

Figure 5.3 South-East Asia in 1965

Following the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II, the French returned to reclaim their colony.

- However, the Vietnamese nationalists did not want the French back. They wanted their national independence.
- This led to the **First Indochina War** (1946–54) between the nationalist Vietminh, led by Ho Chi Minh, and the French.

The French suffered a humiliating defeat at **Dien Bien Phu** in 1954 and very soon left the country.

The **Geneva Conference of 1954** divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel into two countries. North Vietnam became a communist country led by Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam was non-communist and soon became a dictatorship led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

South Vietnam was given the solid backing of the United States.

American involvement in the Vietnam War

In 1960 opponents of the government of South Vietnam formed the National Liberation Front

(NLF) to fight the Diem regime. It became known as the **Vietcong**. The Vietcong comprised mostly southern Vietnamese although the organisation came to be dominated by the communist North.

The aims of the NLF (and North Vietnam) were the overthrow of the South and the unification of the country.

The United States saw this as further evidence of communism trying to take over the world. Following the policy of **containment** (see p. 72) the United States gradually built up its support of the South.

The United States also believed in the '**domino theory**' (an idea stated by President Eisenhower in 1954 that if one country fell to communism, then its neighbour would fall and, 'like a row of dominos', all the countries of South-East Asia would fall to communism) and so believed it had to make a stand in Vietnam against communism.

In 1965 the first US troops landed in Vietnam. By 1968 there were over 500 000 American troops fighting against the communists.

American involvement in the Vietnam War would prove to be disastrous for both Vietnam and the United States.

- Vietnam lost millions of lives and its country was devastated by war.
- The United States lost almost 60 000 men and suffered a humiliating defeat.
- The conflict in Vietnam was a struggle for reunification; the United States mistakenly viewed it as yet more communist expansion.

Why Australia entered the Vietnam War

It was against this background of American intervention that Prime Minister Menzies decided to commit Australian troops to Vietnam. Australia was to lose 500 men in Vietnam and at one stage had 8000 troops there. Australia had several reasons for becoming involved in the Vietnam War. Figure 5.4 summarises these reasons.

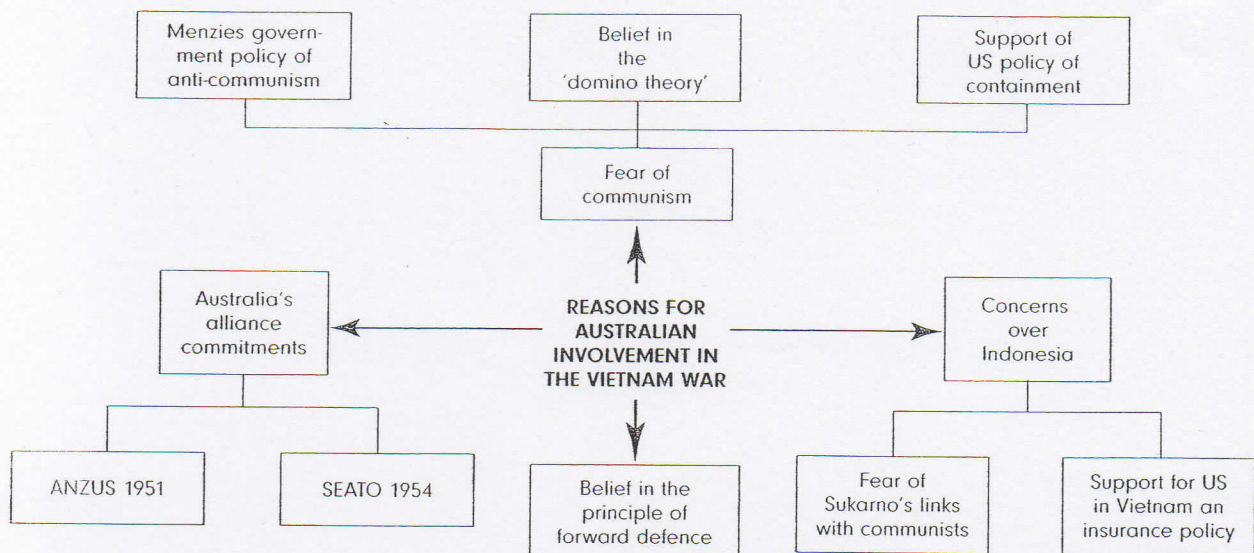


Figure 5.4 Reasons for Australian involvement in Vietnam

The government of Robert Menzies (prime minister 1949–66) had a long record of strong action against communism.

- It had sent Australian troops to fight against communist North Korea in the Korean War (1950–53).
- It had tried to ban the Communist Party in 1950–51.
- It took full advantage of the Petrov Affair in 1954.

Menzies was a firm believer in the American policy of containment. During the 1950s, Australians fought with American troops in Korea and with British troops in Malaya to contain the spread of communism.

Menzies had also expressed his belief in the ‘domino theory’.

The government believed that Australia had a commitment to support its ally the United States.

- Australia had been an ally of the United States (and New Zealand) since the signing of the ANZUS Pact in 1951.
- Australia was a member of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation), composed of nations who signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty in 1954.

The government also believed in ‘forward defence’ (the idea that it was better to face enemies in battle

long before they reached the shores of Australia). If communism was sweeping down through Asia to threaten Australia, then it was better to meet that threat in Vietnam.

Menzies told parliament in 1965: ‘The takeover of South Vietnam [by the communists] would be a direct military threat to Australia’.

In the early 1960s, Australia’s main defence concern was not Vietnam but Indonesia.

- Indonesia’s leader Sukarno was unpredictable.
- Indonesia had already taken control of West Papua and was involved in hostilities with Malaya.
- In Indonesia there was a large Communist Party with which Sukarno was becoming linked.
- In 1965 an alleged communist attempt to seize power led to hundreds of thousands of deaths in Indonesia and the eventual overthrow of Sukarno.

Australia’s fears over events in Indonesia had a direct impact on its policy in Vietnam.

- Involvement in Vietnam was a kind of ‘insurance policy’.
- If Australia supported the United States in Vietnam and proved itself a loyal ally, then the United States would presumably come to Australia’s assistance if it faced a future threat from Indonesia.