for independence or their quarrels. Previously involved in the East-West conflict, here the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians are the subject of the rivalry between the two great Marxist-Leninist powers.

The analyst who wants to score points against Marxism-Leninism can find opportunities there. The combatants profess the same doctrine, which they counter by their deeds. If capitalism is intrinsically imperialist and socialism is intrinsically peaceful, how do these views reconcile with experience? The Viets and the Khmer Rouge, allied against the Americans and the governments supported by them, seem to have foreseen the new power struggle from the day of their joint victory. The Chinese had supported and supplied the Hanoi government during the first war against the French, as well as during the second one against the "puppets" in Saigon and the United States. Four years after the fall of Thieu the Vietnamese

were closely linked to Moscow, incorporated into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and at the same time deemed enemies by the Chinese, the formidable neighbor they resisted for centuries.

The East-West rivalry obeyed unwritten rules that were more or less respected. The most rarely broken rule was the one that forbade border crossings by regular armies. It seems that it no longer inspires respect. Indian troops, governed at the time by Mrs Gandhi, crossed the border of Pakistan's eastern province, a province in revolt against the so-called central government in Islamabad, some 3,000 kilometers from Bengal. Should the then "Empress of India" be accused of aggression? Formally, she definitely should be, but what was the alternative? Voters in what became Bangladesh had voted overwhelmingly for the independence party. Negotiations between General Yahya Khan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the independence party leader and the father of the nation (later assassinated), had failed. The latter was thrown in prison; revolt broke out and repression too; insurgents in the eastern province proclaimed their state, and this provoked resistance and guerrilla warfare. Without Indian intervention, guerrilla warfare and repression would have continued for years. The legal judgment does not leave any doubt; however, the political and moral judgment wavers. In Africa, Tanzania sent its troops, accompanied by Ugandan refugees, to attack Field Marshal Idi Amin's bloodthirsty dictatorship. The Tanzanian troops have not yet withdrawn and Uganda has not established relatively stable government. Should we applaud the fall of a tyrant or fear the practice of justice by armed forces that set a precedent? If the neighbor of a country that is poorly treated by its rulers sets itself up as a vigilante, the foundation of the United Nations Charter falls apart. And the vigilante rarely acts out of selflessness.

The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops in some way reproduces the previous two cases. Pakistan's eastern province was suffering from a brutal military regime, and Field Marshal Idi Amin deserved every punishment. Pol Pot's regime inflicted appalling suffering on the people. These Marxist-Leninist leaders, responsible for the death of one or two million of their countrymen, were led by semi-intellectuals educated in Paris, who benefited from Chinese support. In this case, all the actors – the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the People's Republic of China – acted in accordance with the precepts or customs of Machtpolitik, or the most radical Machiavellianism. The Soviet Union sought a trusted ally on a diplomatic and military footing to the south of China. By the same logic, China was trying to break the encirclement and therefore weaken Vietnam, which was won over to the Soviet cause. There remains the case of the two smaller countries, Vietnam and Cambodia. Why did they not both try to remove themselves from the larger powers' quarrel?

As far as we know, the conflict between the Vietnamese and the Cambodians was not originally caused or manipulated by the Russians and Chinese. Possibly, even before the defeat of American "imperialism", it broke out on the day the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge came to power. According to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Pol Pot's team was obsessed with the Vietnamese threat, and, in its paranoia, believed it was hardening and preparing the people for the ultimate test, the fight for the survival of the Khmer people against the Vietnamese wish to destroy them.

This strategic and political analysis seems too simple, so to speak. The Marxist-Leninist parties are hardly accusing each other of betraying their common truth. The Chinese scarcely assert the superiority of Khmer Marxism over Vietnamese Marxism. The Chinese criticize the Vietnamese attack – an irrefutable fact, according to the normal language of international law. The Vietnamese counter by citing Cambodian provocation and, additionally, the atrocities that they blame on Pol Pot's team.

The Chinese, in their turn, have introduced an innovation in the language of international relations. They have inflicted a "punishment" on Vietnam in response to the aggression committed against Cambodia. From Mrs Gandhi and President Nyerere to the Marxist-Leninist leaders in Beijing, Phnom Penh and Hanoi, cynicism is gradually asserting itself and the rationale of avenging justice is disappearing. With no international community empowered to intervene against a bloodthirsty despot, are rulers who assume the right to judge a neighboring regime any better than those they condemn? At times, it is almost shocking to cede to the principle of non-intervention in countries' domestic affairs; interventions also sometimes appear as heinous as passivity. What happens when there is no higher authority than that of states? Depending on the case, the detached observer, a person of goodwill, is inclined one way or the other. I preferred the Indian attack to a long guerrilla war; if the Vietnamese had acted out of concern for the Khmer people, they would not have invaded Cambodia, put in power "dissidents" who had been conveyed in Vietnamese army trucks, nor added to the affliction of a people already bled dry and devastated by bombing, war and the Khmer Rouge's madness.

What happens when there is no higher authority than that of states?

Thus, events in the Indochinese peninsula mark another phase in global politics, unless they reveal another style of interstate relations. Should the warring parties' Marxism-Leninism be blamed, or other historical traditions? I hesitate to answer, but am inclined to say no. In

Europe, the respect of borders is explained by the face-off of the two superpowers' armies. Too many explosives were stockpiled by both sides for anyone to risk lighting a match. The fight for Berlin proceeded prudently; West Berlin was symbolically American territory. And we should note that Stalin did not bring Tito to heel with military aid, as Khrushchev did in Hungary, and Brezhnev did in Czechoslovakia. Was he more cautious than his successors? Was the division of Europe not yet sufficiently stabilized? Did the lack of a common border between the big and the smaller, disobedient brother create an obstacle? All these reasons seem plausible to me; the decisive reason in my opinion is: Stalin thought that Tito and his people would have fought against the aggressor, even Russian. The Hungarians fought, and, within a few days, the matter was settled. In Yugoslavia, it risked becoming protracted. In Africa, the leaders of the new countries agreed to the principle of respect for borders, not so much out of submission to the United Nations Covenant as from fear of challenging the borders. These were in fact mapped out by the European powers, all arbitrary to one degree or another, cut ethnic groups in two or three, and grouped heterogeneous ethnicities together. This is why almost all the African states took a stand against the Biafra revolt to save Nigeria. Similarly, Somali forays into Ogaden to support Somali rebels against the government in Addis-Ababa met with little support and sympathy in Africa. The political and legal principle is transformed into a moral duty. For how long? I dare not say. States tend to continue to exist.

Should the Indochinese case be considered unique or abnormal? Let us rather say that various circumstances promoted, so to speak, the renewal of wars after the withdrawal of the Western powers. The Chinese have a tradition of limited border operations. In 1962, they gave India a lesson on the heights of the Himalayas. This time, the "punishment" inflicted on Vietnam also implied a challenge to the Soviet Union. The latter did not take up the gauntlet, for reasons we do not know. It is powerful enough to show that it does not fear anyone, and perhaps it hopes to normalize relations with the People's Republic of China.

Vietnam greatly dominates Laos and Cambodia through the size of its population, its resources and its army. This is what precipitated the decline of the Khmer empire in the past. France had created an Indochinese Federation, and the Vietnamese considered themselves the heirs of the federal power. In Laos, they did not need a visible invasion to establish themselves as masters. The Americans, after Lon Nol's coup, brought South Vietnamese troops into Cambodia, who were greeted by the population as invaders and not as allies. The Vietnamese could probably have

established their domination in Cambodia in the same way as in Laos: Pol Pot's aggressiveness provided the Vietnamese with the opportunity, given the lack of justification, to use force.

The United States and the Europeans are somewhat fatuous spectators in the face of this imbroglio or gangsters' quarrel. They condemn the Vietnamese invasion and do not approve of the punishment administered to the culprit. It seems the Chinese rulers have some contempt for the Americans, who no longer resist Soviet hegemony towards the Europeans, who also profess to ignore the Soviet threat. Nothing is resolved, either in the field or in diplomatic negotiations. The Cambodian resistance continues and representatives of the Khmer Rouge occupy Cambodia's seat at the United Nations. Prince Norodom Sihanouk does not endorse either of the two communist "regimes", one a slave of Vietnam and the other one taking refuge in the forests. During the coming months, Cambodians will starve by the thousands or hundreds of thousands as the Vietnamese army resumes its offensive.

The morality, amorality or immorality of foreign policy

The Western countries play hardly any role in this part of the world. They are not directly responsible for the horrors of Pol Pot's regime or for Vietnamese imperialism. But they can no longer ignore the part they have had in these people's misfortune; first the French, and then the Americans. It is not a question of rousing the passions of yesterday, or of agreeing with one or the other, but of thinking about matters of conscience – the morality, amorality or immorality of foreign policy.

In 1944, 1945 and 1947, the choice was obvious, so to speak. France, which had just emerged from the shadow of occupation, was then governed by General de Gaulle, who sent an expeditionary corps to Vietnam, which was intended to take part in the last battles against Japan. The North was occupied by the Chinese and the South by the British. The French troops had to relieve the occupying forces, but once the relief had been carried out and the French freed from Japanese prisons, what goal should the Provisional Government of the Republic have pursued? Nowadays, consensus would be achieved without difficulty. The French Union formula should not mask the continuity of a semi-colonial regime, but, on the contrary, facilitate the path to independence. The Viet Minh started the war in 1946, but the French bear the major responsibility for it, by bombing Haiphong and by forming a government for Cochinchina intended to prevent the unity of the three Kys: Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin.

At that time, there was no question of conscience. We had not produced any effective figures in a political adventure against Ho Chi Minh, and we had not integrated locals into the expeditionary corps in Asia. Resistance to Japan was conflated with the nationalist movement. Beyond the controversy and negotiations, one single question arose: to freely accept the end of the colonial regime, and hence the independence of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, or to try, as we did, to keep half of what was allotted? Ho Chi Minh's nationalists were communists or led by communists, but neither General de Gaulle nor the Ministers of the Fourth Republic, at least until the Korean War, led a crusade or *containment* policy against communist expansion. They defended the French empire. In a conversation I had with him in 1953, General Navarre refused to think of the French fight as part of the Western or American exclusively anti-communist strategy. The Americans were looking for non-communist rulers, independent from the French, and the French for rulers favorable to the French Union and inclined to settle for autonomy. To simplify, but without falsifying the historical reality, it can be said that the first Vietnam War was caused by the French refusal to grant independence to the three countries in Indochina, more specifically to the so-called Viet Minh party, a coalition in which the communists held key positions.

The morality agreed with the country's national interest

In this case, morality, so far as this word can be used, aligned with the country's national interest. In 1945, the Allies (the Americans and the British) had accepted the principle of self-determination; the Americans and the Soviets both condemned the European empires. The French themselves no longer believed in the civilizing mission; how many of them would have considered it moral to sacrifice men and resources to preserve a few crumbs of imperial authority? And the national interest did not suggest another solution. André Malraux, who ascribed the same opinion to General Leclerc, told me in 1945 that ten years and 500,000 soldiers would be required to restore French order in Indochina. He was mistaken in his optimism. After the communist victory in China, neither twenty years nor a million soldiers would have sufficed.

We were abandoning the people we had "protected" to a regime that we now know is merciless and cruel, this is true. Supporters of French Algeria accused me of losing interest in the Algerian people, by abandoning them to the National Liberation Front (FLN) and to the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA). In 1945 or in 1946, Vietnamese communism was not separate from the demand for independence. The facts did not give us the freedom of choice between the various contenders for

power in the liberated country. Under the pretense of rejecting Ho Chi Minh – General de Gaulle criticized the Ho Chi Minh solution again in 1950 – we prolonged a hopeless struggle for eight years. A local defeat and the Soviet Union's diplomacy at the time resulted in the Geneva Accords, which ultimately saved our face and allowed us to do what we should have done eight years previously.

In 1954, we could no longer hand over all of Vietnam to the Viet Minh. We had founded a Republic of Vietnam, recognized by most Western states. This republic had an administration and an army. Inevitably, a division similar to that of Korea resulted from the war. South Vietnam encompassed a fragment of Annam together with Cochinchina. It was opposed to North Vietnam, less in its traditions and historical memories than in its rejection of communism. In other words, it is the first Vietnam War more than the division of the country into two zones of occupation, Chinese and British, that created the conditions for the second war.

Admittedly, the Geneva Accords provided for free elections by universal suffrage, with a view to unification two years later. At the instigation of the Americans, Diem rejected this procedure. Equally, who thinks that the president of the South could have campaigned in Hanoi and held a public meeting there? Neither Korea, nor Germany, nor Vietnam, two fragments of one country subject to hostile regimes, could be united by ballot papers. From 1954 onwards, there were only two possibilities: the co-existence of both Vietnams or unification by force, hence with the North.

The decision to leave South Vietnam to its own devices had become far more difficult than the French decision to negotiate with the Viet Minh and to recognize the unity of the three Kys. In 1954, the US chiefs of staff warned the president against the risks of intervention. There is no army without a state; therefore, it was necessary to create a state so that the army could fulfill its role. What decision did the political and moral analysis suggest? In 1968, all the global and French left were lambasting US imperialism; nowadays, some admit their mistakes while many are questioning themselves. As for Solzhenitsyn, who is relentless, he criticizes the West's lack of courage.

In 1960, the majority of the South Vietnamese did not want to join their northern compatriots under communist rule, and, by the same token, they supported or at least accepted a state that was attacked by the other Vietnam, which was impatient to impose its regime on another state or quasi-state whose existence or legitimacy it did not recognize. If North Korea or the German Democratic Republic (GDR) tried the same thing, who would not accuse it of aggression?

The US policy in Vietnam was not immoral *per se*, if we agree with the previous propositions, if the Vietnamese did not expect the Northerners to be liberators; it conformed to the practices of the rivalry of the two superpowers, and protected a country or half a country from the rigor of the Hanoi regime. Why has this policy gradually been disavowed by US opinion and vilified by global opinion beyond those spheres that were always hostile to the United States? I see several reasons: first, the instability of the government in Saigon, the control of the generals, and the usual troubles of regimes financed by the United States – corruption, arbitrariness, etc; next, doubt about the people's feelings towards a state that seemed unable to survive without the presence of American troops; and, finally, the war methods adopted by the expeditionary corps from the United States, not only bombing the Ho Chi Minh trail, but also North Vietnam and Hanoi.

In the United States, as the war continued and victory became more distant, public opinion considered it increasingly immoral. A questionable fight for a poorly perceived national interest, the Vietnam War tore the nation apart and contributed to the youth and student rebellion. At the time, it was said to be a moral revolt; a lack of courage, replies Solzhenitsyn. In order to romanticize their revolt, the opponents idealized the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese regime. Should we now ask them to confess their mistake or their fault? Were the hawks right as opposed to the doves? Neither of them was completely wrong or right.

Diplomatic decisions, especially those that involve or could involve the use of military force, must first and foremost be subjected to a test of what is possible, of the balance between objectives and means. Whoever promises an ally a guarantee they cannot provide fails in the morality of action in a world of heartless monsters. After the occupation of the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland, France could only honor its treaty with Czechoslovakia through a war that the French were determined not to wage. Georges Bonnet and Édouard Daladier probably hoped to dissuade Hitler by threatening him to fight for the Sudetenland without the firm intention of carrying out this threat. They did the same in 1939 for Poland and perhaps they thought, even after the fall of Poland, that war would not take place.

An idea of P.-J. Proudhon comes to mind. In one of his books, which deserves to be better known, *War and Peace*, he writes more or less that the right of a nation does not go beyond its force and its ability to assimilate conquered people. "[…] as a means of conquest, battles were no longer respectable... The addition of Nice and Savoy was presented by

the imperial government as a border adjustment, motivated by the sudden expansion of Piedmont... Only Algeria became our conquest; but this conquest after thirty years, as after the first day, is reduced to a military occupation... France has spent, in an average year, fifty million and twenty-five thousand men to keep this trophy. The imperial government complains, like Louis-Philippe's government did previously."[1]. By refusing independence to the Viet Minh, France claimed the right of force without having the required resources.

The Americans fought a war that was called a war of principle in the last century and is now called ideological. It would seem ironic to accuse the US leaders of having under-estimated their force. But force is not reduced to arms and the military value of soldiers and their leaders. The will and unity of the people also constitutes a part of a nation's force. However, the United States paralyzed itself by refraining from mining Haiphong port – except, at the last moment, to extract peace in its own defeat – and by adopting a defensive strategy of attrition.

The right of a nation does not go beyond its force

Bombers crossed the demarcation line, never crossed by the expeditionary corps. In order to achieve their political goal – to build a self-sustaining South Vietnam – what military objective had to be set for the expeditionary corps? For the lack of clear thinking about the task entrusted to military chiefs, the latter conducted operations that seemed, at the same time, indeterminate, pointless and cruel. We can discuss whether the United States did not have the force needed, or whether it was not able to use it. The important fact is: American policy in Vietnam, legitimate in its intention, clearly became immoral because it produced the same destruction as its adversary without achieving its own purpose. Whoever judged the events in this light did not support either side and drew censure upon themselves from both of them. However, you could neither deceive yourself about the regime of a united Vietnam, nor advise continuing a war that challenged the unity of the people of the United States and distracted the imperial republic from its global role. Sometimes, immorality in foreign policy is born of blindness, incompetence and illusion.

The case of Cambodia arouses still more passion. Faced with the martyrdom of this country, threatened with disappearance and a victim of famine and the Vietnamese conquest, who cannot but question

1. P.-J. Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix*, Paris, 1861, p. 328-329.

themselves? What responsibility did I take with my pen, if not by taking action? Jean Lacouture let out a cry of horror and remorse. We knew that the Khmer Rouge were communists, and we did not refuse to believe Solzhenitsyn when he told us about the concentration camps that would multiply in the three countries of the Indochinese peninsula. We do not know the Khmer Rouge. Who are the "criminals"? Those who made the decision to bomb the strip of land where the fallback positions and rest bases of the Vietnamese fighters were based? Those who planned the coup that overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk and put General Lon Nol in power? President Nixon and Henry Kissinger who, indifferent to the Cambodians themselves, used this space of operations, which was probably a strategic error? Now, some argue that it was worthwhile continuing the war in order to spare the Cambodians from the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Others argue, with just as much reason, that the years of bombing and fighting have forged "new men" in Vietnam and Cambodia, seemingly insensitive to compassion and, so to speak, intoxicated, drunk on violence, similar to drug addicts who can no longer do without their poison.

I refuse to take sides in these polemics. In 1944-1945, even before the defeat of Germany, I was an advocate, not without scandalizing the Gaullists, of not returning to Indochina unless it was to negotiate the independence of the three countries with the nationalists. Then, I did not publicly campaign against the Indochinese war, not out of support for a policy that the leaders themselves did not approve of, but out of awareness of the trap we had fallen into. How to withdraw honorably? With regard to Algeria, I campaigned because I had more influence in 1957 than in 1946 or 1947.

Now, who recalls the Indochina wars without a troubled conscience? Neither those who unconditionally supported the Viet Cong and the Khmers, nor those who engaged with the United States in the war and dragged Cambodia into turmoil, congratulate themselves on or are proud of their past. In order to have a clear conscience in such times, you need the unwavering faith of a Manichean: good on one side and evil on another – although one may at least grant to the Manichean a virtue that rarely agrees with his faith: the transfer of values. Good becomes evil and evil becomes good. How are the roles divided between Moscow and Beijing, and between Beijing and Hanoi?

These observations, on the sidelines of a history full of noise and anger, illustrate the ongoing debate about violence and morality in international relations. At the outset, the collapse of an empire and a national claim:

despite the heterogeneity of the three Kys, Vietnam established itself as a nation, united by the strongest of the three components, Tonkin. By playing on the North-South opposition, the French, in the illusion of preserving part of their authority, started a civil war inside Vietnam, which combined with the decolonization war and incorporated the Vietnamese war of liberation, first into the East-West rivalry of the superpowers, and then into the Sino-Soviet rivalry. The French policy in 1945-1946 is the least excusable, because it was based on a misconception of national interest, on an extreme over-estimation of French force, and on a lack of understanding of the Vietnamese right of independence. This right was claimed by a communist party. At least, it should have been granted to the non-communist South – which the Americans and not the French did. The independent southern state gave in to the force of the North. The unity of the three Kys was realized in 1975, thirty years after the rejection of this unity by Thierry d'Argenlieu and the French government – a rejection that, in retrospect, seems neither prudent nor moral to me. Some will object that the Viet Minh's imperialism, which targeted Saigon in 1946, has since conquered Phnom Penh and Louang Prabang. Nobody can say with certainty if Vietnam, united in 1946, independent and formally in the French Union, would have developed as it did during the Thirty Years War. However, what this war tragically illustrates is the old proverb: old sins cast long shadows. In 1945, we could withdraw from Indochina honorably. In 1956 or 1957, we could honorably negotiate the stages of Algeria's independence. In 1962, our departure was not honorable. We left the Harkis to the victors' vengeance, and our troops were ordered to repatriate the lowest possible number of Algerians who had chosen our side. Henry Kissinger recalls that General de Gaulle told President Nixon in 1969 to withdraw from Vietnam as quickly as possible. He forgot that he needed four years to leave Algeria.

The ongoing dialogue of violence and morality

Should we condemn the war of principle and never defend a regime that we prefer to a heinous regime that, moreover, endorses the opposite side? Obviously not. The Vietnam War shook the United States, not because it was immoral and imperialist *per se*; it gradually appeared so because the United States did not dare or did not know how to use its force, and it had to lose politically without the excuse of a military defeat. Dien Bien Phu helped to serve France, whose governments were too weak to make a decision without justification. General de Gaulle transformed the withdrawal through the power of the word. The Americans were not in the fortunate position of having either a Dien Bien Phu or a de Gaulle. Do the crimes of the Vietnamese and Cambodians justify their struggle in retrospect? Do they condemn their

retreat? To which the other school replies that the Khmer Rouge would never have come to power if Nixon and Kissinger's policy had not devastated the country. The retrospective debate will remain as passionate as the controversies at the time of the events, the worst being that both sides somehow have their share of truth.

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