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RETHINKING POST-WAR CONSEQUENCES SETTLEMENT: A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION WITH EVIDENCE FROM VIETNAM–UNITED STATES RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines theoretical perspectives on post-war consequences settlement within the field of peace studies and international relations, with particular reference to the case of Vietnam–United States relations. Drawing on the concept of “positive peace” proposed by Johan Galtung, the paper argues that addressing war legacies extends beyond the cessation of violence to include the elimination of structural inequalities and the reconstruction of social trust. The research systematizes four major approaches: humanitarian–ethical, legal–political, reconciliation–constructivist, and developmental–cooperative perspectives. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative analysis, combining theoretical review with case study analysis of Vietnam–United States post-war cooperation. The findings suggest that effective post-war settlement requires a multidimensional approach integrating moral responsibility, institutional reconstruction, identity transformation, and sustainable development. The Vietnam–United States case demonstrates how cooperation in areas such as Missing in Action (MIA) accounting, dioxin remediation, and support for war victims has contributed not only to addressing material consequences but also to rebuilding trust and reshaping bilateral relations. The study highlights that post-war settlement can function as a mechanism of constructive engagement, transforming historical conflict into a foundation for long-term cooperation. This research contributes to literature by linking theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence, offering insights into how post-conflict societies can achieve sustainable peace through integrated approaches

KEYWORDS: Post-war consequences; Reconciliation; Vietnam–United States relations; Peacebuilding.

I. INTRODUCTION

Addressing the consequences of war is a central theme in the study of peace and international relations, reflecting the ethical, political, and humanitarian aspects of relations between nations. According to Johan Galtung, lasting peace is not merely the absence of direct violence, but also the process of eliminating “structural violence”—that is, the unjust conditions, poverty, and inequality left behind by war (Galtung, 1969, p. 183). From this perspective, addressing the consequences of war is the starting point of “positive peace,” where justice, humanity, and cooperation are restored. It is particularly

important in the context of nations working together to rebuild reliable infrastructure, restore development capacity, and construct a rational and sustainable foundation after conflict. Theoretically, there are three more appropriate approaches to why addressing the consequences of war is necessary. Thus, addressing the consequences of war is not only about resolving the losses of the past but also an expression of "soft power"—the ability to create a nation's self-healing, tolerant, and cooperative strength. In the case of Vietnam, the process of cooperation with the United States in resolving the MIA issue, dioxin decontamination, and supporting war victims is a vivid example of the "active peace" approach mentioned by Galtung. This is not only a symbol of national compassion but also a foundation for Vietnam to affirm its peaceful, humane, and responsible foreign policy identity in the 21st century.

II. OBJECTIVES

This article aims at three main objectives:

- Systematizing the main theoretical perspectives on resolving the consequences of war in peace studies and international relations.
- Analyzing the main approaches, including: humanitarian-ethical, legal-political, reconciliation-construction, and development-cooperation.
- Clarifying the meaning and practical application of these approaches through the case of Vietnam-United States.

III. SCOPE

- Content: Focuses on theoretical frameworks and approaches to addressing the consequences of war, without delving into quantitative analysis.
- Scope: Uses the Vietnam-US relationship as the primary case study, with international references.
- Subjects: Considers both state and non-state levels, including governments, communities, war victims, and international organizations.

IV. TIMEFRAME AND METHODOLOGY

- Research period: Focuses on the post-Cold War period, particularly from the normalization of Vietnam-US relations (1995) to the current stage of relationship development.
- Research methods: Theoretical analysis based on the works of Johan Galtung, John Paul Lederach, Roland Paris, and Alexander Wendt; Case study of Vietnam-US relations; Interdisciplinary approach combining peace studies, international relations, and development studies.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Major Theoretical Approaches

Firstly, the humanitarian-ethical perspective argues that all wars leave profound human and social losses, and therefore the warring parties have a moral obligation to remedy the consequences

(Walzer, 1977, p. 262). Searching for and collecting remains, assisting war victims, or remediating the environment are expressions of humanitarian spirit and historical responsibility.

Secondly, the political-strategic perspective emphasizes that healing the consequences of war is a necessary condition for establishing and maintaining political stability and preventing the recurrence of conflict (Paris, 2004, p. 37). A lasting peace can only exist when all parties fairly acknowledge the past and look towards a common future. Thirdly, there is the development-cooperation perspective, which argues that resolving the consequences of war is a steppingstone to restoring social capacity, reviving the economy, and expanding international cooperation, especially in the context of globalization (Lederach, 1997, p. 75).

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Regarding how to resolve the consequences of war, peace theories suggest many different approaches. According to Lederach (1997), it is necessary to combine "bottom-up reconciliation"—that is, the participation of the community, victims, and civil society organizations—with "top-down reconciliation"—that is, the political commitment of the state and international institutions (p. 85). This approach ensures that the healing process is not just a diplomatic symbol but becomes a substantive foundation for social stability. At the same time, as Galtung points out, the post-war reconstruction process must be linked to transitional justice, aiming to restore trust and ensure that human rights values are respected.

Regarding the significance of addressing the consequences of war, scholars argue that it is not only a humanitarian act but also a process of building a new order, where conflicting parties move from confrontation to cooperation (Galtung, 1996, p. 9). According to Paris, overcoming the consequences of war contributes to strengthening institutional capacity, developing the economy, and rebuilding civil society – fundamental elements for lasting peace (Paris, 2004, p. 45). At the international level, it is a way for countries to build a positive image, create trust, and affirm their responsible role in the international community.

The Humanitarian Perspective views the remediation of war consequences as a moral obligation and a humane act, stemming from the understanding that war leaves profound losses not only material but also spiritual, cultural, and collective memory. According to Lederach (1997), reconciliation cannot be achieved solely through political agreements or state mechanisms, but must be “built on human relationships,” through healing, commemoration, and support for affected communities (Lederach, 1997, p. 24). From this perspective, addressing the consequences of war is part of the process of social moral reconstruction – where conflicting parties work together to restore the dignity, trust, and sense of humanity damaged by war violence. In international practice, a humanitarian perspective has become the foundation of post-war cooperation between nations, especially in cases where the wounds of war linger across generations.

In Vietnam, this approach is clearly demonstrated through the humanitarian cooperation process with the United States since 1988 in the search for and repatriation of American soldiers missing in action (MIA). Marr (2021) noted that the MIA program “contributed to changing the image of the United States in the eyes of the Vietnamese people, opening the way for humanitarian diplomacy” (Marr, 2021, p. 612). This is not merely a technical or logistical humanitarian effort, but also a profound socio-political reconciliation gesture, helping two former wartime adversaries rebuild trust based on universal human values. Besides the MIA program, a series of other activities such as demining, dioxin decontamination at Da Nang and Bien Hoa airports, and support for Agent Orange victims also reflect the humanitarian nature and restoration of human dignity in post-war policies. From Galtung's (1996) perspective, this is an expression of "positive peace" – not just the end of violence, but the process of rebuilding social structures based on justice and humanity (Galtung, 1996, p. 9). Therefore, humanitarian cooperation between Vietnam and the United States is not only about overcoming the consequences of war, but also about creating a foundation of mutual trust and understanding, thereby transforming the "painful past" into "social capital" for diplomatic reconciliation.

At a broader level, the humanitarian perspective emphasizes that addressing the consequences of war must focus on restoring memory and dignity, not just dealing with physical damage. Commemorative activities, historical education, and support for affected communities help maintain historical memory as part of “justice of memory,” thereby preventing the recurrence of violence. This also forms the basis for nations to affirm their humanistic identity in foreign policy, demonstrating their capacity for self-healing and soft power within the international system. A humanitarian approach not only reflects moral responsibility for the losses of war but also demonstrates the high level of political culture a nation possesses in confronting its past. Vietnam's persistent cooperation with the United States in the humanitarian field – even before the normalization of relations in 1995 – shows that the spirit of “setting aside the past, looking towards the future” is not just a political slogan, but a practice with profound reconciliation significance. It is from this humanitarian foundation that Vietnam-US relations have developed from humanitarian dialogue to a comprehensive strategic partnership, reflecting the positive transformation of post-war international politics.

From a legal-political perspective, addressing the consequences of war is seen as an objective requirement to ensure justice and international responsibility. War, whether waged in the name of "justice" or "self-defense," leaves profound humanitarian, legal, and moral consequences that no nation can deny or avoid. Walzer (1977) asserts that "every act in war, even in the name of justice, leaves behind moral responsibility that nations cannot escape" (Walzer, 1977, pp. 291-293). This argument forms the basis for the concept of post-war legal responsibility, in which states are obligated to implement measures of reparation, reconstruction, or humanitarian cooperation to remedy the consequences of armed conflict.

After World War II (1945), the international community concretized this legal-political perspective through a series of mechanisms such as the Nuremberg Tribunal, the Tokyo Tribunal, and

economic reconstruction agreements. Most notably, the Marshall Plan (1948–1952) was not only economic in nature but also a political measure aimed at shaping and stabilizing the post-war international order. According to Hogan (1987), this plan helped rebuild Europe on a new legal and institutional basis, while affirming the responsibility of the United States for the recovery of the Western democratic world (Hogan, 1987, pp. 52–54).

2. Case study: Vietnam-United States

In the legal-political approach, addressing the consequences of war is not only about repairing damage, but also about building an international order based on justice and law. Applying this approach to the case of Vietnam clearly shows the transformation of war responsibility into political cooperation. From 2012 to 2018, the United States funded \$110 million to decontaminate dioxin at Da Nang Airport – one of the most heavily contaminated "hot spots" left behind by Agent Orange. In January 2018, the US and Vietnamese governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOI) to begin cleanup work at Bien Hoa Airport. After a year of joint project planning, the two governments developed a 10-year remediation plan by 2020 with an estimated cost of up to \$450 million (Martin, 2021, pp.5-6). These actions clearly demonstrate the United States' commitment to fulfilling its legal and political responsibilities in addressing the consequences of the war in Vietnam. From an international relations perspective, they constitute both indirect compensation and a strategic confidence-building measure between the two countries.

From the perspective of international justice theory, this process reflects the principle of "responsibility to repair"—that is, the obligation of states to remedy the losses caused by their military actions, whether through economic support, humanitarian aid, or development cooperation. It is not only a legal obligation but also an expression of political ethics in modern international relations, where power must be accompanied by responsibility. According to Paris (2004), such post-war reconstruction measures play a central role in strengthening institutions, preventing renewed conflict, and promoting international integration (Paris, 2004, p. 47). At a general level, the legal-political perspective affirms that addressing the consequences of war is an essential part of a rules-based international order. When nations acknowledge their historical responsibility and cooperate in addressing the consequences of war, they act not merely as "winners and losers," but as equal partners in the peace-building process. This is particularly significant in the Vietnam-US relationship, where cooperation in addressing dioxin and MIA issues not only closes a painful chapter in history but also lays the foundation for a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2023 – a symbol of the transformation of legal and political reconciliation into diplomatic reconciliation.

According to the Reconciliation-Constructivist Perspective, the consequences of war are not only manifested in physical destruction but also in the perceptions, memories, and discourses of the warring parties. War leaves behind "invisible legacies" – collective memories, pain, prejudices, and the image of the "enemy" constructed over time. Wendt asserts that “national identity and interests are constructed in the process of social interaction,” meaning they are not fixed but change according to how subjects understand, interpret, and behave toward each other (Wendt, 1999, p. 385). Therefore,

resolving the consequences of war cannot rely solely on material or legal measures, but must aim at reconstructing perceptions, changing the image of the opponent, and redefining relationships on a new foundation. The reconciliation-construction perspective thus emphasizes the role of memory diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy as key tools in post-war reconstruction. Coker (2014) argues that “the only way to heal the memory of war is to make it the starting point of dialogue”—that is, to transform memory from a “collective wound” into a “resource for dialogue” (Coker, 2014, p. 78). This requires the parties to acknowledge the past but not allow it to shackle the future, moving toward a reconciliation discourse where empathy, justice, and cooperation are prioritized over conflict and retaliation.

In the case of Vietnam and the United States, this is a prime example of the constructive reconciliation process in post-war international relations. After the war, the two countries carried deeply contrasting images: “aggressor” and “victim.” However, through humanitarian cooperation (searching for missing soldiers – MIA, dioxin decontamination, supporting war victims), both sides gradually rebuilt each other's image – from “objects of conflict” to “cooperative partners.” According to Marr (2021), these humanitarian activities act as “catalysts of reconciliation,” helping to transform war memories into a foundation of political trust and mutual understanding (Marr, 2021, p. 612). That process paved the way for the normalization of relations in 1995, and after nearly three decades, upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023, demonstrating the development from “memory diplomacy” to trust diplomacy.

From the perspective of social constructivism, this transformation demonstrates the argument that international relations are not shaped by power structures, but by the meaning that states assign to each other's actions (Wendt, 1999, p. 385). When Vietnam and the United States both recognized that overcoming the consequences of war was not a burden of the past but an opportunity for cooperation, they made a cognitive shift – a core element of constructive reconciliation. This shows the power of “reconciliation diplomacy,” transforming war memories from symbols of division into a source of energy for future cooperation. Therefore, the constructive reconciliation perspective provides the most comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the process of Vietnam and the United States transforming their post-war relationship. If the humanitarian perspective emphasizes moral obligations, and the legal-political perspective emphasizes international responsibility, then the constructive reconciliation perspective points out how the parties reconstruct social reality and foreign identity. Vietnam's proactive approach to “dialogue on memories” instead of “debate on memories” demonstrates the humanistic diplomatic vision and peace-building capacity of a nation that has experienced war but has not allowed war to define its future.

From a developmental perspective, addressing the consequences of war is not only a humanitarian issue but also a national development strategy aimed at building sustainable peace. Jeffrey Sachs (2015) argues that post-conflict reconstruction should not be limited to restoring infrastructure, but rather to “building development capacity to prevent the recurrence of poverty and instability” (Sachs, 2015, pp. 43–44). This implies that peace can only be sustained if it is linked to

inclusive development, aimed at improving the quality of life and strengthening the resilience of post-war communities. From this perspective, Vietnam is a prime example of integrating the goal of addressing the consequences of war into its national development strategy.

The National Action Program for Overcoming the Consequences of Landmines and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) for the period 2010–2025 not only focuses on demining but is also closely linked to livelihood development, community education, and poverty reduction in rural areas – the areas most heavily affected by the war. A report by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (2020) shows that cooperative projects with the United States, such as the UXO Remediation Program and the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA), have helped tens of thousands of households obtain safe agricultural land, thereby creating a foundation for local economic development. In other words, the cooperation policy between Vietnam and the United States in this field has gone beyond the framework of "reconciliation diplomacy," becoming part of development diplomacy – where technical cooperation, financial assistance, and technology transfer are seen as tools for building trust and strengthening bilateral ties.

Furthermore, U.S. support for Vietnam through USAID programs, such as the Dioxin Remediation at Bien Hoa Airbase Area project, is not only aimed at addressing the consequences of war but also at building environmental infrastructure, governance capacity, and local human resources. This reflects a fundamental shift in the post-war approach – from “humanitarian assistance” to “sustainable development cooperation,” clearly demonstrated in the Vietnam-U.S. relationship model. Thus, from a development-cooperation perspective, post-war reconciliation is not simply about erasing hatred, but a process of social reconstruction through human, economic, and environmental development. Vietnam has transformed its painful past into a driving force for cooperation, while the United States sees it as an opportunity to demonstrate global responsibility and strengthen its image as a peace-building nation.

Addressing the consequences of war is not merely about rectifying material damage, but a comprehensive process encompassing justice, humanity, and development cooperation – the three pillars that constitute sustainable peace. According to Lederach (1997), peace cannot be understood simply as “the absence of violence” but as “the presence of justice and relationships rebuilt on the basis of mutual trust and respect” (Lederach, 1997, p. 84). In the case of Vietnam-US relations, the process of healing the consequences of war clearly demonstrates this spirit: justice is ensured through the recognition and remediation of the consequences of Agent Orange, humanity is shown through cooperation in searching for MIA remains, and development is affirmed through projects for environmental restoration, livelihoods, and community education. When implemented on a foundation of trust, responsibility, and mutual respect, this process transcends mere technical or humanitarian boundaries to become a measure of national character – demonstrating the capacity to confront and overcome the past. According to Galtung (1996), “positive peace” requires nations not only to end wars but also to build new social structures to eliminate the root causes of conflict (Galtung, 1996, p. 32). It is in this sense that Vietnam has demonstrated a model of proactive peacebuilding, where the

past is resolved through compassion, tolerance, and strategic vision.

Vietnam's approach to addressing the consequences of war clearly reflects the philosophy of "transforming suffering into development." Instead of focusing on demands or punishment, Vietnam aims for substantive cooperation, using the process of post-war recovery as a diplomatic tool to build trust, paving the way for normalization and the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership with the United States. More broadly, this effort by Vietnam contributes to shaping a more peaceful world order, where nations learn to resolve conflicts through restorative justice and mutually beneficial cooperation, rather than retaliation or confrontation. In a context of global instability, the "constructive peace" model pursued by Vietnam holds significant value as a reference for nations that have experienced conflict, affirming the role of human factors and morality in contemporary international politics.

In the study of reconciliation in scientific research, the post-war reconciliation process is often considered within the field of peace studies. Although "reconciliation" is a common term in life and political and social life, it was not until the end of the Cold War and the trend towards peace, cooperation, and development on a global scale that reconciliation became a research topic in the social sciences (Rettberg, Ugarriza, 2016). Since then, subsequent research has paid more attention to strategies for coexistence between former enemies in the post-war era. Notably, from the mid-1990s, the trend in research on reconciliation among former enemies has been building relationships without violence (Bar-Tal, Bennink, 2004). Reconciliation and development in post-conflict peacebuilding have begun to become a major topic. International relations practice has shown much discussion of reconciliation as a post-conflict measure to prevent further conflict. Following the groundbreaking work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, reconciliation—through truth commissions, formal apologies, memorials, etc.—has become an important element in post-conflict peacebuilding discourses and practices. However, from an academic perspective, reconciliation is not a conceptualized tool for peacebuilding, or an operational term for post-conflict analysis. Practice demonstrates that very few empirical studies have been conducted in the field of reconciliation because the gap between theory and practice is vast. Claims about the relationship between, for example, truth, justice, peace, and reconciliation require empirical support (Mendeloff, 2004).

There are various approaches to the term reconciliation. In English, "harmony" has its etymological origin in Latin; "reconciliare" with the prefix "re-" means "again" and "conciliare" means "to make friends" (Barnhart, 1988). Reconciliation is a social process involving mutual recognition of past suffering and the transformation of destructive attitudes and behaviors into constructive relationships toward lasting peace. Generally, the term means the re-establishment of peace or conflict resolution, referring to a return to a previously existing state before a relationship broke down and addressing the issues left behind by the legacy of war or conflict. Therefore, reconciliation is seen as a pragmatic process in which relationships are rebuilt to facilitate lasting peaceful coexistence (Staub, 2006). Therefore, reconciliation is a process of transforming hostile relations through changes in perceptions, collective memory, and social attitudes. Reconciliation is not

synonymous with forgiveness or forgetting, but rather a process of acknowledging harm, demonstrating responsibility, and building sustainable relationships.

The history of international relations shows that cases experiencing violent conflict need to address the legacies of the past to prevent recurrence and alleviate the “memory of war.” At the same time, it is clear that mechanisms geared towards accountability do not automatically pave the way for reconciliation, conflict transformation, and a stable peace. Moreover, reconciliation and conflict transformation have some similarities but are not identical. “Reconciliation” and “justice” are terms often mentioned when studying conflict management and peacebuilding. However, the conflict between the pursuit of justice and the speaking of truth in discourse, or the cessation of organized violence and the ideal level of unity, is often associated with the utopian concept of “positive peace” (Galtung, 1969).

A difficulty arises from the fact that political discourse often focuses on the post-conflict context with one side's victory, while peace solutions are usually negotiated at a point when one side is in a military or political stalemate (Artur & Dieter, 2013). Furthermore, Lederach emphasizes that reconciliation comprises four essential elements: truth, mercy, justice, and peace. Not only that, Lederach proposes a “Peacebuilding Pyramid” referring to the cooperation of three levels of leadership in society: the top, middle, and bottom levels. The higher the level of leadership, the greater the access to the overall picture and the greater the ability to make decisions and influence the reconciliation process. Meanwhile, lower levels are closer to the public or the main target of the reconciliation process, but have fewer opportunities to access the overall picture and less ability to directly influence the issues related to them. Therefore, this reverse relationship leads to awkward situations in planning and implementing the reconciliation process.

In international relations practice, coexistence between former enemy nations is one of the important issues in regional cooperation. In East Asia, historical legacy is seen as a factor hindering the process of cooperation and development. Even “historical memory” always persists and requires considerable time and effort to “transform” historical narratives and write the future. A prime example is the relationship between Japan and South Korea, often seen as a relationship “hindered by history”. This is because reconciliation is not only a process of ending conflict, but also a process of transforming the relationship. However, the issue of reconciliation needs to be approached cautiously, with arguments based on building “trust” and “practical” strategic interests, thus requiring a combination of research methods and a multidisciplinary approach.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article systematizes and analyzes the main theoretical perspectives on addressing the consequences of war in peace studies and international relations, including: the humanitarian-ethical approach, the legal-political approach, the reconciliation-construction approach, and the development-cooperation approach. Based on Johan Galtung's concept of “positive peace,” the study affirms that addressing the legacy of war is not merely about mitigating material damage, but is a multi-dimensional process aimed at rebuilding social structures, restoring trust, and reshaping relations

between nations. The analysis reveals that each theoretical approach reflects a different dimension of post-war peace: the humanitarian perspective emphasizes moral responsibility and the restoration of human dignity; the legal-political perspective highlights international responsibility and the role of institutions; and the reconciliation-construction approach focuses on transforming perceptions, memories, and identities. While the development-cooperation perspective views overcoming the consequences of war as the foundation for sustainable growth and international integration, a significant contribution of the research is that no single approach can fully explain the post-war process; instead, a multi-dimensional, integrated framework is needed to understand and effectively implement this process. The case of Vietnam-US relations provides compelling practical evidence for this argument. Cooperation in areas such as searching for missing soldiers (MIA), dioxin decontamination, demining, and supporting war victims has contributed not only to overcoming material consequences but also to rebuilding trust and transforming perceptions between the two former adversaries. This process demonstrates that addressing the consequences of war can become an effective diplomatic tool, transforming historical conflict into a foundation for strategic cooperation, thereby clearly reflecting the operation of humanitarian, legal, constructive, and development factors in practice. From a theoretical perspective, the study proposes a "theoretical integration" approach as a necessary direction in post-conflict research, aiming to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Practically, the article suggests that countries that have experienced war can apply this model to build sustainable reconciliation strategies based on a combination of responsibility, dialogue, and cooperative development. In a world still plagued by protracted conflicts, Vietnam's experience shows that peace is not a one-time achievement, but a continuous process built through political, ethical, and social efforts. Transforming the "legacy of war" into a "resource for cooperation" not only contributes to strengthening bilateral peace but also holds significant reference points for building a more humane, stable, and sustainable international order.

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