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Silk for silver: Dutch-Vietnamese relations, 1637-1700

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INTRODUCTION

The subject

Students of Vietnamese history have long bemoaned the enduring ignorance about the relationship between the Vietnamese Kingdom of Tonkin¹ and the Dutch East India Company (the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, hereafter VOC), caused by the fact that the VOC documents relating to Tonkin have remained unexplored. These rich and enticing sources on the political economy of seventeenth-century Tonkin have posed a virtually insurmountable barrier to researchers because they are written in seventeenth-century Dutch.² There is one exception. W.J.M. Buch, who had on an earlier occasion written about the VOC relations with Quinam, devoted an article to Dutch-Vietnamese relations under the title “La Compagnie des Indes Néerlandaises et l’Indochine”, published in *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* (1936-1937).³ Although this study provides readers with a chronological history of the VOC in Indo-China, it fails to analyse the political and commercial trends which constituted the eventful history of the VOC-Tonkin relationship in detail. Consequently, it does not provide any analysis of the Dutch impact on the political economy of Tonkin, nor does it present any idea about the position of Tonkin in the intra-Asian trading network of the VOC. Despite the need of, and continuous calls for, a comprehensive study of the VOC-

¹ From the early seventeenth century, Đại Việt was split into two kingdoms: Đàng Ngoài (Tonkin) ruled by the Lê/Trịnh and Đàng Trong (Quinam) governed by the Nguyễn. “Đàng Ngoài”, (“outer road” or “outer direction”) was known to Westerners as Tonkin (also Tonquin, Tonqueen), a corruption of the Vietnamese name “Đông Kinh” (literally meaning: Eastern Capital). The term “Đông Kinh” used in this book refers narrowly to the deltaic plain of the Hồng River, while “Tonkin” and “Đàng Ngoài” are alternatively used to refer to northern Vietnam which included both Đông Kinh and the Thanh-Nghệ regions. Đàng Trong (“inner road” or “inner direction”) was usually recorded as Quinam, a corruption of the Vietnamese term “Quảng Nam”. The English and other Westerners called Quinam Cochinchina, which, in the seventeenth century, consisted of the prefectures of Thuận Hoá and Quảng Nam but gradually expanded its territory towards the south, incorporating what is today the southern part of central Vietnam and the Mekong River Delta by the eighteenth century. On the terminology of these terms: Nguyễn Tài Cẩn, “Về việc dùng hai động từ ‘vào’ ‘ra’ để chỉ sự di chuyển đến một địa điểm ở phía nam hay phía bắc trong tiếng Việt hiện đại” [About the Usage of the Two Verbs “To Go In” and “To Go Out” to Indicate Travel to a Point in a Southern Direction or a Northern Direction in Modern Vietnamese], *TCKH* 4 (1991): 36-42; Keith W. Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57-4 (1998): 949-978.

² Phan Huy Lê, “Phổ Hiến: Research Issues to Be Considered”, in The Association of Vietnamese Historians & People’s Committee of Hải Hưng Province, *Phổ Hiến: The Centre of International Commerce in the 17th-18th Centuries* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1994), 10-22.

³ W.J.M. Buch, “La Compagnie des Indes Néerlandaises et l’Indochine”, *BEFEO* 36 (1936): 97-196 & 37 (1937): 121-237; Idem, *De Oost-Indische Compagnie en Quinam: de Betrekkingen der Nederlanders met Annam in de XVII^e eeuw* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1929).

Tonkin relationship, only a few articles have appeared in the second half of the twentieth century in which the operation in Tonkin of the VOC are dealt in the framework of the East Asian trade of the Dutch Company in general. None of these articles has dealt fully with the VOC-Tonkin relationship *per se*.⁴

This lack of knowledge about the Tonkin trade of the VOC has occasionally led historians to inappropriate conclusions. In 1961, Thành Thế Vỹ wrote *Ngoại thương Việt Nam hồi thế kỷ XVII, XVIII và nửa đầu thế kỷ XIX* [The Foreign Trade of Vietnam in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Early Nineteenth Centuries] which remains a standard work in this field up to today.⁵ In this study, Thành Thế Vỹ used Buch's article as one of the Western sources available at the time he was writing. Some of his conclusions on the Tonkin trade of the VOC as well as the development of foreign trade in seventeenth-century Tonkin are unconvincing, however, largely because of the lack of figures on the VOC's import and export volumes. Similarly, in the early 1970s, Nguyen Thanh Nha in his *Tableau Économique du Vietnam aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* argued that, as the commodity economy and foreign trade of the country developed, the elite of Vietnamese society became a less monolithic group succumbing to the intrusion of an "invading power", that is money. Because of the shortage of concrete figures, it was not clear in his arguments what the seventeenth-century foreign trade of Vietnam looked like or to what extent this development influenced local society. Moreover, some of his claims of fundamental socio-economic changes such as the emergence of the "embryonic bourgeoisie" seem, as A.B. Woodside has pointed out, "...exaggerated, or at least not thrown into proper relief by comparisons with the greater changes occurring in neighbouring societies at the same time".⁶ As a study of the monetary aspect of Vietnamese history, John K. Whitmore's article, "Vietnam and the Monetary Flow of Eastern Asia, Thirteenth to Eighteenth Centuries", has correctly demonstrated the position of Vietnam in the international monetary system in the medieval and early modern periods. However, the significant turning-point of the seventeenth century and such monetary aspects as the volume of precious metals and coins imported into Tonkin

⁴ The most significant study of the VOC Tonkin trade is the article by P.W. Klein in 1986. In this article, the silk trade of the VOC with Tonkin throughout the entire period of the relationship is studied in detail P.W. Klein, "De Tonkinees-Japanse zijdehandel van de Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie en het inter-Aziatische verkeer in de 17^e eeuw", in W. Frijhoff and M. Hiemstra (eds), *Bewogen en Bewegen: de historicus in het spanningsveld tussen economie and cultuur* (Tilburg: Gianotten, 1986), 152-177. Besides, several pieces of research by Japanese scholars have also partly dealt with the VOC Tonkin trade. See, for instance, Nara Shuichi, "Silk Trade between Vietnam and Japan in the Seventeenth Century", in *Phổ Hiến*, 162-183; Yoko Nagazumi, "The Tonkinese-Japanese Trade in the mid-seventeenth Century" (in Japanese), *Annual Reports of Josai Graduate School of Economics* 8 (1992): 21-46; Kato Eiichi, "Shuinsen Licence Trade and the Dutch in Southeast Asia", in The National Committee for the International Symposium on the Ancient Town of Hội An, *Ancient Town of Hội An* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993), 142-148.

⁵ Thành Thế Vỹ, *Ngoại thương Việt Nam hồi thế kỷ XVII, XVIII và nửa đầu thế kỷ XIX* [The Foreign Trade of Vietnam in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Early Nineteenth Centuries] (Hanoi: Sử học, 1961).

⁶ Nguyen Thanh Nha, *Tableau Économique du Vietnam aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* (Paris: Cujas, 1970). On criticisms of some of Nguyen Thanh Nha's claims, see the book review by Alexander Woodside in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30-4 (1971): 922-923.

by the Dutch and other foreigners as well as the impact of this trade on the local price level, labour, and handicraft industries are not properly addressed.⁷

It was not until the early 1990s that the socio-economic history of central and southern Vietnam (Quinam or Cochin China) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was brought to light by Li Tana's *Nguyễn Cochinchina*. After analysing internal aspects of Quinam, Li analyses the dynamics of the country with respect to overseas trade, placing central Vietnam in the closely knit trading networks of East and South-East Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸ It is no exaggeration to say that Li's landmark study has offered historians a standard reference on early-modern central and southern Vietnam. Her achievement probably explains the fact that, since the publication of her work, most of the studies on early modern Vietnam have dealt in fact with Quinam and have virtually failed to mention Tonkin. Two such works can serve as an example here.

In an attempt to include Vietnam in the world of early modern South-East Asian maritime commerce, in his profound work *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* Anthony Reid has argued that, in opposition to the sustained urban growth in the other South-East Asian countries where power shifted from the older capitals to trade-based cities, the trade boom gave Vietnam the impetus to develop a new type of a cosmopolitan, commercial city – the capital Thăng Long. He praises the grandeur of the capital compared to other South-East Asian cities.⁹ The crucial miss in Reid's discussion of the commercial development of Thăng Long in the seventeenth century is that he considered this phenomenon in itself, not placing it in the context of the interrelated commercial trading network, first, along the "Tonkin River" and secondly and more importantly, in the East and South-East Asian trading networks which were being run effectively by both Asian merchants and European commercial enterprises. Similarly, in his reflective work *Strange Parallels*, Victor B. Lieberman, too, has discussed every aspect of seventeenth-century Tonkin except its foreign trade, whereas

⁷ John K. Whitmore, "Vietnam and the Monetary Flow of Eastern Asia, Thirteenth to Eighteenth Centuries", in J.F. Richards (ed.), *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, (California: Carolina Academic Press, 1983), 363-396.

⁸ Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina, Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: SEAP 1998). See also: Li Tana and Anthony Reid (eds), *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen, Documents on the Economic History of Cochinchina (Dang Trong), 1602-1777* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993); Li Tana, "An Alternative Vietnam? The Nguyen Kingdom in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29 (1998): 111-121. Besides Li's works, there are also several remarkable studies on early modern central and southern Vietnam. See, for instance, Nola Cooke, "Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyen Rule in Seventeenth-Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina)", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29 (1998): 122-161; Nola Cooke and Li Tana (eds), *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880* (Singapore: Singapore University Press); Charles Wheeler, "Re-thinking the Sea in Vietnamese History: Littoral Society in the Integration of Thuận-Quảng, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37-1 (2006): 123-153.

⁹ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 2: *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 62-63, 71 and passim.

he did deal properly with the overseas trade of Quinam.¹⁰ In short, the clear-cut fact inexorably emerges that, in contrast to the availability of good references relating to Quinam, the protracted ignorance of the foreign trade of Tonkin has continued to challenge historians who have wished to obtain a bird's-eye view on northern Vietnam in the early modern era.

This monograph deals specifically with VOC-Tonkin political and commercial relations between 1637 and 1700. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that, since the VOC was the largest trading partner of Tonkin and its archive is the best documented, a comprehensive study of the Dutch enterprise will not only highlight the VOC-Tonkin relationship *per se*, it will also help to draw attention to such relevant aspects of seventeenth-century Tonkin as economic development and social transformation. Before introducing the analytical framework of this study, it is of importance to recapitulate one of the most relevant aspects of this monograph: the Tonkin connection in the intra-Asian trade of the VOC during the seventeenth century.

Tonkin in the intra-Asian trade of the VOC

Recent research on VOC trade has rightly considered its well-devised intra-Asian trade the key factor in the commercial success of the Dutch Company in Asia in the seventeenth century.¹¹ Shortly after their arrival in Asia, Dutch merchants realized the importance of establishing and maintaining a closely knit trading network between various trading markets. The prime task of such a network was to supply goods for their homeward-bound ships but it also had a second essential role: to yield profits by redistributing Asian goods to these places.

The intra-Asian trade of the VOC was run as follows. Silver was invested in Indian textiles which were indispensable to conducting the pepper and spice trade with the Indonesian Archipelago. While the bulk of the Indonesian spices was shipped to the Netherlands, a large amount of these commodities was also distributed to various Asian trading centres such as India, Persia, Formosa (present-day Taiwan), and Japan. Raw silk and silk piece-goods procured in Bengal, Persia, China, and Tonkin were sent to Japan, where they were exchanged for Japanese silver and, in the later period, copper and gold. The bulk of Japanese silver was sent to various Asian trading-places as investment capital and, to a lesser extent, it was exchanged for Chinese gold in

¹⁰ Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, Vol. 1: *Integration in the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), (Chapter Four).

¹¹ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal 1630-1720* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 15-23; Leonard Blussé, "No Boats to China: the Dutch East India Company and the Changing Pattern of the China Sea Trade, 1635-1690", *Modern Asian Studies* 30-1 (1996): 51-70; Paul A. Van Dyke, "How and Why the Dutch East India Company Became Competitive in Intra-Asian Trade in East Asia in the 1630s", *Itinerario* 21-3 (1997): 41-56; Femme Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company, Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003), 124-126.

Formosa. This gold, together with that which arrived from the Republic itself was remitted to the Coromandel Coast in order to keep the textile trade running smoothly.¹² With the successful re-organization of its East Asian trade during the 1630s, the fan-shape trading network of the VOC, spreading out from its centre in Batavia, enjoyed a period of high profits and great effectiveness. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the intra-Asian trade had become so important to the entire business of the VOC in the East that, writing to their masters in the Netherlands in 1648, the Governor-General and the Council of the Indies in Batavia figuratively referred to it as the “soul of the Company which must be looked after carefully because if the soul decays, the entire body would be destroyed”.¹³

If the intra-Asian trade was the key factor in the success of the VOC business in general, its exclusive trade with Japan, which the Dutch enjoyed from the early 1640s, made a critical contribution to the success of this intra-Asian trade. Insofar as the financial aspect of the Company was concerned, the rapid enlargement of its business in Asia in the early seventeenth century required an annual increase in the amount of its capital mainly in the form of silver bullion and gold. Despite the fact that there were no serious problems regarding the supply of these metals from the Netherlands, there was a limit to the capital that the Directors were in a position to send to the East Indies.¹⁴ The best solution to this shortage problem was to develop the Japan trade in order to procure silver from this island nation. The annual production of Japanese silver had increased spectacularly throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century and peaked during the first three decades of the seventeenth century.¹⁵

Yet, in order to obtain Japanese silver, the Dutch needed Chinese silk. Prior to the arrival of the Dutch in the Far East in the early 1600s, what was known as the Chinese-silk-for-Japanese-silver trade had been conducted smoothly by Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese traders. Having no direct access to mainland China, the VOC was forced to conduct a “third-country trade” in order to purchase Chinese silk at a regional

¹² Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company*, 121-124; Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, 16, 19; Ryuto Shimada, *The Intra-Asian Trade in Japanese Copper by the Dutch East India Company during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 5-8.

¹³ Om Prakash, “European and Asian Merchants in Asian Maritime Trade, 1500-1800: Some Issues of Methodology and Evidence”, in J.M. Flores (ed.), *Revista de Cultura 13/14: The Asian Seas 1500-1800, Local Societies, European Expansion and the Portuguese* (Macao, 1991), 131-139 (Reprinted in Om Prakash, *Precious Metals and Commerce*, Variorum 1994). See also: Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1976), 3-27; Els M. Jacobs, *Koopman in Azië: de handel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg, 2000).

¹⁴ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company*, 16, 19. See also: Femme Gaastra, “The Exports of Precious Metal from Europe to Asia by the Dutch East India Company, 1602-1795”, in Richards (ed.), *Precious Metals*, 447-476; Idem, “The Dutch East India Company and its Intra-Asian Trade in Precious Metals”, in Wolfram Fischer, R. Marvin McNinnis, and Jürgen Schneider (eds), *The Emergence of a World Economy, 1500-1914*, Vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1986), 97-112.

¹⁵ Kobata Atsushi, “The Production and Uses of Gold and Silver in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Japan”, *Economic History Review* 18-2 (1965): 245-266. See also: R.L. Innes, *The Door Ajar: Japan's Foreign Trade in the Seventeenth Century* (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1980), 21-41.

rendezvous. It was this trading strategy which encouraged the Company to make contact with Quinam during the first three decades of the 1600s. Nevertheless, by the middle of the 1630s the outflow of Chinese silk to regional markets gradually dried up as the economy of China was thrown into disarray by internal political chaos. Tonkinese silk presented itself as an ideal alternative to Chinese yarn on the Japanese market from this time until the middle of the 1650s, when Bengali silk began to capture the Japanese market and became profitable. Between 1641 and 1654, the VOC's Tonkin-Japan trade reached its zenith. It is estimated that during this fourteen-year period, out of the 12.8 million guilders' worth of commodities which the VOC shipped to Japan, the contribution of Tonkinese raw silk and silk piece-goods was 3.5 million guilders.¹⁶ By analysing the VOC's import and export trade with Tonkin, this monograph demonstrates the critical role of the Tonkin connection, at least at a certain period, in the Far Eastern trade of the VOC in particular and its intra-Asian trade in general.

Source materials and analytical framework

This monograph analyses the political and commercial relations between the VOC and Tonkin during the period 1637-1700. It will focus on various aspects of the mutual relationship between the two parties, namely: the vicissitudes in political relations and varying trends in the VOC's import (silver and copper) and export (silk, ceramics, musk, and gold) trade. The research begins with a glimpse into the history of the Vietnamese maritime trade, focusing particularly on the seventeenth-century foreign trade of Tonkin and the arrival of the VOC in Quinam and Tonkin. After having presented a general background to Vietnamese historiography and the Dutch setting, it analyses the VOC-Tonkin political and commercial relations in detail as this is the main thesis of this monograph. Finally, it examines Dutch influence on indigenous society and economy.

Since this study deals specifically with the VOC-Tonkin relationship, the principal sources are the Dutch records relating to Tonkin preserved at the *Nationaal Archief* (National Archive) of the Netherlands in The Hague.¹⁷ Most of the information and figures used in this study have been extracted from the unpublished collection of *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren* which contains most of the records of the VOC's

¹⁶ Klein, "De Tonkinees-Japanse zijdehandel", 152-177; Blussé, "No Boats to China": 51-70; Hoàng Anh Tuấn, "Mậu dịch tơ lụa của Công ty Đông Ấn Hà Lan với Đàng Ngoài, 1637-1670" [The VOC-Tonkin Silk Trade, 1637-1670], *NCLS* 3 (2006): 10-20.

¹⁷ A general guide on the VOC records relating to Quinam and Tonkin can be found in: Truong Van Binh and John Kleinen, "Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie (VOC): Materials on Relations between the Dutch East India Company and the Nguyen Lords in the 17th and 18th Centuries", in *Ancient Town of Hoi An* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993), 37-48; Hoàng Anh Tuấn, "Công ty Đông Ấn Hà Lan ở Đàng Ngoài, 1637-1700: Tư liệu và Nghiên Cứu" [The Dutch East India Company in Tonkin, 1637-1700: Documents and Research Issues to Be Considered], *NCLS* 3 (2005), 30-41.

Tonkin factory between 1637 and 1700. For the years in which the Tonkin factory records have been lost, relevant information about the VOC's Tonkin trade could be found in the records of the VOC factories in Formosa and Japan. The published VOC sources such as the *Generale Missiven* and the *Batavia Dagh-register* also provided helpful information on the VOC-Tonkin political relations.

In order to deal effectively with diverse themes in one book, this monograph employs different methodologies. Instead of applying a simple chronological narrative as Buch has done, this study uses the thematic approach in examining the vicissitudes in the political relations. In Part Three, which examines the commercial relations, I investigate the structure of the VOC's Tonkin trade and its changes over time. I also make use of the quantitative method to demonstrate the trends in the VOC's import and export trade with Tonkin. When necessary, a comparison between Dutch records and records in other languages such as English and Vietnamese is made.

As a background, Part One (Chapters One and Two) provides an overview of Vietnamese historiography. Since there have been different, even contradictory, points of views about the foreign trade of Vietnam, its overseas trade in particular, several sub-chapters are devoted to recapitulating the ideas of several schools.¹⁸ It is argued in this section that, although the Vietnamese found themselves in an extremely favourable geographical position lying across the East-West and the North-South maritime routes, they were far from active in participating in maritime activities. It was the civil wars between the Trịnh and their Nguyễn rivals in the early seventeenth century, leading to the political separation of Quinam and Tonkin, which reversed the attitude of both rivals toward foreign trade. In foreign traders both sides found a crucial source of supply of weapons and money to prosecute their rivalry and ambitions for territorial expansion. In Tonkin, the arrival of foreign merchants with large capital sums stimulated the development of its commodity economy, especially the silk and ceramic industries. The permanent residence of foreign merchants in the capital laid the foundation for an interrelated commercial system along the "Tonkin River", linking the commercial centre of Thăng Long with the outside world.

Part Two (Chapters Three and Four) examines the political history of the VOC-Tonkin relationship in detail. It has already been mentioned that the chief aim of the VOC was to acquire silk which it could trade in Japan, while the Lê/Trịnh rulers expected some more tangible advantages than just commerce from the Dutch Company, namely a military alliance and a regular supply of weapons. Conflicting interests severely challenged the strength of the mutual relationship. After a short period in which an intimate relationship was enjoyed, the VOC-Tonkin tie deteriorated and ended embarrassingly in 1700. On the basis of major historical events, this part highlights the major phases in the VOC-Tonkin political relationship in the period 1637-1700.

Part Three (Chapters Five to Seven) analyses the VOC's Tonkin trade from its

¹⁸ See Chapter One for a detailed discussion of this debate.

inception in 1637 to its end in 1700. Arriving in Tonkin with the expectation of acquiring Vietnamese silk to export to Japan in exchange for silver, the Dutch Company was indeed able to conduct this trade to its satisfaction until the middle of the 1650s. Then, the demand of Japanese consumers shifted from Vietnamese silk to the Bengali product. Consequently, the Tonkin-Japan silk trade of the VOC, indeed its Tonkin trade in general, began to decline, notwithstanding endless attempts made by the High Government to revive the ailing patient during the 1660s. After the “silk age”, the Dutch Tonkin factory switched to the export of such products as Vietnamese silk piece-goods and Chinese musk to the Netherlands, Chinese gold to the Coromandel Coast, and Vietnamese ceramics to the insular South-East Asian markets.

In Part Four (Chapter Eight) an attempt is made to examine the Dutch impact on the indigenous society during the 1637-1700 period. Utilizing information and analyses from the preceding chapters supplemented by contemporary travelogues, this chapter highlights significant transformations in the local politics, society and economy under Dutch influence. While conclusions on the political and economical aspects can be drawn on the basis of concrete figures and information, we can only speculate on the Dutch impact on the cultural and social domains. Incontrovertibly, the VOC’s import of metals for coinage and export of local products from Tonkin stimulated the development of the commodity economy of Tonkin. This is largely believed by Vietnamese historians to have contributed remarkably to the emergence of “sprouts of capitalism” in Vietnam. The Dutch participation in several of the military campaigns of Tonkin against Quinam in the 1640s, not to mention their regular supply of weapons and ammunition throughout the seventeenth century, are regarded as an external catalyst in the Tonkin-Quinam wars.