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# Friend or Foe? Neocolonial Rhetoric in US- Vietnam Relations

An analysis of presidential speeches between 1993 and 2009.

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2208579

POLI31555

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2024-25

Word count: 9995

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of BSc in Politics and International Relations.

I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group

## Dedications

I would like to dedicate this to my family who continue to support me in everything that I do. Also, thank you to my friends and of course, Ned, who has been my rock throughout this process.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Sam Power, for his invaluable time, guidance and expertise. Thank you for dealing with my endless questions and countless hours of Teams calls.

## Abstract

This dissertation investigates how neocolonial rhetoric is deployed in US presidential speeches to exert power over Vietnam between 1993 and 2009. Focusing on the period following the 1995 normalisation of diplomatic relations, it examines how neocolonial dynamics persist despite the formal establishment of friendly bilateral relations. Through in-depth reflexive thematic analysis of speeches by Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, this study identifies key neo-colonial rhetorical strategies, including paternalistic framings of US moral superiority; the promotion of economic liberalisation as the sole path to development; selective reframing of the Vietnam-American War and the construction of a common enemy through US-led global security initiatives. This dissertation finds these strategies reinforce asymmetrical power hierarchies in which American intervention is justified, and Vietnamese development is subordinated to US hegemonic structures. While contextual factors, such as China's rising superpower status and the tragic events of 9/11, significantly affect how neocolonial rhetoric is used by the US, the underlying objectives remain consistent: to exert power through covert, neocolonial means. Through applying a social constructivist framework to neocolonial theory, this study hopes to exemplify the value of the conjunction of these theories. In doing so, it offers an alternative to traditional realist frameworks for understanding asymmetrical international relations in the postcolonial context.

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## List of Abbreviations

ASEAN - Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BTA - Bilateral Trade Agreement

FDI - Foreign Direct Investment

IR - International Relations

MFN - Most Favoured Nation

POW/MIA - Prisoner of War/Missing in Action

PSI - Proliferation Security Initiative

RTA - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

TA - Thematic Analysis

TINA - There Is No Alternative

US - United States

# 1. Introduction

Over the past 75 years, US-Vietnam relations have shifted from conflict to cooperation, marked by a lingering struggle over power and influence (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 410). The aftermath of the Vietnam-American war was dominated by continued US attempts at control, this time through economic and political restrictions aiming to regulate Vietnamese development on the international stage, as opposed to armed conflict. Is it naïve to suggest formal normalisation of relations alone can remove the entrenched power dynamics associated with US domination? Indeed, this dissertation sees the formal normalisation of relations as providing a mask of overt friendly relations, to hide continued US neocolonial dynamics. Central to this argument is the role of US presidential speeches, which serve as a mechanism of soft power where neocolonial rhetoric is constructed and legitimised (Nye, 2017: 1). Drawing on the Two Presidents Thesis (Wildavsky, 1966: 7), which positions US Presidents as constrained domestically whilst holding great autonomous foreign policy power, this dissertation uses reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 35-36) of presidential speeches made by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush between 1993 and 2009, to better understand the mechanisms by which neocolonial rhetoric is used to exert power over Vietnam.

The period of diplomatic friendship between 1993-2009 allows for in-depth neocolonial rhetoric analysis, as overt conflictual relations formally ended with the 1995 normalisation of relations (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 410). Following this, a foundational relationship was formed with attempts at a strategic relationship under Bush (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 413). However, the extent that relations were mutually beneficial is increasingly questioned, as the US grapples with maintaining superpower status alongside the rise of China (Tuan, 2010; Kyianytsia, 2019).

The central research question guiding this dissertation is: How is neocolonial rhetoric used in US presidential speeches, between 1993-2009, to exert power over Vietnam?

For the purpose of this study, the key terms in this question are defined as follows:

Power is a loaded term and has been highly contested within academic literature (see Baldwin, 2013; Holsti, 1964). This dissertation uses Joseph Nye's (2017: 1) soft power conception defined as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion". This understanding moves away from associations with warfare, to emphasis on "technology, education and economic growth" (Nye, 1990: 154). Therefore, the focus of the second half of the research question refers to how the US uses tools in these identified areas to covertly influence decision-making of the Vietnamese government as favourable to US foreign policy goals.

Scholars debate whether rhetorics' normative function is to allow mutual understandings through social agreements (Herrick, 2020: 7), or whether it has a manipulative function in shaping audience knowledge (Gill and Whedbee, 1997: 12). As neocolonialism is rooted in productions of unequal power relations via covert "rhetoric, discourse and representation", this dissertation takes the latter definition (Na'puti, 2020: 7). Rhetoric, especially within political speeches, entails an inherent power relation as the speaker has a purpose to "persuade, perhaps to exhort and instruct" (Gill and Whedbee, 1997: 12). This is achieved through symbols like "any mark, sign, sound, or gesture" allowing communication of ideas (Herrick, 2020: 6). Foucault (1979: 1) explores rhetoric as political power, suggesting power is a malleable concept influenced by dominant symbolic systems in that moment. Therefore, neocolonial rhetoric, is conceptualised as the use of language and other symbols framing states as politically, economically and culturally inferior to others (Nkrumah, 1965: x), subsequently justifying unequal power relations characterised economic and political interference.

## **1.1 Aim and purpose**

Despite US-Vietnam relations being extensively academically researched (see Kattenburg, 1984; Martin, 2009; Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017), there is limited discussion of how neocolonialism affects covert US dominance mechanisms over Vietnam, especially in the post-normalisation era (for a limited exception see Gregg, 2020). Therefore, this research adds empirical data on US-Vietnam relations



whilst contributing more widely to the neocolonial field by showcasing its relevance in understanding post-Cold War international relations (IR). By focusing on US-Vietnam relations between 1993-2009, this dissertation offers insights into the enduring legacy of neocolonial patterns of power within contemporary politics. It also raises questions beyond the scope of this dissertation and flags the need for a detailed analysis of foreign policy strategies to expose neocolonial attitudes in the Global North.

US foreign policy analysis offers insights into presidential ambitions due to their significant, autonomous foreign policy power (Wildavsky, 1966: 7). As Clinton and Bush were leaders of the Democrat Party and the Republican Party respectively, the extent that neocolonial rhetoric is a structural characteristic of American politics or party-dependent will be assessed. This not only adds useful critical analysis to this dissertation but also provides valuable contributions to American foreign relations literature.

## **1.2 Enemies to ‘lovers’: US Vietnam Relations**

Following the end of the Vietnam-American War and the subsequent unification of Vietnam in 1975, bilateral relations remained non-existent and tense (Manyin, 2009: i). Post-war relations seemingly reached a nadir when in June 1978 Vietnam signed a formal alliance with the Soviet Union and became further strained when Vietnam invaded Cambodia (Pribbenow, 2006: 459). As a consequence, the US, China and the ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) states imposed a series of sanctions – largely in the form of embargoes – which, when the Reagan administration refused cooperation, made the possibility of a normalisation of relations increasingly unrealistic (Poon-Kim, 1977: 753). It is a period of isolation providing invaluable context, especially when measured against US claims that its guidance led Vietnam to have a place in global politics.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 created further hinderances for Vietnam, with the Soviet Union’s collapse meaning the loss of its key foreign trade partner (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 407-8). In a bid to build new trade relations, Vietnam introduced economic reforms transforming its economy from

centrally planned to market based (Robbins, 2011: 222). This sharp turn towards liberal capitalist practices caught the US's eye, increasing potential for reconciliation of relations. It prompted the US to finally lift its 19-year trade embargo against Vietnam in 1994, opening the gates for US investment in the attractive, new market (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 411). The subsequent year, normalisation of relations was finally achieved by Clinton (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 404). Post normalisation, both sides made seemingly encouraging efforts at strengthening relations (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017: 405), with the signing of a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA), and the US extending Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to Vietnam on the turn of the century (Le, 2013: 9). This formally declared Vietnam was to be treated equally to other states also receiving US preferential treatment, therefore marking Vietnam a friend. Their economic interdependence increased steadily in the 2000s with 17% of Vietnamese exports going to the US in 2011 (Martin, 2011: 9) and US firms being the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Vietnam in 2009 (Manyin, 2009: 12).

In the 2000s, Vietnam and the US aimed to elevate the strong economic ties already established through embarking on four annual summits between 2005-2009 where groundbreaking moments, like the first Vietnamese Prime Minister on US land since the War, took place (Manyin, 2009: 12). The 2005 and 2008 summits were particularly notable due to their focus on cultural integration (Dosch, 2009: 382). Agreements on Vietnamese military officers going to the US for English language training; resuming of US adoptions of Vietnamese children; and the launch of a bilateral education task force, highlights a shift from previously economic relations (Manyin, 2009: 11-12). This development provides vital context for analysis of neocolonial relations as cultural integration is key mechanisms of soft power (Nye, 2017: 1).

Since 2009, of which is beyond the timeframe of this dissertation, US-Vietnam relations have fluctuated. Chinese aggression in the South China Sea improved Vietnamese security relations with the Obama administration (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2019: 603). Whilst Trump's arrival in the Oval Office created instability through his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Siracusa and Nguyen, 2019: 602-3) and tariff-based protectionist policies (Head, 2025: n.p).

### **1.3 Chapter Outlines**

This dissertation begins by outlining the turbulent history of US-Vietnam relations, situating the research question within the post-1995 period of diplomatic normalisation. The Literature Review, Chapter 2, explores the three key themes within existing scholarship: US-Vietnam relations, neocolonial rhetoric, and US political speech. It also outlines the theoretical framework, justifying the choice of social constructivism for its compatibility with neocolonialism and ability to showcase how political speeches affect power relations. Next, Chapter 3 details the methodological approach, justifying the choice of a Reflexive Thematic Analysis of presidential speeches. This will highlight how the speeches' varied contextual nature reflects the multi-faceted nature of neocolonial rhetoric, therefore allowing for more valid analysis. This analytical approach provides a series of notable themes which, as explored in Chapter 4, showcase how neocolonial rhetorical strategies exert power over Vietnam. These include paternalistic US framing exemplifying the neocolonial "white saviour complex" (Wilcox, 2021: 6); promotions of economic liberalisation as the sole developmental path reinforcing "core-periphery" structural dependencies (Mahoney and Rodríguez-Franco, 2018: 22-6); selective memories of the Vietnam-American War, particularly emphasis on POW/MIA (Prisoners of War/Missing in Action) issues obscuring US responsibility and Vietnamese tragedy, clear evidence of Spivak's (2023: 76-78) neocolonial "epistemic violence"; and finally the rhetorical shift between Clinton and Bush, from global leadership framing to post-9/11 security discourse. The penultimate chapter details implications for future research, including comparative studies centring Vietnamese voices and reflections of broader US foreign policy approaches. It argues for the value of the conjunction of social constructivism and neocolonialism in providing an alternative IR approach, removing eurocentric and North American tendencies. The concluding chapter argues neocolonial rhetoric legitimises asymmetrical US-Vietnam relations therefore aligning with US foreign policy desires. It also considers the uncertain future of US neocolonial rhetoric, suggesting a critical juncture of US foreign policy under Trump.

## 2. Literature Review

### **2.1 Three understandings of US-Vietnam Relations: Strategic, Historical and Ideological**

There is significant literature exploring US-Vietnam relations during the conflict itself (see Hess, 1994; McMahon, 2002; Burns, 2017), however, literature becomes more limited post-war especially following the 1995 formal normalisation of relations (for limited examples see Siracusa and Nguyen, 2017; Le, 2013; Allen, 2009). Literature is focused into three main thematic camps: strategic relations (see Le, 2013; Nguyen and Tran, 2024) historical perspectives (see Manyin, 2009; Palmer, 2004), and ideological power relations (see Thao, 2019; Martini, 2004).

#### 2.1.1 Strategic relations

This literature clarifies the overt nature of US-Vietnam relations, using a realist lens to explain the logic behind normalisation of relations as driven by bilateral economic and geopolitical opportunities (see Donnelly, 2000). Whilst it lacks constructivist critical analysis, it offers valuable insights into how the US seeks to present relations with Vietnam as mutually beneficial (see Le, 2013; Tham, 2005). Realism views states as rational actors within an “anarchic international system”, acting strategically for survival (Manullang, 2022: 159). Whilst it aids understanding of the nature of international systems, it fails to acknowledge how factors like state communication and discursive relational framings affect power dynamics. There are some exceptions like Thayer (2018) whose work combines analysis of strategic relations with a constructivist emphasis on ideational factors and state perceptions. Similarly, Marciel (2023) highlights cultural norms and identities as crucial for US-Vietnam relations. However, these articles remain limited due to the absence of empirical data substantiating their constructivist claims. This dissertation will exemplify the usefulness of constructivist approaches in understanding US-Vietnam relations through providing data via thematic analysis. It also shifts the scope of analysis from realist, overt, foreign policy decisions to the covert use of neocolonial rhetoric.

Literature discussing economic relations following normalisation of relations is often focused on specific policies, for example, the BTA in 2000, and Vietnam achieving World Trade Organisation

membership in 2007 (Le, 2013: 9). Most literature citing closer relations, especially through economic interdependence, takes a positive stance, emphasising the relief of friendly US-Vietnam relations following decades of conflict (Tham, 2005; Hiebert, Nguyen and Poling, 2014). However, there is a growing, critical body of work questioning whether this newfound friendship is a panacea or a curse due to power asymmetries (Zambernardi, 2011; Vu, Soong and Nguyen, 2023). For instance, US dependency creation simultaneously aids Vietnam's economic development, maintains US control via trade and prevents Chinese dominance in Vietnam (Cossa and Khanna, 1997). This debate is important as power imbalances are core tenets of neocolonialism (Haag, 2012: 3-13). Other issues like POW/MIA resolution (Allen, 2009, Lord 1994) and defence relations (Jordan, Stern, and Lohman, 2012; Stern, 2009) dominate strategic relations literature. This study aims to further this critical literature, through critical analysis of neocolonial rhetoric within political speeches. In doing so, the true nature of relations is more likely to be revealed than through narrow analysis of specific policies.

### 2.1.2 Historical explanations

The second thematic camp investigating US-Vietnam relations post normalisation is historical explanations. This literature is not naïve to relational constraints, particularly human rights and political reform (Jendrzejczyk, 2000; Vu and Kien, 2016), and Vietnam-American War Legacies (Martin, 2009; Palmer, 2004). These contextual themes are important as they affect framing of relations and subsequently narratives within US presidential speeches.

Substantial literature grapples with fundamental contrasts in political values, many marking it as the most significant constraint to US-Vietnam relations (Manyin, 2009; Palmer, 2004). The US is the self-proclaimed beacon of democracy (Sozan, 2024: 1), whereas Vietnam is a “one-party, authoritarian state” (Manyin, 2009: 16). Subsequently, some Vietnamese hold reservations about forming friendly relations in fear of the destruction of the Vietnamese Communist Party's “monopoly of power” (Manyin, 2009: 3). Carothers and Feldman (2023) provide a broad analysis of the complexities of US interaction with Vietnam due to its authoritarian status. Diverging political beliefs are not contained to political institutions. There is substantive literature citing fundamental differences in human rights approaches

meaning truly friendly relations are unviable (Jendrzejczyk, 2000; Vu and Kien, 2016). For example, Manyin (2009: 16) cites Vietnam's increasingly harsh crackdown on anti-government individuals as incompatible with the US's grounding in freedom of speech.

Similarly, substantial literature cites Agent Orange and other War legacies as major hurdles in achieving true strategic relations (Martin, 2009; Palmer, 2004). Manyin (2008: 8) explores how despite the Vietnamese government repeatedly requesting US compensation for dioxin victims, only in 2010 was a 10-year, \$300 million plan finally designed by the US. The legacy of Agent Orange is not a historical issue; in 2004, one million people were victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam, leading to fifty-thousand children born with body deformities (Palmer, 2004: 1). This showcases how US-Vietnam relations cannot be viewed solely through realist conceptions of strategic advantage, instead one must acknowledge how contextual legacies of the Vietnam-American War frame relations post-normalisation.

### 2.1.3 Ideological relations

This third understanding of US-Vietnam relations shifts analysis from overt foreign policy to soft power. This provides vital contributions to understandings of neocolonial rhetoric as soft power is the effect of the covert tools neocolonialism theory refers to. Soft power is defined as “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion” (Nye, 2017: 1). As Vuving (2009: 12) states soft power policies “nurture positive images, and propagate myths in favour of the source country”. This is evident within literature with discourse focusing on the analysis of educational policies (see Robbins, 2011; Thao, 2019), spread of the English language (see Priest 2010; Thao 2019) and the framing of historical events (see Martini, 2004; McMahon, 2002).

Literature exploring US-Vietnam ideological relations can be understood through two lenses: those analysing government-to-government relations (see Gibbons, 2014) and those focusing on people-to-people relations via private companies and individuals (see Thao, 2019). Whilst ‘people-to-people’ relations are important indicators of relations through reflecting public mood, as they are reactive to

government decisions, they are an important, but secondary consideration (Nguyễn, 2023; Verba, 1967; Priest, 2010). For this reason, this dissertation will focus on government-to-government relations, through presidential speeches, as they ultimately determine the overarching nature of relations. For instance, via Clinton lifting the trade embargo against Vietnam in 1994 (Thao, 2019: 56).

Thao (2019) argues the aim of ideological diplomacy is to persuade Vietnamese people they desire US values and institutions, therefore framing bilateral relations as mutually beneficial. For instance, educational exchanges and English teaching shift Vietnam's educational system away from the Soviet Union frameworks and to the US (Thao, 2019: 68), therefore showcasing how the US frames itself as a guiding figure to Vietnam. Similarly, Robbins (2011: 219) argues the 1996 Fullbright educational programme played a role in restoring bilateral relations, through 3000 Vietnamese students taking up studies in the US. This literature, not always explicitly, explores neocolonial concepts where one state imposes cultural norms and values as a mechanism for control (Nkrumah, 1965: x).

Ideological literature also discusses how discursive methods like political speeches affect framing of events. Martini (2004: 1) cites a shift in warfare from bitter, tragic death during the Vietnam-American War, to a battle of "cultural memory" post 1975, where US manipulation of historical events minimised Vietnamese voices. McMahon (2002: 162) develops this further, investigating how "public memory" of the Vietnam-American War is malleable, therefore presenting opportunities for the US to "manipulat[e] the past in order to mold the present". The reconstruction of events through political speeches significantly affects how relations develop. McMahon (2002: 163) emphasises this by arguing the framing of historical events is more influential than the actual past itself. The growth of literature in this thematic camp is indicative of shifts in US foreign policy from military to covert tools (Thao, 2019: 2). This dissertation will further this growing literature by providing empirical evidence to theoretical claims of power imbalances.

## **2.2 Neo-colonial Rhetoric**

The breadth of colonialism literature is vast with the development of many approaches including imperial narratives (Spanos, 1996; Marsh, 2013), postcolonial critiques (Dirlik, 2002; Parry, 2004) and economic dependency models (Gartzke and Rohner, 2011; Mahoney and Rodríguez-Franco, 2018). This dissertation will focus on neocolonialism, which builds upon the ideological frameworks set out in imperialist literature and economic dependency critiques. It extends postcolonial critiques by assessing how power mechanisms continue to exist in current, so-called, decolonised IR. It provides a nuanced understanding of how power relations covertly operate through media, discursive rhetoric and policy framing. This is evidenced through the development of neocolonial concepts like the White Saviour Complex (Wilcox, 2021) and Othering (Kennedy, 2013).

The term neo-colonialism gained popularity following Nkrumah (1965: x), defining it as sovereign states having their economy and political policy indirectly controlled by another. Although referring to the “continuation of western colonialism by non-traditional means”, it is not limited to historical colonial relations (Prasad, 2003: 6). For example, South Vietnam was historically colonised by France, yet Nkrumah (1965: x) claims the US has established neo-colonial control. Neocolonial literature has developed to investigate diverse aspects of IR like political interference and financial dependencies (Haag, 2012: 3). In her seminal critique, Spivak (2023: 76-78) conceptualises neocolonialism as both a political process of “epistemic violence” where “subaltern” voices are silenced and as an embedded ideology within literature where scholars’ application of Western theoretical frameworks inadvertently continue neocolonial silencing (Spivak, 2023: 80). This dual-faceted nature of neocolonialism makes it a useful theoretical framework to assess neocolonial rhetoric within political speeches.

Within neocolonial literature key concepts explore how rhetoric is translated through political speeches. These include the White Saviour Complex, referring to the Global North establishing paternalistic power dynamics through positioning themselves as cultural “messiahs” for the Global South (Wilcox, 2021: 6). Concepts like “othering” are significant in Orientalism literature referring to the psychological explanations separating the “Orient and the Occident” (Kennedy, 2013: 8). Dependency discourse where “core” exploits “periphery” for developmental gain, is important in showcasing how processes



like trade affect neocolonial relations (Mahoney and Rodríguez-Franco, 2018: 22). These concepts showcase how power imbalances are covertly weaved into political speeches, therefore an understanding of them, combined with US-Vietnam historical knowledge, is vital for effective thematic coding (Na'puti, 2020: 1).

## **2.3 US Political Speech**

American foreign policy has global influence (Blanchard et al, 2008: 5), with potential to sway policy and control economies (Hendrickson et al, 1997: 184). Therefore, the way US narrative develops is vital to understand IR. Literature is divided with some scholars taking a normative view focusing on constructions of American identity through desired values like a belief in democracy (Beasley, 2011; Gyuró, 2015). Others take a strategic approach exploring how Presidents use speeches for agenda-setting where public opinion, domestic or foreign, is desired to align with political goals (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; Rochefort and Donnelly, 2012). Some take a critical approach exploring the power of presidential speeches to legitimise behaviour and employ soft power diplomacy (Gusthini, Sobarna and Amalia, 2018; Munawar, 2018). Whilst this dissertation builds upon all of the above, it is largely situated in the final critical approach. In doing so it engages with academic debate between normative conceptions of US presidential speech as encouraging democracy (Weinstein, 2011), and speech as a mechanism for ideological control and manipulation (Brock, 2005).

Literature investigating US presidential speech regarding the US-Vietnam War is extensive, particularly Presidents Johnson and Nixon's speeches during the conflict, where justifications like promotions of democracy are significant (Sutton, 1994; Sigelman and Miller, 1978; Connelly, 1967). Post-war presidential speech analysis becomes more limited, with articles exploring how Clinton and Bush used the Vietnam-American War to frame bilateral relations and lessons for future ideological battles (Snee, 2001; Williamson, 2010). This dissertation will expand on the current limited literature exploring post-normalisation relations, using speeches to investigate how neocolonial rhetoric affects power relations between 1993-2009.

Despite neocolonialism being a growing area of literature, its explicit application to US presidential speech is limited. Whilst some research investigates how presidential rhetoric is used to justify military actions (see Kellner, 2007), maintain economic dependencies (see Wood, 2007) and promote American essentialism (see Oddo, 2011), all of which touch on key neocolonial critiques. The use of direct neocolonial theory in guiding research is absent. Literature becomes even more limited regarding using a neocolonial lens to explore US-Vietnam relations through presidential speeches. There is literature focusing on cold war rhetorics (see Endress, 1997) and economic partnerships (see McMahon, 1999), all of which reveal unequal relations as outlined in neocolonial theory. However, this dissertation will fill a key gap by explicitly applying a neocolonial lens to US presidential speech, investigating how Clinton and Bush covertly exert power over Vietnam despite normalisation of relations.

## **2.4 Identified Gap**

As the literature review highlights, this dissertation fills a critical gap in existing scholarship. Despite extensive work exploring the Vietnam-American War and reconciliation efforts, its focus is largely limited to realist conceptions of IR. Subsequently, strategic and historical perspectives are prioritised, meaning analysis is dominated by overt policy decisions. While the growing field of social constructivist and neocolonial literature uncovers covert power mechanisms such as ideological framing and dependency creation, literature applying neocolonial theory to presidential speeches is significantly limited. Similarly, although US presidential speech has been investigated in terms of identity construction, agenda-setting and soft power, all of which are the effects neocolonial rhetoric, there are limited direct references to neocolonialism. This gap in theoretical application of political speeches becomes even more significant regarding Vietnam following the 1995 normalisation of relations. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by applying a social constructivist and neocolonial lens to Clinton and Bush's' presidential speeches, providing empirical evidence of how rhetoric covertly exerts US power over Vietnam, despite formal normalisation of relations.

## **2.5 Theoretical Framework**

This dissertation moves away from dominant realist conceptions of foreign policy; instead, it adopts a social constructivist approach, viewing constructions of meaning grounded upon wider “structural” context like norms and values, as opposed to individual, presidential “psychologies” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 85). Social constructivism is particularly critical of traditional realist conceptions of IR which prioritise overt, state policy, while overlooking covert ideological power mechanisms sustaining power hierarchies (Manullang, 2022; Donnelly, 2000; Tham, 2005). Constructivists, by contrast, emphasise discourse and rhetorical framing in shaping state identities and global positioning (Nye, 2017; Vuving, 2009). For instance, constructivists see the impact of dialectal framing in reshaping Vietnam-American War legacies as more significant in affecting relations than the factual past (McMahon, 2002; Martini, 2004).

Although neocolonialism and social constructivism originate from separate theoretical backgrounds, their integration offers a powerful lens for analysing how political speeches exert power. The constructivist emphasis on framings of state roles (Marciel, 2023; Vuving, 2009), particularly in normalising US hegemony, aligns with neocolonial concepts examining how ideology reinforces global hierarchies (Nkrumah, 1965; Haag, 2012). Neocolonial concepts like the White Saviour Complex (Wilcox, 2021) and Othering (Kennedy, 2013), deeply resonate with constructivist theory on the framings of paternalism and culture. Therefore, this dissertation will apply a constructivist lens to neocolonial rhetoric to explore how the US constructs Vietnam as a dependent state and the material consequences of these constructions, such as economic dependencies.

### 3. Methodology

This research analyses twelve speeches made by Clinton and Bush between 1993-2009 from a range of contexts. For example, Bush's (2006) Hanoi Radio Address and Clinton's (1993) Statement on US Policy towards Vietnam. Foucault (1979) sees the power of rhetoric situated in its representation of dominant narratives in a particular moment in time. Therefore, an analysis of multiple speeches within a relatively limited timeframe allows for dominant systems of symbols to be uncovered, meaning valid conclusions can be made into how neocolonial rhetoric is used.

Contextual variation increases empirical evidence through showcasing a theme's importance via its regular occurrence regardless of context. It acknowledges the multi-faceted nature of neocolonialism within cultural, economic and political relations (Nkrumah, 1965: x). Clinton's (2000) remarks at Vietnam National University reflects how cultural diplomacy via soft power, such as educational exchanges, achieve closer relations between populations. Official Statements are aimed at the Vietnamese government, representing neocolonial rhetoric in formal foreign policy. A range of contexts and audiences is useful to investigate the malleable and persistent nature of neocolonial rhetoric.

The speeches have also been chosen based upon their significance to US-Vietnam relations. Whilst there are biases of subjectivity, these decisions are made with grounded understandings of US-Vietnam relations. Also, to make a valid claim of neocolonial rhetoric in US presidential speech, any varied group of speeches should result in the same conclusions.

One may consider conducting research using a neocolonial framework without including the voices of the 'colonised' actors, the Vietnamese, as problematic through assuming passivity. However, as analysis examines how the US exerts power over Vietnam, the causal actor is the US, therefore the focus of analysis is justified. The way Vietnam negotiates its role and power within bilateral relations is beyond the scope of this dissertation but will be appreciated within the Discussion Chapter.

This dissertation will analyse speeches in the period of 1993-2009. Although the focus of the dissertation is the post-normalisation period, this analysis will include the two pre-normalisation years as they build a picture into how US-Vietnam relations reached formal friendship. The timeframe concludes in 2009 in line with the end of Bush's second term (The American Presidency Project, n.d). Restricting analysis to this timeframe allows for more in depth analysis of the two Presidents following the 1995 normalisation of relations.

Braun and Clarke's (2022: 35-36) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) framework will be used to analyse speeches. Thematic Analysis (TA) refers to "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). Themes are "classification of more discreet concepts" woven throughout text (Ryan and Bernard, 2003: 87). This is useful in identifying neocolonial rhetoric as it allows for the identification of wider themes emerging from language but are not limited to that of the speech transcript. A fundamental tenet of rhetoric is its' creation through symbols that reflect social agreements (Herrick, 2020: 7). Therefore, TA allows for language to be critically assessed within the context of US-Vietnam relations, allowing for more informed conclusions. This framework usefully provides a comprehensive 6-step guide to RTA, from ensuring effective coding, to the development of productive data analysis and write-up (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 35-36). This aids critical research examination, in doing so maximising accuracy of data collection and analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 96).

There are limited ethical concerns with TA, however, reflexivity is important as thematic coding is inherently "interpretative" meaning objectivity is unviable as one's understandings affect perceived meanings (Morse, 1997: 446). Braun and Clarke's (2022: 14) framework emphasises critical reflection as necessary to encourage research transparency. This RTA framework has been selected precisely because the pursuit of objectivity is not preferable when analysing political speeches (Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016: 37). Without a grounded understanding of neocolonialism and US-Vietnam relations, effective coding is compromised and "risks superficiality" (Clarke and Braun, 2019: 22). Yardley (2000: 215) supports this by citing "sensitivity to context" as fundamental for effective

qualitative research. Subsequently, the strength of RTA lies in contextual application encouraging nuanced thematic coding.

## 4. Findings

This dissertation follows Braun and Clarke (2022: 135) “analytical narrative” framework where each theme is discussed using supportive extracts. This framework was chosen as it facilitates in-depth critical analysis, exemplifying social constructivist theory through the data. The themes analysed are US paternalism; economic liberalisation; selective reframing of the Vietnam-American War; and US-led security initiatives.

### 4.1 Moral Superiority and the US as a Paternal Figure

The first salient theme identified was the US’s self-asserted paternalistic role, underpinned by claims of US moral superiority. This presents clear neocolonial rhetoric as it aligns with what Wilcox (2021: 6) refers to as a “White Saviour Complex”. This is where Global North states establish paternalistic power dynamics through positioning themselves as cultural “messiahs” to the Global South. This leadership role dates to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with Woodrow Wilson claiming that “[making] the world safe for democracy” was the guiding principle of US foreign policy (Smith, 2012: 3). This legacy is clear with Bush and Clinton making frequent references to the US’s global role.

“Free trade and open markets are at the foundation of my administration's efforts to promote prosperity and opportunity around the world.” (Bush, 2001, lines 1-2)

“At the dawn of a new millennium, the United States stands ready to shoulder its leadership role throughout the world.” (Bush, 2001, lines 17-18)

“The delegation will also [...] press for progress in the areas of basic freedoms, democracy, and economic reform.” (Clinton, 1993, lines 57-8)

The ability to influence Vietnam relies heavily on US soft power, which Nye (2017: 1) defines as the ability to influence states through “attraction rather than coercion”. Unlike hard power which manifests

through military control, this diplomacy relies on political speech influencing perceptions of states (Nye, 1990: 154). Although, normative conceptions of US presidential speech see promotions of democracy as reflective of US values (see Beasley, 2011; Gyuró, 2015), this dissertation takes a critical approach arguing consistent framings of the US as a benevolent guide justifies intervention in Vietnamese affairs. Lakoff's (2010: 71-72) constructivist approach explains how dialectal framing exerts power through "frames" or "schemas", shaping how language constructs meanings. Political ideologies rely on repeated phrases to create entrenched neural associations, reinforcing dominant thinking and global hierarchies (Lakoff, 2010: 71). This process is particularly significant in creating neocolonial power dynamics as by consistently framing the US as a guiding figure, Bush and Clinton justify US moral authority over Vietnam, subsequently legitimising asymmetrical power relations.

Von Hippel (2000: 186) sees this shift towards soft power necessary following the US's defeat in the Vietnam-American War. The loss removed options to directly "rebuild the state" to fit democratic desires, therefore covert mechanisms were the only way to achieve foreign policy desires (Von Hippel, 2000: 186). This is evidenced through policies like the BTA in 2000 (Le, 2013: 9) and educational exchanges like the 1996 Fullbright educational programme (Robbins, 2011: 219). The neocolonial rhetorical framing of the US's global role, combined with cultural diplomacy promoting bilateral policies, ensured the US remained embedded in Vietnamese affairs.

Data analysis uncovered key differences between Clinton and Bush's use of neocolonial rhetoric in framing the US's moral leadership. Bush adopts a more direct approach through framing democracy promotion as a global security imperative and explicitly positioning the US as leading that movement. For instance, through using paternalistic metaphors like referring to Vietnam as a "young tiger" (Bush, 2006a, lines 5-6), requiring US guidance.

"You're like a young tiger, and I look forward to continuing to work to make sure our bilateral relations are close." (Bush, 2006b, lines 5-6)



Whereas Clinton employs a more subtle neocolonial approach, presenting US influence as a shared path towards progress. For instance, rather than employing the more traditional ‘othering’ discourse, framing non-western states as a backwards Orient in need of intervention (Kennedy, 2013: 8). Clinton (2000a: lines 15-21) links Vietnam’s independence to US core values thereby positioning increased integration as natural. This strategic rhetorical shift from oppositional framings to mutual values, ultimately serves the same purpose: to justify continued US influence.

“In 1945, at the moment of your country's birth, the words of Thomas Jefferson were chosen to be echoed in your own Declaration of Independence” (Clinton, 2000a, lines 15-21)

A consistent theme for Clinton and Bush was an emphasis on the connection between democratic freedoms and human rights, with closer bilateral ties framed as contingent upon an improved Vietnamese human rights record.

“History shows that free societies are peaceful societies. So America is committed to advancing freedom and democracy” (Bush, 2006a, lines 34-36)

“The delegation will also raise with the Vietnamese continuing human rights concerns and press for progress in the areas of basic freedoms, democracy, and economic reform.” (Clinton, 1993, lines 57-8)

This dissertation is critical of these demands, seeing this framing as serving a neocolonial strategy where the US maintains global leadership and advances economic interests, as opposed to a genuine commitment to instilling democratic values. Von Hippel (2000: 186) supports this through marking the US’s democracy rhetoric as superficial as it’s more focused on establishing anti-communist governments, than promoting legitimate democratic practices. This suggests promotions of democracy align with US trade objectives, as the removal of communist economic policies allows for Vietnamese economic liberalisation and American FDI. For instance, the BTA (2000) (Manyin, 2002: 1) created

significant opportunities for US firms with exports growing by 32% annually (Le, 2013: 9). This is not to diminish the significant economic gains Vietnam also enjoyed from economic liberalisation (Manyin, 2002: 1), however, it showcases how the US could engage in trade negotiations under the justification of spreading democracy.

Similarly, during normalisation of relations in 1995, Clinton asserted that bilateral relations were reliant on Vietnam improving human rights records to ensure a “free and peaceful Vietnam” (Nguyen, 2023: 4). However, despite the US condemning Vietnam’s record, with a 2002 Congressional Report finding Vietnam in the highest group of human rights violations, they continued bilateral relations with trade increasing by 107% from the previous year (Nguyen, 2023: 4). This suggests human rights violations are inconsequential to relations. Therefore, showcasing how neocolonial rhetorical strategy, through framing the US as a moral leader, can justify intervention, allowing the US to exploit economic opportunities.

The critique of American interventionism in prioritising pro-American, anti-communist governments instead of democratic systems is not new to this field (see Sussman, 2006; Dobson, 2002; Long and Tang, 2012). Notably, the Iraq War, 2003-2011, under Bush, which was justified under the guise of liberating Iraq from authoritarian rule and to spread democracy, was criticised for creating economic collapse, long-term political fragmentation, and continued violence (Ryan and Kiely, 2009: 92). Whilst simultaneously allowing the US to exploit economic opportunities, particularly in relation to oil, due to the removal of a hostile regime (Salameh, 2008: 4). This raises the question over whether the US’s paternal framing to Vietnam serves a similar purpose in justifying intervention to serve its own interests. Therefore, implying neocolonial rhetorical strategy is a pattern of US foreign policy. Notably, Clinton refers to the critiques of American interventionism in his 2000 speech at the Vietnam National University of Hanoi.

“we do not seek to impose these ideals, nor could we. [...] Only you can decide, for example, if you will continue to share Vietnam's talents and ideas with the world, if you will continue to

open Vietnam so that you can enrich it with the insights of others [...] your future is important to the rest of us, as well. For as Vietnam succeeds, it will benefit this region and your trading partners and your friends throughout the world.” (Clinton, 2000a, lines 144-152)

This is particularly significant as while Clinton claims Vietnam has autonomy, the persuasive framing implies the ‘right’ choice is increased bilateral relations. Therefore, creating a rhetoric framing any deviation from US preferences as irrational and unsustainable for long-term development.

Therefore, constructivist analysis shows through persistent paternalistic framing, neocolonial rhetoric remains key in exerting power over Vietnam through reinforcing asymmetrical power relations and justifying American intervention. Whilst Clinton and Bush have stylistic differences in rhetorical strategies, with Bush emphasising more directly the US’s global leadership role, and Clinton deploying more covert tactics emphasising equal partnership. Ultimately both presidents deploy soft power rhetoric to justify US influence, demonstrating the persistence of neocolonial discourse in American foreign policy between 1993-2009.

#### **4.2 Economic Liberalisation as the only Route to Development**

Another dominant rhetorical strategy is the portrayal of economic liberalisation as Vietnam’s sole path to modernity. This rhetoric reinforces neocolonial power structures by presenting western economic models as superior. This strategy can be theorised as ‘Othering’, where Vietnam is framed as backwards, whilst the US is the progressive Occident (Kennedy, 2013: 8). The emphasis on the US’s global altruistic role in promoting development is evident in Bush’s assertions.

“Free trade and open markets are at the foundation of my administration's efforts to promote prosperity and opportunity around the world.” (Bush, 2001, lines 1-2)

This ‘othering’ rhetoric positions Vietnam as the compliant state requiring US guidance due to its socialist practices, rather than an equal partner. This not only reinforces paternalistic dynamics, where the US assumes the role of Vietnam’s economic guide, but it also lays the foundation for structural dependency. By positioning Vietnam as lacking expertise to achieve modernisation independently, core-periphery dynamics are created where the US, the ‘core’, dictates Vietnam’s global integration, while Vietnam remains a subordinate dependent state (Mahoney and Rodríguez-Franco, 2018: 22). Bush’s (2001) statement on the BTA exemplifies how US economic interests are prioritised over their mission for global “opportunity and prosperity”, therefore exemplifying how neocolonial power is exerted through economic policy.

“the Vietnam bilateral trade agreement, [...] will increase opportunities for U.S. firms by requiring Vietnam to dismantle a wide range of trade barriers, open its services markets, and provide comprehensive protection of intellectual property rights” (Bush, 2001, lines 6-9)

“General Secretary Le Kha Phieu said this summer, and I quote, “We have yet to achieve the level of development commensurate with the possibilities of our country. And there is only one way to further open up the economy.”” (Clinton, 2000a, lines 94-98)

Clinton’s inclusion of a Vietnamese official during his speech to Vietnamese University students frames the pursuit of economic liberalisation as Vietnamese-led, with the US simply aiding their journey. This rhetorical strategy is reflected in Fairclough’s (1992: 62) concept of ideological work, where language is used strategically to present hegemonic interests as mutually beneficial, therefore, obscuring power asymmetries. This marks a rhetorical shift shaped by audiences being US or Vietnamese. Whilst this is not unexpected, it reveals the adaptive nature of neocolonial rhetoric with Clinton and Bush altering portrayals of US paternalism to exert ideological dominance. Van Dijk’s (2008: 27) supports this by arguing that elite discourse reproduces power through subtle forms of paternalism.

Data analysis also found rhetorical differences between presidents. Clinton adopts a gentler tone positioning the US as a guiding figure aiding Vietnam's development, a framing in line with Said's (1978: 31) Orientalist theory where the West positions itself as a civilising force. Whereas Bush is more direct, demanding Vietnam follows US economic structures for continued bilateral relations. These differences are contextual as Clinton, in the early years of post-normalisation, is more cautious of fostering friendly relations, whereas Bush, following 9/11, is more direct in the requirement of Vietnamese support to expand US security objectives in Asia. Therefore, showcasing how neocolonial rhetorical strategy evolves dependent on audience and geopolitical context. However, it ultimately has the same effect: exerting power over Vietnam through framing economic liberalisation as the sole path for global integration.

The inclusion of the phrase "only one way" (Clinton, 2000a, lines 94-98) builds on the western narrative that neoliberalism is the only manifestation of development (Brohman, 1995: 126), therefore legitimising US intervention. It shuts down discussion into alternative development methods which may disrupt neoliberal hegemony and challenge US interests. In the early 2000s, neoliberalism faced increasing pushback with politicians supporting alternative economic models winning elections and public support (Chang, 2003: 5). For instance, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the 2002 Brazilian Presidential Election, and there was the Chiapas Revolt in Mexico against neoliberal practices (Chang, 2003: 5). Subsequently, Clinton may be cautious of the spread of these critiques, therefore will emphasise further the rhetoric of neoliberalism as the sole path to modernity. This strategy reflects the TINA (There Is No Alternative) strategy promoted originally by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s to reject alternatives to neoliberal economic systems (Munck, 2003: 495). This reinforces neocolonial power relations where Vietnam's agency and global integration is controlled by the prescribed path of US-led economic liberalisation. Clinton's harsh emphasis on the requirement of Vietnam to follow US-approved methods of development is showcased clearly.

“in recent years the rate of growth has slowed and foreign investment has declined here, showing that any attempt to remain isolated from the risks of the global economy also guarantees isolation from its rewards” (Clinton, 2000a, lines 90-93)

This threat of “isolation” invokes a Cold War dichotomy. Vietnam is framed as having two choices: be complicit with US-favoured economic liberalisation or become isolated from global integration. This Cold War rhetoric is relevant as Vietnam aligned with the Soviet Union's socialist practices and therefore was an ideological opponent to the US's fight for capitalist democracy (Hong, 2023: 176). Clinton's assertion that Vietnam will have “guarantee[d] isolation” invokes fear due to the fall of the Soviet Union and its isolation from the global community. This showcases how US foreign policy rhetoric strategically uses Cold War legacies, through presenting bilateral ties with the US as the ultimate way to ensure global integration.

Overall, this dissertation uncovers how neocolonial rhetoric frames economic liberalisation as the inevitable path to development. Therefore, justifying power exertion over Vietnam through American intervention in Vietnamese economic policies, allowing the US to pursue its own economic objectives.

#### **4.3 Framing of the War and the US's Selective Memory**

A key neocolonial rhetorical theme was the selective framing of the Vietnam-American War, where American imperial aggression is disregarded through a curated narrative of heroism, reconciliation and moral righteousness. This aligns with Martini's (2004: 1) argument citing a shift in warfare from tragedy to a battle of “cultural memory” post 1975. The US government's manipulation of historical events, worked to minimise Vietnamese experiences (Martini, 2004: 1), for instance, despite huge payouts of over \$380 million for the environmental clean-up of Agent Orange, the US government has never officially accepted responsibility for the generational health impacts among Vietnamese people (Morrow and Inglis, 2021: 16-17). This failure to acknowledge Vietnamese tragedy is reflected within the data through a sanitised memory emphasising reconciliation and post-war relations.

One framing strategy is the overwhelming focus on POW/MIA issues. This emphasises US sacrifice and extensive efforts to retrieve American bodies as representative of strong US moral values. In doing so it 'others' Vietnamese loss and the controversy of US intervention. This is supported by Spivak's (2023: 76-78) conception of neocolonialism which sees "subaltern" voices silenced through "epistemic violence". Here this refers to the disregard for the Vietnamese tragedies, such as the monumental loss of 14% of Vietnam's population (Allukian and Atwood, 2008: 316). This strategic framing has a strong neocolonial rhetoric as POW/MIA efforts are presented as an impressive testament to US values as opposed to representative of the monumental scale of the tragedy.

"Never before in the history of warfare has such an extensive effort been made to resolve the fate of soldiers who did not return." (Clinton, 1995, lines 23-24)

"our policy toward Vietnam must be driven not by commercial interests but by [...] accounting of our POW/MIA's." (Clinton, 1993, lines 12-13)

The positioning of the US as the central actor in reconciliation efforts further reflects neocolonial rhetoric through establishing asymmetrical power relations (Nkrumah, 1965: x). For instance, by framing reconciliation as contingent upon Vietnam's cooperation in resolving US cases, a US leadership role is reinforced.

"any further steps in relations between our two nations depend on tangible progress on the outstanding POW/MIA cases." (Clinton, 1993, lines 48-49)

"any improvement in relationships between America and Vietnam has depended upon making progress on the issue of Americans who were missing in action or held as prisoners of war. Last year, I lifted the trade embargo on Vietnam in response to their cooperation." (Clinton, 1995, lines 4-7)

Moreover, emphasis on US-led reconciliation efforts through cultural and educational exchanges, increases US ideological influence (Robbins, 2011: 219). As argued by Thao (2019), education exchanges and teaching of the English language aim to make the US attractive through integrating American values into education systems. This strategy aligns with neocolonial rhetoric through shifting reconciliation focus away from the painful consequences of American intervention and onto improving bilateral ties through the ideological integration of US values in Vietnamese society.

“a new Vietnam Education Foundation. Once enacted, the foundation would support 100 fellowships every year, either here or in the United States, for people to study or teach science, math, technology, and medicine.” (Clinton, 2000a, lines 123-125)

The rhetoric of US paternalism is also evident in the justifications for the Vietnam-American War, with the US framing it as a wider ideological fight for Vietnamese freedom. This strategy stages the conflict as a lesson in perseverance rather than an outright failure, with eventual Vietnamese economic liberalisation weaponised as evidence of successful US involvement. Presenting the war as Vietnam’s period of teenage struggle that was outgrown with acceptance of US’s parental guidance, exemplifies a neocolonial rhetoric through removing Vietnamese agency in reconciliation efforts.

“engaging the Vietnamese on the broad economic front of economic reform and the broad front of democratic reform will help to honor the sacrifice of those who fought for freedom's sake in Vietnam.” (Clinton, 1995, lines 39-40)

“Whatever we may think about the political decisions of the Vietnam era, the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives. They fought for the freedom and the independence of the Vietnamese people. Today the Vietnamese are independent” (Clinton, 1995, lines 51-54)



The War is framed as part of the global fight against tyranny, subtly justifying US interventionist policies. Clinton's (1995, lines 51-54) assertion that American soldiers "fought for the freedom and independence" of Vietnam and now "the Vietnamese are independent" exemplifies attempts at reshaping historical memories. It disregards hardship and legacies of Agent Orange (Manyin, 2008: 8), instead simplifying the conflict to a successful US fight for freedom.

This theme reflects constructivist and neocolonial understandings of ideational power, where dominance is asserted by controlling narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 85), making the reframing of imperial aggression as moral sacrifice a key tool in the exertion of power over Vietnam. This narrative centres reconciliation efforts as US-led, reinforcing its self-proclaimed aim to be a paternal figure for global democracy and freedom.

#### **4.4 US-led Global Security and a Common Enemy**

Analysis reveals Vietnam is consistently framed as a strategic partner advancing US security goals both regionally in Asia and on the global stage. This rhetorical strategy reinforces global hierarchical relations where the US leads global security and freedom.

Clinton frames relations with the US as synonymous with freedom and development, therefore normalising US intervention within Vietnam. By comparing Vietnam to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Clinton (1995, lines 39-40) positions Vietnam on the same trajectory of economic liberalisation and western political structures, implicitly suggesting alignment with US norms is both natural and necessary. This exemplifies neocolonial rhetoric by masking hierarchical relations where the US dictates global security norms, under the guise of partnership. The phrase "serves our interest" reveals the underlying power dynamic, where Vietnam's inclusion in the "community of nations" is not simply a move of altruism by the US, but a way of advancing US security strategies.

“I believe normalization and increased contact between Americans and Vietnamese will advance the cause of freedom in Vietnam, just as it did in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.” (Clinton, 1995, lines 39-40)

“By helping to bring Vietnam into the community of nations, normalization also serves our interest in working for a free and peaceful Vietnam in a stable and peaceful Asia.” (Clinton, 1995, lines 30-31)

Moreover, the emphasis on stability in “Asia” points to the role of Vietnam in regional Indo-Pacific security and as a strategic US partner balancing the rising influence of China (Thi et al, 2021: 104). Vietnam’s alliance acts as a counterweight to potential instabilities caused by China to US global security ambitions (Tuan and Thuy, 2016: 180). This situates Vietnam within a hierarchical neocolonial framework where its value is measured by its strategic utility to US hegemony in Asia. This showcases how neocolonial rhetoric covertly presents asymmetrical power relations as pragmatic diplomacy through phrases like “community of nations” and “stable and peaceful Asia” (Clinton, 1995: lines 30-31), therefore showcasing the usefulness of combining social constructivism with neocolonial theory in exposing covert messaging.

There is a rhetorical shift under Bush following the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in September 2001, otherwise known as 9/11. This led the US to frame bilateral relations as a necessary fight against a “common” evil: radical Islamic terrorism (Bush, 2006a, lines 19-24). This rhetoric aids both the US’s global security ambitions and performs a strategically useful function in shifting the role of the aggressor from the US in the Vietnam-American War and onto the Middle East and anti-terrorism measures.

“Asia is important to America because we face common threats to our security. [...] Since September the 11th, the terrorists have attacked a nightclub in Bali, a hotel in Jakarta, a ferry

packed with passengers in Manila Bay, [...] their stated goal is a radical Islamic empire stretching from Europe to Southeast Asia.” (Bush, 2006a, lines 19-24)

By listing terrorist attacks across Asia, Bush positions Vietnam in a situation of vulnerability. This rhetoric persuades Vietnam of the rationality of aligning with US security objectives, however, the implications of doing so are not always straight-forward for Vietnam. For instance, whilst Vietnam expressed support for the 2003 US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) aiming to counter “the threat from proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”, they did not join until 2014 (Song, 2023: 242). Thi, Van and Tuan (2021: 144) note Vietnam’s delayed cooperation as showcasing the complexities of Vietnam forming security ties with the US whilst maintaining relations with China. Following US global security initiatives may create issues for their own domestic security due to the increasingly complex US-China relationship and tensions with China over the South China Sea (Thi, Van and Tuan, 2021: 144). This suggests whilst Bush’s neocolonial security rhetoric is influential, it does not exist in a vacuum; other factors like Vietnam’s relationship with China significantly affect the success of the rhetoric.

Rhetoric on the legacy of the Vietnam-American War is also used to further US security initiatives outside of Vietnam. For instance, post-9/11 political discourse referenced the Vietnam-American War to legitimise a prolonged ‘War on Terror’. Bush used the conflict to justify intervention, arguing its withdrawal from Vietnam led to chaos like the fall of Saigon (Long, 2015: 85) and the Cambodian genocide (Stanton, 1993: 141). This assertion disregards the role of the US in destabilising Vietnam, therefore showcasing historical amnesia (Spanos, 2003: 31). Spanos (2003: 31) argues American culture selectively reimagines historical events to justify its actions, particularly those driven by American exceptionalism. This exemplifies how neocolonial rhetoric is used to justify US action in other conflicts through reframing Vietnam-American War legacies. Therefore, suggesting the US’s selective memory is a neocolonial tactic, allowing it to exert dominance over Vietnam and others in the name of global security.

“So they're trying to break our will in the hopes of getting America to leave the battlefield [Iraq] early, and they cite Vietnam as a reason they can prevail.” (Bush, 2005, lines 132-33)

Thematic analysis has showcased how both Clinton and Bush use neocolonial security rhetoric to position Vietnam into US hegemonic structures. Whilst Clinton frames Vietnam as playing a vital role in US global security objectives, due to the context of 9/11, Bush employs a shared enemy tactic to rationalise closer bilateral ties and to shift heat away from American interventionist policy. The success of these strategies in exerting power over Vietnam is mixed due to the complex nature of US and Vietnamese relations with China.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Decentring US Power: Implications for Future Research

While this research has focused on how the US has exerted power over Vietnam between 1993-2009, future research could significantly benefit from the inclusion of Vietnamese voices. Wider literature on postcolonial IR warns portraying the Global South as passive victims of western power risks reproducing colonial hierarchies (see Chowdhry and Nair, 2002). Meaning this research, by centring the US as the causal actor, risks unintentionally removing Vietnamese agency. Therefore, incorporating Vietnamese political discourse via presidential speeches, policy statements or media narratives would provide more valid analysis into how Vietnam frames its own role in bilateral relations. This creates potential for comparative data analysis or a replication of research from a Vietnamese perspective, thereby centring Global South voices within IR scholarship.

The inclusion of Vietnamese voices also encourages exploration of other contextual events shaping bilateral relations. For instance, an interesting absence from this dissertation's analysis was the implications of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 on US-Vietnam relations. Whilst literature hints to the success of bilateral ties following the crisis, like through the signing of the BTA in 2000 (see Manyin, 2009; Riedel, 2009). It would be intriguing to apply a constructivist lens to consider how this event affected bilateral relations from Vietnam's perspective, especially regarding American economic leadership and dependency.

This dissertation has shown how rhetorical strategies have evolved throughout 1993-2009 in response to US context, for instance Bush reacting to 9/11 (Spanos, 2003: 31) and Clinton combatting the growing critiques of neoliberalism in the early 2000s (Chang, 2003: 5). However, it would be useful to assess how US-Vietnam relations have developed more recently through issues like the Covid-19 and Trump's tariff-based economic strategies. These events suggest a critical juncture of US foreign policy approaches. The effects these will have on US-Vietnam relations is beyond the scope of this dissertation, however, are important to understand the future trajectory of neocolonial power structures.

Future research may also adopt a comparative approach, examining whether these US neocolonial rhetorical strategies mirror those used elsewhere. Whilst this dissertation touched on the use of Vietnam-American War legacies to legitimise American intervention in Iraq during the ‘War on Terror’ (Spanos, 2003: 31), it would be valuable to consider how other aspects of foreign policy reflect that experienced by Vietnam between 1993-2009. This would determine whether these neocolonial strategies constitute a broader US foreign policy strategy, rather than a state-specific tactic. A comparative discourse could therefore offer deeper insights into the ideological coherence and contradictions of US global power.

## **5.2 Reframing IR: Theoretical Implications and Future Directions**

This research demonstrates the usefulness of social constructivism in analysing IR, particularly when assessing rhetorical and discursive practices. Traditional IR discourse is dominated by realism which prioritises overt, strategic and historically grounded state relations (Manullang, 2022: 159). While realism remains influential, it disregards covert mechanisms of power, thereby reinforcing global hierarchies. By contrast, this dissertation argues a social constructivist approach exposes how western powers continue to exploit colonial rhetoric to exert dominance. This critique of IR theory is increasingly important, due to the current period of global reflection of colonialism and growing demand to decolonise. Thus, this research has wider implications by presenting an alternative approach to foreign policy analysis, one combatting neocolonial silencing within IR (Spivak, 2023) through recognising the true implications of foreign policy on the Global South.

This research has showcased the usefulness of combining social constructionist theory with neocolonialism due to their shared understandings of soft power mechanisms such as identity-construction and agenda-setting (see Marciel, 2023). The conjunction of these theories allows for a nuanced analysis moving beyond overt political or economic domination. It exposes the symbolic power of language in legitimising unequal global hierarchies (see Munawar, 2018). By exploring this

intersection, this research offers a conceptual framework that can be applied to other postcolonial relationships within IR.

A further contribution of this research is its exploration of the performative nature of foreign policy, particularly how presidential rhetoric serves two functions: domestic legitimacy and international credibility. Wider studies of political communication emphasise the dual objectives of presidential rhetoric in appealing domestically and shaping global reputation (see Campbell and Jamieson, 2008). As this research has exemplified, rhetorical strategies are context-dependent, making it challenging to identify the ‘true’ motivations behind foreign policy ambitions. It is plausible that shifts in rhetorical strategy may reflect not only evolving foreign policy objectives but also shifting domestic landscapes. This has been made incredibly clear by the current, Trump administration where increased protectionism prioritises domestic popularity at the expense of foreign policy relations (Scott, 2025: n.p). For instance, placing a 46% tariff on Vietnamese exports may signal a sea change in US foreign policy and call the Two Presidents Thesis into question (Head, 2025: n.p). However, this is both beyond the scope of this dissertation and requires significant long-term analysis by future scholars. Gaining a strong understanding of these complexities is important for future research and policy analysis, particularly in an era where political messaging is increasingly mediated through the global media and rapid public scrutiny.

## 6. Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that between 1993 and 2009, Presidents Clinton and Bush asserted dominance over Vietnam through covert neocolonial rhetoric embedded in political speech. Through a thematic analysis of twelve presidential speeches using a social constructivist lens, this research found mechanisms of soft power were central to framing the US as a moral, strategic and economic leader, therefore legitimising unequal power relations with Vietnam.

Key themes of democratisation, historical reconciliation and economic liberalisation consistently positioned Vietnam as the subordinate partner in need of US guidance. Vietnam's post-conflict success in integrating internationally was often framed as contingent upon alignment with US ideals. Moreover, the rhetoric used to exert power adapted to contextual factors like 9/11 or rising critiques of neoliberalism, suggesting neocolonial rhetorical strategies transcend party lines, reflecting a cohesive, though dynamic, US foreign policy approach.

This is important in showcasing that the 1995 formal normalisation of relations was insufficient in establishing truly equal bilateral relations, highlighting how legacies of colonialism continue to affect IR into the 21st century. Neocolonial rhetoric was ultimately used to subtly maintain and legitimise asymmetrical relations, in turn aligning with US geopolitical and ideological foreign policy desires.

However, this dissertation also notes that these rhetorical strategies do not exist in a vacuum. The success of US strategies in exerting power is limited by broader geopolitical constraints such as China's dominance in Asia and growing superpower status. Therefore, whilst this dissertation demonstrates how US neocolonial rhetorical strategy functions to exert power over Vietnam, further research is required to evaluate their true effectiveness in practice.

Looking forward, this raises interesting questions about the future of US foreign policy strategy. As presidential rhetoric becomes increasingly unpredictable under Trump with his 'America First' doctrine,



the extent to which neocolonial rhetoric will persist, or be reshaped, remains uncertain. How this evolving discourse will affect US foreign policy approaches to Vietnam and the rest of the world, and whether it will challenge existing power hierarchies, warrants further critical investigation.

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