

BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY REORIENTATION**

by

**BECK HING LEE**

B.A., University of Massachusetts-Boston, 2005  
M.A., University of Massachusetts-Boston, 2006  
M.B.A., University of Massachusetts-Boston, 2007

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2011

UMI Number: 3463134

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 3463134

Published by ProQuest LLC 2012. Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

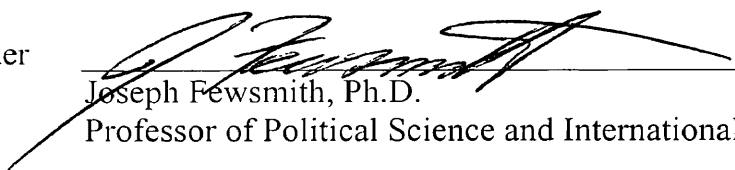


ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

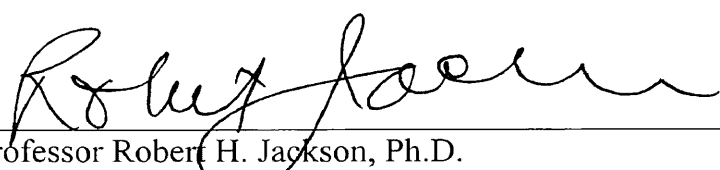
PhD  
2011  
leeab  
cop. 1

Approved by

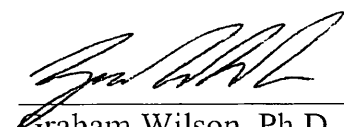
First Reader

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Joseph Fewsmith, Ph.D.  
Professor of Political Science and International Relations

Second Reader

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Robert H. Jackson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Political Science and International Relations

Third Reader

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Graham Wilson, Ph.D.  
Professor of Political Science and Chair,  
Department of Political Science

4/12/11



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This is for my parents to whom I owe my entire education, my wife who always stays loyally by my side and my grandmother who passed away during the course of this PhD program.

# **VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY REORIENTATION**

(Order No. 3463134 )

**BECK HING LEE**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2011

Major Professor: Joseph Fewsmith, Professor of Political Science and International Relations

## **ABSTRACT**

Vietnam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century faced many wars and military struggles. The ruling communist regime, which unified Vietnam under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), had a reputation for stubborn militancy and its threat to regional peace. By the 1980s, it had been internationally isolated because of its occupation of Cambodia. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, Vietnam went through a turning point in its foreign policy stance when it unconditionally pulled out all its troops from Cambodia, normalized relations with China, developed relations with the US and joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It also proclaimed its desire to befriend all countries.

Vietnam's change from its past belligerent behavior to integration with the international community in the spirit of friendliness and cooperation is clearly quite remarkable. In this dissertation, I explore Vietnam's initial motivation to change, the influences that determined its path of change, and the processes through which it was

realized. Extreme socioeconomic hardship and international isolation forced Vietnam to make profound adjustments in its foreign policy in the struggle to survive. However, I argue that diplomatic interaction with ASEAN also influenced Vietnam's foreign policy thinking and encouraged Vietnam to adhere to a change that was more constructive and strikingly different from the paths of such other communist countries as North Korea and Cuba.

My argument is supported by data derived from news reports, statements, and documents as well as by the descriptive literature in published books and articles. I find that powerful forces in the international system, evolving relations with the major powers and the domestic crisis at home were the main drivers of Vietnam's change. However, intense engagement in ASEAN activities also helped alter Vietnam's approach to foreign relations, and the formation of its new international identity. ASEAN played a subtle but important role in making Vietnam's foreign policy reorientation come to fruition. Vietnam's regional integration with ASEAN and Southeast Asia in turn, put it on a firmer course toward integration with the world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: VIETNAM'S WRENCHING HISTORICAL RELATIONS	14
CHAPTER 3: THE PUZZLE AND THE ROLE OF ASEAN	38
CHAPTER 4: EVOLUTION OF DOMESTIC CIRCUMSTANCES	64
CHAPTER 5: COMPLEX DYNAMICS DURING THE CAMBODIAN CRISIS	111
CHAPTER 6: THE TURNING POINT-IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORS	137
CHAPTER 7: NEW INITIATIVE TO CULTIVATE US-VIETNAM RELATIONS	191
CHAPTER 8: EVOLUTION OF VIETNAMESE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS DIVERSIFICATION, REGIONALISM AND INTEGRATION	243
CHAPTER 9: ASEAN'S UTILITY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	322
BIBLIOGRAPHY	342
CURRICULUM VITAE	352

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AMM	ASEAN Ministerial Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ARVN	Army of Republic of Vietnam
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CMEA	Council of Mutual Economic Assistance
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MIA	Missing in Action
NLF	National Liberation Front
ODP	Orderly Departure Program
OV	Overseas Vietnamese
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
POW	Prisoner of War
PRC	People's Republic of China

PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
US	United States
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
WTO	World Trade Organization
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Around the time when the Cold War was coming to an end, Vietnam began undergoing a change in its foreign policy orientation toward friendliness with all countries in the world, diversification of relations and integration with the international community. The overall process through which it occurred was an arduous one, complicated by ups and downs that required many tests of its own will and the encouragement of other actors supporting this change, in order for it to sustain itself toward the fruition of the final outcome, a foreign policy reorientation that was dramatic and remarkable. Vietnam's success in this respect came about not only because Vietnam changed its stance vis-à-vis the world; Vietnam's changed foreign policy stance would have meant little if the world showed no response to it; rather, it was also because the world changed its stance vis-à-vis Vietnam that this foreign policy reorientation could be deemed successful. The realization of this new foreign policy orientation was thus consummated particularly by the watershed events of July 1995, the normalization of relations with the US, and the entry into ASEAN as a full member, signaling a new era of peace and reconciliation in Vietnam's foreign relations.

### **Main Argument**

Vietnam's foreign policy reorientation was an interesting phenomenon and the aim of this dissertation is to understand why it occurred. My argument is that there were

many unique factors and circumstances that led to this change and in the course of my dissertation I will explore them and explain how this change came about. Given Vietnam's belligerent past, it would not be surprising if it went down a radically militant path like North Korea and adopted a bellicose stance, in the face of the crisis of the communist world. But Vietnam chose the path of peace, reconciliation, cooperation and integration. It may be that Vietnam was just changing for the sake of economic benefits and survival. But North Korea, Cuba and Burma were also major pariah states that were far from secure domestically; yet they did not make such qualitative foreign policy changes. North Korea and Cuba were also fellow communist states and they faced just as much domestic turmoil<sup>1</sup> in those difficult times exacerbated by Soviet Union's fall. Burma's human rights record and repressive governance style had deepened its isolation from the world and sharpened the seriousness of its domestic woes that resembled the plight of those communist countries. Yet it has remained a pariah in the international community because of its stubborn refusal to make constructive changes internally and externally. Therefore, by such comparison, Vietnam's foreign policy change was a substantial transformation in behavior.

It was these three small communist countries (Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba) that moved together into a post-Cold War time period, bruised but not done for and this puts them in a very similar predicament all at the same time. Even though Burma was

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kanako Yamaoka, "Comparison of Two Remaining Socialist Countries-Cuba and Vietnam: Possibility of Economic Reform in a Socialist Society and Its Possible Impact," Program on US-Japan Relations Working Paper (2007) and Kang H. Park, "Does North Korea Follow Vietnam's Path?: Institutional Constraints," Paper Submitted to KIEA Conference (2009).



not communist, it also shared similar leadership, governance, economic and political problems as these communist countries as well. Each of them was a smaller country in a vastly unfavorable environment; North Korea was surrounded by democratic and capitalist South Korea, Japan and of course the US. Vietnam and Burma were surrounded by anti-communist and pro-West Southeast Asian countries that had made leaps and bounds in their economic development far exceeding their own. Cuba was of course a lonely and tiny communist country in a vast capitalist West. And with Soviet Union's fall, Cuba's prospects were even more precarious.

Maurice A. East gives a list of characteristics to describe small states including "avoidance of the use of force as a technique of statecraft."<sup>2</sup> These qualities may be what are intuitively assumed about smaller states, but some small countries are actually more belligerent and bellicose than larger states and exhibit behavior that run counter to these assumptions. Since they have much smaller capabilities especially militarily, they should take the status quo as a fait accompli instead of seek to revise them. Yet, historically, this is not always the case and they may sometimes turn out to be more erratic and unpredictable and behave in ways that threaten the security of others as well as their own.

The two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union truly had the most to lose during the Cold War had it turned into a hot war; they were therefore mostly restrained in their decisions and conduct in the midst of a highly charged and tense international

---

<sup>2</sup> Maurice A. East et al., *International Events and the Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1975), 160.

environment. Therefore, the resultant crises, violence and fighting almost always ended up in proxy as in the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War, partly due to the impulsive actions of the lesser powers aligned with either of the two blocs.

And after the Vietnam War, Vietnam did not have to take over Cambodia completely to solve its border disputes with the Khmer Rouge, but it did anyways. Even though the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had successfully taken over the whole of Vietnam and was firmly in control of it, the country was exhausted from two wars at that time and was not strong enough to take up any new military adventure without incurring high risks and huge costs, but the newly established Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) backed by its superpower patron, the Soviet Union, chose to solve its problems militarily again, apparently flushed with recent successes. Seeing the Phnom Penh government crumble so easily, the Vietnamese army stepped up its invasion deep into Cambodian territory until a stalemate was reached.

Then, in the early 1990s, North Korea reacted by wanting to go nuclear soon after Soviet Union's fall and showed enduring recalcitrance to the US and other states in the region. The profound international geopolitical changes during those years must have made North Korea feel forced to show its nuclear card. It claimed to have acquired nuclear weapons to protect its own self and for self-defense purposes but it probably never gave up on the idea of overthrowing the south (South Korea) one day. And Cuba, despite expectations to the contrary, clung stubbornly to its socialist system even after Soviet Union collapsed and when its economy was in a serious crisis. The major event

that surprised the international relations world however, was Vietnam's move to adopt this whole new friendly foreign policy stance. The behavior of North Korea and Cuba around the same period of time highlights the difference and significance of Vietnam's approach.

China also reoriented its foreign policy stance towards more openness and integration with the international community but China started doing so much earlier and it was due to the threatening power of the Soviet Union rather than its downfall that China turned to the US and later on instituted reforms based on more forward looking and less ideological thinking of Deng Xiaoping. China's opening up was arguably more gradual as well, compared with Vietnam which could be said to have suddenly become a "born-again Christian."<sup>3</sup> The timing and conditions for China's change were thus based on a very different strategic backdrop, although in both cases, the exigency for the adjustment of foreign policy posture was acute. On the other hand, Vietnam's change was arguably more dramatic and sharper. Also, it was probable that Vietnam learned from China but it makes us wonder why North Korea and Burma, both of which are in proximity to China, did not follow suit. What made Vietnam more receptive to openness, reforms and normalization of relations with a host of countries especially the US and so on? In other words, what made Vietnam accept whatever good advice or influence it might have received and take such a sound and pragmatic path that was applauded and

---

<sup>3</sup> During the initial debates on whether Vietnam should be trusted on the joint efforts to resolve the MIA issue, Vietnam was described by certain quarters in the political circles involved in the MIA issue that it was not a "born again Christian" and it should not be trusted. But its new foreign policy proclamations seemed aimed at projecting an image along those lines.

well-received by the international community?

It is obvious that Vietnam in that period of foreign policy change was truly a country desperate for foreign help because of its material paucity. But it would be an oversimplification to perceive that unfavorable geopolitical and material impetus automatically led to its cooperative behavior. Vietnam faced the same dilemma as North Korea as to whether opening up would help it survive or further undermine its already precarious predicament. Material needs and the drive to survive do not always naturally lead to the most pragmatic decisions, given the pervasive security dilemma in international politics in general and would not have necessarily led to pragmatic decisions in Vietnam's hostile international environment in particular. As we saw in North Korea, its half-hearted attempts to open up to the world often caused knee-jerk reactions that brought it back to square one, a hostile stance with a nuclear trump card.

There was evidently more to it than just circumstantial necessity in Vietnam's case. Or rather, there were more complex dynamics or processes through which Vietnam responded to its harsh circumstances positively to adopt a new constructive foreign policy approach. Without the influence of certain actors and factors within these dynamics, Vietnam might have been perpetually at a loss about how to respond pragmatically to its trying conditions.

I argue that the main driver of this foreign policy change was Vietnam's trying material and geopolitical condition at that time. It was one of the many factors involved,

albeit the most important one. Vietnam had to free itself from devastating effects of international isolation that were compounding the dire situation at home. However, diplomatic interaction with ASEAN in particular ameliorated the security dilemma tendencies magnified by the adverse situation at that time that could have led to a more undesirable change in Vietnam's foreign policy. But because of the way these factors played out, including the ASEAN factor, a persistent process occurred towards a favorable outcome. I will explore extensively how ASEAN lubricated this process which was filled with friction until the final outcome was realized and firmly established. The ASEAN factor was therefore crucial; however, it was underpinned by the material, geopolitical reality that Vietnam faced and acknowledged. Thus, Vietnam's geopolitical, domestic and strategic situation will also be explored at length to also include relations with the US and China, both very important actors in this process.

Thus, there were several different factors and international actors involved that interacted in complex political, economic and diplomatic dynamics that connected Vietnam's dire material predicament with the desirable foreign policy reorientation outcome that Vietnam experienced. My goal in this dissertation is therefore to explore, analyze and explain the conditions, factors, actors and dynamics that led to Vietnam's foreign policy reorientation. The main focus of my analysis is on the period between 1987 and 1995 which was the most critical time when major developments took place and underpinned Vietnam's reorientation of foreign policy. Highlighting North Korea and Burma relative to Vietnam in terms of their behavior is of interest and particular

relevance. I will refer to these countries from time to time. However, this dissertation is not geared towards a comprehensive comparative analysis between Vietnam and North Korea or Burma; rather, juxtaposing Vietnam with these other countries on certain aspects of my argument will help illuminate certain points I make further.

This dissertation thus revolves around these main questions: why did Vietnam reorient its foreign policy and how did this reorientation turn out to be successful? Some of the larger questions that are also implicitly answered include but are not limited to: in order to promote integration, do institutions help, and can diplomacy help assuage suspicion and build trust?

There are a number of reasons why I chose to take up Vietnam's case. First of all, I find Vietnam a particularly interesting case, very worthy of attention in a post-Cold War world and one that provides a fertile ground for insightful analysis with vast ramifications. Even though communism did not collapse there just as in a few other countries, it has been one of the more progressive post-Cold War communist countries and it stands out in this respect. Vietnam is also located in a region that is strategically crucial and has great significance and potential. Vietnam and greater Indochina divides Northeast Asia from maritime Southeast Asia. In fact, the original ASEAN countries were motivated to bring the Indochinese countries into ASEAN partly so that it could play a more influential role in shaping the future of this region that had been for so long a locus of great power and regional conflict with detrimental spillover effects. US policy in Southeast Asia today seems to have been rekindled and this epitomizes the importance of

the sub-region.

Vietnam has been studied widely especially in the context of the Vietnam War and the Cold War; however, post-Cold War Vietnam and its foreign policies in the early post-Cold War years have not been given as much attention. Southeast Asian politics in general have also been largely neglected and mainly studied by scholars in that region. Yet Vietnam started making important foreign policy changes around the end of the Cold War and it had since been largely committed to those changes. And Southeast Asia is one of the most dynamic regions in the world. Thus, it is important to study Southeast Asian politics and to highlight Vietnam's more progressive policies as compared to other surviving communist countries like North Korea and other difficult countries like Burma or Iran. As a Southeast Asian myself, I find that studying a part of the region different from my country of origin, such as Vietnam would be intellectually stimulating and rewarding to my academic interests and pursuits.

Vietnam's changed behavior was truly substantial for a country with so violent a history. It was not just a change, but a momentous change and it was not just any country, but one with a problematic past. Vietnam had been a problematic country with a history of being uncooperative and hostile to many countries, and taking actions often without universally legitimate grounds, the continued occupation of Cambodia being the case in point. It had also been one with an unflattering political governance record that did not conform to international standards which made it a target of criticism on the basis of human rights, freedom and so on. Once upon a time, the word Vietnam referred to a war

rather than a country and it conjured images of an international outcast, a communist threat and so on. Not anymore; Vietnam today is known as a great travel destination, friendly country and integrated member of the international community. This problematic state had chosen to shed its belligerent past and join the international community in the spirit of friendliness and cooperation.

Understanding why Vietnam changed has implications beyond Vietnam or even East Asia. It also strongly touches upon the role of diplomacy, institutional influence utility and regionalism and integration and how they can play a role in ameliorating the intensity of security dilemma politics and encourage greater cooperation, integration and therefore stable peace. There still are countries in the world that are not well-integrated and friendly and may even be potentially difficult and uncooperative so as to endanger international security. And there is a need to understand the process of change in foreign policy direction because “the opportunities and the dangers that can result from failing to deal with the changes that beset us are too great to be ignored.”<sup>4</sup> This case offers insights on why a country with such a belligerent track record like Vietnam turned out to be different and clues as to how some of these other states can also be coaxed out of their uncooperative behavior.

### **Methodology and Sources**

The methodological approach used is essentially the historical case method. I will

---

<sup>4</sup> Charles F. Hermann, “Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy.” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No 1, pp. 3-21: Blackwell Publishing. (1990): 20.



mainly construct my argument based on the analysis and logical inference of evidence found in events that had transpired and statements that had been made. My main sources of data are the daily reports from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service on East Asia (FBIS-EAS), archived news reports on the New York Times (NYT) website, as well as documents and material available on the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) website and the archive section of the official ASEAN website.

The FBIS-EAS contains huge amounts of daily reports that contain enormous amounts of data on events, excerpts, speeches, statements and declarations that were reported by different foreign news services and networks of many different East Asian countries that give a comprehensive, balanced picture of historical ongoing. I rely heavily on the information found in these reports particularly for the years between 1987 and 1995 which make up the most crucial time period for my analysis of the process of Vietnam's foreign policy reorientation which began around the late 1980s and culminated in the establishment of friendly relations with several parties in the early 1990s and mid-1990s. The respective ASEAN and Vietnam MOFA websites provide significant amounts of primary material on joint declarations, treaties and signed agreements, official statements, political speeches and reports that can be easily assessed. NYT archives also contain good sources particularly on American political dynamics as well as global events.

There will also be substantial historical discussion of Vietnam and Southeast Asia for which many books, articles and journals are relied on as references. There are many

books that provide rich accounts of Southeast Asian and Vietnamese politics and foreign policies. There are also plenty of articles about ASEAN and its diplomatic initiatives in Southeast Asia. The journal, *Asian Survey* provides excellent accounts of contemporary Asian politics in general and Vietnamese politics in particular.

Apart from the above sources from which I derive the data for my argument or references for historical description, I will also take into account some information I have obtained from informal interviews that were done with Vietnamese people residing here in the US or visiting the US. Such information is not meant to be part of the evidence to support my core argument; rather it is for the purposes of illustration, even though it may substantiate the points that I make. There is a huge Vietnamese population in certain cities of Massachusetts such as Springfield and Dorchester. Some of the older ones have military credentials as well and had served in the South Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> Others had escaped communist persecution and faced trying conditions before finding a new life here.

However, most of them are descendents of the generation of Vietnamese who left Vietnam due to the Vietnam War and they are predominantly from the southern part of Vietnam. Even though they are politically disconnected from Vietnam, they still have contacts with relatives there and often made trips back. From them, some authentic first hand information about Vietnam's conditions based on their travels back to Vietnam had

---

<sup>5</sup> A good account of the Vietnamese immigration history is told in Chapter 2 of *Hien Duc Do, The Vietnamese Americans* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999). More on the Vietnamese exodus will be discussed in later chapters.

been obtained. Those who were visitors to the US had largely been international students who were either from the north or south but they were generally more well-to-do because most Vietnamese families do not have the wherewithal to send their children overseas to study.<sup>6</sup> They all offered interesting viewpoints about Vietnamese perceptions, culture and problems as well as their opinion of the current Vietnamese regime. Sometimes, common folks can give just as many clues as top tier figures and their statements may even be more detailed also. Certain informal interviews with Vietnamese residing in Vietnam were conducted through phone or in the form of survey through third parties.

---

<sup>6</sup> There is a trend of increase in the number of international students from Vietnam coming to the US for college education. This testifies to some improvement in the economic well-being of the people in Vietnam.

## **CHAPTER 2: VIETNAM'S WRENCHING HISTORICAL FOREIGN RELATIONS**

### **Brief Historical Background of Vietnam**

It is important to have a certain level of understanding of the history of Vietnam and its foreign relations in order to appreciate later developments involving ASEAN-Vietnam interaction as well as Vietnam's domestic and foreign policy evolution. The underlying historical dynamics in the region especially in the twentieth century had shaped its subsequent political affairs. Vietnam's historical struggles and experience had particularly molded its characteristics that were deeply entrenched in its foreign policy thinking.

### **Historical Struggles**

Vietnam has a long and continuous history of fighting and warring. A country with a long slender shape surrounded by China in the north, Laos and Cambodia in the West and the South China Sea in the East, it is located in a strategically vulnerable position and had been exposed to centuries of foreign invasions. Even though its cultural and religious foundations had been greatly influenced by China and India, its fight and struggle for independence had built a distinct sense of Vietnamese identity.

In its modern history, Vietnam was filled with no fewer wars and struggles. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese nationalists had already fought fiercely against the French colonialists. Even though many nationalist organizations made gains by attacking French garrisons or employed guerilla tactics against French troops, there were no decisive victories that were threatening enough to topple French rule. During this period of time, the movements and operations of the Vietnamese communists were small. There were many other competing nationalist organizations based on religious ideology or pure nationalistic sentiments. Some of the fledgling Vietnamese communist movements were initially based in southern China.

The most important figure in the Vietnamese communist movement was none other than Ho Chi Minh who grew up in poor living conditions. Ho's observation of France's colonization of Indochina angered him deeply and fueled his nationalist feelings. He had seen the harshness of the French and wanted to find a way to help his country gain independence. He was deeply bitter about the predicament of his country which was beset with turmoil, poverty and socioeconomic injustices. Even though he felt compelled to take action, he was powerless to make any real changes. Prior to the Japanese occupation, when the French were firmly in control of Indochina, he had already left Vietnam to seek ways to launch his revolutionary campaigns.

He thus spent much of his adult life abroad in other countries, shaping his views on the world and his aspirations to find a solution to his country's problems. He was exposed to rich learning experience that would ultimately set the course of action he

would choose to take in his ambition to secure Vietnamese independence. His political thinking and strategies were also shaped greatly by the insights he had gained through his travels<sup>1</sup>. He adopted many different names including Nguyen Tat Thanh and Nguyen Ai Quoc<sup>2</sup> in order to protect his identity in doing so.

In 1911, he started to work on a French ship so that he was able to travel to many European, African and American countries before he settled in France in 1917. In 1919, he entered the French Socialist Party and later on applied for membership in the Communist International<sup>3</sup>. He had also come to be acquainted with the US; in his travels, he managed to briefly tour the US and draw inspiration from it. In his minimal exposure to the US, Ho had witnessed America's entrepreneurial spirit as well as political culture. He found President Woodrow Wilson's call to make the world safe for democracy and uphold the principles of self-determination appealing.

Unfortunately, he did not receive a reply after sending a letter to President Wilson to seek his support for Vietnamese independence movements. So this initial influence was not furthered and did not result in a stronger connection with the US so as to become a basis for potential future Vietnamese political development towards democracy. It is difficult to say whether Ho would have been sufficiently influenced by democratic ideals

---

<sup>1</sup> Ton That Tien provides a more sinister biography of Ho. He describes his contacts abroad to have been largely utilitarian, for the sake of succeeding in his stratagems. The prospect of possibly being receptive to democratic ideals would actually be essentially a farce. See Ton That Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (New York, New York: Taylor and Francis New York, Inc, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> There are various sources on the biography of Ho Chi Minh. There are also variations on different aspects including his marital status and so on. There were also many names he adopted before his rise to fame but these are two that most biographies point to. See Khac Vien Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2009), 563.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 121.

had there been more support for his cause from the West. In any case, he instead had to seek out the only other serious alternative: communism, which he embraced, partly due to strategic reasons such as the presence of support from communist states and because he believed he was also able to tie communist revolutionary precepts to the Vietnamese predicament and therefore shore up Vietnamese nationalism.

He thus traveled to the Soviet Union in 1923 where he participated in the activities of many communist organizations. After almost two years, he went to southern China to garner support from Vietnamese nationalists in order to form the Vietnam Association of Revolutionary Youth. Guangzhou was a base for many revolutionary movements and Ho Chi Minh also coordinated clandestine activities and collaborated with Vietnamese communists from there.

### **Viet Minh Movements during the Japanese Occupation**

When the Japanese Pacific invasions reached Indochina, French control over Vietnam was terribly shaken.<sup>4</sup> A mixture of different colonialists carved Vietnam up while Vietnamese nationalist movements maintained underground operations and watched curiously the unfolding of events. Under the Japanese and French, the Vietnamese population suffered poor living conditions. In Tonkin and Annam, peasants endured a long famine. In Cochinchina, there was also an acute shortage of consumer

---

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 211.

goods. Millions of people went about in rags and widespread discontent reached even the wealthier landlords.

When the Japanese were close to defeat and World War II was drawing to an end, Ho Chi Minh went down south back to his country to form the Viet Minh only with a handful of people including Vo Nguyen Giap, whom Ho selected to be the leader of his armed battalion. Vo Nguyen Giap was an important Vietnamese communist figure. He was born in Quang Binh province and was a high school history teacher in Hanoi. After taking part in revolutionary activities since 1925, he joined the Vietnamese communist movement in 1940. He quickly rose in the ranks of the Vietnamese communist hierarchy, becoming the commander of the Vietnamese Liberation Army and then the Minister of National Defense. He would later be instrumental in the decisive battle against the French at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>5</sup>

The Viet Minh communists decided first of all to gain mass popular support to defeat the French and Japanese. They were therefore initially inclined to work together with non-communist nationalists in seeking Vietnamese independence. A national front was established that brought together all social classes, political parties and religious groupings. Because of the deteriorating situation under the French and Japanese, many of the bourgeoisie and intellectuals and students became drawn to the Viet Minh and swelled up its numbers. The Viet Minh strategy was to draw the masses to take action

---

<sup>5</sup> The Vietnamese continue to glorify the Battle of Dien Bien Phu which they call a “globe-shaking victory” and General Vo Nguyen Giap continues to be a living icon of a momentous point in Vietnamese history. See “Aspects of National Development,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_vietnam/history/#v2xol3lr2NUJ](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_vietnam/history/#v2xol3lr2NUJ) (accessed July 2010).



politically and militarily. The steps taken by Viet Minh included confiscation of land belonging to the wealthier landowners and merchants and reallocating them to the neediest and poorest of the population through reduction of land rents, loan interest and a fair share of communal lands.<sup>6</sup>

Such actions in effect helped the Viet Minh gain widespread popularity among the working class and recruit new members as it came to dominate the nationalist movement in Vietnam which eventually forced out the non-communist nationalist groups that refused to share power with the Viet Minh. In 1944, a huge famine struck northern Vietnam and caused widespread starvation. The Viet Minh was quick to take this opportunity to capture food supplies belonging to the Japanese or rich landlords and redistribute them to the poor.<sup>7</sup> Vietminh's moves helped win a lot of popularity particularly from the impoverished, which made up most of the population. Thus, while the Vietminh regular forces attacked Japanese and French garrisons to procure grains and supplies, they could also prod the mass peasants to use whatever tools or weapons they could to rise up and achieve those goals as well.

### **Declaration of the Establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)**

At the end of World War II, with the defeat of the Axis Powers and the surrender of the Japanese to the Allied forces, Ho Chi Minh took the opportunity to launch the

---

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 4 in Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, Ltd., 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992), 236.

August Revolution in which the Viet Minh attacked several cities in order to gain as much control of the country as possible. The French-installed puppet Emperor Bao Dai abdicated his throne to allow the Viet Minh to take over the country. Making a grand public appearance in front of a huge enthusiastic audience, Ho Chi Minh declared himself president of this newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. His exposure to American political culture in the past led him to adopt the wordings of the American Declaration of Independence during his speech to the audience in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi. He also wanted to use his knowledge of American political ideals to gain contacts with influential US officials. So, even in Ho Chi Minh's times, there had actually already been friendly encounters with the US.

However, the Nationalist Kuomintang forces came down south from China together with massive troops on the pretext of disarming the Japanese in North Vietnam but the Viet Minh was concerned that these Chinese forces wanted to overrun Vietnam to install a noncommunist government that would be friendly to Kuomintang. While the British disarmed the Japanese in South Vietnam, the French on the other hand wanted to reassert control of all of Vietnam even though the US, with whom the Viet Minh had cultivated some good relations through Ho Chi Minh's political tactics, had reservations against the French move because the US also has a history of struggle for independence from colonization.

In any case, the French government took a series of urgent measures to reestablish French sovereignty in Indochina. French troops parachuted into southern Vietnam and

fortified their positions. At first, in the face of the Kuomintang army coming from the north and the French army reestablished in the south, the adversaries seemed too numerous and formidable for the Viet Minh to fight against alone. So, while Ho Chi Minh cautioned against any rash moves and maintained a friendly demeanor with the Kuomintang by welcoming it as friends, he also invited the French back to North Vietnam to act as a counterweight against the Kuomintang. After negotiating with the French to secure a withdrawal of the Kuomintang forces, Ho Chi Minh also attempted to gain French concessions to a peaceful decolonization process. That however did not materialize as the French moved to reassert total control of Vietnam and the whole of Indochina. The conditions were thus ripe for a war with the French forces.

### **The First Indochina War**

The Viet Minh forces thus escaped back into the jungle and prepared grounds for a long struggle against the French. It mobilized people from all sectors of the population; young or old, men or women, peasants or teachers to play a part in its war efforts. This was the start of the first Indochina War. During this time, the Viet Minh decided on a strategy to wage battles suited to its condition of being technologically inferior in the face of a militarily advanced adversary. A strategy of the people's war was adopted and local self-defense forces made up of guerillas operated in their villages while continuing farm work. Regional forces which covered a relatively large area of territory had well-trained regular forces capable of conducting larger scale operations. Thus while guerillas harassed enemy troops, the regular army would go wherever it was deemed necessary to

concentrate on large scale military operations. These armed forces gained in strength and experience the more they fought while the French soldiers tired of pursuing enemy soldiers who disappeared into jungle conclaves each time the French chased after them. The Vietnamese population also staged several demonstrations under Viet Minh direction, calling for independence and freedom.

The struggle between the French forces and the Viet Minh soon reached some level of stalemate. Superior French forces with new reinforcements kept the French control secure in the urban areas. However, Viet Minh forces continued to fortify villages and expanded their guerilla operations to pin as many French personnel down as possible through stealth attacks and assassination campaigns. The general population was supportive of the Vietnamese resistance efforts and shielded the Viet Minh from direct confrontation with French 'search and destroy' operations. One strategy that Viet Minh kept applying was the propaganda aspect. To do this, the Viet Minh set up educational centers and schools to totally improve the literacy of the masses and at the same time indoctrinate them with fierce nationalist ideas and the tenets of communism. Thus the Viet Minh was able to enlist the help of common people from young children to old people to serve as spies and information sources. Many of those who seemed harmless and unsuspected by French officers were able to set up bombs and landmines and inflict substantial damage.

At the same time, the world communist movement got stronger<sup>8</sup> and became a potential threat to the noncommunist world. Since the communist victory in China, the Korean War and now a strengthening communist control of North Vietnam, there was grave concern that should Vietnam completely fall to communism with France's defeat, the rest of Southeast Asia might succumb to communism as stated in the Domino Theory. So American sympathy for Vietnam turned into fear of communist expansion and the US therefore opted to support French efforts to reassert control. However, the success of Mao Zedong in defeating the Kuomintang and the establishment of the PRC was a favorable and advantageous turn of events for the Viet Minh. With a friendly rear and a new source of material support from an ideological ally, the Viet Minh pursued resistance against the French without respite.

The French tried to draw the Viet Minh forces out into the open for conventional battles but the Viet Minh forces refused to be lured into disadvantageous positions. The Viet Minh offensives culminated in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu where the French suffered a disastrous defeat in 1954 by forces led by General Vo Nguyen Giap who is a celebrated Vietnamese war hero today because of it. This French defeat was due to both its own miscalculations and the Viet Minh's vital element of surprise. Vo's peasant army

---

<sup>8</sup> It was a time when the North Vietnamese were able to draw support from the communist world led by the Soviet Union. As stated in the Vietnam MOFA website, in the early 1950s, "Viet Nam established diplomatic relations with China, the Soviet Union and other People's Republic states in Asia and Eastern Europe. The socialist countries then became a very important source of supports for our resistance war against the French colonialists. In parallel with the military front, Vietnamese diplomats actively took part in the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, demanding major powers to recognize fundamental national rights of the Vietnamese and Indochinese people, making remarkable contribution to liberating the north of Viet Nam and bringing the Vietnamese revolution into a new stage." See "A Brief Diplomatic History of Vietnam," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng\\_vietnam/nr040810155433/#TzoRuQLtNKw](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng_vietnam/nr040810155433/#TzoRuQLtNKw) (accessed June 2010).

used whatever limited resources they had at their disposal to transport arms and heavy weapons but it was unexpected that such a backward peasant army was able to carry heavy artilleries through rugged terrains up adjacent hills and mountain passes to completely surround a vital French garrison and force their surrender after a two month siege.

The transportation of the heavy weapons with mere men and animal carts were also camouflaged perfectly so that by the time those weapons were positioned properly, the Viet Minh soldiers were able to attack the garrison with precision while countering air attacks with anti-aircraft guns and outmaneuvering the technologically superior French units to finally force their surrender. This coincided with the Geneva conference where the Vietnamese communists took the opportunity to bargain hard, while the French, no longer having the wherewithal to hold its colonies, conceded and relinquished them, granting independence to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Based on the Geneva Agreements, Vietnam was to be partitioned at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Even though Ho Chi Minh and his communist cadres disapproved of it, they had no choice but to agree to it due to pressure from China and the Soviet Union. Elections were supposed to be held as part of the agreement but Ho Chi Minh had the consolation that he would have the majority of the votes. The newly installed Ngo Dinh Diem government however refused to hold elections when the time came, arguing that he was not a signatory of the Geneva Agreements. Angered, the Viet Minh saw this as a clear violation of the spirit of the Geneva Agreement. Many of those who lived in the DMZ

(Demilitarized Zone) retreated south to seek safety. Thousands of National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong forces also remained in South Vietnam in preparation for continued armed insurgency against the South Vietnamese regime in coordination with the northern regime. All these led to the consolidation of lines drawn between communist North Vietnam, supported by the Soviet Union and China, and South Vietnam propped up by US material, military and advisory support. Once again, the seeds of war were sown.

### **Second Indochina War: Vietnam War**

Meanwhile, American involvement in Vietnam had taken a major turn beyond mere advising and military support as a new war was in the making. It was the Second Indochina War or Vietnam War as is usually called, and is the more well known one in the US and that incurred huge human costs to both sides. The full scale war between the US and North Vietnam brought enormous damage to North Vietnamese lands. Heavy bombardment pounded vast agricultural areas, creating deep craters some of which still exist on this day. Millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians died in this war while tens of thousands of American soldiers also perished.

The difficulty for the US in its efforts to contain communist expansion lay in the absence of a good leader to keep South Vietnam united against the north. North Vietnam was brutal in its tactics but it had the popular pretext of fighting for national liberation.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> According to Neil Jamieson, the Ngo Dinh Diem had a rigid, uncompromising self-righteous personality and thought of himself as the father of his country. He would crush whoever interfered with his authority

The Viet Minh was thus able to use propaganda to its advantage. Because of its continued will to fight and surprising resilience in using guerilla tactics and infiltration methods, the US had to rely more and more on sophisticated weaponry to make up for its disadvantages.

North Vietnam was thus heavily bombed as American and South Vietnamese troops relied on air superiority to break the North Vietnamese will to fight. But the regular People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) that was more focused on conventional warfare and the National Liberation Front that infiltrated the southern regime and relied primarily on guerilla warfare made good use of the thick forest covers for their troop operations. They also used the nearby friendly Laos and Cambodian border region for supplies and logistics.

The Ho Chi Minh trail was a treacherous man-made network that cut through areas in Laos and that allowed the North Vietnamese to conduct troop movements secretly and transport supplies. That was why the American leaders wanted to bomb certain Cambodian and Laotian regions in order to cut the North Vietnamese supply lines.

---

because of his belief in his moral superiority. He tolerated no opposition and truly believed that he knew what was best for his country. Such a personality and attitude eroded his legitimacy keenly and built up enormous amounts of opposition against him. He had to therefore fight two fronts, against the communists externally but also at home where his authority was often questioned. Ho Chi Minh on the other hand was only referred to as "Uncle Ho" and such a label had a very important connotation. He was not patriarchal as a father would be but he was one who would intervene as a figure of legitimate moral authority when the situation arises; he was thus a figure of immense authority but his title and function as more of an uncle made him less intrusive in the territories he controlled. His regime therefore had this sort of legitimacy that allowed him to garner the support for his revolutionary campaigns.



However, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia turned down the request and even allowed territorial access to the Viet Cong.<sup>10</sup>

In the north, Viet Minh's leader, Ho Chi Minh always kept a simple non-extravagant life-style<sup>11</sup>; he dressed simply to keep him connected with the peasants which formed the majority of the Vietnamese population. That was a major reason why he had great popularity throughout the country during the struggle against the French. And that was also why, after the Geneva Accords in Paris, Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam refused to allow elections to be held fearing that Ho would win the popularity vote with large swaths of the rural population throwing their support to the Viet Minh.

In South Vietnam, rising corruption made the job of gaining legitimacy and maintaining stability difficult. Ngo Dinh Diem was chosen as President of the Republic of South Vietnam because the US believed that he represented the best anticommunist candidate available. Yet, he turned out to be autocratic and repressive and turned many of the South Vietnamese people against his regime as well as the US. Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu was the head of the secret police and had a major hand in this administration's actions.

They persecuted the people and attacked many religious groups particularly the Buddhist ones that represented the majority of the population and caused widespread

---

<sup>10</sup> Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1996), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Many scholars state that Ho's triumph as a nationalist was because he was incorruptible which frustrated many attempts of President Lyndon Johnson's administration on negotiation. See Ho's personal charm tactics, image and demeanor in Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 44.

anger over their heavy-handed treatment. Many of those who were prosecuted had not even the slightest connections with the communists; as such more and more of those who initially were anticommunists turned towards the communists, swelling their ranks and increasing their infiltration operations, complicating the work of the Saigon authorities and their American advisors.<sup>12</sup>

The Ngo brothers' rule and management were also mired with cronyism and intrigues. Constantly suspicious and reactive at the moment anyone showed disagreement against them, they kept exacerbating the situation and even antagonized their own followers because of their nepotistic and heavy-handed ways. Their meddling with military matters had caused resentment and dissent even amongst the generals and soldiers and there were thus several coup attempts on Diem's life, but he managed somehow to gain an upper hand for a while.

Even though the US especially during the Kennedy administration wanted to build a stable and staunchly anticommunist South Vietnam based on good governance to win the people's support and allegiance, Ngo Dinh Diem's administration pretty much erased any of such possibilities.<sup>13</sup> The US thus had a hard time in winning hearts and minds in Vietnam despite many strategies that were employed including agrarian reform, infrastructure building, and community development and so on. Regular search and

---

<sup>12</sup> The Ngo brothers' rule caused so much discontent that senior Vietnamese military leaders took an opportunity to see a senior provincial US military adviser to privately talk about the seriousness of Ngo Dinh Nhu's heavy-handedness and say that if he did not go, South Vietnam would crumble. See Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 245.

<sup>13</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 386.

destroy operations by the South Vietnamese and US Marines did little to abate the problem if they did not actually compound it. Many Vietnamese people including those residing in villages in the south resented the disruption in their lives in turn came to view the US troops as occupiers and new colonialists to such an extent that it was hard for the US and South Vietnamese troops to differentiate amongst the South Vietnamese people between communist enemies or those who were just purely nationalistic.

Thus, the southern regime stood feebly and remained weakly instituted; there was no doubt that the regime held little legitimacy<sup>14</sup> and with the passage of time, many South Vietnamese turned against it and many also joined the communist camp. Brutal methods were cavalierly used against those suspected of being communist or opposed to the regime exacerbating the widespread anger towards Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother.

The security condition was so precarious that this vicious cycle spiraled on until finally, local South Vietnamese generals staged a coup de tat against the Diem regime with America's tacit approval to remove Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother from power. The situation did not stabilize as the South Vietnamese junta leadership changed hands over and over again leaving the same problem of bad governance unsolved. When President Nguyen Van Thieu took over, there was some improvement in terms of regime stability but it ultimately would not prevent the deterioration of morale in the South Vietnamese army and its eventual collapse.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In America, the Vietnam War also incurred a huge political toll. Massive antiwar movements and protests went on in Washington. The media coverage of the extensive bombing as well as heavy American casualties caused an uproar in the US. It is interesting that American involvement and conduct in a war in this small country located so far away from home led to so much domestic repercussions. This was a trying time because drug abuse, racial tensions and disenchantment with the federal government pervaded the domestic scene in the US. Vietnam took advantage of this situation to win political points by seeking sympathy from the American population and to bend America's fighting will.<sup>15</sup> The plight of the Vietnamese, their countless sufferings and the Vietnamese civilian and American war casualties became useful propaganda for the North Vietnamese regime to appeal to American voters and sway American politicians.

The widely televised Tet Offensive during Lunar New Year, when Vietnamese forces launched one of the most coordinated attacks by conventional troops was a decisive turning point<sup>16</sup> in America's role in Vietnam. Even though the North Vietnamese army and the NLF suffered crippling losses, the attack had a psychological effect on the American people and government. There was a credibility gap between official White House pronouncements and the actual situation on the ground. Some of the later footage of Vietminh regular forces marauding the south and almost taking over the US embassy belied any true progress that the Johnson administration tried to project. President

---

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 4, The CPV and the United States in Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*.

<sup>16</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 465.

Johnson could no longer conceal the real situation in Vietnam for which he would take a heavy political toll that he declined to run for reelection as a result.

When President Nixon came into the picture, a new exit strategy called “Vietnamization”<sup>17</sup> was crafted with the advice of Henry Kissinger, the chief foreign policy advisor. Negotiation with the North Vietnamese, increasing shift of the responsibility to the South Vietnamese army and engagement with China to put pressure on the Vietminh were all part of the new strategy being pursued. The Paris peace talks were held as Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger negotiated peace terms. However, nothing came out of it until later. President Thieu was loath about signing the agreement but in the face of American pressure, reluctantly agreed.

The ceasefire was broken however by continuing attacks by both sides. With the signing of the Paris agreement, military disengagement of the US and the presence of dry season suitable for military offensives, the North Vietnamese army seized the moment to press their attack.<sup>18</sup> “A major turning point of the war in South Vietnam was the loss of Phuoc Luong Province, 70 miles north of Saigon on January 7, 1975, after a three-week communist offensive. In Saigon, the public reaction was one of mounting apprehension

---

<sup>17</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 466.

<sup>18</sup> Khac Vien Nguyen gives a detailed account of the final phase of the North Vietnamese invasion of the south. See Beginning of the End in Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 316.

mixed with widespread cynicism; corruption in the Army was believed by many to be so gross that outpost defenders had to pay other units for artillery support and air supply.”<sup>19</sup>

South Vietnam proved completely vulnerable without US support. Not only was fighting without superior air cover difficult, the general disarray and indiscipline of the South Vietnamese army and the lack of a coherent military strategy led to many fiascos that steadily reduced Thieu’s hold of the south. Town after town and city after city were taken by the north and the weakened and demoralized South Vietnamese regime seemed less and less able to hold out any longer.

Its economy was also suffering without America’s sustained financial and economic aid. With the US having played such an extensive role for a significant period of time, the Vietnamese of the southern regime had become well-acquainted with a more liberal economic system and had enjoyed the fruits of free enterprise despite the dangers from the north, the NLF insurrection or the ruling elites’ heavy-handedness. US presence and economic aid had been the engine of growth and prosperity for South Vietnam while it existed. However, when the US withdrew from the scene, South Vietnam proved unable to sustain itself militarily and economically. The South Vietnamese regime and society had become too dependent on the US for their continued viability and when it withdrew its role, they quickly crumbled, out of their many weaknesses in the face of the North Vietnamese onslaught.

---

<sup>19</sup> John C. Donnell, “South Vietnam in 1975: The Year of Communist Victory,” *Asian Survey*, Vol 16, No. 1 (January, 1976): 1.

In 1975, Saigon fell to the PAVN which took control of the whole country. Subsequently, in 1976, the Vietnamese communist leadership changed the country's name to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In the closing months preceding PAVN's overrunning of the country, many transport vehicles like helicopters rushed to bring refugees out of the country. In subsequent years, many Vietnamese also secretly fled through boats and so on. Many of those who reached the United States were given political asylum whereas those who were left stranded and found to have previously had the slightest links with the former southern regime or the US were forced into reeducation camps or incarcerated.

The Vietnam War remained a huge source of bitterness in the relations between Vietnam and US for years to come. It was one of the most traumatic episodes in US history. Even today, talks about difficult war terrains such as Iraq or Afghanistan, often conjure up images of Vietnam. It goes without saying that it was certainly not easy to mend relations between the US and Vietnam.

The Vietnam War was also an important historical juncture that played a major part in shaping Vietnamese belligerence, distrust, sensitivity to external interference as well as false pride in its international revolutionary communist role and mistaken notions of socialist dogma that led to devastating economic failure later on. Vietnamese military victory did not translate into socioeconomic success; it only allowed the communist leaders to bring the country to further ruin. The war exacted enormous costs on the

country and it would be many years before basic infrastructure would be installed and genuine economic activities could be resumed.<sup>20</sup>

### **Beginnings of Post-War Negotiations with the US**

Yet, immediate Vietnamese post-war actions showed that even at that time, there was already the desire and intention to establish relations with the US. It was obvious to the new Vietnamese leaders themselves that despite military victory, their country was in ruins and powerful outside help was desperately needed. Vietnam clearly wanted to gain from the technological and economic prowess of the US. The Soviet Union was by far a less desirable substitute.

However, as was mentioned in previous chapters, Vietnam was negotiating from a very different mindset at that time and clearly from a position of greater strength than as compared to Vietnam locked in the Cambodian quagmire in the 80s. But almost immediately after the war, the US slapped numerous sanctions and embargoes on Vietnam. Vietnamese assets in the US were frozen and diplomatic relations could make no headway with the Vietnam War so fresh in memory. The US vetoed Vietnam's application to become a member of the UN and also pressured allies to maintain an embargo on Vietnam and it prohibited trade of US businesses with Vietnam<sup>21</sup>. Even Japan which was keen on having new relations with Vietnam had to be deferential and

---

<sup>20</sup> See "Aspects of National Development," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_vietnam/history/#v2xo13lr2NUJ](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_vietnam/history/#v2xo13lr2NUJ) (accessed June 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 30.



stayed in line with the US position. For example, in 1988, “Honda Motor Co. had been planning to build an assembly plant in Vietnam but backed off under American pressure.”<sup>22</sup>

The Vietnamese leaders still tried to seek normalization of relations but no breakthrough could be achieved largely because of its insistence on reparation money as well as American reluctance to acquiesce to a former foe. Vietnamese leaders consistently pointed to the 3.25 billion dollars<sup>23</sup> of reconstruction aid that Nixon promised and it became a major bone of contention between the two countries. In any case, the US was not ready to compromise and as far as war reparation payment or previously stated compensation commitments were concerned, the US was in no mood to comply.

When Vietnam dropped its insistence on monetary compensation however, there was some hope that normalization was at hand. But that sanguine expectation was premature as negotiations in the end came to a naught. The US still remained intransigent about improving relations with Vietnam in no small measure because of the lingering bitterness from the Vietnam War. The US also chose China over Vietnam as a priority country to normalize relations with because of the strategic exigencies of the day. Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach hoped for a quick decision by the US to opt for normalization but ended up having to sign a 25 year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the

---

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Crosette, “Currency Crisis is Ravaging Vietnam’s Fragile Economy,” *NYT*, April 10, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, 30.

Soviet Union instead, which was a tacit alliance document. Vietnam went on to settle old scores with Cambodia by invading it with Soviet backing. This would come to be the Third Indochina War and develop into a Cambodian crisis which will be explored in detail later. This development pulled Vietnam back into the belligerent stance that would put Vietnam in a position of lasting isolation from the international community. The costly perpetual stalemate in Cambodia would give Vietnam a taste of its own medicine in a war of attrition waged by the resistance factions supported by an anti-Vietnamese coalition involving external powers like the US and China.

### **New Punitive War on Vietnam**

The US situation prior to the end of Vietnam War was such that antiwar movements abounded and a state of division and disunity at home persisted. Protests went on and caused so much tension in the government and general population. This was the political factor that caused American loss and disengagement from Vietnam. And the communist north cunningly leveraged the antiwar sentiments of the American people. However, Vietnam was no longer able to effectively showcase its plight to the US public and lobby for support when the war was finally over because it was moving on when the US had finally extricated itself from the Vietnam quagmire and Vietnam was left to its own devices.

At the same time, a new stage of war was being waged on Vietnam by the US; the international trade embargo imposed on Vietnam effectively starved it and brought it to

its knees in a way that could not be done purely militarily. This American-led embargo continued “to cripple Vietnam’s economy.”<sup>24</sup> To a great extent, without the US sanctions and pressure on US allies to observe them, Vietnam might not have been so compelled to compromise. It utilized the economic strategy to prevent Vietnam from benefiting from the world’s largest economy as well as from others that mattered to Vietnam and that could have made a difference to Vietnam’s development through trade and aid. Thus Vietnam was not able to progress and develop and it suffered long from the socioeconomic shortcomings that most of the socialist bloc was facing concurrently.

Thus there were many missed opportunities for Vietnam to have good relations with the US and much of the rest of the world, partly due to the international strategic predicament at that time as well as the psychological perceptions of the two parties. Vietnam right after the Vietnam War was negotiating from a point of being a Soviet-backed socialist champion flushed with victory in the Vietnam War<sup>25</sup> while the US had little interest in improving relations with a former bitter foe when other strategic exigencies took precedence.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Ex-Envoy Possible Foreign Minister,” *The Nation* in English, June 21, 91, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report-East Asia (hereafter FBIS-EAS), (June 21, 91): 39.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Pike, “Recent International Developments in Asia,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 12, (December, 1979).

## **CHAPTER 3: THE PUZZLE AND THE ROLE OF ASEAN**

### **Vietnam's Conditioned Character**

We can thus see from the previous chapter that Vietnam had historically had many foes; it had shown to be not very adept at diplomacy because of the sort of tenuous relations it had and it often exhibited a bellicose mindset. It had been at war for a whole century, being one of the main belligerents in the First Indochina War against France, the Second Indochina War against the US and the Third Indochina War against Cambodia and China.

Its thinking during that time was warlike and survivalist, revealing a rather Machiavellian orientation, hostile and recalcitrant political stance and the convenient use of tactical and military means to solve problems. It was battle-hardened but when it achieved unification, its ideological erroneousness and lack of administrative ability caused further poverty and hardship. It was therefore highly unlikely for the communist Socialist Republic of Vietnam to be cooperative, open and peaceful in its orientation, or be willing to be more integrated with the world. However, it eventually did in a rather dramatic turnaround and quick fashion; given Vietnam's history and the national character it displayed in the past, Vietnam's move to comprehensively reorient its foreign policy poses a puzzle.

### **The Geopolitical Context**

Vietnam in the 1980s was in disarray. Not only was its economy in dire straits, the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP) was under a lot of fire for its ongoing domestic socioeconomic woes. Natural disasters in addition to ineffective central planning caused widespread famine and health problems.<sup>1</sup> Many people lived in abject poverty and a state of malnutrition, and their dissatisfaction and grievances with government initiatives were palpable, especially in the south where the people had traditionally experienced more outside influence and pluralism. Vietnam was incurring huge costs with the ongoing occupation of Cambodia as the remnant Khmer Rouge and other resistance factions fought a war of attrition against it, using the Thailand-Cambodia border as a friendly rear.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, Vietnam was undoubtedly in a period when it was most vulnerable because of all the immense international structural geopolitical changes. The Tiananmen Square incident, the decline and ultimate disintegration of Soviet Union, social instability and serious economic problems at home all magnified the panic and desperation amongst communist regimes during the final days of the Cold War. Vietnam had lost a great pillar to lean on, it no longer had the foreign aid needed to sustain its costly occupation of Cambodia and it was diplomatically isolated internationally and had no one to easily turn to for help.

### **Leadership in the Midst of Unfavorable Changing Conditions**

---

<sup>1</sup> *AFP Dispatch*, March 12, 1990, FBIS-EAS (March 14, 1990): 72.

The Soviet Union was already cutting back on its aid to Vietnam as it underwent its own political turmoil towards the end of the 1980s. Successful international initiatives to further isolate Vietnam incurred further political and economic costs to its already detrimental domestic situation. Many of the leaders had no idea how to solve all the problems that they were facing at the same time. It was imperative that Vietnam did something drastic or it could implode or lose its domestic grip of power. In 1986 it implemented “doi moi” to reform and restructure the economy but it had mixed results.<sup>2</sup> It did not translate into commensurate foreign policy change towards openness that was necessary for foreign investment and trade to contribute to the reforms and economic development of the country.

In fact, Vietnam still propped up a stubborn resistance regarding the Cambodian issue and Vietnam did not serve as an attractive place for foreign investors who could bring in badly needed capital to help jumpstart its economy, because of the non-existence of an investor-friendly domestic business environment. But lack of progress at home and major world events such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the overwhelming US success in the Gulf War shook the very foundations of faith and stability in the regime’s grip of power and caused fear about its survival. The decline and ultimate fall of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe undoubtedly had a big impact and deep impression on the rest of the communist world.

### **Different Responses in Other Similar Countries**

---

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market* (New York, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997): 24.

But this watershed moment did not constitute an across the board change in other surviving communist nations, especially the comparatively smaller ones. A brief look at North Korea just to study its reaction to the end of the Cold War highly illuminates its contrast from Vietnam's case. The first North Korean nuclear crisis occurred in the early 1990s, soon after the fall of the Soviet Union. North Korea felt that only the nuclear bomb could protect its regime in the face of perceived threats from the US and South Korea. Of course its nuclear program had been existent for some time already but the crisis of communism hardened its resolve to have a full-fledged nuclear arsenal and led it to openly flaunt its nuclear advancement. Apart from that, it remained a very secretive, repressive and isolated country while championing "juche"<sup>3</sup> or self-reliance at home. Within North Korea, there was a propaganda machine that portrayed its own self as a powerful country with an image of superiority, high morale and moral legitimacy. North Korea's bizarre and radical characteristics only became more acute after the Cold War.

The reality of the situation however, was grim at home for North Korea as it lacked the essentials for feeding its population and running its day to day affairs. North Korea saw itself to be vulnerable to military attack by enemies and despite the attempts to project an image to the contrary, the elites were well aware that its economy was in grave danger; it suffered from lack of energy and productivity to feed the people and run the country effectively. So, even though Kim Jong Il inherited his father's legacy and continued to be treated as a supreme leader that was above admonishment, the country's

---

<sup>3</sup> Samuel S. Kim, *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 233.

poor conditions put the leadership on edge for fear of losing power and control.

So, it might have wanted nuclear weapons not just as a form of deterrence through brinksmanship<sup>4</sup> but also as a status symbol as well as a useful tool in its ploys and deceptive bargaining tactics. Gaining enormous aid packages from other countries was a very important objective in North Korea's negotiation strategy and having the nuclear card was perceived as a way to extract more benefits. Such is the way North Korea remains to be today and it uses brinksmanship, aggressive rhetoric and provocative actions in dealing with its insecurities and perceived external enemies.

Looking at Vietnam, there is no doubt that it was also compelled to change just as other surviving communist states were because of the same detrimental international geopolitical changes and similar socioeconomic crisis at home. But Vietnam chose instead to open up relations with all, including its former foes. By the late 1980s, Vietnam had already occupied Cambodia by force for a long time (more than a decade) and had had tense relations with the US, China and the ASEAN states of the time.

But not long after it pulled out of Cambodia in 1989, it normalized relations with China and then normalized with the US and joined ASEAN as a member and formed cooperative trade relations with Europe. Clearly, harsh geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions necessitated change, but why were Vietnam's reactions to the same unfavorable domestic and international conditions different in a positive way from the

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



other surviving smaller communist states?

### **Comparison with Other Countries**

Some may argue that Vietnam's economy was in such a terrible state that it just had no choice but to open up. But the North Korean economy was just as bad if not worse, notwithstanding the fact that it still received generous aid from China that kept it afloat. At least Vietnam's "doi moi" improved the agricultural production of rice but North Korea was "almost 20 years behind Vietnam and after many years of its "juche" policy, it ended up with isolation from the globalized world, poor infrastructure, technological obsolescence, uncompetitive industries, and poverty-ridden economy.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, North Korea still pushed for its military augmentation to the fullest rather than open up to benefit itself economically. Even though Cuba also faced major downturn after losing foreign aid from the Soviet Union, it stubbornly clung to its own devices and managed to resuscitate its economy after a number of years without adopting a friendly stance towards the US or the capitalist world. If Cuba, a tiny, lone socialist island in a largely capitalist world remained indifferent while North Korea reacted to these international geopolitical changes deemed threatening to its national security by putting itself in a nuclear siege mode, why would Vietnam have responded in such a constructive way?

Vo Nguyen Giap, the architect of Dien Bien Phu battle that decisively ended

---

<sup>5</sup> Park, "Does North Korea Follow Vietnam's Path?: Institutional Constraints". A comparison of the political economy of the two communist countries is made here by the author.

French rule considered it a virtue to sacrifice numerous lives to attain national goals. To him, there was no fuss or qualm that masses of people die because essentially, a lot of people will die everyday anyway and deaths in the hundreds or thousands will not be in vain and are immaterial in the pursuit of victory.<sup>6</sup> Vo was a contemporary of Ho Chi Minh and many in that generation, thought this way and saw the world in Machiavellian terms. Like Machiavelli, they did not reject virtue<sup>7</sup>; rather their understanding of it was in line with Machiavelli's theory of statecraft.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Viet Minh often made strategic blunders, it was still tactical calculations and actions based on competitive realpolitik thinking that were always firmly employed.<sup>9</sup> In fact, it used to think of foreign relations in terms of "standing with one great power to oppose another one or neighboring countries."<sup>10</sup> Could Vietnam be playing the same balancing game as it always seemed to have? It played off the USSR and China against the US in the Vietnam War, China against the USSR after the US departed from Vietnam and then when the USSR was no more, it perhaps tried to play off China and ASEAN against each other.

However, if it was in such a realpolitik frame of mind, why make such majestic proclamation of friendliness to all? Could it have been a farce? Why would Vietnam have

---

<sup>6</sup> David, Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns* (New York, New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jackson, *Global Covenant: Human Conduct in the World of States* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 160.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 57-65.

<sup>10</sup> Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2001), 107.

changed its attitude to such a great extent as if it was so eager to all of a sudden turn from a regional and international outcast into an ultra-friendly country? If it was only seeking to balance one against another just as it used to do, such dramatic multidirectional proclamations would have been unnecessary and this purported change would also turn out to be short-lived. We will see in later chapters that today, in retrospect, this change had not been short-lived. Vietnam did not revert to its old ways; in fact it is becoming more and more integrated regionally and globally.

The Vietnam War was also much more recent than the Korean War and the costs of that war were not any less severe; logically speaking, bitter feelings should still be present on both sides. Wasn't Vietnam afraid of the consequences of opening up that the North Korean leadership is still so fearful of today? ASEAN countries had traditionally also been a bulwark against communist expansion.<sup>11</sup> So why would Vietnam so enthusiastically bind itself into an institution that it so distrusted in the past?

In fact the founding ASEAN countries still have strong knit military relations with the West. Singapore and Malaysia are part of the Five Power Defense Arrangement with Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Thailand regularly has Cobra Gold military drills with the US. The Philippines hosted a US military base prior to 1992, when it was closed down, and after which Singapore provided certain military installations for use by the US

---

<sup>11</sup> In fact, when the communist north successfully took over the whole of Vietnam, it came as a shock to the ASEAN countries which had to readjust their own positions with the new regional reality which at first came with fears of communist takeover in the region. See Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1989), 63.

military to make up for it.<sup>12</sup> Fear of “peaceful evolution”<sup>13</sup> by outside forces or negative influences had been characteristic of the psyche of Vietnamese leaders. They usually had deep suspicions that often bordered the level of paranoia, and were afraid to lose control or be subjected to subversion. Why had Vietnam overcome such distrusts to a good degree?

Perhaps Vietnam was actually operating out of distrusts, and because of certain irredentist aims and motivations, it needed to find another strategic source from which to draw support for its territorial claims. It might make sense especially when we take the outstanding territorial disputes Vietnam had with China, particularly those that involved the islands in the South China Sea. There were naval clashes between China and Vietnam over those islands in 1974 and 1988 and there was also a shared concern amongst the other Southeast Asian states about competing claims over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Yet, if Vietnam’s purpose was to balance against China, shouldn’t it have beefed up its military instead of bringing its military budget down especially when Vietnam would be the frontline state against China?

Looking at its military; it was getting much less than what it used to receive and made to commit only to defense capabilities. It “reduced the strength of its armed forces

---

<sup>12</sup> Steven Erlanger, “The World; The Search for a New Security Umbrella.” *New York Times* (hereafter NYT), May 12, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Carlyle Thayer and Ramses Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 182.

by half to 700,000 to 800,000”<sup>14</sup> during the three years between 1987 and 1990, according to Vietnamese military sources. “The Vietnamese government started to cut back on armed forces personnel in 1987. Vietnam’s armed forces totaled 1.5 million at the end of 1978 when Vietnam sent its troops to Cambodia.”<sup>15</sup> According to these sources, “the government will continue to reduce the military and will submit a bill to the National Assembly later this year to revise the military conscription system to shorten the terms of service. The reduction has been carried out not only in the Army, the Navy, the Air Force but also in regional forces and most of the 50,000 soldiers withdrawn from Cambodia in September last year have been discharged from military service, they said.”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps its economic woes prevented it from being able to maintain a strong military, but if we look at North Korea, it was no richer and had even fewer resources; yet its military was constantly upgraded and its forces were armed to the teeth. These countries knew how to find ways to keep themselves militarily ready but Vietnam had chosen to reduce its military spending and lower its guard and readiness. ASEAN on the other hand was no military alliance and should any military clash occur with China, ASEAN would be in a very weak position to help Vietnam. Joining ASEAN with the intent of explicitly balancing China militarily would perhaps endanger its security interests even further and not be strategically prudent.

---

<sup>14</sup> “SRV Reduces Armed Forces by Half Since 1987,” *Kyodo* in English, November 1, 1990, FBIS-EAS. (November 2, 1990): 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

So, to dismiss Vietnam's change only as another tactical maneuver, this time to balance China, is also somewhat simplistic. Its actions and policies in the 1990s seemed more like the dropping of guard as a signal that it was more comfortable with the international environment and it realized that its situation required a focus on peaceful economic development. It seemed to have genuinely changed its preferences, and wanted to improve its domestic well-being as well as its relations with other countries rather than be isolated. It was concerned about those South China Sea islands with overlapping claims with China but felt that in joining ASEAN, even though it did not constitute military backing, there was diplomatic clout, the same one ASEAN used to garner international support to isolate Vietnam at the height of the Cambodian crisis.

Vietnam had learned its lesson well. Should China do anything rash, it would surely tarnish its own reputation. In fact, there had already been a 1992 Joint Declaration on the South China Sea by ASEAN in protest of Chinese actions on the Spratly Islands which were claimed by many Southeast Asian countries including the maritime countries like Malaysia and Brunei.<sup>17</sup> So, Vietnam found its position rather secure as it has come to show in the recent past through its international engagement and participation. Its past Cambodian adventure incurred unbearable costs ultimately even though it gambled that it had a great power backer and had little to fear. Vietnam could have made another foreign policy mistake out of "tactical thinking". But it didn't; rather it chose to open up and did not engage in power politics; rather, it welcomed foreign countries and of course, their

---

<sup>17</sup> See Haco Hoang, "Outward and Beyond: Institutional Change in Southeast Asia," PhD Dissertation, (2002): Chapter 6.

accompanying foreign investment and capital.

There is no doubt that the material reality and geopolitical prerogatives forced Vietnam into a position in which it was imperative to make a radical change. But what was to be this change? Vietnam, in contrast to North Korea and Cuba, made a sweeping change in its foreign policy stance towards friendliness with the outside world including the West. Even former rivals which it labeled enemies in the past were called friends whose friendship it said it cherished. Many Vietnamese official lines and statements from its foreign ministry and other agencies are today filled with words of goodwill and friendliness towards all countries in the world: to open up, to build friendly relations, to threaten no one, to abide by international law and norms and so on.<sup>18</sup>

The acute diplomatic isolation of Vietnam in the late 1980s could have forced it to isolate itself further and even propel it towards a siege mentality or fortress-like foreign policy stance like North Korea. In fact, it could have chosen to respond to such a hostile environment by magnifying the perception of external threat to prop up its nationalist credentials, promote unity and support of the Vietnamese people for the regime and legitimize austere and repressive measures. But it decided not to go down that route.

For the sake of national interest and regime survival, Vietnam could not afford not to change or do something drastic. Vietnam was in a really serious state of crisis at that time. But it also had a huge inertia for change, particularly positive change: it had no

---

<sup>18</sup> See "Vietnam Foreign Policy," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqvK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqvK42khS1TB) (accessed June 2010).

momentum to build on and it had a heavy constraining ideological baggage and had to face many discouraging external signs in its seemingly hostile immediate international environment. So, even though Vietnam was poised to change then, there were many events that should have prevented Vietnam from doing so in a remarkably progressive way, or at least discouraged major readjustments that would have logically been deemed risky. The Tiananmen Square incident for example should have left a sense of apprehension about moving forward with reforms and opening up. The collapse of the Soviet Union, partly due to opening up should have also made Vietnam deeply uncomfortable about more open relations with other states especially the West for fear of “peaceful evolution.”<sup>19</sup>

Watching all of these could have forced the Vietnamese elite towards a change in the opposite direction, the direction towards further isolation or recalcitrance. Yet, Vietnam went ahead in full force to change its foreign policy towards openness and friendliness, commensurate with economic reforms at home. This shows that the Vietnamese elite had a certain measure of reassurance and determination to move towards opening up even though the geopolitical conditions at the time were not favorable to Vietnam and were not even remotely reassuring.

In other words, indeed Vietnam was compelled to respond and change, under such extreme, unfavorable circumstances but in what way? Should it isolate itself further and

---

<sup>19</sup> Carlyle Thayer talks about peaceful evolution and the VCP’s fear of it on several pages of Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, especially on p. 219.



stamp down on domestic opposition? Should it attempt to build a nuclear bomb like North Korea did in the early 1990s? Or should it join the world, in the face of adversity and hostility, which it did? But with uncertainties about how the world would respond, how would Vietnam have been comfortable in just opening up? But without doing so, wouldn't further self-isolation have led to the risk of implosion or the end of the regime amidst powerful forces beyond its control?

### **An Unprecedented Change**

The initiative that Vietnam took to move towards normalization of relations with China and unconditional normalization of relations with the US, and its unrestrained attitude in joining ASEAN, all suggested a break of Vietnamese foreign policy behavior from the past. In 1987 however, a year after the “doi moi” (what most scholars refer to as renovation) economic reform policy was instituted, Vietnam was still very rigid in terms of negotiating on the Cambodian issue. So, doi moi as a domestic reform did not imply a foreign policy “renovation”.

Vietnam still refused to compromise on its Cambodian occupation and it still attempted sporadic attacks on the resistance factions at the Thai border to change the status quo. Relations with many countries were still tense as international isolation of Vietnam and condemnation of its actions were still very strong. Only in 1989, Vietnam finally pulled out all its troops from Cambodia unconditionally. Then quickly, it normalized relations with China in 1991, and then in 1995 with the US and in that same

year and month became a member of ASEAN and established economic agreements with European countries.

The progressive actions that Vietnam took were unprecedented. Nothing clearly pointed to the likelihood that Vietnam would work towards such dramatic and progressive outcomes. Many factors showed that the Vietnamese regime was in trouble and about to take perhaps drastic and radical steps to survive and stay in power but none of these clearly showed that Vietnam would move greatly in such a way towards opening up and relaxing its foreign policy especially when China just suffered from the Tiananmen Square incident, a tumultuous event attributed to Deng's reforms and when the Soviet Union was teetering towards collapse in its rush to embrace democratic reforms. Even though Vietnam also faced some conservative backlash and tightened its political grip at home, it ultimately pushed forward with reforms domestically as well as in its foreign policy. On a closer look, there is compelling evidence that ASEAN played a role in bringing about such an outcome.

### **Birth of ASEAN**

In the 1950s and 1960s, the other parts of Southeast Asia saw the birth of many newly independent nations, most of them through peaceful decolonization and transfer of power and sovereignty, with an exception of Indonesia. They were all burdened by underdevelopment and had to first and foremost build their countries toward stability and prosperity. For a region with such a diversity of languages, ethnicities and cultural

characteristics, domestic as well as regional relations were naturally sensitive to such cleavages. The new regimes had yet to build their own bases of support and legitimacy while confronting the ever present threat from local communist insurgents.

But the Cold War effects on the region had just been felt, with the Vietnam War brewing while the period of “confrontation” in which Indonesia launched attacks on the Federation of Malaysia was just beginning. This was the time when Indonesia under Sukarno posed a military threat to the neighboring countries by threatening to take over Malaysian territories by force. This experience resulted in an atmosphere of insecurity as many of the newly formed nations had a lot of nation-building work to do and could not afford to fall into unrest or inter-state conflict.<sup>20</sup>

Maritime Southeast Asia “therefore comprised a diverse set of states with a variety of bilateral tensions.”<sup>21</sup> These new regimes therefore came to have a very possessive attitude towards sovereignty and dogmatic adherence to the principle of non-interference as they needed a stable order in which to build their nations domestically and survive. Ministers from the different Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines came together and expressed their common interests and commitment to building a stable regional community so that each country and nation could pursue the goals of national resilience without fear of being mired in great power rivalry or inter-state conflict.

---

<sup>20</sup> “The Founding of ASEAN,” <http://www.ascansec.org/7069.htm> (accessed November 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Michael Leifer, “The ASEAN Regional Forum,” *Adelphi Paper* 302 (1996): 13.

In 1967, a year after the official end of the confrontation episode, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was born with the Bangkok Declaration signed by the five countries. “The five ministers who signed it – Foreign Minister Adam Malik of Indonesia, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam of Singapore, and Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman of Thailand - would subsequently be hailed as the Founding Fathers of probably the most successful inter-governmental organization in the developing world today. And the document that they signed would be known as the ASEAN Declaration.”<sup>22</sup>

“It was a short, simply-worded document containing just five articles. It declared the establishment of an Association for Regional Cooperation among the countries of Southeast Asia to be known as ASEAN and spelled out the aims and purposes of that Association” which were about “cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, technical, educational and other fields, and in the promotion of regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law and adherence” to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference as defined by the United Nations Charter.<sup>23</sup> The ASEAN countries agreed to practice restraint in their relations so that no strife or conflict would rupture their socioeconomic progress.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> “The Founding of ASEAN,” <http://www.aseansec.org/7069.htm> (accessed November 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. This page describes the beginnings of ASEAN quite succinctly.

<sup>24</sup> For more of ASEAN’s aims, purposes and fundamental principles, go to “Overview,” <http://www.aseansec.org/64.htm> (accessed November 2009).

“Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Narciso Ramos, a one-time journalist and long-time legislator who had given up a chance to be Speaker of the Philippine Congress to serve as one of his country's first diplomats spoke during the formalities of ASEAN's founding. He recalled the tediousness of the negotiations that preceded the signing of the Declaration that “truly taxed the goodwill, the imagination, the patience and understanding of the five participating Ministers.”<sup>25</sup> That ASEAN was established at all in spite of these difficulties, he said, meant that its foundations had been solidly laid. And he impressed it on the audience of diplomats, officials and media people who had witnessed the signing ceremony that a great sense of urgency had prompted the ministers to go through all that trouble. He spoke darkly of the forces that were arrayed against the survival of the countries of Southeast Asia in those uncertain and critical times.<sup>26</sup> “The fragmented economies of Southeast Asia,” he said, “with each country pursuing its own limited objectives and dissipating its meager resources in the overlapping or even conflicting endeavors of sister states carry the seeds of weakness in their incapacity for growth and their self-perpetuating dependence on the advanced, industrial nations. ASEAN, therefore, could marshal the still untapped potentials of this rich region through more substantial united action.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Growing Pains**

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “The Founding of ASEAN,” <http://www.aseansec.org/7069.htm> (accessed November 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Yet, not too long after that, ASEAN was beset by a territorial dispute when “the Philippines resurrected its Sabah” claim from Malaysia.<sup>28</sup> Singapore and Malaysia also had lingering distrust towards their large neighbor, Indonesia because of the legacy of the “Confrontation” period when Indonesia, then under President Sukarno launched military campaigns against Malaysia and that endangered Singapore. The beginnings of ASEAN were thus filled with friction and uncertainty, causing fear that it would suffer the same fate as its predecessor, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) which was formed by Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines and which fell apart for this reason. Fortunately, even though soured relations brought ASEAN activities to a temporary halt, good sense and reason eventually prevailed and the contending countries’ agreement to put problems aside allowed the fledgling association to survive its birth pangs.

When the Vietnam War was brewing, the newly established ASEAN convened to discuss the humanitarian toll and its danger to regional peace. “The Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Thailand met in Kuala Lumpur on 15th February 1973. The meeting was held in accordance with an earlier understanding that the Foreign Ministers should meet periodically to discuss international developments affecting the region. The meeting was held to assess the recently concluded Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam and to consider its implications for Southeast

---

<sup>28</sup> Hoang, “Outward and Beyond: Institutional Change in Southeast Asia.” 104.

Asia.”<sup>29</sup> In that meeting, the participants came to an agreement that the Southeast Asian countries had to exert whatever effort that was necessary to rehabilitate Vietnam and all of Indochina and help in their reconstruction.<sup>30</sup> The meeting declared “its readiness in the spirit of neighborliness and regional cooperation to have meaningful ASEAN participation in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of all the states of Indochina.”<sup>31</sup> The matter was ultimately to be referred to the Standing Committee of ASEAN.<sup>32</sup>

In the years to come, the ASEAN members continued to face many ups and downs, but they explored ASEAN’s philosophical basis earnestly and learnt to consult one another and trust one another. Indonesia, being the largest country with the greatest population became the de facto leader as the ASEAN Secretariat was established in Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital. Yet their real test did not come until later on, when they had become more mature and no longer could afford to only “look inward”<sup>33</sup> and ignore the ongoing outside the current ASEAN region. This was when ASEAN had to increase its functional role and “look outward.”<sup>34</sup>

Both Vietnam and ASEAN were wary and distrustful of each other throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Even though ASEAN did extend its hand for the first time to Vietnam in the late 1970s, the invasion of Cambodia was a blatant violation of their

---

<sup>29</sup> “Joint Press Statement The ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting To Assess The Agreement On Ending The War And Restoring Peace In Vietnam And To Consider Its Implications For Southeast Asia,” Kuala Lumpur, February 15, 1973, <http://www.aseansec.org/1255.htm> (accessed January 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Hoang, “Outward and Beyond: Institutional Change in Southeast Asia,” 103.

<sup>34</sup> Hoang, “Outward and Beyond: Institutional Change in Southeast Asia,” 150.

cardinal principle of respect for sovereignty in ASEAN's eyes that precluded any further progress in relations. ASEAN therefore felt compelled to take a stand to side with the ousted Cambodian factions and garnered international support to condemn Vietnam's violation of international law and the UN Charter. If ASEAN allowed Vietnam to have its way, it would have created an impression of ASEAN's ineffectiveness and a precedent that could have had serious and dangerous repercussions to the future security situation of Southeast Asia.

### **Vietnam's Revolutionary Communist Role**

Vietnam at that time was still an exporter of communism and still supported communist insurgents elsewhere including Thailand, one of the founding members of ASEAN. Accommodating Vietnam at such a time would have invited serious protests and divisions within ASEAN. Thus, there could be no compromise to Vietnam being condoned and allowed free reign in that regard. ASEAN took up this challenge to step up international pressure and condemnation against Vietnam. So, even though ASEAN did try to connect with Vietnam at first, the desired results did not materialize and ASEAN had to fall back on the decision to isolate and go against Vietnam's moves<sup>35</sup>.

It is important to note that Vietnam had also already wanted to improve relations with ASEAN countries as well as the US in the late 1970s but did not have the flexibility it learned later on in the 1990s, to negotiate a workable solution for the outstanding

---

<sup>35</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Chapter 3.



issues; so, it was a missed opportunity. Vietnamese negotiation attitudes at the time tended to lean towards hard bargaining tactics to extract as much gains as possible. For example, it insisted on getting massive monetary and other compensation from the US before it was willing to help in resolving Vietnam War Missing in Action (MIA) American GI cases.<sup>36</sup>

As far as ASEAN was concerned, it also insisted that ASEAN be disbanded to make way for a new one as it had the suspicion that ASEAN was motivated in a hard-line anti-communist way. To be sure, ASEAN was meant for that, even though its eventual incorporation of a communist state like Vietnam was arguably a break from past principles. So, it was probably of no surprise if the Vietnamese leadership in the late 1970s wanted to create some sort of a regional association that was at least communist-friendly to circumvent or replace this anticommunist grouping that was located so close to it.

However, when Vietnam, by itself instituted some market reforms due to mounting economic problems stemming from the stagnation of state-owned enterprises, some ASEAN countries thought that this could be a time for reconciliation with Vietnam, but other ASEAN countries including Singapore were more cautious and less enthusiastic. Indeed, Vietnam was still very inflexible in terms of its foreign policy position especially with regards to the Cambodian question and did not relent. Only when the situation was as dire as in the late 80s did Vietnam's major change in policy truly

---

<sup>36</sup> Mark E. Manyin, "The Vietnam-U.S. Normalization Process." CRS Issue Brief for Congress (2005): 2.

show signs of manifesting.

### **Reengaging Vietnam and Vigorous ASEAN-Vietnam Diplomatic Activity**

This period of time starting from the late 1980s was when ASEAN felt was the time to truly reengage Vietnam especially if Vietnam was willing to relinquish its position unconditionally on Cambodia. Even then, there were however a lot of debate and disagreement about what exactly to do with Vietnam in light of surer signs that Vietnam was going to comply with international pressure to pull out of Cambodia.

There were also uncertainties about whether Vietnam constituted the real threat and whether or not it could be trusted. This caused a lot of tension and divergence but ASEAN persisted in consulting one another before finally making a decision to make an effort in a concerted way to renew relations with Vietnam. The merit of ASEAN here was that the members were able to put their different opinions aside and move forward with a common stance. Singapore for example was wary of differences in the political system with Vietnam and said that “enemies do not become friends overnight”, yet decided to go ahead not long after Indonesia did so, to conduct formal as well as informal visits to and set up business ventures in Vietnam. Since the 1990s, Singapore was one of the most enthusiastic countries in Southeast Asia that invested in Vietnam.

What happened during the period between 1990 and 1993 was crucial. There was a flurry of high-level diplomatic activity and interaction between top leaders of ASEAN countries and Vietnam. In 1990, President Suharto of Indonesia visited Hanoi. He was

the first among ASEAN leaders that visited Vietnam since 1977<sup>37</sup>. Since then, more and more ASEAN leaders poured into Vietnam. They pushed ahead to try and warm up relations with it and create a better understanding of ASEAN's merits and norms including regional integration, commitment to peaceful economic development and openness in trade and foreign relations.

At the same time, they also encouraged Vietnamese leaders to make a tour around ASEAN countries to see for themselves. The Vietnamese leaders reciprocated and traveled to several ASEAN countries including Singapore and Malaysia where the economic advancement left them a deep impression.<sup>38</sup> In those few short years, there were many back and forth travel and communication between ASEAN and Vietnamese leaders that gave Vietnam a learning opportunity about the development models of ASEAN countries and ASEAN's modus vivendi while having an observer status in many of the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings (AMM). Vietnam also received the message and invitation to be an ASEAN member and Vietnam had also made formal requests to enter ASEAN sooner rather than later. This fruitful time period was filled with a lot of interaction and diplomatic engagement, a lot of convincing and mutual reassurance signals through Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacy.

Vietnam's immersion with ASEAN and the individual countries in the early 1990s therefore helped to change Vietnam's mode of thinking that also led to its greater

---

<sup>37</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 105.

<sup>38</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 106.

flexibility in its construction of relations with other countries, thereby accelerating its normalization with a number of important countries including the US and China and improvement of relations with many other countries as well. If Vietnam was still a belligerent exporter of communism, acceptance of Vietnam's ASEAN membership could never have been conceived of. ASEAN enlargement came with conditions such as Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia and many other concessions including agreeing to UN-sponsored elections in Cambodia and active Vietnamese participation in ASEAN diplomatic activities. There were no other tools ASEAN could rely on except through persistent diplomatic exertion in order to achieve its goals of regional reconciliation.

### **ASEAN's Strategy**

ASEAN's strategy to incorporate Vietnam as well as the other new members (Laos, Burma, and Cambodia) may theoretically be to serve a longer term purpose of using further diplomacy as a way to agree to disagree and a strategy of enmeshment to over time attune the new members profoundly to ASEAN's political culture. It is clear that one underlying motivation of the ASEAN founders in this effort was to integrate the newcomers into a larger Southeast Asian security community<sup>39</sup> committed to certain norms. This was not very different from Western Europe embracing Eastern European countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall and imparting democracy and freedom to these less democratically-oriented countries.

---

<sup>39</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 102.

In many ways, such a strategy has had success; at least behaviorally speaking, Vietnam did make substantial changes which ASEAN could point to as evidence of institutional influence. The Southeast Asian regional dynamics were one dimension of the process of Vietnam's foreign policy change; it has to be seen in light of many other extenuating factors to truly understand its significance. Thus the dynamics involving the ASEAN factor will be explored again in later chapters after other dimensions have also been explored.

## CHAPTER 4: EVOLUTION OF DOMESTIC CIRCUMSTANCES

It is important to scrutinize in some detail the domestic circumstances under which Vietnam finally moved to reorient its foreign policy. The acute constraints and pressures to change came fundamentally from the detrimental domestic circumstances that forced the Vietnamese elites to see that their policy and approach, not just at home but also in foreign relations had to be radically altered.

### **Vietnam's Post-War Failures**

When the North Vietnamese invasion was completed, the work to integrate the northern and southern parts of Vietnam was at hand for the communist leaders. However, they largely failed in this respect.<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese Communist Party Politburo immediately tried to impose draconian socialist principles, began the process of agricultural collectivization and placed all economic entities under party auspices. It decided to execute policies that consolidated central control by forcing social changes towards a northern style socialist mode, instead of engage in efforts and programs to integrate North and South Vietnam and pacify strenuous relations. These erroneous actions reinforced the southerners' views that indeed disastrous times were coming.

---

<sup>1</sup> Even on this very day, there are almost two Vietnams; even some youngsters in South Vietnam still feel dislike and bias against their northern counterparts not because of the north-south cleavage but because of the legacy of the northern takeover which brought about entrenched discrimination against South Vietnamese in official positions.

All previous South Vietnamese who had any connection with the US, the defunct South Vietnamese regime or any sort of capitalistic activities became the prime targets for reeducation programs in which they were humiliated or punished. Even those without the above connections but had some capitalist leanings became suspects and were also constantly monitored by communist cadres or agents. Many South Vietnamese left to escape the evil times and for a better life elsewhere between the mid-1970s and the 1980s. Those who had to remain in Vietnam suppressed their resentment quietly, if they were lucky enough to escape persecution. The communist elites remained suspicious of southerners and perpetually monitored their every movement and spied on them. Such distrust, suspicion and the resulting prejudice continued for a long time. Even today, southern Vietnamese are often discriminated against for government positions.

“As early as 1977, all apparatuses of the party and state as well as mass organizations-women, youth, trade unions and the Fatherland Front-were mobilized with a great deal of commotion in a campaign to eliminate private ownership, to transform capitalist enterprises in Saigon into state or jointly owned enterprises to make all the peasants in the south join agricultural cooperatives and those already existing in the north to be enlarged to commune size. Big state farms were created to serve as vanguard units in agriculture.”<sup>2</sup>

In now Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon), there were about three hundred thousand households belonging to traders and industrialists, large and small scale, all

---

<sup>2</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 344-345.

classified as “capitalists”<sup>3</sup> This term also had a derogatory connotation which gave the campaign to transform old production structures an emotionally charged, self-righteous character that caused anxiety among all strata of the population. The issue was complicated by the fact that a majority of Saigon capitalists were the Hoa in Cho Lon, forming a virtual state within a state and controlling key sectors of the southern Vietnamese economy.<sup>4</sup> The Hoa businessmen in Cholon also controlled the entire network of hundreds of retailers down to the most remote villages in the Mekong delta.<sup>5</sup> They became a target for communist persecution on the pretext that they were dangerous capitalists as “truckloads of soldiers and volunteers wearing red armbands descended on the maze of teeming narrow streets in Cholon to confiscate private property and valuables in the name of destroying free enterprise”<sup>6</sup> so that suddenly, well-to-do civilians had nothing left in their possessions. This coercive action on the pretext of socialist principles upon Cholon as well as other areas in the south led to a lasting deep sense of resentment and disillusionment.

The Vietnamese treatment of the Hoa also became intertwined with deteriorating Sino-Vietnamese relations; at that time, anti-Chinese sentiments were so strong; Le Duan, General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party said, “These Chinese hegemonists and expansionists have always been our enemies” and “I have known that

---

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 345.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 340.

<sup>6</sup> Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, 108.



ever since Nixon went to Peking in 1971.”<sup>7</sup> With the US-China rapprochement, there were fears of an encirclement of Vietnam by the US, China, Cambodia, Vietnam’s nemesis now openly allied with China, and even Thailand which had close ties with the US. The Hoa in Vietnam were therefore prime political suspects much like the ethnic Chinese in Sukarno’s Indonesia, as they were seen as another dimension of a hostile encirclement strategy. And Vietnamese actions certainly did not sit well with the Chinese. Thus Sino-Vietnamese relations were greatly exacerbated and complicated by the Hoa issue.

In any case, North Vietnamese personnel poured into the south to turn almost every facet of South Vietnamese society into one in accordance to the communist doctrine, uprooting the livelihood of millions. Hundreds of thousands of people were sent to take part in cooperative farming, and education was revamped so as to allow a new system for socializing students to take hold. “The result was the establishment of an enormous bureaucratic apparatus which decided everything down to the smallest detail, excessive centralization which left no room for any initiative by provincial leaderships, enterprises or individuals. Each unit and individual resigned to awaiting instructions on central level financial subsidies, raw materials, planned targets, and decisions on wages and prices.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 344.

“The 1976-1980 Five Year Plan testified to a premature ambition: 21 million tons of food, 10 million tons of coal all of which were based on unfounded optimism and lack of realistic assessment.”<sup>9</sup> Major projects included metallurgical complexes, emphasis on the heavy industry development, rapid transformation of hundreds of districts into agro-industrial centers and the massive transfer of people to mountainous regions to accelerate the reclamation of uncultivated land.<sup>10</sup>

“Repeated typhoons in the summer of 1978, causing the loss of 3 million tons of rice and affecting 6 million people, considerably aggravated the situation in an economy already crumbling due to unfortunate measures and erroneous policies and destabilized by the mass exodus of the Hoa<sup>11</sup>. The rural regions of southern Vietnam were also greatly undermined. Because of the accelerating campaign towards agricultural cooperativization, agricultural, industrial and handicraft production fell considerably and the black market proliferated. The rate of inflation rapidly increased causing on one hand rapid impoverishment of many strata of the population, particularly civil servants and workers in state enterprises and on the other, rapid enrichment of a number of traffickers and corrupt managers. Popular discontent increased and the legitimacy of the regime

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Also see Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), Chapter 2, The Socioeconomic Setting.

<sup>11</sup> This would become an issue of contention in relations between China and Vietnam and attributed to partly for the deterioration of their relations into war.

began to erode.”<sup>12</sup> Many of the revolutionary veterans also became disillusioned by the seeming betrayal of the revolutionary ideals by the communist government.

By the end of the 1976-1980 Five Year Plan, it was clear that economic failure was widespread. The lack of technical expertise and experience in economic management in addition to arbitrary manipulation of prices, wages and currencies often led to results contrary to those expected and even catastrophic consequences. For example, price adjustments in 1981 caused a surge in inflation<sup>13</sup> and exacerbated the food shortage situation. Food production stood at 14.4 million tons and not the 21 million tons that was expected.<sup>14</sup> The food shortage crisis was the most serious post-war problem ever experienced then and it undermined this Five Year Plan and shook the very foundations of Vietnam’s national reconstruction and economic development.

As a result of party ineffectiveness, there were many areas of Vietnam which faced famine because they were not able to produce as much or receive enough rice, a Vietnamese staple. Urgent transfer of food aid from the Soviet Union to the most pressing areas only brought about partial relief. The south was particularly affected and faced chaotic conditions. According to Nguyen Khac Vien, increase in food production was only 6.45 percent<sup>15</sup> while population growth was approximately 10 percent<sup>16</sup> from

---

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 345.

<sup>13</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

<sup>14</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 347-348.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 347.

<sup>16</sup> This is a rough estimate based on a number of different sources including Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348. It is also based on a number of different population watch websites. Based on the following

1976 to 1980. In a way it is not too surprising that the Vietnamese population went up so high in that post-1975 period given the short respite from war. The war years had caused stagnation in population growth and even serious dwindling in population numbers in some areas.

With so many Vietnamese deaths numbering in the millions from the Vietnam War, Vietnam's population in 1975 was at a very low base. And immediately after the war, it was a baby boom period for Vietnam as deployed soldiers finally got to return home and reunite with their families. Besides, the Vietnamese society was overwhelmingly agrarian and like other traditional agrarian societies in Asia, it favored having many offspring and this was a good chance to make up for lost time and expand their families astronomically in just a few short years, in anticipation of good times to come that were promised by the victorious communist regime, not realizing that Vietnam would be tied down in another Indochinese conflict so soon after reunification.

Unfortunately, things would not turn out that way and those born during those times would come to suffer immensely in their childhood if they were to even survive. Even though Vietnam resorted to massive imports, most of the Vietnamese population was not able to afford the skyrocketing food prices and they suffered from malnutrition and hunger. Apart from serious lack of food, there was poor performance in other sectors as well. By 1980, there was only 0.1 percent growth in the industrial field and fabric

---

websites, <http://www.populstat.info/Asia/vietnamc.htm> and [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/peo\\_pop-people-population](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/peo_pop-people-population), the population growth during the period lay somewhere between 9.5 and 12 percent.

production stood at 1.75 million meters against an expected 450 million meters.

Electricity was also short, with 3.68 billion kwh produced against a target of 5 billion kwh<sup>17</sup>.

### **Effects of Self-Destructive Policies**

According to Nguyen, “the terrible consequences of war, though real, could no longer explain everything.”<sup>18</sup> There were other reasons to pinpoint why communist Vietnam fared so badly socio-economically; the three Indochinese wars had wreaked so much damage on Vietnam that it would be generations, before there could be genuine recovery. There were also serious natural disasters that continually exacerbated the conditions in many crucial areas especially agriculture. However, no one with an objective viewpoint could deny that the socialist system and the corrupt mismanagement made matters worse, much worse<sup>19</sup>. This is a country with vast natural resources and potential for a good deal of development. But Vietnam’s insistence on ideological purity and attachment to this postwar hubris only served to bring about its utter failures. Time came to prove that the communist guerilla warriors were no technocratic administrators capable of developing a nation in peacetime.

Forced collectivization, restriction on freedom and the confiscation of private possessions were among the many self-destructive policies that led to a crisis, a term

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 347.

<sup>19</sup> Some informal phone interviews had been conducted on older folks in the southern Vietnamese region to get a better understanding of what they went through during the times of communist takeover. It is quite apparent that they did suffer greatly because of the north’s actions.

which some Vietnamese used, but was actually avoided in official speeches that only highlighted errors in implementing general policy, management and administration, and the shortcomings and inadequacies of specific policies. Rectification measures were taken but unable to stop the impoverishment of the majority of peasants and workers. Vietnam had found independence but it was one in a state of extreme poverty and paucity.

This regime already had little legitimacy in the south and was now losing legitimacy even in the north. As disaster after disaster, man-made or natural impoverished most of Vietnam, the only credential the communist regime could point to as a source of legitimacy was its role in leading the country towards unification and independence. As a result, some passionate discussions took place throughout the period prior to the Fifth Party Congress which was held in March 1982. When the Congress was held, it generated a more realistic vision of the situation as compared to the Fourth Congress in which there were huge difficulties in defining objectives, serious errors about solutions as well as excessive ambitions and unrealistic visions.<sup>20</sup>

### **Generational Change in Leadership**

Generational change in the leadership echelons of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had begun since the early 1980s but it came about only after a long arduous

---

<sup>20</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*. 347.

process<sup>21</sup>; what was intended to give greater stability in leadership transition in the past actually resulted in hesitance and delays in much needed leadership reforms. Even when some leadership changes were occurring, continued inertia remained. By 1982 for example, only a few state and party positions began to be filled by second generation leaders<sup>22</sup>. The highest and key leadership positions remained to be controlled by the first generation leaders.

Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach took over Nguyen Duy Trinh's position as foreign minister. Nguyen Co Thach was reform-minded as was Nguyen Van Linh, a widely known economic reformist. Nguyen Van Linh was born in Hung Yen near Hanoi in 1915. He was put into jail by the French when he was caught distributing leaflets containing propaganda against the French. Joining the VCP after his release, he was sent to Saigon to help recruit members and establish new party cells. He was charged with the position as party secretary in the south during the Vietnam War and he was instrumental in organizing propaganda campaigns against the southern regime as well as the Americans stationed there.

His time there must have influenced his reformist thinking that favored a market economy and private industry. When Vietnam was unified under communist auspices, he repeatedly voiced his opposition to the north's initiative to force the south to adopt socialism. In fact, his subsequent arguments with Le Duan, a conservative old guard

---

<sup>21</sup> It was a long process because actual plans for generational change had started in the 1970s but never came to fruition until the 1980s and the whole process took almost twenty years to complete.

<sup>22</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 105.

member caused Nguyen Van Linh to lose his Politburo seat in 1982 while he was a party chief in Ho Chi Minh City<sup>23</sup>. However, his liberal reform-minded inclinations endeared the southern population to him and gave him the reputation for being quite an economic expert. In fact, he was recalled and reinstated to the Politburo membership in 1985 to deal with the mounting economic crisis which he was believed widely to have the expertise in handling.

So both Nguyen Van Linh and Nguyen Co Thach were very much against the post-Vietnam War plans to rapidly and forcibly collectivize South Vietnam's agricultural farms. But it was Nguyen Co Thach who would come to be one of the key personalities in the interaction with ASEAN leaders and who would convey and promote multidirectional foreign policy stance later on. Like Nguyen Van Linh, his reformist-oriented stance would however cost him his title although his contributory influence in diversifying Vietnam's foreign relations set Vietnam's foreign policy change in motion. (More on this will be explored later on.) Another reform-minded person was Vo Van Kiet who would later become the premier. Together with Nguyen Van Linh, he had been strongly critical of the operation of trade and commerce based on socialist principles.

The generational transfer of power to younger leaders was therefore not achieved quickly. It was a process prolonged out of reluctance to transfer power to the new generation too quickly. Thus, many of the members of the old guard still occupied key decision-making positions. For example, Vo Nguyen Giap, chief architect of the Dien

---

<sup>23</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 108.



Bien Phu victory against the French, was already 71 when he stepped down from his Politburo position at the Fifth Party Congress in 1982 but the Politburo was still largely controlled by the first generation of leaders. General Secretary Le Duan had been on this seat for more than twenty years in 1985. And those old guard members who left their seats remained politically influential on the sidelines. The gradual generational leadership change reflected clearly a conservative outlook in the leadership core.

### **Serious Problems in the 1980s and Their Fallout**

However, the extremely difficult domestic socioeconomic conditions spurred a more thorough revamping of the leadership organization at the Sixth Party Congress held in late 1986. Prior to that, the scale of the failure and domestic resistance to the regime's attempts to structure the country's economy based on collectivization of agriculture and principles of socialism had made socioeconomic failure glaringly acute since the beginning of the 1980s. The problems of food scarcity, low productivity, inefficiency, corruption, unemployment, and so on made life miserable for the general population. Only the privileged party cadres who had power over resources were able to exploit the situation to their own benefit. It was a vicious cycle that encouraged more corruption that in turn crimped the livelihood of the ordinary citizens.

“The Fifth Party Congress mentioned earlier however, could not map out a really new effective policy. Even for short term objectives it basically just promoted the stepping up of cooperativization of most peasant households and the taking of

agricultural food products for planned distribution throughout the country to all social strata. The move towards agricultural cooperativization was aimed at bringing 85 percent of peasant households in southern Vietnam into various forms of collective undertaking. So, basic socioeconomic structures were not actually properly dealt with<sup>24</sup> or reformed; instead, the stepping up of the old measures was adopted.

“Some measures or policies had nevertheless brought some results.”<sup>25</sup> For example, attention was given to the production of consumer goods, notably handicraft which had been neglected in favor of heavy industry and this boosted the production of a number of articles in common use.<sup>26</sup> The Politburo also gave recognition to the allotment of family plots to peasant households and some liberty of action regarding cultivation and the sale of agricultural products which increased production somewhat<sup>27</sup>.

“However, these improvements were neither significant nor enduring. Other measures were not significantly helpful, such as the permission given to the state enterprises to carry out in addition to the official plan, a half-hearted plan oriented towards the free market. The general situation was precarious and the balance of trade showed a large deficit. Earnings from exports covered only one-third of imports, the most serious distortions were found in the financial area in prices, wages and currencies. Prices for the same product differed, depending on the sector that produced it. This fact

---

<sup>24</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 347.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

encouraged the growth of the black market, corruption and smuggling. Wages and salaries barely met one third of the minimal expenses for workers' families."<sup>28</sup>

State expenditure far exceeded receipts; inflation increased and "soared in 1985 to a staggering annual rate of 700 percent"<sup>29</sup> due mostly to scarcity of products, huge budget deficits and high demands. The value of the monetary unit in 1985 was only 0.075 of that in 1981.<sup>30</sup> Another reason for this high inflation rate was because in September 1985, a new financial measure was adopted but which backfired and added fuel to the fire. It was decided that new banknotes should be issued, the new monetary unit being ten times the value of the old one. Contrary to expectations, such a measure caused astronomical inflation. The National Assembly session held in December 1985 observed in its report that the economic and social stabilization objectives put forward by the Fifth Congress of the CPV as well as the indices of the 1981-1985 plan had not been achieved<sup>31</sup>. At the same session, influential members of the government were relieved of their duties, the first time such a measure was taken, testifying to the serious nature of the economic and social crisis and to the fact that disenchantment was increasingly spreading throughout the different social strata.

"The more state enterprises, both industrial and commercial produced, the larger the deficits became. Absenteeism and desertion by workers paralyzed their enterprises. Peasants lost interest in the activities of the agricultural cooperatives, intellectuals could

---

<sup>28</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

<sup>29</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 473.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

not carry out their functions and a class of newly enriched people through the black market and other illegal or corrupt means at the expense of the general population emerged.”<sup>32</sup> “Economic in origin, the crisis took on a social character, destroying the fundamental values of society and gradually creating a state of anomaly.”<sup>33</sup>

It is estimated that in 1985, the population of Vietnam was about 60 million people.<sup>34</sup> The Vietnamese Communist Party generally had a membership pool of about 3 percent of the population.<sup>35</sup> Going by that figure, there were roughly about 1.8 million party members nationwide. Party documents revealed that from 1975 to 1985, 190,000 party members were expelled<sup>36</sup>, mostly for reasons of morality and that roughly represents about a little more than 10 percent of party members. This was a large percentage of expulsion and indicated how cadre indiscipline must have contributed greatly to corrupt practices that led to poor socioeconomic performance.

The move of Vietnamese citizens to escape the country rather than remain also reflected the extremely dire situation. In just a few years, 1.5 million people emigrated, some seven hundred thousand of whom were Hoa people<sup>37</sup>, in a diaspora which was a

---

<sup>32</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348. Also see *Hanoi Domestic Service*, Mar 23, 1988, FBIS-EAS, (March 31, 1988): 50.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

<sup>34</sup> <http://countrystudies.us/vietnam/34.htm> (accessed March 15, 2011). Vietnam had had to curb population growth as a twin policy of dealing with the food shortage problem. Population growth accelerated in the early years in the period of 1975-1985, and the Vietnamese government had to take measures to discourage this trend and which had been quite effective. This 1985 population figure, though a rough estimate, shows a number that had significantly stabilized.

<sup>35</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 69.

<sup>36</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

<sup>37</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 33.

new and major development in Vietnam's history.<sup>38</sup> Given the large population growth over some years between 1975 and 1985 and assuming the population of Vietnam in 1985 was roughly 60 million, this mass exodus represented very roughly between 2.5 to 5 percent in the loss of the population. The mass exodus also drained Vietnam of its brains and talents that were critical for its recovery from the terribly destructive wars. Many of these waves of emigration brought Vietnamese expatriates, called Viet Kieus to faraway countries, particularly the US where many of them became successful over the years. Indeed, Vietnam's deplorable situation was plain for all to see.

### **Incapability of Recovering from War Devastation**

The devastated lands throughout the country due to wars had not been regenerated or covered by reasonably functional infrastructure. The underdeveloped and badly maintained road networks hampered the task of proper distribution of food to the population. Even when certain basic commodities were available for distribution, the stark difficulty of being able to reach the most remote villagers denied many segments of the population of the most basic necessities. In any case, there were not enough to go around with, due to such poor productivity levels that made shortages of basic items a painfully persistent reality. The inclination to experiment with some market reforms grew stronger along with the heightened resistance of commoners to directives for collectivization or many other local party decrees. Yet, many party cadres continued to use their power to reserve disproportionately many of the scarce items for themselves.

---

<sup>38</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 348.

Without enough of the needed managerial expertise and technical skills, the party and state were at a loss of what to do. The party's strategy of constantly maintaining possessive control through otherwise repressive methods served only to temporarily quiet down voices of opposition. Many farmers chose to abandon their farms because party directives mandated their products to be sold at extremely low prices to the state while very little were left for their own households; indeed, what was allowed for them to keep could hardly feed their families.<sup>39</sup> It was therefore not surprising that many Vietnamese civilians chose to escape their country altogether and seek prospects for survival elsewhere.

Even though some attempts were made to rectify the situation, there was very little qualitative change and these problems afflicting the Vietnamese socioeconomic domain continued to worsen. At the core of these problems was the ineffective economic system based on socialist principles as well as the corrupt local cadres naturally tempted to abuse their power within an oversized and possessive bureaucracy.<sup>40</sup> The party preferred to tolerate small abuses in order to keep it firmly in control. However, the rapid accumulation of problems in the Vietnamese society could no longer be ignored and in May 1986, Le Duc Tho, one of the most senior communist leaders, openly attacked the party's shortcomings which he said had led to demoralization, sycophancy, and opportunism. He spoke of corruption "tainting every level of the party."<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, September 21 1987, FBIS-EAS, (September 25, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 474.

The centralized planning of Vietnam's economy and the set up of farms through collectivization and the adherence to state enterprises and control, brought about dislocation of basic services, widespread poverty and increasing numbers of "boat people." Some of these people would successfully make it to other countries especially the West and be known as the Viet Kieus or overseas Vietnamese; amongst them, many would later on participate actively in denouncing the SRV's repressive ways. The SRV in turn would come to suspect that these Viet Kieus had conspired with "hostile imperialist forces" to subvert the Vietnamese regime.

### **The Sixth Party Congress of Vietnam**

The Sixth Party Congress was thus a pivotal time when the seriousness of these issues began to be addressed truthfully. Unlike past congresses, the sixth had more debates and expression of discontent and candid opinions on the issues of the time. In the face of unsatisfactory performance and mounting criticism toward the leadership that could no longer be concealed, three senior leaders who belonged to the first generation of Vietnamese leaders who ranked alongside Ho Chi Minh voluntarily gave up their positions at this congress.<sup>42</sup> They were Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, General Secretary Truong Chinh and Senior Politburo Member Le Duc Tho.<sup>43</sup> Le Duc Tho was a

---

<sup>42</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 109.

<sup>43</sup> There was a lot of leadership reshuffling since the 1986 Congress. In Porter, pg. 107, three first generation leaders, Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong, and Le Duc Tho resigned from their Central Committee memberships "for reasons of age and health". However, it was likely that many of them were lamed for poor performance and therefore pushed towards leaving room for a new generation of more reformist leaders. Pham Hung ended up being the "only first generation leader left in the body" In 1988 however, Pham Hung died and at that time, the National Assembly elected Do Muoi to be the new premier

well-known Vietnamese figure who declined the Nobel Peace Prize for his contribution in finalizing peace agreements with the US through negotiations with Henry Kissinger. His reasoning was that with his country so ravaged from wars and disrepair, there was no peace to speak of and the prize was not proper for him to accept. Indeed, since reunification, Vietnam's situation was truly dire and Le Duc Tho must have been quite exasperated and frustrated with his and his Party's inability to rectify it.

Their sudden departure along with other old members made the Vietnamese leadership almost completely devoid of the first generation leaders. This was "the most sweeping reorganization of party leadership in half a century" and "five of thirteen Politburo members lost their seats."<sup>44</sup> It was widely known that the voluntary resignations of the top tier leadership figure were likely due to the pressures outside as well as within the party for some accountability for the abject economic failure.<sup>45</sup> These were leaders who could be said to know how to fight a war but not know how to run a country. There were no technocrats or administrative experts capable of perceiving the finer points on fixing the economy.

---

as the previous administration "failed to anticipate the seriousness of the shortfall in food". All this shows that party and state leadership at those precarious times went through reshuffling in the face of pressing problems that gave a new generation of reformists an edge when the pressure mounted and the time was ripe.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Crosette, "Vietnamese Name New Party Chief," *NYT*, December 19, 1986.

<sup>45</sup> The party very seldom did purges and the voluntary resignations of these old-timers were indeed voluntary but they faced enormous pressure to step down because they truly had no idea how to solve the extremely serious economic problems involved that seemed much more complex than war. In any case, they remained as advisers to the Central Committee and had unlimited powers to intervene in serious decisions. Nonetheless, they had to let some of the younger protégés take over to try handling the tasks at hand.



Yet Truong Chinh was someone of the old generation who had at least some enlightened reformist views. Nguyen Van Linh who could be considered a second generation leader was able to step up in his rank in the Politburo because of Truong Chinh's support and blessing.<sup>46</sup> Nguyen was therefore elected to the position of general secretary and "named the head of the VCP"<sup>47</sup> in this Sixth Congress in December 1986, signaling a new era of domestic reforms for Vietnam. "Doi moi" which referred to a reform program to address and rectify the devastating socioeconomic situation in Vietnam, was officially announced.

Nguyen Van Linh thus had a strong mandate to launch his economic reform initiatives. He opted to reduce the subsidization of goods for party cadres and members and encouraged private enterprises especially in the south to meet the demands for consumer goods. David Lamb explains the decision to adopt doi moi succinctly, "Given the depths of Vietnam's desperation, it was a decision made out of necessity, yet it reflected the pragmatism of a government that understood slogans don't fill empty stomachs. Doi moi was designed not as an ideological retreat from socialism but as an instrument to introduce elements of a free-market economy, to encourage private enterprise, and to free the entrepreneurial spirit of the Vietnamese."<sup>48</sup>

### **Radical Changes at the Home Front**

---

<sup>46</sup> *Vietnamese News Agency in English*, 3 March, 1987, FBIS-EAS (4 March, 1987): 3.

<sup>47</sup> Crosette, "Vietnamese Name New Party Chief," *NYT*.

<sup>48</sup> Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, 117.

The doi moi resolution predicted in particular that the period of transition to socialism will be long and fraught with difficulties and that it would comprise many stages. It affirmed the necessity of maintaining the existence of private, individual and capitalist economic sectors with the same legal rights as the public sector. It also decided that the management of all the economic and public sectors must no longer be based on purely political criteria but on profitability.<sup>49</sup> Political and ideological mobilization must be replaced by material incentives. The dogmatic priority of heavy industry was to be at least attenuated; handicrafts and light industry as well as the production of consumer goods were given an important position.<sup>50</sup> This new economic policy was proclaimed allowing the implementation of many reforms in the coming years and thereby dramatically changing traditional socioeconomic structures and opening up the still unexplored path of the market economy.<sup>51</sup>

Many more decisive changes were instituted. Food production was made one of the highest priorities so as to be able to nourish a largely underfed population. Rice production was increasingly emphasized and agricultural de-collectivization and more freedom given for farmers as far as the use of land and their tenure for it was concerned. This rejuvenated rice production that eased the problem of food scarcity and grain shortage somewhat. The Mekong River Delta had always been historically a fertile area with high farming yields. The reversal of some of the collectivization policies that have

---

<sup>49</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, November 14, 1987, FBIS-EAS (November 19, 1987): 46.

<sup>50</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, November 28, 1987, FBIS-EAS (November 30, 1987).

<sup>51</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, December 21, 1987, FBIS-EAS (December 21, 1987): 46.

caused production to stagnate since 1976 motivated the more independent-minded farmers of the south to increase food production. They were also allowed to keep a greater share of their output than before.<sup>52</sup> By 1988, full freedom and utilization and commercialization were given to peasants in the allocation of lands that were previously under state control. Such a measure greatly stimulated agricultural production which had shrunk to alarmingly low rates at that time. Other measures also gradually lowered the inflation rate.

### **Newfound Freedom**

Since 1987, people were encouraged to speak up more, even against party cadres who did wrong. The Central Committee even issued directives that encouraged citizens and officials alike to openly criticize those guilty of wrongdoing and that restricted any official means to censoring this freedom.<sup>53</sup> The press in particular was given more freedom to publish traditionally taboo subjects. “For the first time, it spoke clearly and frankly about the errors and shortcomings of the regime and social problems, overtly denouncing bureaucratism, corruption and conservatism.”<sup>54</sup> The party pointed out that “the Congress should mark a crucial stage in the renovation of our philosophy, our work methods and our organizational modalities, in accordance with the foundations of Marxism-Leninism and with the requirements of our era as was expressed in the great

---

<sup>52</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 475.

<sup>54</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 349.

ideas of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)” and “Our party must look straight at the truth and speak the whole truth.”<sup>55</sup>

The VCP also paid special attention to “serious and prolonged errors regarding the most important specific policies, errors in the implementation of programs decided, errors caused by subjectivism, voluntarism and stemming from ideological mistakes and errors in the policy of organization and promotion of cadres.”<sup>56</sup> Journalists therefore took advantage of this newfound freedom to expose social injustices caused by many corrupt local leaders, resulting in their removal or replacement by more competent ones.<sup>57</sup>

For a long time, apart from criticism from certain higher leadership echelons quarters, the population in general was accustomed to accepting policies decided by the leadership without protest. This time, a storm of opinion arose, particularly among the most politicized social strata. Even party militants and quite a few intellectuals outside the party were engaged in passionate discussion of economic and social problems and burning ideological issues in a way that the leadership was never accustomed to. Information from the Soviet Union about perestroika and glasnost, ideas from the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU and changes in the party leadership galvanized the Vietnamese people. The leadership of the CPV affirmed in an official statement its total support for the internal and external policies adopted at the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, considering it an historic turning point in the evolution of Soviet society.

---

<sup>55</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 350.

<sup>56</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, August 31, 1987, FBIS-EAS (September 2, 1989): 39.

<sup>57</sup> John H. Esterline, “Vietnam in 1987: Steps toward Rejuvenation,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 1988).

Preparations for the Sixth Congress of the CPV throughout 1986 were carried out in an atmosphere entirely different from those before previous congresses. In grassroots party organizations, trade unions, and mass organizations such as the Fatherland Front, the issues were exhaustively discussed in the administration and committees; many suggestions from the rank and file obliged the leadership to considerably modify the draft general report prepared by the Politburo.<sup>58</sup> There were so much passionate political energy being channeled into the national development effort and huge amount of opinion that served as an input for the discussion and elections of delegates to the National Congress.

The VCP had in the past not been able to discipline cadres well and there was unbelievably widespread corruption and abuse of power by local cadres. With Nguyen Van Linh coming into power, the sacking of many party cadres occurred. Thousands of cadres were as a result disciplined or punished. For example, “Ha Truong Hoa, Party Secretary of Thanh Hoa Province, whose position was widely regarded as impregnable despite his well-publicized abuses of office” was removed. And “by 1988, Nguyen Van Linh had succeeded in replacing almost all of the country’s forty province secretaries and 80% of the 400 or so district party chiefs. Eleven hundred party cadres were tried for corruption in the first six months of 1988.”<sup>59</sup> Nguyen seemed determined to root out corruption and bring about genuine reform to revive the Vietnamese society.

---

<sup>58</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, July 8, 1988, FBIS-EAS (July 10, 1988): 39.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald J. Cima, “Vietnam in 1988: The Brink of Renewal,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (January 1989): 65.

This freedom was correspondingly exercised within the leadership echelons as well. The National Assembly also criticized the government of being inefficient in solving pressing day to day problems that resulted in continuing difficulties that had characterized the socioeconomic crisis of that time. Inflation got worse before getting any better as prices of essential goods reached astronomical levels. But reform policies eased prices for a while between 1987 and 1988 before they went up again due to problems with economic cooperation with the Soviet Union.

In Central Committee plenums, Nguyen Van Linh also took the opportunity to encourage more candid assessments of the national situation and promoted pluralistic means to address and resolve other pressing issues. He encouraged people to speak and act so as to allow major shortcomings in the system to be highlighted and therefore corrected instead of being swept under the carpet. These plenums were unprecedented in that high-level leadership figures actually voiced their real opinion about the problems in the governing system and even took responsibility of their own failings by accusing the party itself of being over-bureaucratic and undisciplined. Fears about becoming too detached from the constituency over the years were also expressed.

The concept of legality was highlighted and at each session of the National Assembly, numerous laws were debated and adopted. Each sector of the civil and judicial administration and the economic management endeavored to define in detail the modalities for the application of new laws. "Continuing with the momentum of the Sixth Party Congress, Nguyen Van Linh tried to define a new cultural policy. About one

hundred writers and artists who assembled for this purpose unanimously demanded the liberalization of existing structures and practices and obtained Nguyen Van Linh's agreement."<sup>60</sup> A new generation of writers and artists began writing novels, stories, poems and making films in a new spirit without being preoccupied with government oversight. Fundamental concepts in the human sciences concerning history, sociology, and philosophy again began to be questioned and dogmatic affirmation like condemnations without appeal were no longer accepted by many researchers.

### **Rights of the People**

There was passionate display of unhappiness and frustration towards the injustices of the system. There was also criticism towards the ruling regime's heavy hand on the citizens. Fundamental political rights had not been respected and many intellectuals stood out to speak against party and government abuses. A member of the Vietnamese intelligentsia by the name of Tran Bach Dang was one of the outspoken critics of the lack of political rights accorded to ordinary citizens. Nguyen Van Linh made an effort to ensure more freedom for the religious communities; one particular group that had traditionally been persecuted by the government was the Christians. He even personally assured the catholic bishops in Hanoi of the party's respect for the "freedom of religion."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 351. Also see *Hanoi International Service* in English, December 31, 1987, FBIS-EAS, (January 5, 1988): 55.

<sup>61</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 476.

There was also the Club of Former Resistance Fighters who lobbied for fairer policies in the selection of leaders as well as more economic freedom. This club was initially set up in 1983 in Ho Chi Minh City where it had always been traditionally a more cosmopolitan center, by former officers of the revolutionary Vietnamese army and led by General Tran Van Tra<sup>62</sup>, a zone commander in the south during the first and second Indochina wars. Those who resided there were naturally more receptive to free enterprise to promote better standards of living in various ways including greater productivity and more personal freedom.<sup>63</sup> This club would come to have a number of different branches and comprise more party members who took part in the military struggles in the south and who wanted to set up a forum for former officers with interest in the direction of the country so as to be able to influence party policies and decision-making.

There were essentially many organizations known as front organizations in Vietnam that acted as extensions of party oversight. However, over time, due to disenchantment with party policies as well as the indirect effects of reforms, these organizations might have turned towards acting more independently and diverged from official party policy and caused irritation in conservative circles. Later on, the party would move to ban the publications of the Club of Former Resistance Fighters as

---

<sup>62</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 68. This general was none other than the one who led the conquest of Saigon. Yet he had criticized the party on the policy of forcing the south to follow socialist principles so rapidly instead of seeking ways to bring about reconciliation. After his purge, this club was a way for him to maintain some still some level of influence on party policies.

<sup>63</sup> Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, 35.



expressions of opposition from different quarters including the club's publications became a looming source of threat to the regime's political legitimacy and control.

### **Problem of Party-State Structure**

One chronic problem for the SRV that often handicapped the country's administrative and managerial functioning was that no proper and meaningful separation of party and state functions existed. The state apparatus had been basically a tool for the party to enact its policies that were often whimsical. The party did not allow a proper functioning state structure to delegate clear duties to state organs. That is to say, in day to day functions and especially in times of exigency, state agencies were not able to exercise full authority because of the need to first consult party leadership.

The centralized power of the Vietnamese regime was therefore basically what had handicapped the country's ability to channel its considerable resources towards national development. Indeed "from the period of underground activities, then through protracted war, the party mechanism has for too long been all-encompassing, enveloping state organs. Party echelons from central to village levels seize every concrete problem and resolve it directly, eclipsing the role of state organs."<sup>64</sup>

A widely documented large scale famine in 1988 adversely affected the livelihood of "ten million Vietnamese in eight northern provinces."<sup>65</sup> The government was slow in response and had uncoordinated actions prompting widespread dissatisfaction and

---

<sup>64</sup> Nguyen Khac Vien as cited by *Porter, Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism.*

<sup>65</sup> Cima, "Vietnam in 1988: The Brink of Renewal," 66.

complaints. The respective ministries were not able to act swiftly by importing food and so on. According to Porter, “Vo Van Kiet noted the government’s failure to coordinate important policies on prices, import-export rules, foreign currency exchange rates, and management according to the new rules of operation in a timely manner.”<sup>66</sup>

Some of the detrimental outcomes due to government incompetence, indecisiveness and procrastination had even led to “popular demonstrations.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, apart from the immediate resolution of the food scarcity problem through reversal of collectivization of agriculture so that farmers at the fertile Mekong river area could freely engage in rice production and greatly improve the levels of food production, genuine changes within the political system had to also be carried out to be able to cope with many other immediate contingencies.

### **Reorganizing the Party-State Structure**

Thus, the revamping of the regime structure was also underway. Politburo member Vo Chi Cong announced the restructuring of the party-state system to the heads of delegations to the National Assembly and asserted that more autonomous state structure would be established and organized and important specificities of socioeconomic plans would fall under the jurisdiction of the ministries. Even though the

---

<sup>66</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

party would continue to decide broad objectives, the decision on minute administrative details would not be controlled by the party leadership<sup>68</sup>.

Administrative duties would be performed without having to be excessively monitored by party leaders that served only to limit the state's capacity. Nguyen Van Linh took the lead in expressing the need for the state to be functionally competent so as to be able to solve the pressing problems of the country. The National Assembly which is the highest state organ and supposed to represent the people and which used to be just a legislative arm of the Political Bureau and a rubber stamp for its legislative policies would also no longer be just ceremonial forums to formalize the dictates of the party.<sup>69</sup> National Assemblies now became a more genuinely pluralistic arena where debates on policies were broadcast on the media.

Yet these changes had brought about mixed results and less than expected positive effect while the country continued to be beset by myriad problems. The state's inability to respond effectively to these problems could not be turned around overnight and efforts to do so were hampered by continuing possessiveness of the party in maintaining control as well as other external developments such as declining Soviet aid. The state structures were also bogged down by the lack of expertise in dealing with finer points of socioeconomic development.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, December 19, 1989, FBIS-EAS (December 2, 1989): 65.

<sup>69</sup> *Vietnamese News Agency*, June 17, 1987, FBIS-EAS, (June 17 1987): N6-14.

A major impediment was that the party itself was ineffective and needed major reforms. Its leading members lacked the sophistication to deal with the scale of problems within and without. And the success of reforms depended very much on the power distribution within the party core. Nguyen Van Linh's position as the general secretary was pivotal in ushering in the "doi moi" era. But the party's tradition of coalescing and reaching consensus mainly within the leadership core had not changed much even as doi moi was moving full steam ahead. The reformers felt the need to reform such practices but conservative forces held such attempts in check. But reform efforts persisted so that much background negotiation went on in which conservative forces sought to strike a balance with some of the reformers.

### **Balance of Forces in New Leaders**

In fact, many of the younger leaders brought in through the leadership generational change were protégés of either the conservative or reform-minded predecessors and were carefully selected so that the leadership continued to have some sort of balance of power between the conservative and reformist factions. The party was thus generally split between conservatives who favored slower and less risky pace of reforms that did not threaten the party's control and the reformists who thought that it was this very inertia against change that crippled the party and it was imperative for it to reform quickly in order to maintain its relevance and legitimacy.

In any case, reform-minded, more flexible, more moderate and less ideological members were also brought into the higher positions in the process. For example, Do Muoi belonged to the second generation but he could be considered either a reformist or conservative. He had been known to support reforms enthusiastically but had taken a fervent ideological stance alongside newer conservatives as well. He thus played a sort of a balancing role within the so called troika in the top leadership echelon representing party and state power.<sup>70</sup> He held the post of Prime Minister or the Chairman of Ministers in 1988 after his predecessor, Pham Hung died.<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, the lackluster improvement in the nation's problems magnified by the explosion of penned up popular frustrations made Nguyen Van Linh's reforms look glaringly troubling and built up a growing conservative backlash. The domestic economic reforms clearly carried huge risks as opposition was manifesting from different quarters. To make matters worse, the tumultuous domestic crisis in Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe coincided with the growing opposition expression at home. As we shall see later, attempts to persuade the dropping of economic embargo on Vietnam by other countries did not come immediately with the Vietnamese troop pullout from Cambodia and increased the dilemma of Vietnamese foreign policy. Thus, the seemingly socially uprooting reforms implemented so far caused pessimism, skepticism and fear of the loss of grip of party power amongst the conservatives.

---

<sup>70</sup> Kent Bolton, "Domestic Sources of Vietnam's Foreign Policy" in Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 178.

<sup>71</sup> "Hanoi Picks Reformer as Premier as It Moves to Unleash Economy," *NYT*, Aug 10, 1991.

## Conservative Backlash and Tightening of Control

Yet, the conservatives' concern was not that they thought reform was not a good idea; rather they were afraid that the party would lose political power ultimately if control was relaxed too much. They would rather sacrifice some progress in order to stay in power and maintain the party's preeminence which they feared would be diminished to the extent of becoming irreversibly damaged over time with the pace of reforms. "Indeed, even in 1988, no one in the Vietnamese leadership stood against the idea of reform."<sup>72</sup>

This was an especially sensitive period of time because Vietnam's domestic reform experiments were being tested and assessed and any untoward outcomes could easily spur knee-jerk reactions. Just the same for many other issues, the party did not have the ability or expertise to decide, tackle or respond effectively to some of the fundamental problems so as to maintain its legitimacy. Even though prices of certain items were brought to lower levels and food shortage was becoming less acute, the country still remained extremely poor and backward.

Basic commodities still had serious inflation problems; the price of fish<sup>73</sup> for example increased at the rate of 100 dong<sup>74</sup> per pound each week rendering most families unable to afford it.<sup>75</sup> And currency problems continued despite efforts to curb them.

Between early March and April 1988, the value of dong which is Vietnam's monetary

---

<sup>72</sup> Cima, "Vietnam in 1988: The Brink of Renewal," 64.

<sup>73</sup> Fish is a culinary delight for Vietnamese in general and in those days, a household being able to afford to eat fish would signify a wealthy family.

<sup>74</sup> This is the Vietnamese currency.

<sup>75</sup> Barbara Crosette, "Currency Crisis is Ravaging Vietnam's Fragile Economy," *NYT*, April 10, 1988.

unity, fell by more than half.<sup>76</sup> Technical help from and economic cooperation with the Soviet Union often led to less than satisfactory results. For example, the Soviet hydroelectric project, the Tri An Dam project was a massive one meant to solve acute energy problems but the dam became defective and the project had to be discontinued.<sup>77</sup> It was under such circumstances that the party tended to become reactive whenever signs of resentment or anti-government feelings manifested.

The conservatives' fears were not totally unfounded as by 1988 and 1989, calls for political pluralism were also mounting. The party began to feel that the fierce responses by the people, the press and even the party members were seemingly getting out of control and it might no longer be able to cope with them. Hundred of letters reached government offices to denounce corruption of officials. The press had become so accustomed to criticizing the incompetence of cadres and leaders that not a day passed without hearing news of an official found involved in some injustice.

At the time, the Tiananmen crackdown in the summer of 1989 and the deteriorating domestic situation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union simultaneously occurred and brought panic to the party. Even though there were no such mass uprisings happening in Vietnam, there was fear that the momentum of reforms and the popular feelings incited by the widely publicized critical accounts of government and party

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

wrongdoings might bring about such an eventuality. All of these therefore induced a sudden impulse to tighten the reins on domestic expressions of opposition or dissent.

It spurred President Vo Chi Cong to give a speech in which he said, “The socialist countries, whether under reform or not, are meeting with acute difficulties at different levels, some are facing serious crises on all the economic, social and political planes. Swift and complicated developments are taking place in a number of countries where the communist party’s leading role has become the target of attack and is being neutralized by antisocialist political forces.”<sup>78</sup> He also said, “In a number of socialist countries, besides their great achievements and strengths, the communist parties in their leadership have seriously violated socialist democracy and violated the principle of democratic centralism in party’s life and alienated themselves from the masses.”<sup>79</sup>

At this time, the need to withdraw from the increasingly costly occupation of Cambodia combined with the realization of the need to be more economically integrated with the world threw the leadership more deeply into the dilemma of reforms. While the maritime Southeast Asian countries were booming and growing, Vietnam was mired in the same debilitating trends that seemed to engulf the rest of the communist world. The scale of dissatisfaction at home seemed to put the survival of the party at stake also. There was thus a temporary halt on reforms at home as the conservatives quickly moved in to censure the calls for pluralism in the face of uncertainties.

---

<sup>78</sup> “Vo Chi Cong Speaks to Delegates,” Hanoi *VNA* in English, December 19, 89, FBIS-EAS, (December 20, 89): 67.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*



## Reversal of Reforms

Nguyen Van Linh himself was under pressure to also correct his past statements regarding the freedom of expression. He gave warnings that any call for political pluralism would be met with certain punishment. In a speech, he attacked people who were undermining the party's role.<sup>80</sup> He emphasized the continued importance of the party and its leadership role in the country.<sup>81</sup> He also emphasized that the state sector still played the dominant role in the Vietnamese economy and emphasized Vietnam's adherence to socialism.<sup>82</sup> Amidst a growing sense that the pluralist calls of the people were endangering party rule, the VCP reacted sternly and issued directives against the expression of opposition.

By 1990, the VCP had adamantly resisted repeated calls for greater political pluralism that even included suggestions of multiparty rule. In that respect, the party gave no compromise and by this time, the freedom and openness that were temporarily advocated were reversed. Many of those who had continued to take advantage of such freedom were punished. The VCP came to believe that some conspiracy existed to try to undermine and overthrow party rule through so called "peaceful evolution."<sup>83</sup> Douglas Pike sums up the atmosphere of the regime in 1990 in saying that "by all evidence of word and behavior", the conservatives of the Politburo "during 1990 genuinely believed

---

<sup>80</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 99.

<sup>81</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, March 20, 1989, FBIS-EAS (March 31, 1989): 70.

<sup>82</sup> *Vietnamese News Agency*, September 1, 1989, FBIS-EAS (September 8, 1989): 68.

<sup>83</sup> Carlyle Thayer in Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*.

that the SRV was the target of a massive world wide conspiracy to destabilize the society and topple the government.”<sup>84</sup>

### **Dropping of Reformist Leaders from Politburo Membership**

A major sign that calls for pluralism were so pervasive to reach even within the Politburo itself was the widely publicized ouster of Tran Xuan Bach<sup>85</sup>, Director of VCP Foreign Affairs Department. Because he raised the issue of whether a multiparty system<sup>86</sup> should be adopted, his behavior had gone beyond the threshold of tolerance of the VCP leadership and his removal was inevitable. He was thus ousted from his Politburo membership. From now on, there would be no criticism or expressions that threatened the stability and sanctity of the communist party and regime.

All of a sudden, the freedom that was advocated only in recent years seemed to have quickly disappeared. Nguyen Van Linh's reforms had apparently started a storm he was not able to control and he tried desperately to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control and also to protect his own political position. Yet the onset of his departure had begun. In 1991, Nguyen Van Linh, at the age of 76, was replaced by Do Muoi, 74 as the General Secretary of the VCP.<sup>87</sup> Even though the party emphasized that Nguyen Van Linh was not being ousted and Nguyen Van Linh himself told colleagues that his

---

<sup>84</sup> Douglas Pike, "Vietnam in 1990: The Last Picture Show," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January 1991): 81.

<sup>85</sup> *Kyodo News Service Dispatch*, FBIS-EAS (March 28, 1990): 67-68.

<sup>86</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, January 5 1990, FBIS-EAS (January 8, 1990): 68.

<sup>87</sup> Philip Shanon, "Vietnam Appeals for Foreign Help," *NYT*, June 28, 1991.

departure was due to his age and poor health<sup>88</sup>, the outcome of his reform initiatives and pressures from the conservatives most probably also played some part.

The new openness underscored inefficiencies and ineffectiveness within the socioeconomic system and brought about efforts to correct and self-correct them. However, it also had limits in enacting real fundamental changes and brought about undesirable outcomes that endangered and ultimately removed Nguyen Van Linh from his party position. In a way, it was a path that Vietnam took to eventually build up the impetus so as to finally push successfully towards external openness beyond mere domestic reforms which had been temporarily stifled. Limited gains from domestic reforms pushed foreign policy reforms forward which in turn arguably strengthened and rekindled domestic reforms later on in times to come.

As Stern points out, Nguyen Van Linh was only able to “achieve some success in making the party responsive to the altered political playing field” but he “could not push beyond the conservative majority and his own faith and political beliefs to provoke real change in the Vietnamese political world.”<sup>89</sup> However, Nguyen Van Linh’s stamp on the history of Vietnamese politics was undeniable. He took the challenge and sought to fundamentally change the system and to turn Vietnam around towards a progressive and prosperous country. Even though his cause to transform the domestic political and economic structure of the Vietnamese world did not completely fulfill his expectations,

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, (New York, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 179.

he definitely shook the stubborn inertia to provoke change and got reforms moving before it could have been too late. Yet, the outcome of such attempts coincided with enormous world systemic changes and forced Nguyen Van Linh to pull the reins on the effects of his own self-initiated changes.

### **Time of Confusion and Dilemma for the VCP**

Indeed as Gareth Porter puts it, “The VCP leadership explicitly acknowledged in 1989 that the renovation project had complicated the task of maintaining political and ideological control over Vietnamese society.” Renovation, it said, had created “many new issues in theory and practice that are strongly affecting the thoughts and feelings of our party cadres and members and the people. The Political Bureau, having admitted that the orthodox Soviet model of socialism was no longer tenable, was unable to point to a substitute for it.”<sup>90</sup> Also, normalization with two important countries, the US and China had been coveted but the troop withdrawal from Cambodia had apparently not been enough to make them happen. That is why Lewis Stern calls 1990 a year of “losing face and losing ground for the Vietnamese leadership.”<sup>91</sup>

Yet, even though the freedom of expression allowed much dissatisfaction to be expressed but resulted in less than hoped for progress to get out of the economic crisis, it did come to show that the masses including huge swaths of party membership had grown disenchanted with the ideals of socialism and lacked confidence in the ability of the party

---

<sup>90</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*.

<sup>91</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, 125.

to bring the country out of deadlock and achieve genuine progress. One party member said, “There is a contradiction between reality and their principles, which they cannot abandon”<sup>92</sup> referring to the aging party leaders who were “deeply divided”<sup>93</sup>. The tightening of the reins due to conservative pressures to maintain stability also did little to mitigate the grim but silent mood of the country but it only temporarily blocked the reform momentum. It would be a year or two before a more relaxed international environment would lighten the SRV’s hand on the newfound openness and freedom from past reforms.

In any case, Nguyen Van Linh had already taken a tougher stand in trying to push for reforms, setting the stage for continued reforms in the 1990s. According to Stern, “Linh was adamant about the need to end secrecy and to subject the entire policy-making structure and leadership to an open, public process of inspection. He urged full coverage of attempts to root out corruption, and endorsed a prying style of journalism in sensitive and hitherto sacrosanct realms, including the process of cadre selection and personnel advancement within the party and the government.”<sup>94</sup> Much like Deng Xiaoping, he also faced obstacles and opposition but he tried to overcome them even though he had to sometimes compromise with them; he essentially opened the door for potential subsequent changes.<sup>95</sup> There were major setbacks to reform and in the end, Nguyen Van

---

<sup>92</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Vietnam Leaders Reported Deeply Divided,” *NYT*, January 31, 1991.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, 172.

<sup>95</sup> In Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) he describes how Deng Xiaoping faced mounting opposition since the Tiananmen incident but he did not give up; rather he weathered the storm and kept up the momentum for

Linh was out; however, the people for the first time genuinely tasted some freedom of expression and understood that artificial restraint on the people's rights and expression and contortion of their creative talents are not beneficial for the future of Vietnam's development.

### **Pressures for Foreign Policy Change**

In a way, the uneven domestic reform process that had mixed results and that sparked fears of the country's domestic situation spinning out of control and that spurred a conservative backlash and the party's reasserting of total control, had brought about some good in the realization of a perceived need for and the fruition of an external openness. Thus the momentum for reform had not been completely defeated and it actually translated into the beginning of the much needed and equally important foreign policy reform.

It was in the context of these domestic and international forces that the leadership soon realized that a commensurate foreign policy reform had to be undertaken in order to augment cautious reforms at home. Reforms at home clearly posed risks but they were still acknowledged to be necessary despite the setbacks and repercussions. A very important unintended lesson learned here was that external reforms were also necessary

---

reforms. In a way, Nguyen Van Linh was Vietnam's Deng Xiaoping in that he also faced the same sort of conservative opposition at the same time due to the events that signaled a crisis for communism but he also pulled through by permanently steering Vietnam in the direction of reforms even though he did not last as long in Vietnam's leadership as China's Deng Xiaoping. Mikhail Gorbachev was like Soviet Union's Deng Xiaoping but he too did not last that long as he was also ousted for better or for worse. Anyhow, there were visionary leaders who could be a great force for real change in the remnant communist world if they could find more help and avenues for policy reorientation.

in order to make reforms at home truly effective and meaningful; the Vietnamese elites were therefore confronted with the choice to either do it all or not at all. Although caution had to be infused nonetheless, the very first step Vietnam had to achieve was freeing itself from international isolation and its position as a social outcast in the international community.

There was a need to reorient its foreign policy in an intelligent way to secure a friendly international environment. There was also a need for foreign investment, aid, technology and expertise. There was a need to be free from diplomatic isolation. The issue of paramount importance was the state of the country's economy but domestic reforms by themselves could only do so much to alleviate the problems. And there would still be widespread dissatisfaction if the country was not able to feed itself and indeed even in 1988, there were still acute problems of food shortages.<sup>96</sup> If the people were well-fed and carefree, there would not have been the sort of unrest from reforms that needed harsh government clampdown. Internal and external reforms had to go hand in hand.

In late 1989, President Vo Chi Cong criticized the progress of the VCP and also said that other communist countries had been slow to adapt to changing circumstances and also purported that anti-communist countries were taking advantage of the situation to try to overthrow communist states including Vietnam. He also specifically criticized the economic mismanagement in which "the economic mechanism remained heavily bureaucratic and dependent on subsidies" and that "international cooperation relations

---

<sup>96</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, June 21, 1988, FBIS-EAS, (June 22, 1988): 41.

were late to expand in accordance with the new trend”<sup>97</sup> thus indicating his and the Vietnamese elites’ acknowledgement that international cooperation was necessary.

There was a need to be able to learn and participate in a peaceful environment and reap benefits from it. Finally, there was a need to participate in the global economy and to become more integrated with it. In fact, Do Muoi, the new general secretary, used his first news conference to plead for international help to end Vietnam’s long years as a “poor and backward nation.”<sup>98</sup> However, within the leadership circles, mid-ranking party members and officials said that there was “persistent disagreement over crucial issues such as how far to open to the West while preserving Communist Party power which has become linked to party personalities.”<sup>99</sup>

This was the critical time when ASEAN felt that it was indeed time to reach out again to Vietnam. ASEAN was a test case for Vietnam to learn the fundamentals of an open door foreign policy and integration with the world. Vietnam was thus poised to make further radical changes on the external front that could be characterized as a “foreign policy doi moi”. It was in this context of uncertainties, dilemma and pressing needs that this foreign policy reorientation was brought about. It was also this eventual relaxed policy and openness that would allow domestic reforms at home to regain life and meaning.

---

<sup>97</sup> “Vo Chi Cong Speaks to Delegates,” Hanoi *VNA* in English, December 19, 1989, FBIS-EAS (December 20, 1989): 67.

<sup>98</sup> Philip Shanon, “Vietnam Appeals for Foreign Help,” *NYT*, June 28, 1991.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*



Fortunately also, Do Muoi who replaced Nguyen Van Linh as the general secretary of the VCP was “widely regarded as a reformer and an action-oriented man”<sup>100</sup> with immense problem-solving experience. Many Vietnamese officials believed that Do Muoi would continue with reforms where Nguyen Van Linh left off, albeit more cautiously. “Though at first a lukewarm subscriber to the reformist line in the mid-1980s, he quickly became an important voice for sustained economic change and policy flexibility.” That is why some would characterize him as a conservative; in actual fact he had been playing a balancer role to prevent too much of infighting between the conservative and reformist elements in the party and to placate their respective fears and concerns. And since Do Muoi took over the general secretary position after the Seventh National Congress in 1991, he had been approving of reforms both domestically and externally.

For example, at the Seventh Party Congress in late 1991, it was declared that the “National Assembly was to establish a fully codified system of government based on the principle of constitutionalism” and “rule of law is to prevail.” “The party would continue to fix policy but the National Assembly would have full responsibility and the necessary authority for implementing it. It was to have great latitude in determining how programs would be implemented and considerable freedom in enforcing changes in policy. In

---

<sup>100</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, 148.

practical terms, this is political power that the National Assembly has never had before.”<sup>101</sup>

Do Muoi also proved to be a reform-minded leader by adopting “Nguyen Van Linh’s pro-market economic views and vowing that economic liberalization would remain the party’s “keynote” concern.”<sup>102</sup> He “replaced more than half of its policy-making group, the Politburo and ushered in many new younger members most likely to support moves toward a free market in Vietnam.”<sup>103</sup> “Four out of the seven new ministers” were from the south and had been “associated with reform.” In order to encourage foreign investment, he also built on the liberal foreign investment law<sup>104</sup> passed under Nguyen Van Linh’s watch that was heralded as the most liberal in the communist world.

In some way, US administration officials and observers saw this as an emulation of “the Chinese model in which steps to expand private enterprise are accompanied by tight, centralized control over the nation’s politics.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, China had always played a unique role in Vietnam’s mind. Whether in the economic or political dimension, China was often seen as a model to follow but at the same time a competitor to reckon with. In the 1990s, China also gained new friends in the international arena by normalizing

---

<sup>101</sup> Douglas Pike, “Vietnam in 1991: The Turning Point,” *Asian Survey*, Vol 32, No. 1 (January 1992): 77.

<sup>102</sup> Shanon, “Vietnam Appeals for Foreign Help,” *NYT*.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>104</sup> Barbara Crosette, “Currency Crisis is Ravaging Vietnam’s Fragile Economy,” *NYT*, April 10, 1988.

<sup>105</sup> Clifford Krauss, “US is encouraged by Hanoi Cabinet,” *NYT*, August 18, 1991.

relations with other Southeast Asian countries<sup>106</sup> including Singapore. Vietnam followed suit but also competed for the same international attention and goodwill. Underpinning such moves was of course Vietnam's desire to also compete for the much needed foreign direct investment.

The prime minister position which was vacated by Do Muoi was filled by Vo Van Kiet, another reform-minded individual from the south who had struggled to shift the country away from central planning to market economy. The choice of Vo Van Kiet, who fell into the number 3 position in the Politiburo, was apparently intended to bolster the reformists<sup>107</sup> in the leadership echelons. He was actually nominated by President Vo Chi Cong while the National Assembly Chairman Le Quang Dao nominated Pham Van Khai, head of the State Planning Committee who declined the nomination.<sup>108</sup> But a closed session voting was held in any case, to give legitimacy to the confirmed selection of Vo Van Kiet as the new prime minister, with results of 425 out of 445 National Assembly members who attended it.<sup>109</sup>

There would however still be clouds of confusion and dilemma in the Vietnamese leadership before more positive development in the foreign policy arena would firmly come about. Underneath the tightening of controls domestically, the Vietnamese leadership had been engaging in intense and meaningful talks with ASEAN

---

<sup>106</sup> *The Straits Times*, January 20, 1991, FBIS-EAS (January 21, 1991).

<sup>107</sup> "Hanoi Picks Reformer as Premier as It Moves to Unleash Economy," *NYT*, August 10, 1991.

<sup>108</sup> Apparently, having another nominee would give a more democratic impression of the leadership selection process but since the other nominee declined, Vo Van Kiet was automatically the selected candidate even though a National Assembly voting session would legitimize it further.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

counterparts.<sup>110</sup> And when the time came, Vietnam benefited profusely from the more relaxed international atmosphere as foreign investment poured into the country from different international quarters. Singapore for example quickly became Vietnam's biggest trade partner.

As we shall see later on in the later chapters, Vietnamese leaders' visits of some of the more well-to-do Southeast Asian countries would serve to encourage Vietnam to follow their models as Vietnam was similar to those countries in a number of ways especially in terms of size, geography and availability of resources. Vietnam also adopted a very different approach in its foreign policy stance which would stand very much in stark contrast with Vietnam's days of war thinking and alliance based on military cooperation or ideological fervor as we shall also analyze further in Chapter 6.

---

<sup>110</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, January 11, 1989, FBIS-EAS (January 11, 1989).

## CHAPTER 5: COMPLEX DYNAMICS DURING THE CAMBODIAN CRISIS

Cambodia had frequently had bad relations with Vietnam since ancient times. The ethnic Khmers and Viets had been historical competitors over the fertile agricultural grounds in the Mekong River delta areas. This historical enmity could not be offset by their common communist backgrounds as it translated into these two communist regimes' struggle for dominance. Cambodia detested the patronizing attitude of Vietnam which often called itself the "big brother" of the Indochinese countries and which wanted the other Indochinese countries to acknowledge and address Ho Chi Minh in a common way as Uncle Ho.

Records showed that the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) stated that Vietnam was "worse than the French colonialists."<sup>1</sup> Vietnam had always considered Indochina to be its sphere of influence. Its ability to sustain guerilla operations in South Vietnam was largely due to the presence of a friendly rear in Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam had therefore always asserted this special relationship with Laos and Cambodia. Yet, even though Laos was more submissive and acknowledged Vietnam's Indochinese communist leadership, the Communist Party of Kampuchea was not so deferent and had previously tolerated Vietnam only because they had a common enemy. In fact, even in

---

<sup>1</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 149.

the past, Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge's leader had always held a militant anti-Vietnamese line.

After the communist victory in Vietnam and Cambodia, the two countries almost immediately attacked each other on their borders, inflaming their age-old rivalries. At this time of Sino-Soviet rift, the action of Cambodia, a declared ally of China, in attacking Vietnamese borders, brought Vietnamese tolerance levels to its limits. All of these, together with confidence in its superpower protection in the Soviet Union led Vietnam to go ahead and launch a full scale retaliatory military attack and invasion of Cambodia.

In the completion of unification of Vietnam on Hanoi's terms, Vietnam's rift with China, its erstwhile ally also became more and more serious. There were already deep underlying tensions between the two countries that were exacerbated by several events to the breaking point. First and foremost, since ancient times, Vietnam and China have always had a love-hate relationship. Even though the two communist regimes had cooperated as allies, the Vietnamese had always had a certain level of suspicion towards China's intentions and often believed that Chinese strategy had always been to keep Vietnam too weak to be a threat to it but useful as a buffer against China's external threats.

### **Post-Vietnam War Relations with ASEAN**

Since the unification of Vietnam under the newly named Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), this regime had actually attempted to establish cordial relations with its

Southeast Asian neighbors. There had been exchanges between ASEAN and Vietnam in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War. The ASEAN states had already held the view that some level of cordial relationship with a unified communist Vietnam that did not harbor hegemonic ambitions beyond its borders would be in ASEAN's interests and began some degree of diplomatic interaction in the hope of bringing a post-Vietnam War stable regional architecture to fruition. There were hopes that at least a peaceful condition free of threats in the region could be maintained.

However, ASEAN countries had some reservations toward Vietnam at first and vice versa. Even though the ASEAN countries felt that with the end of the Vietnam War, some sort of regional reconciliation needed to be reached, an ASEAN that included Vietnam at that time was almost unthinkable, not just for ASEAN but also for Vietnam. Vietnam did not actually look at ASEAN in a favorable way. In fact Vietnam saw ASEAN as a pro-West association with active anti-communist designs and campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Vietnam therefore rejected ASEAN's underlying philosophy and functional principles even though they actually did not have any explicit ideological stance.

Meanwhile, Vietnam moved to solidify its special relationship with Laos and in 1976 they jointly declared their support for the revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> But Democratic Kampuchea\*(DK) adamantly refused to join Laos in requiring a special relationship with Vietnam and occupying a subordinate position to Vietnam. In

---

<sup>2</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 203.

<sup>3</sup> Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*, 73.

fact, Vietnam would soon find an intransigent Cambodia intolerable beyond its limits so much so that a new round of conflict would further wear down Vietnam's national resources and domestic economy, and inflict heavier costs that would ultimately force Vietnam later on to make a radical change in its foreign policy position.

Vietnam's declaration of solidarity with Laos manifested its potential hegemonic intentions to be not just a leader in the Indochinese communist bloc but also in other parts of Southeast Asia. This came in light of communist Vietnam's recent victory in unifying the country and its confidence in its battle-hardened troops, endowed with stockpiles of leftover weapons from the departed US troops. Because of Vietnam's apparent championing of the communist revolutionary cause in the Third World, ASEAN therefore also rejected Vietnam's foreign policy approach and saw it with equal suspicion.

Yet some accommodation from both sides did occur albeit with a high level of wariness before the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia occurred. Vietnam took the diplomatic interaction with neighboring Southeast Asian countries seriously enough and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong visited a number of ASEAN states in September and October 1978. But Vietnam had a very different mindset at that time—a strongly communist ideologically-oriented one. His message was basically that Vietnam wished to have working relations with Southeast Asian countries but did not recognize ASEAN as a legitimate regional organization.



## **The Cambodia-Vietnam and Sino-Soviet Conflicts**

The conclusion of the Vietnam War brought about the rupturing of relations amongst the communist countries that were once thought of as a monolithic actor directed by Moscow. The consolidation of communist control by the respective communist regimes in the socialist bloc did not lead to a strong alliance; rather, historical animosities that were previously put aside in the face of a common enemy, resurfaced to turn the communist nations against one another.

Tension built up between the newly unified Vietnam under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and the newly established communist Cambodia, Democratic Kampuchea (DK) under Pol Pot. The potential for an escalation between the two communist countries was greatly heightened. Border incursions by Cambodian forces were frequent and aggressive but Vietnamese forces regularly retaliated. Once, the Vietnamese escalated their counterattacks with thousands of troops entering the Cambodian side but they pulled back in early 1978, thinking they had taught the Cambodians enough of a lesson. However, immediately after, Cambodian forces initiated incursions again in Vietnam's Tay Ninh<sup>4</sup> region.

The conditions for a large scale offensive were therefore brewing. Cambodia wanted to have equal status with Vietnam and not be subordinate in any way but Vietnam insisted upon this "special relationship" as the revolutionary big brother even if it meant

---

<sup>4</sup> Karl D. Jackson, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 1: (January 1979): 73.

souring relations with China or going to war with Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> In any case, Pham Van Dong wanted to see to it that a potential war which indeed materialized within a few months in December 1978 would not be a source of conflict between Vietnam and the other Southeast Asian countries. Even though Pham did not receive any such assurance from the ASEAN countries, there was confidence within the Vietnamese elite that a Cambodian adventure would not trigger any backlash from the ASEAN members.

In the early 1970s, China underwent a process of détente with the US in the hope of balancing against the Soviet Union in a larger enmity that had been building up since the 60s while the US used China's influence to put pressure on Vietnam to compromise in the Paris Peace talks. This caused irk and resentment amongst the Vietnamese leaders towards China. Vietnam viewed China's improved relations with the US also as a betrayal of international communism. In 1972, the thawing of relations between China and the US, President Nixon's visit to China and the issuance of the Shanghai Communiqué struck the Vietnamese as Chinese collusion with imperialists. Vietnam's many past deep grievances against China also resurfaced. It had been very unhappy with China since the Geneva Conference when China pushed Vietnam to sign the agreement and agree on the partition of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. During the Vietnam War, Vietnam also felt that China wanted to drag on the war in order to keep the US tied down and Vietnam disunited.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

To China, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia was a "blatant act of ingratitude for extensive Chinese assistance for over nearly thirty years" with the "backing of a hostile superpower" to "assert dominance over the whole of Indo-China."<sup>6</sup> It was mindful of how much generous support it had given Vietnam during the Second Indochina War. Within the Chinese military, anti-Vietnamese feelings grew greatly as many of the officers were those who only recently were stationed in Vietnam to help in its war efforts. China had for decades allocated a major share of its foreign aid to Vietnam and as such the latest act of invasion destroyed any chance for inaction or compromise.

According to Andrew Scobell, Beijing in the 1960s "provided almost two thirds of China's entire foreign military assistance" to Vietnam in that decade.<sup>7</sup> China had been an important backer of communist Vietnam in its struggle against the French and the Americans by sending numerous advisers and large amounts of equipment. Due to their geographic proximity and common communist revolutionary experience, their relations had therefore been characterized to be "as close as lips and teeth".<sup>8</sup> However, historical animosities, territorial disputes, superpower influences and their own hegemonic ambitions had brought about rancorous relations that were only suppressed in times of exigency and mutual need. When they could no longer hold a lid on the underlying tensions, open fighting came to the fore.

---

<sup>6</sup> Yahuda, *The International Politics of Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995*, 205.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 142.

<sup>8</sup> Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 130.

Hostile Sino-Soviet relations became the main reason that drove the readjustments in relations amongst Vietnam, China, the Soviet Union and the US. The Indochinese region became a highly contested one between Vietnam backed by Soviet Union, and China. Cambodia openly allied with China and engaged in attacks into Vietnamese territory in the name of historical enmity and territorial disputes. Vietnamese and Chinese positions on the Soviet Union further diverged and pulled Sino-Vietnamese relations further apart.

Recognizing that the Soviet threat could only be mitigated with US help, China sought rapprochement with the US with success. Common interests brought about normalization between the two countries and Sino-US relations substantially improved over the years since a communiqué between them was signed in 1972. Vietnam regarded China's move as a betrayal, as a defection to the enemy camp and China's complicity in "imperialist" designs of the US. It was a major source of irritation in Sino-Vietnamese relations but it was temporarily muted by the Vietnamese who were focused on fighting as the Vietnam War had not come to a clear conclusion. After the tumultuous years of 1976-1977, China moved to pragmatically undertake reforms under Deng Xiaoping's auspices but still reeling from the devastating effects of the Cultural Revolution, it needed to utilize its resources for domestic modernization purposes and therefore reduced aid to Vietnam, again adding to Vietnam's discontent.

But Vietnamese grievances regarding the Chinese did not stop there. In January 1974, not long before the north's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) swarmed into the

south to retake the whole country, China wrested control of the Paracel Islands from the South Vietnamese navy. Because the North Vietnamese army was focused on the task of taking over the rest of southern Vietnam, the issue was allowed to be sidelined for the moment; however, in the Vietnamese psyche, China had made an outrageous move and it signaled a grim future in Sino-Vietnamese relations. Le Duan, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) at the time, visited China in September 1975, soon after the North Vietnamese successfully overwhelmed the southern Thieu regime and took over the whole of Vietnam. In this trip, he protested Chinese action in the South China Sea in the 1974 military seizure of the Paracels. This was on top of other thorny territorial problems involving the land borders in northern Vietnam where military clashes occurred quite frequently although on a small scale.

In contrast, it is interesting to note that Vietnam had wanted to seek peace with the US in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War in the hope that US repayment could be secured. Vietnam was quite ill-prepared for the harsh and acute difficulty of governing, administering and rebuilding a war-torn country with such dilapidated conditions which US aid could help mitigate. Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach made trips to the US to secure such an outcome but he failed to achieve it.

### **Vietnam's Post-Unification Campaign**

Another source of contention in Sino-Vietnamese relations lay on the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam issue. When the North Vietnamese successfully took over the whole

country, a massive initiative to impose socialism in the south was implemented. This socially uprooting course of action included forced agricultural collectivization policy, arrest and punishment of those found to have had complicity with the former US-backed South Vietnamese regime as well as persecuting those who were not necessarily politically liable but were a source of “morally corrupt capitalist influence”. Many South Vietnamese communities were persecuted; one of the highly targeted groups was the ethnic Chinese, known as the Hoa people who had been perceived as rich capitalists and was deemed a threat to the newly formed socialist republic.

These were the merchants and entrepreneurs who were natural targets of Vietnamese persecution of people or groups of any capitalist visage. The “Cholon Chinese quarter of old Saigon was swept out in 1977-78 by a wave of anti-capitalism.”<sup>9</sup> To escape being sent to reeducation camps or mired in political repression, many ethnic Chinese residents chose to take off. As such, a large number of the resulting “boat people”<sup>10</sup> who escaped Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnam War was of ethnic Chinese origin. Among the many Vietnamese refugees, hundreds of thousands were of ethnic Chinese descent<sup>11</sup> and many reached southern China. China even sent ships over to help with their repatriation. To China, which at that time had a possessive attitude towards ethnic Chinese who were citizens elsewhere, Vietnam was systematically targeting ethnic Chinese on a pretext of removing capitalism in a deliberate act of anti-

---

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market* (New York, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>10</sup> This refers to people who illegally escaped the country by any boat that could carry them away.

<sup>11</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam, A Long History*.

China expression. The timing of such aggravating events exacerbated Sino-Vietnamese relations to the point of no return.

But this mass exodus of refugees flowing out of Vietnam in large numbers did not only exacerbate relations with China but also with other Southeast Asian countries. This was because many of the Vietnamese refugees also reached lands as far as Malaysia and Singapore. The impression that Vietnam was deliberately persecuting ethnic Chinese seemed to have been most irksome for China while for the ASEAN states, it became an issue of division amongst the members over burden-sharing of taking in these refugees as well as the sensitive domestic issue of race relations within the local population of respective countries.

It prompted ASEAN to issue this joint statement, “ASEAN and the United States viewed with concern the serious international humanitarian problem posed by the presence of Indo-Chinese refugees in ASEAN countries and agreed on the urgent need for a concerted international effort to find a just and durable solution to the problem. The United States pledged to intensify its efforts, and to cooperate with ASEAN in encouraging the world community to do more.”<sup>12</sup>

Malaysia had received thousands of these refugees but was most angered that no other countries were prepared to accept them. Foreign Ministry Secretary General Yusof Hitam said that these people fell into two categories, the physically handicapped and

---

<sup>12</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the Second ASEAN-US Dialog,” Washington D. C., August 2-4, 1978.

those without economic skills but Malaysia was most compassionate in accepting them and bearing the brunt of the Vietnamese refugee problem with some of the refugees staying as long as six years in Pulau Bidong because no other countries were willing to accept them.<sup>13</sup> They fell under either of the two categories-the physically handicapped and those not possessing any “economic skills”.<sup>14</sup> He also added that Malaysia was against the conditions set by other recipient countries that only accepted refugees who would make “good investments.”<sup>15</sup>

In the end, bearing substantial economic burden of accepting the refugees, the Malaysian government decided that the Pulau Bidong refugee settlement camp had to be closed<sup>16</sup> even though Malaysia continued to try to get third countries to accept the Vietnamese illegal immigrants despite the poor response it had been receiving.<sup>17</sup> The Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba said of the refugees that the Malaysian government would not “forcibly repatriate them, on humanitarian grounds but will allow them time to decide.”<sup>18</sup> Malaysia, he said, “had been sheltering the largest number of boat people compared with other Southeast Asian countries.”<sup>19</sup> And for Malaysia, this problem went on up till the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, based on a Malaysian commentary on the settlement camp closure, “the Malaysian government’s announcement on its decision to close the Pulau Bidong refugee settlement camp will be

---

<sup>13</sup> *Bernama* in English, June 25, 1988, FBIS-EAS, (June 27, 1988): 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Kuala Lumpur International Service* in English April 25, 1988, FBIS-EAS (April 26, 1988): 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Kuala Lumpur Bernama*, December 2, 1991, FBIS-EAS (December 2, 1991): 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



received with understanding by all right-thinking people. The presence of this facility has been a staging an incentive to many Vietnamese citizens to leave their country. Thailand and Malaysia because of their proximity to Vietnam and the South China Sea have had to bear the brunt of this complex problem.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Overseas Chinese**

The problem of overseas Vietnamese was further complicated when they were of Chinese descent. The PRC still had a possessive attitude towards the overseas Chinese not just in Vietnam but elsewhere as well, particularly in Southeast Asia at that time. When the communist party in Indonesia was still active in the 1960s, China regarded the ethnic Chinese there as extensions of Chinese citizenry. This caused friction with host countries. There was even a differentiation in the definition of “hua ren” meaning ethnic Chinese and “hua qiao” meaning overseas Chinese. This distinction became increasingly blur when China decided to help repatriate the Vietnamese citizens of Chinese descent particularly in the late 1970s, as they were treated and advocated for by the PRC government as if they were Chinese citizens themselves. Such a move became troubling for Vietnam and for other Southeast Asian countries as well where large percentages in the population were of ethnic Chinese descent.

Actually, the further away the ethnic Chinese were from mainland China and the longer they had been in a host country, the more distant they would be politically from

---

<sup>20</sup> “Commentary Backs Camp’s Closure,” *Kuala Lumpur International Service* in English, April 25, 1988, FBIS-EAS (April 26, 1988): 34.

mainland China. Many third generation ethnic Chinese in Indonesia for example would most likely be almost as culturally distinct from mainland Chinese as any other Southeast Asian people and would probably have next to no interest whatsoever in mainland China's political affairs and zero political connections with its ruling regime. The tendency to lump all ethnic Chinese together and the fact that many ethnic Chinese in other host countries were actually well-assimilated and loyal to their host countries make China's possessive attitude a source of complication with other Southeast Asian countries with large ethnic Chinese population and a cause for greater fear of China's assertiveness and potential in destabilizing ethnic relations in the societies of those countries.

It is difficult to say for sure whether Vietnam's ill treatment of the ethnic Chinese people in the past was deliberate but such a problematic relation was not entirely different from Vietnam's difficult relations with other minorities such as the Highlanders in the mountainous Vietnamese regions. In any case, in reaction to this 1978 major influx of ethnic Chinese refugees, China retaliated by cutting off economic aid and withdrawing all technical experts. This turn of events would carry enormous weight in Vietnamese decision to lean even more closely towards the Soviet Union in abandonment of China, thereby exacerbating Sino-Vietnamese tensions.

### **Vietnam's Decision to Rely on the Soviet Union and Subsequent Events**

Faced with reduced China aid and no aid at all from the US, Vietnam's inclination to move even closer to the Soviet Union was consummated by Vietnam's joining of the

Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and the conclusion of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union on November 3rd, 1978. This treaty was in effect a tacit alliance pact in exchange for economic aid and concessions, preferential trade relations and military aid to the benefit of Vietnam. As a quid pro quo, Vietnam opened up Cam Ranh Bay as a strategic forward base for Soviet naval and air forces providing all-year warm water naval access to the Pacific which the Soviet Union had been devoid of on the vast Soviet landmass, which the Soviet Union found favorable for exerting greater Soviet influence in Indochina.

The Soviet Union thus strengthened its military-strategic edge against China in their ongoing conflict. Given such new geopolitical developments, China began to feel dangerously encircled by the threat of the Soviets which China had labeled as the most dangerous imperialists. China and Soviet-directed Vietnam harbored deepening suspicions and hostilities towards each other and border skirmishes between them increased. A new Cambodian regime aligned with a hostile Vietnam would be the very last straw.

Penned up feelings of resentment, the war of words involving the labeling of China as an imperialist, border disputes, alliance with a hostile superpower and most of all the invasion of its own ally, Cambodia, brought China beyond the threshold of tolerance. When Vietnam quickly toppled Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) in December 1978 and replaced it with the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), China decided that a military showdown with Vietnam would be inevitable.

The turn of events therefore precipitated an attack from China in February 1979, soon after Deng Xiaoping's visit to the US in this Third Indochina War to "teach Vietnam a lesson" in which large numbers of Chinese forces invaded northern Vietnam and took many key cities but which also suffered large numbers of casualties because of Vietnam's battle-hardened troops and weapons captured from the Americans as well as substantial assistance by the Soviet Union.

Within weeks, proclaiming that it had achieved its goals, the Chinese troops pulled back to China but border skirmishes along Vietnam's northern fringes continued as sporadic Chinese attacks occurred to harass and keep the Vietnamese forces unsettled. Even though China had decided on the strategy to quickly withdraw its forces once its objective to "teach Vietnam a lesson" had been achieved, partly also because it feared that this attack on Vietnam might have incited a war with the Soviet Union, its losses were unexpectedly heavy. China mainly relied on waves and waves of troops to overwhelm the Vietnamese. Vietnamese military planners at the time also knew that China was at the time preoccupied with domestic issues and did not have the strength and will to conquer all of Vietnam and they took this into account in its military deliberations. One main problem for the Chinese was that the weapons used by their army were inferior to those the Vietnamese captured from the departed Americans. Apparently, it was this experience that awakened China to their need to augment its military machine.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> This is according to a Chinese Cambodian immigrant who had some military background he did not want to elaborate on.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese troops continued to occupy Cambodia with Soviet Union's backing but the retreated anti-Vietnamese Cambodian resistance forces were ultimately able to hold up against the more formidable Vietnamese forces which launched several campaigns to root out the remaining Khmer Rouge forces that had dug in deep and turned to guerilla warfare as the situation reached a stalemate. China also maintained the strategy of attrition by keeping Vietnamese troops engaged along the Sino-Vietnamese borders to sap Vietnamese energy and resources. Thailand became a frontline state against an expansionist Vietnam as those remnant resistance factions found safe haven at friendly Thai borders and continued guerilla style attacks on the Vietnamese occupiers. The pro-Vietnam Heng Samrin regime installed in Phnom Penh maintained firm control over most of Cambodia with Vietnam's continued presence. During this time, ASEAN countries kept a united front by garnering international support on the Cambodian issue.

### **ASEAN's Position and Role in the Cambodian Issue**

To be sure, there were sharp differing opinions within ASEAN about the way to deal with Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, some of the ASEAN countries dispatched troops to support American war efforts against the North Vietnamese troops and NLF guerillas. The Philippines and Thailand made token contributions in the effort to curb the communist threat in Vietnam while certain countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia preferred to remain neutral because of their concern about the possible long term threat

---

from China instead of Vietnam. Indonesia in particular felt sympathetic to Vietnam because of its own historical violent struggles for independence from the Dutch.

Vietnam wanted to assure ASEAN countries that it would not support insurgents in the region but ASEAN remained suspicious and did not fully trust Vietnam's words. The conclusion of the Vietnam War therefore did not ultimately yield significant progress in Vietnam-ASEAN relations even though ASEAN had the intention to cautiously reach out to Vietnam. Before the invasion of Cambodia, Vietnam had already wanted to convince ASEAN countries to drop the ASEAN position to establish a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). Vietnam wanted to see a new institution being created to replace ASEAN and its pro-West framework. The invasion of Cambodia was what completely nullified efforts to potentially patch up ASEAN-Vietnam relations even though Vietnam sought to convince the Southeast Asian leaders that it was a necessary move to remove the threat of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime. Vietnam continued to downplay its Cambodian occupation to try and turn the situation into a *fait accompli*.

The pre-Suharto period's Indonesian leader, Sukarno however, was a member of the Non-aligned Movement in the Bandung Asian-African Conference. Because of the alleged involvement of China in the communist insurgency in Indonesia, the post-Sukarno leadership under President Suharto was much more concerned about China's future role in the region and felt more threatened by it than Vietnam. Thus, also due to a common historical armed struggle for independence, Indonesia had since the

establishment of ASEAN been more sympathetic toward Vietnam than other ASEAN countries.

There were therefore tense divisions within as ASEAN held annual meetings to convene and discuss Indochinese developments. These were some of the many challenges that ASEAN faced when it just passed its first decade of existence and that again threatened its very survival as a viable regional organization. Many other territorial issues involving great power rivalries tore ASEAN's solidarity in different directions. These ASEAN founders were also only starting to learn to deal with regional problems with diplomacy and peaceful resolution.

The Southeast Asian region was a place where many such outstanding territorial issues remained to be solved. If Southeast Asian countries could pursue the object of irredentism or solve border disputes by just fighting it out, it would have been an ominous prospect for Southeast Asia as a whole. Thailand, an ASEAN member, was the frontline state facing a militant Vietnam. Vietnam had also launched sporadic attacks against Thailand and clearly there was grave concern about how far the Vietnamese military machine would go. In the past, Vietnam had also maintained contacts with and supported communist insurgents in Thailand. If ASEAN did nothing about it, it would have seemed impotent and helpless in the face of a serious violation and threat in the region.

There was fear of a number of possible consequences of inaction; the respect for sovereignty, a key principle in external relations amongst ASEAN countries would have been totally nullified and states in the region would fall into a melee mode and seek irredentist claims with impunity. ASEAN therefore had to take a stand in order to project its commitment to this principle. The division that came from the Indochinese developments eventually turned into unity amongst the ASEAN members. As Leifer says, “the need for carefully coordinated diplomatic responses to the Cambodian conflict enhanced ASEAN’s ability to generate a climate of mutual confidence among its partners to cope with bilateral tensions.”<sup>22</sup> They banded together to seek to maintain international attention on the Cambodian issue and appealed to the UN to keep the pro-Vietnam Heng Samrin regime from being internationally recognized or given the Cambodian UN seat. The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) was formed as a coalition of communist Khmer Rouge and noncommunist elements including Prince Norodom Sihanouk who represented a benevolent face in Cambodia.

Having this coalition was in large part to lessen the bad image of the Khmer Rouge and create an alternative organization that could politically challenge the one installed by the Vietnamese. ASEAN from the outset had a serious dilemma; the Khmer Rouge was an atrocious, egregious organization that had committed atrocious crimes against humanity. None of the ASEAN countries was in a willing position to support such an illegitimate organization. A large number of Cambodian civilians actually called

---

<sup>22</sup> Leifer, “The ASEAN Regional Forum,” 16.



Vietnam's invasion, a liberation<sup>23</sup> of Cambodia from the clutches of despotic rule. Scores of them took to the streets to express their welcome for the Vietnamese forces. So, creating a coalition would lessen the Khmer Rouge's role and having Norodom Sihanok's leadership gave it much more legitimacy and popularity. Such a coalition would then be suitably capable of challenging the illegitimate government set up by the Vietnamese in terms of gaining local and international support and approval.

ASEAN however did not make its moves completely on its own. It highly coordinated its actions with external powers, particularly the US and China. ASEAN as a regional organization also lobbied and worked closely with the UN to garner sustained international attention on this issue to prevent it from turning into a *fait accompli*. This persistent effort achieved great dividends as there was eventually a UN-sponsored elections held after the Paris Peace Agreement to determine Cambodia's political future.

China provided military aid to the resistance factions and Thailand allowed its borders to be a support base in the resistance effort. The US led a major Western trade embargo that exhausted Vietnam economically and that prevented any sort of respite. It is no wonder this war of attrition was called Vietnam's Vietnam as Vietnam got a taste of its own medicine. It fought in a foreign country to protect a regime it installed but that was not able to self-defend well on its own, faced a determined guerilla enemy force that had the support from a major power and a friendly rear in a neighboring country and faced domestic and international criticism for its actions.

---

<sup>23</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 471.

ASEAN therefore played an important part to turn the tide against Vietnam using its own strategy of attrition, even without many resources at its disposal. This war of attrition however, was not military in nature, but a diplomatic one. Not only did ASEAN succeed in what had not been achieved militarily, which was to force communist Vietnam down, but it also managed to help change a closed, hostile and hegemonic Vietnam dramatically towards improved behavior as we will see later.

Even though the ASEAN countries valued sovereignty, in times of a common communist threat, they did give-and-take and sacrifice sovereignty to a certain level in order that each party was able to achieve some important goals. For example, Malaysia allowed Thailand to conduct hot pursuit operations that crossed their borders so that members of certain Muslim separatist groups of southern Thailand could be captured more effectively.

ASEAN countries also had a major negative reaction to Vietnam's signing on to the CMEA and the de facto alliance treaty with the Soviet Union and subsequently the invasion Cambodia which dashed ASEAN's hopes of a Southeast Asia free of great power conflict. ASEAN's greatest nightmare had indeed turned into reality as a Soviet-backed Vietnam was now engaged in warfare with a China-backed Cambodia. Whatever goodwill that was built up prior to the Vietnamese invasion completely dissipated. Hopes were dashed in ASEAN as their principal rule of observance and respect for sovereignty was brutally violated in their neighborhood. All previous diplomatic efforts that forged goodwill feelings came to a naught.

This time the ASEAN states could not take a neutral position. Vietnam's military threat on an ASEAN member, Thailand put the prospect of ASEAN's cardinal principle in real and present danger. All decided that Vietnam's blatant actions foreshadowed a grim future for Southeast Asian security if it was left to do as it wished, backed by a communist superpower. The ASEAN countries therefore banded together to highlight the seriousness of the situation to the international community to prevent the Cambodian crisis from being ignored and to deny Vietnam-installed puppet Cambodian regime the legitimacy it sought.

Soviet connection in Vietnamese military adventure here constituted the greatest threat. The presence of Vietnamese hegemonic ambitions backed and supported by a hostile superpower with forward bases in the vicinity was cited as the major reason why Vietnam's behavior could not be tolerated. Not realizing that such a major backlash would result from the invasion, Vietnam's radical and militant posture was however again rekindled in the face of growing hostility around it and Vietnam rebuffed any diplomatic efforts to deny Vietnam's hold on Cambodia and was intransigent and unyielding in the Cambodian situation.

Yet, other than sustaining diplomatic pressure, it was limited in terms of military wherewithal to generate a true countervailing force against a seemingly revolutionary, hegemonic and expansionist Vietnam backed by Soviet power. Vietnam's army was the

biggest in Southeast Asia totaling 1.5 million<sup>24</sup> and had been battle-hardened and well-equipped by Soviet procurements as well as leftover American weapons. ASEAN's efforts therefore had to be supported by the other great powers on its side, namely the US and China. US approval and Chinese support were both essential in order to keep the odds in ASEAN's favor in the objective of preventing Vietnamese presence in Cambodia from becoming a *fait accompli*. China contributed arms to the resistance factions in the borders while the US gave it tacit support and led the Western arms embargo against an initially unbending Vietnam.

ASEAN was particularly concerned however, that the continuation of great power rivalry being played out right at its doorstep would be ever-present. Yet, whichever way it turned, the presence of great power dynamics was omnipresent in the evolution of the Cambodian problem and in fact, ASEAN had to work with such dynamics in order to sustain its momentum in pressing Vietnam to desist in its bellicosity. In the recent past, ASEAN's principal objective had been based on the recognition that the new nations of Southeast Asia needed a stable regional political climate in order for the Southeast Asian regimes to survive and be firmly established. There was much work to do and there was no desire to engage in any sort of debilitating conflict that would upset their domestic development, described by Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas as "national resilience".

---

<sup>24</sup> Tokyo *Kyodo* in English, November 1, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1990): 55.

However, the Indochinese conflicts had a profound effect on ASEAN countries' perception of regional security. While there was a deep desire to be firmly established as new regional states, allowed to focus on fostering domestic economic development and protecting their newfound sovereignty, the ASEAN states were fully aware that with the current wider geopolitical circumstances, it was imperative that they remained engaged with the great powers because their own military strength was nowhere near the capability of protecting this very notion of sovereignty that they so cherished, in a time of exigency when the threat of communist expansionism had not subsided. Thus this new geopolitical situation that took shape would persist for a number of years.

### **Vietnamese Problems and Responses in the 1980s**

The Vietnamese elites must have continued to harbor resentment toward China for being in the way of the improvement of relations between the US and Vietnam. This was not surprising because the US was putting greater weight on improved relations with China instead of Vietnam, and in any case, the Vietnam War was still raw in US memory and improved Vietnam-US relations were just difficult to accomplish at that time.<sup>25</sup>

China had also been in a superior position that kept Vietnam in its current predicament. China had several times been an obstacle to Vietnam's strategic plans. By arming the anti-Vietnamese resistance forces in Cambodia, China made the effort to keep Vietnam embroiled there, and by being of a higher priority to the US, China indirectly

---

<sup>25</sup> Sheldon W. Simon, "Recent Developments in Asia," *Asian Survey* Vol. 19, No. 12, (December 1979): 1173.

had a hand in initially excluding Vietnam from joining the UN and dampening the prospects of normalization of relations with the US as well as other important countries. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor viewed Vietnam as a "peripheral issue" when the US faced a choice between China and Vietnam, and did not want to allow the pursuit of diplomatic relations with Vietnam to jeopardize the fledgling good feelings with China. Thus China was able to move ahead diplomatically and economically at the expense of Vietnam.

Given the relatively recent rancorous, even violent Sino-Vietnamese relations, it was not easy to see their relations being patched up. On February 2, 1982, "the New China News Agency said that Vietnamese troops crossed into China's Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, planting mines and directing gunfire."<sup>26</sup> Both Vietnam and China had "tried to create the impression" that the other side was "responsible for tension along the Sino-Vietnamese border."<sup>27</sup> The ratcheting up of aggressive rhetoric went on without respite; on November 29, 1982, China "accused Vietnam of trying to encroach on its territories by claiming vast areas of the Tonkin Gulf and two dispute island groups."<sup>28</sup> A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said, "The Vietnamese authorities must bear full responsibility for all the serious consequences that may arise."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> "China Charges that Vietnam is Provoking Border Conflict," *NYT*, February 3, 1982.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> "China Says Vietnam is Trying to Seize Parts of Tonkin Gulf," *NYT*, November 29, 1982.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 6: THE TURNING POINT-IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH IMMEDIATE NEIGHBORS

### Mounting Problems for Vietnam

Even though Vietnam remained intransigent about its occupation of Cambodia, it faced mounting problems in the 1980s that forced it to relent. Its economic plight became desperate. People were living in extreme poverty and there was widespread hunger and malnutrition. Corruption was rampant and the communist government's socialist initiatives only caused more backfiring, exacerbating the depressing conditions that caused widespread suffering. People in the countryside and those without any links to the elite bore the most of the government's ineffectiveness.

The Vietnamese elite did not expect such a scale of problems and that running a country could be much more difficult than winning a war. "If anything, the war in Cambodia and the interruption of economic aid from other countries made considerably worse a situation that was already almost hopeless."<sup>1</sup> Within the leadership, there was a sense of demoralization because of the mounting problems at home and the external pressure from outside. There were palpable signs of dissent and resentment towards the government because of shortage of food, soaring inflation and social injustice.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Many socio-economic targets were not achieved due to both internal and external reasons. Viet Nam's economy fell into crisis and stagnation and people's lives were difficult." See "Aspects of National Development," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_vietnam/history/#v2xo13lr2NUJ](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_vietnam/history/#v2xo13lr2NUJ), (accessed June 2010).

At the same time, Vietnam had to go on maintaining high military expenditure because of the hostile international environment it was facing. Perceived threats and security dilemma conditions pushed Vietnam to devote substantial resources to national defense. Given the continued occupation of Cambodia, conflict with Southeast Asian neighbors and suspicions about China's intentions as well as distrust and hostility towards Western countries, Vietnam's logical choice was to maintain strategic military preparedness and continue leaning towards the Soviet Union to secure military and economic aid.

According to Ton That Thien, Vietnam's decades of wars had brought it to an almost complete dependence on the Soviet Union. So, ironically, Vietnam fought to win national independence only to find its own self ending up with another foreign master. "Since November 3, 1978 the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was bound to the Soviet Union by a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which was in fact a military alliance."<sup>2</sup> Thai Quang Trung describes Vietnam's role at that time a "guardian-state of the Soviet system" and to be "of greater strategic value than any other Soviet footholds in the Third World, and even more vital than Cuba."<sup>3</sup>

Thus Vietnam was understandably a major source of threat for the non-communist states of Southeast Asia as well as China which was gravely concerned about Soviet encirclement. However, Vietnam's dependence on the Soviet Union provided only

---

<sup>2</sup> See the Chapter 9 on the CPV and the Soviet Union in Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*.

<sup>3</sup> Thai Quang Trung as cited in Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 208-210.



moderate relief to its economic predicament; the people suffered immeasurably, reducing the Vietnamese communist regime's legitimacy greatly.

But subsequent events placed further stress and difficulties for the Vietnamese leadership. Many Vietnamese were sent to work abroad in Soviet Union too but they had to live in unsatisfactory conditions, thus inviting protests from the Vietnamese workers. So, there was strain in relations as well with the Soviet Union, Vietnam's only pillar of support, which it had increasingly relied on for the past years, particularly to sustain the occupation and operations in Cambodia. However, in the second half of the 1980s, it was becoming more and more difficult for the Soviets to go on committing to Vietnam's military adventure and thus less and less foreign aid was given to Vietnam as time went on. It had also been grudging about the way Vietnam had handled its matters independent of Soviet knowledge and instruction.

The Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) framework had only been moderately beneficial to Vietnam. It was based on using credits and barter to receive its needed goods while it exported crafts and raw materials to Soviet Union and East European countries. And the Soviet Union no longer had the wherewithal to give Vietnam a ready market for its products or provide supplies at below market prices. Trade between the two countries would be "based on world prices and conducted in hard currency,"<sup>4</sup> Rashid Khamidulin, representative from the Soviet Union told a news

---

<sup>4</sup> "Soviet Envoy on USSR 'New Stage' Relations," Hanoi *INA* in English, October 31, 1990. FBIS-EAS. (November 1, 1990): 52.

conference. Also, “the new COMECON practices will not be applied automatically.” The Soviet Union which accounted for two thirds of Vietnam’s foreign trade was its main commercial partner. The Vietnamese economy had been “oriented primarily toward other socialist countries.”<sup>5</sup>

The occupation of Cambodia was beginning to exact unsustainable costs as the resistance factions had the support of Thailand and therefore a safe rear from which to launch increasingly virulent guerilla attacks, especially during the dry season. Vietnam had to maintain a presence of large amounts of troops to keep Cambodia under its control while stationing large numbers in defense of the Sino-Vietnamese border as well. And the Soviet Union also signaled its intent to disengage from external commitments and prepared to recall its military units from Cam Ranh Bay and Danang thus leaving Vietnam to fend for itself as it began to lose its superpower backing.

Vietnam had been trying to fix its domestic economy by using market reforms at home. However, without engagement with and participation in the international economic system, these reforms would not yield much. Without a commensurate foreign policy that allowed openness and economic interaction with other countries, Vietnam and its client Indochinese states would never be able to make further progress beyond the meager improvement so far.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

In fact, half-hearted efforts to reform economically at home brought much confusion and instability with bureaucratic deadlocks in a country inexperienced with the technicalities of management based on liberal economics. Domestic unrest, even though not acute, was threatening the party's control and Nguyen Van Linh himself had to scale back on the increase in freedom that he advocated in previous years as he watched other communist countries facing mounting dissent.

Political reforms under Gorbachev in Soviet Union had caused the opposite effects of what were intended. There were outbursts of pent up frustrations by the diverse peoples in Soviet Union while China faced the same sort of protests calling for more freedom and democracy at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Soon after the Berlin Wall fell, communism fell in one country after another in Eastern Europe. Finally, the Soviet Union was also no more. While China held together, conservative opponents attacked Deng's reforms. For Vietnam, reforms had not worked well enough and now there was danger that Vietnam might fall into the kind of crisis the other communist countries were facing. Help through former channels had been cut off and potential help through other channels was withheld. Hostile forces seemed to be coming from every different direction. The domestic situation was deteriorating. In the face of these events, there was no doubt that Vietnam was in a state of trepidation.

Soviet Union's intractable problems, Vietnam's domestic difficulties, China's relatively successful reform experience in the past decade and the economic rise of other Southeast Asian states made it glaringly difficult to ignore the fact that Vietnam was not

heading in the right direction. Since 1980 onwards, there had been a steady loss of public confidence as well as erosion of self-confidence amongst party cadres and members.

“Poverty steadily deepened, defying all remedial measures and slowly pushing Vietnam to the edge of malnutrition.”<sup>6</sup> There was a continuation of the mass exodus of Vietnamese in whatever ways the common people could find, not merely for political escape but for emancipation from the extremely poor living conditions.<sup>7</sup>

All along there had been corruption when certain cadres abused their powers to hoard the limited wealth using their power and privilege rather than allow the trickling down of resources in an egalitarian way based on socialist ideals. Obviously, many average Vietnamese were also not firm believers of socialism; many of them engaged in illegal underground economic dealings to mitigate their debilitating conditions. Many secretly engaged in private trade and business exchange. The disillusionment and frustration with the disastrous effects of socialism were obvious. If only such activities were approved officially and operationalized under some government oversight and properly enforced laws, there would have been major changes and improvements through the release of creative entrepreneurial energies.

So, it was not simply a task of curbing corruption but a restructuring of the economy was needed for ordinary people to have the chance to be self-sufficient. There was recognition that it was because there were larger errors in administrative methods

---

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Pike, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 21 (January 1981): 84.

<sup>7</sup> See conditions of the Vietnamese socioeconomic situation in Douglas Pike, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (January 1982): 72.

that the socioeconomic situation was replete with difficulties. Grain production had slumped and constantly in short supply, average per capita national income had dropped, budget revenues had failed to keep up with expenditures, business efficiency was low, properties had been subjected to huge wastage and losses and distribution and circulation of products were still chaotic.<sup>8</sup>

That was why Vietnam launched its doi moi reform initiative which was partly under the influence of Gorbachev's perestroika. At that time, the Soviet Union was undergoing tumultuous changes; being its protégé, Vietnam was at least moved to take some parallel step in that direction. But Vietnam had also been watching China very closely when Chinese reforms were already well underway since Deng Xiaoping initiated China's economic modernization and domestic reforms in 1978. Reforms in Vietnam were therefore motivated by realities and pressures at home as well as by the experimental economic model that the Chinese presented and Soviet Union's concurrent domestic reform formula.

But, as far as socialist countries were concerned, the Vietnamese were following the Chinese trail. The Chinese and Vietnamese regimes moved towards gaining and maintaining legitimacy by performing well, providing well and bringing about the rightful progress and development that the people longed for. Economic growth and progress were thus essential in order for these regimes to survive. Without armed struggles and fights for independence to strengthen the nationalist zeal and maintain the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, December 19, 1987, FBIS-EAS (December 19, 1987): 42.

logic for endurance and hardship, this was the route that the Vietnamese had to go now so that domestic problems would not spring up in various ways and threaten to erode their power and authority.

The Vietnamese regime certainly had the option of repressing dissent and the use of force. However, it was becoming increasingly risky and image-costly to go down that route in a fast changing world. Thus, it was the economic performance and general well-being of the masses that became the litmus test for the ruling regimes' mandate to rule. Vietnam certainly faced difficulties similar to China, difficulties associated with liberalizing of the economy including income inequalities between the northern and southern parts of Vietnam, inflation and the uncontrollable flow of the unemployed and restless moving from city to city in search of jobs. The basic task of feeding the population had itself been an enormous task. Food and grain shortages were frequent problems that were exacerbated by bad weather. Even by 1990, major grain shortages could occur where farmers would refuse to sell their crops because of fear of insufficiency.<sup>9</sup> But all of these constituted complex problems that required sophisticated solutions.

On the one hand, there had to be growth, on the other, there had to be stability but these things didn't necessarily go hand in hand. The need to bring about balanced, stable and sufficient economic progress was a challenge that Vietnam had to juggle with.

Discontent and social inequalities had to be addressed while economic progress was to be

---

<sup>9</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, October 31, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 1, 1990): 54.

fiercely pursued rather than curtailed. At the same time, the state had to deal with corruption aggressively; the Council of State under Chairman Vo Chi Cong proposed listening more closely to reports on efforts for curbing these negative practices.<sup>10</sup>

### **Intra-ASEAN Differences**

It is important to note the differences, internal dissension and political hiccups that occurred within ASEAN during the Cambodian crisis. ASEAN as a regional security and diplomatic apparatus was far from perfect as far as internal cohesion was concerned. Many a times, they faced disunity even though it never reached the potential of following its predecessor's lead, Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) towards collapse. However, the ASEAN countries had always had marked differences in their opinion of the Indochina situation not just because of the current Cambodian crisis but for previous Indochinese political issues.

Far away countries such as Indonesia had generally favored accommodation towards Vietnam and neutrality during the Vietnam War but Thailand, which stood as the frontline state facing Vietnamese forces close to its borders after the Khmer Rouge forces had been routed and forced to retreat to the Thai-Cambodian borders, felt most vulnerable in the current state of affairs and was most adamant about challenging Vietnam's belligerent position lest Vietnam's recalcitrance grew more threatening.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Thailand had also been a historical rival of Vietnam competing for Indochinese dominance until the French came into the Indochinese scene in the eighteenth century. With the French defeat in Dien Bien Phu, communist North Vietnam became a looming threat to Indochinese security and should the North Vietnamese succeed further, there was fear that Thailand would be the next domino to fall. Thus, along with the Philippines, Thailand had maintained a firm alignment with the US and unlike Indonesia, had contributed to the American effort by providing a token dispatch of troops first in the Korean War and subsequently in the Vietnam War.

Yet, sustaining the anti-Vietnamese resistance forces with Chinese material support was critical in the current opposition against Vietnam. One difficulty of the Cambodian crisis had been that the ousted Khmer Rouge was a glaring negative image in the course of defending Cambodia's sovereignty against Vietnamese occupation. Even though the Vietnamese-installed Heng Samrin regime did not gain international legitimacy, resistance forces with the Khmer Rouge being the primary fighting force constituted an equally unpalatable face and lessened the justness of the cause ASEAN tried to uphold.

This problem was fortunately somewhat resolved by having several resistance factions merged together under one banner including Prince Sihanouk, a highly popular figure amongst Cambodians and in the region. This took much effort on ASEAN's part to work things out as within the tripartite anti-Vietnamese resistance group, there were numerous internal conflicts. One major issue was Sihanouk's insistence that Cambodia



should no longer be called Kampuchea and there should no longer be Democratic Kampuchea (DK). But as China distanced itself from the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot's faction had to be more agreeable to such deliberations.<sup>11</sup>

However, both Thailand and Indonesia also had had a common trying relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Thailand had held the view that China posed a threat in the long run and that communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia were directed under the PRC's leadership. Only with the current state of affairs in which China's help was needed had Thailand's attitude improved towards China.<sup>12</sup> Indonesia's Suharto ousted the pro-PRC Sukarno and set up a government leadership strongly against the PRC ever since, noting the PRC's complicity in the relatively recent upheavals involving the conflict between the military and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) that was believed to be supported by the PRC and prodded by the PRC to incite a revolution, destabilize the region and establish another communist stronghold in the region. Due to the belief that China was involved in the PKI subversive activities, large numbers of ethnic "Chinese were massacred in Aceh and West Borneo."<sup>13</sup> Suharto's Indonesia believed that it was China<sup>14</sup>, rather than Vietnam that posed a strategic threat to Southeast Asia in the long run. So for Indonesia, there was a strategic significance in Vietnam's

---

<sup>11</sup> *The Nation* in English, December 22, 1987, FBIS-EAS (December 22, 1987): 27.

<sup>12</sup> Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*, 340.

<sup>14</sup> Both Indonesia and Malaysia had always been wary of Chinese ambitions and had begun to come to terms with the Vietnam-installed Cambodian government. See Steven Enlanger, "For Asia, The Strain is Showing," *NYT*, July 16, 1989.

joining into the Southeast Asian fold; Vietnam was seen as a strategic buffer against a stronger China.

The Philippines on the other hand had actually been generally less concerned about Vietnam or China. Because it is an archipelago state consisting of many islands, it has generally been well-insulated from any potential external military threat or internal communist insurgency at that time. It was also secure by virtue of its mutual security treaty with the US. Yet, domestic politics would lead to the departure of US troops based there in 1992 and coincidentally, China's increasing assertiveness towards overlapping claims in the South China Sea in the same year would alter Philippines's perception of its security situation in the 1990s and even induce heightened levels of arms acquisition.

Malaysia also had domestic communist insurgency to deal with and it had worked assiduously to suppress it with great success through the Five Power Defense Arrangements. Regular meetings were held between Malaysian and Thai authorities as well and they had been combining resources and coordinating efforts in giving free entry across their borders for hot pursuit operations to capture communist insurgents. To these countries, only a communist Vietnam that no longer exported revolutionary communism will be tolerated. But when Vietnam was in a revolutionary high and did support regional revolutionary activities, it felt that such explicit activities to root out communist activities were directed at it and had tacit support of a US bent on bringing down the Vietnamese communist regime although Vietnam had by the 1980s relinquished supporting revolutionary communist movements in the other parts of Southeast Asia. But even as

late as 1989, Malaysia and Thailand had not wavered in their anticommunist operations as they were committed purportedly to the single aim of “defeating the enemy of communist terrorists.”<sup>15</sup>

### **ASEAN Reaction to Doi Moi**

When doi moi was officially promulgated in 1986, Vietnamese reforms had some effect on ASEAN’s impression. It seemed as though Vietnam was ready to change positively regarding the Cambodian crisis as well as in relations with its neighbors. Singapore which had so far been most fiercely anti-Vietnam in the Cambodian crisis had particular predilection in seeing that the reforms entailed prospects of possible improvement in Vietnamese attitude in the Cambodian situation.

But as was mentioned before, the reforms at home did not immediately translate into reforms in foreign policy. Doi moi did not mean a change in foreign policy; it did not even mean openness in economic foreign policy. Vietnam remained isolated and tried to implement these reforms at home without opening up. Vietnam’s position on Cambodia also remained unchanged as it still had the assurance of Soviet backing in its Cambodian occupation when doi moi first started. To be sure, it had mentioned its plan to withdraw its troops from Cambodia later on but this did not translate to relinquishing its control over Cambodia. Far from it; Vietnam wanted to maintain the Heng Samrin regime so that it could continue to pull its strings from it but Vietnam’s inability to completely eliminate

---

<sup>15</sup> *Kuala Lumpur International Service*, January 18, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 18, 1989): 30.

the threat from the resistance factions forced it to keep high troop levels to protect its puppet regime.

That was why some other ASEAN members were more skeptical despite seemingly genuine Vietnamese domestic reforms and cautioned not to be lured into a possible Vietnamese trap. For example, “Thailand’s Foreign Minister Siddhisavetsila cautioned in June 1987 that Hanoi’s commitment to reform appeared dubious and did not signal an end to its attempt to impose military rule on Cambodia.”<sup>16</sup>

However, some things began to change not too long after doi moi was well under way in 1988. The doi moi initiatives were initially intended to reform the domestic economy and to inject private business initiatives into an ailing socialist economy. Even though there was some success, more resources and corrective measures were needed to sustain the reform momentum and offset the problematic effects that were expected in the efforts to rectify and transform a socialist economy that required capital infusion and technological and managerial expertise which Vietnam totally lacked. As the reforms progressed, it became clearer and clearer that there was therefore an equal need for an injection of foreign capital and know-how to overcome the economic inertia that came from a lack of organizational, infrastructural, capital and technical wherewithal. The barriers were formidable indeed.

---

<sup>16</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 104.

According to Le Dang Doanh, then senior economist at the Ministry of Planning and Investment, there was a pressing need to reform public finance, establish a capital market, including a stock market and different methods had to be applied to attract capital for modernizing equipment.<sup>17</sup> An influx of technical expertise and capital accumulation was crucial. There was a need for new competent leadership figures at home and new friendship with well-developed countries abroad. Vietnam could no longer sustain the costly and debilitating reality of being in an unfriendly international environment.

The possibility of commercial ties suggested another dimension to ASEAN's divergence of interests.<sup>18</sup> While the members had mostly resoundingly emphasized the need to adhere to the association's goal of forcing Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, they had recently come to recognize the lucrative potential of working with Vietnam and establish trade and business ties with it. What Vietnam needed was what ASEAN countries could offer to their mutual economic benefit.

Many events in the late 1980s also portended a new international climate that changed regional interests and priorities towards economic cooperation. Even though ASEAN states maintained that there would be no deal until and unless Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia, many of them were already individually looking at possible areas of trade with Vietnam. Domestic circumstances also contributed to the change in ASEAN

---

<sup>17</sup> Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*, 236.

<sup>18</sup> Enlanger, For Asia, "The Strain is Showing," NYT.

members' outlook.<sup>19</sup> For example, Thailand just went through a sweeping change in government at that time and Chatichai Choonhavan, Thailand's new prime minister declared that "Thai policy would now aim at turning the Indochinese battlefields to marketplaces."<sup>20</sup> This caused some tension within ASEAN because there seemed to have been a break in the spirit of consensus and unity as each individual pursued its own agenda and interests rather than the association's interests. "Thailand was among one of the first countries to renew dialog with Vietnam amid harsh criticism by ASEAN because of the unresolved Cambodian crisis."<sup>21</sup> Some of these ASEAN countries making bilateral diplomatic strides with Vietnam were therefore accused of double dealing by other ASEAN members.<sup>22</sup>

### **Renewed United ASEAN Efforts**

Vietnam initially tested political openings in regional Southeast Asian relations by presenting its own economic attractiveness to individual ASEAN states and enticing and dividing them so as to be able to deal with them bilaterally. The argument that there were Vietnamese intentions to win concessions from ASEAN countries by such attempts is plausible. Vietnam did attempt to extract more through bilateral exchanges. For example, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach had a cordial conversation with Thai

---

<sup>19</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*.

<sup>20</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> *The Nation* in English November 2, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 2, 1990): 50.

<sup>22</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 104.

Foreign Minister Sitthi in 1989 to achieve breakthroughs on the Cambodian issue.<sup>23</sup> Then in 1990, he urged his new “Thai counterpart Subin Pinkhayan to see that the two nations take steps to promote economic ties and not let the friendship between the two countries be held hostage by the conflict in Cambodia.”<sup>24</sup>

Even Indonesia had done some sort of closed door deals with Vietnam unilaterally in an attempt to achieve a breakthrough in the Cambodian crisis. And Vietnam had reciprocated well to such bilateral diplomacy. But such uncoordinated interaction gave the impression of a less united ASEAN as a diplomatic force and hardened Vietnam’s stand at times, seeing a way to negotiate for better terms on the Cambodian issue in particular. And Vietnam had on the overall been very adamant about its position on Cambodia for a long time; that was why for more than a decade, no real resolution on the crisis could be achieved.

Nonetheless, Vietnam was at least somewhat persuaded at first whether from bilateral or multilateral talks about changing its stance on the Cambodian issue because of its dire economic problems at home; so, even the unilateral actions of individual Southeast Asian countries set the stage for more ASEAN-Vietnam interaction. And ASEAN recognized that its diplomatic efforts would have gone down the drain if it allowed mere self-interests to trump the more important outstanding security issue at hand. Fortunately, the “regional resilience” that Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas

---

<sup>23</sup> “Outcome of Sitthi, Nguyen Co Thach Talks Analyzed,” *Bangkok Post* in English, January 12, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 12, 1989): 50.

<sup>24</sup> *The Nation* in English, November 2, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 2, 1990): 50- 51.

had pointed to, referring to ASEAN's unity as a grouping did come through to keep ASEAN solidarity and institutional purpose intact. The Thai government later declared that Prime Minister Chatichai would not visit Vietnam until it pulled all its troops out of Cambodia.<sup>25</sup>

In short, there had been a mobilization for ASEAN to collectively force Vietnam to relent on the Cambodian situation. ASEAN as an organizational entity now persuaded Vietnam to open up and to encourage peaceful development rather than a return to an unproductive behavior of belligerence and the actions henceforth were more in the spirit of "greater Southeast Asian interests rather than for individual country's benefits." This was a learning experience for ASEAN and pointedly pushed the evolution of ASEAN's norms further. When ASEAN took a more concerted action in seeking a grander goal of bridging over the past obstacles and integrating Vietnam and to a lesser extent, the other Indochinese countries into the Southeast Asian orbit, the outcome was more significant as we shall come to see.

The increasingly acute domestic and external problems that Vietnam had been facing combined with ASEAN's return to a more common position with intramural solidarity ultimately gave Vietnam few avenues to maneuver for a more advantageous position. China also put pressure on Vietnam as Chinese Defense Minister Qin Jinwei said to the leader of the Thai military delegation on a visit to China. General Chawalit that China would reject Vietnam's proposal for normalization of Sino-Vietnamese

---

<sup>25</sup> Hong Kong *AFP* in English January 18, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 18, 1989): 46.



relations until Vietnam withdrew all of its troops from Cambodia.<sup>26</sup> He also added that if there were Vietnamese attempts at delaying tactics for troops withdrawal, improved Sino-Soviet ties would be used to isolate Vietnam further.

But Mr. Alatas said that “the recent flurry of diplomatic activity on the Cambodian conflict, including Mr. Sithi’s visit to Hanoi and the current visit by a Vietnamese foreign minister to Beijing” was welcome.<sup>27</sup> It showed that there was an undercurrent of progress despite seeming uncertainties, underlying tension and ambivalence in the ensuing dialog between the different interested parties. Many bilateral and multilateral meetings amongst interested parties were held to discuss ways to resolve the Cambodian issue including a first informal meeting that was held in “Bogor in July, bringing together for the first time the four warring Cambodian factions along with Vietnam, Laos and representatives from ASEAN which supports the resistance.”<sup>28</sup> An ASEAN diplomat said “Without a political settlement in Cambodia, the US, ASEAN and China will not forge closer ties with Vietnam.” It was clear to Vietnam that a Cambodian pullout was a precondition that would not be compromised by the other interested parties. Thus, in the late 1980s, Vietnam’s recalcitrance began to lose steam.

In contrast to the past bellicosity, Vietnam agreed to withdraw its troops from Cambodia unconditionally,<sup>29</sup> reduced its armed forces significantly<sup>29</sup>, relinquished its

---

<sup>26</sup> *Zhong Hua Ri Bao* in Chinese November 27, 1988, FBIS-EAS, (November 30, 1988): 61.

<sup>27</sup> “Alatas Hopeful on Progress in Cambodian Talks,” Hong Kong *AFP* in English, 17 Jan 89, FBIS-EAS (January 18, 1989): 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Tokyo *Kyodo* in English, November 1, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1990): 55.

behind the scene control of the Heng Samrin regime and allowed UN-sponsored elections to be held in Cambodia to let the Cambodian people determine their own government. Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Praphat Limphaphan concluded a two day visit in April 1989 to Vietnam and said his Vietnamese counterpart remarked that after the last Vietnamese troops leave Cambodia in September 1989, Hanoi would no longer involve itself in the Cambodian issue even if foreign countries continued to supply arms to resistance Khmer guerillas.<sup>30</sup> It “accelerated the process of seeking a solution to Cambodia”<sup>31</sup> and all these events particularly removed a great barrier between ASEAN and Vietnam and led to vast improvement in their relations that had long been withheld.

But this change of stance also came about because of some accommodation toward Vietnam’s interests. The difficulty for Vietnam was that it was not just a troop pullout that was required of it. Vietnam also had to agree to a political settlement of the Cambodian situation and accede to the proposal for UN-sponsored elections. That means Vietnam might no longer secure the existence of this puppet regime. However, if there was no insistence of restoring to power of the egregious Pol Pot regime which constituted such a grave security threat to western Vietnamese borders, political settlement would become much more acceptable to Vietnam.

That was why it was another positive development when China distanced itself from the Khmer Rouge and no longer advocated its restoration to power as part of the

---

<sup>30</sup> *The Nation* in English, April 26, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (April 26, 1989): 69.

<sup>31</sup> “Events Surrounding Cambodian Conflict Reviewed,” *Voice of Vietnam* in English, October 23, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 30, 1991): 59.

settlement of the Cambodian crisis. Rather, there had finally been an agreement among all sides including the anti-Vietnamese coalition that the Cambodian people would be free to choose their government through elections under UN auspices. The Supreme National Council (SNC) was set up in Jakarta in September 1990 as a UN brokered peace plan. It consisted of equal representation from each of the three resistance factions.<sup>32</sup>

Doing so took care of a dimension of the problem, namely, Vietnamese interest in preventing a hostile anti-Vietnam Khmer Rouge from returning to power and threatening Vietnamese western borders. There was at least now a high possibility that the Khmer Rouge, being such an infamous and downright repulsive organization would not be elected back into power. The crux of the Vietnamese motivation in its continued occupation and political control of Cambodia could thus be removed as well. And the peace process could move forward with a peace agreement based on a framework drawn up by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.<sup>33</sup>

### **Normalization with China as well as Challenges in Relations**

The Cambodian pullout also helped to improve Sino-Vietnamese relations. That was why it was acknowledged in a Vietnamese commentary that “in recent period, the settlement of the Cambodian issue by peaceful means had been identified as correct and effective.”<sup>34</sup> A “major obstacle was removed when four rival Cambodian parties signed

---

<sup>32</sup> *Jakarta Domestic Service* in Indonesian, November 1, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1990): 41.

<sup>33</sup> Hong Kong *AFP* in English, November 1, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 2, 1990): 40.

<sup>34</sup> *Hanoi International Service*, October, 31, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 1, 1990): 53.

an agreement to end the Cambodian war.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, the deadlocked Sino-Vietnamese relations had already showed subtle signs of improving since the mid-1980s. At that time, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev opted for improved relations with China and the US. “The latest round of Sino-Soviet talks which ended in December 1988 was thought to have directly influenced the Chinese decision”<sup>36</sup> for talks with the Vietnamese. Within the Vietnamese elite, there were also reassessments about relations with China. Certain factions were beginning to be more conciliatory to China while other factions opted for the improvement of relations with the West and continuation to identify China as the primary threat.

Nguyen Co Thach for example was one of the more anti-China advocates and that was why China refused to receive a delegation that included him later on. Nguyen Co Thach was known for his abrasiveness and bitter criticism of Beijing because of the 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately for him, even though he worked hard for friendly relations with the US, he did not achieve enough of a breakthrough yet again. That was why his political position became precarious when his suggestion for a Cambodian pullout did not deliver or did not deliver quickly enough the outcomes that he promised, which were concessions from the West and normalization with the US.<sup>38</sup> Thach, who had been the country’s foreign minister since 1980, had “come under attack from top party leaders for failure to bring about better relations with the Western

---

<sup>35</sup> Sheryl Wudunn, “Hanoi Officials Arrive in Beijing,” *NYT*, Nov 6, 1991.

<sup>36</sup> *The Nation* in English, January 17, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 18, 1989): 49.

<sup>37</sup> Krauss, “US is encouraged by Hanoi Cabinet,” *NYT*.

<sup>38</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 109.

countries or the lifting of the US embargo.”<sup>39</sup> According to an ASEAN diplomat, “Although Thach was very adroit as a diplomat, he could not deliver results for the party.”<sup>40</sup>

The dropping of Nguyen Co Thach in the Seventh Party Congress had many other reasons as well. To senior Vietnamese officials, he was seen to have been “ineffectual in securing military aid from Moscow.” But most of all, it was apparently meant to be a gesture to Beijing. As was just mentioned, Beijing would not receive a delegation from Vietnam that included him; talks had been ongoing for preparation of the normalization between China and Vietnam. So, Vietnam’s cabinet reshuffling also had to be done in adjustment to reflect its new foreign policy stance. According to Douglas Pike, “a common theory in Hanoi is that the departure of Nguyen Co Thach is a sop to the Chinese.”<sup>41</sup> Even US officials expressed hope that “the cabinet changes would reduce tension between China and Vietnam.”<sup>42</sup> So, in a way this arrangement was done partly in deference to China in the hope of quick normalization of relations.

So, China and Vietnam moved towards a climate of détente in which both sides refrained from making disparaging statements about each other. Some promising signs of a thaw in relations were indicated as more bilateral exchange took place and mutual congratulatory exchanges also occurred. The two countries realized that they had

---

<sup>39</sup> “Ex-Envoy Possible Foreign Minister,” *The Nation* in English, June 21, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (June 21, 1991): 39.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Krauss, “US is encouraged by Hanoi Cabinet,” *NYT*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

common interests, common problems and the common need for peaceful relations particularly with the “disintegration of communism elsewhere that drew the two countries” together “with unusual swiftness.”<sup>43</sup> China was in need of overcoming its recent negative international image from the Tiananmen incident while Vietnam had been trying to transcend its longtime international pariah status.

Both countries understood the necessity of sustainable economic growth, foreign investments and regional stability. The success and preservation of their so-called socialist market economy and economic reforms were important to both of them. It was therefore mostly a necessity to keep disputes at bay and preventing them from turning into armed confrontation. A regional conflict would frighten away foreign investors, slow down economic growth and endanger the pursuit of economic reforms and the internal stability of each country. Border trade between them was also mutually beneficial. A large number of Chinese companies invested in Vietnam. The Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi largely benefited from these new trade activities that “resumed after nine years of suspension and that are increasing” according to the *China Daily*<sup>44</sup>. The proximity of the Vietnamese port of Haiphong allowed Chinese companies to dispose of their goods more readily than by going through Guangzhou.<sup>45</sup> “Thanks to this cross border trade,”<sup>46</sup> in the northern fringes of Vietnam, such as Hai Ninh district, income had

---

<sup>43</sup> Wudunn, “Hanoi Officials Arrive in Beijing,” *NYT*.

<sup>44</sup> “China Trade in Vietnam,” *NYT*, March 27, 1989.

<sup>45</sup> Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*.

<sup>46</sup> “Report on Cross-Border Trade in Quang Ninh,” *Hanoi Voice of Vietnam Network* in Vietnamese, September 30, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 2, 1991): 65.

“increased annually, thereby contributing significantly to developing the national economy.”<sup>47</sup>

Improved relations also led Vietnam to more explicitly follow the Chinese model of domestic and foreign relations development. Vietnam had increased the level of political freedom at home in a way that was similar to Soviet Union’s glasnost or openness. But the events of 1989 cut it short as Vietnam reined in on those reforms and abruptly, albeit temporarily stifled the newfound political freedoms of the masses, in response to the trend of communist collapse. Ultimately, the momentum toward greater societal freedom had been generated and when the tumultuous geopolitical situation stabilized and a new international outlook that was unthreatening or even favorable to Vietnam came to the fore, the trend of gradual easing of political freedoms manifested again.

Despite the Tiananmen backlash that China faced, Vietnam continued to focus on economic freedom and reforms albeit without rapidly loosening the political grip on people’s freedom, being even more acutely aware of the possible dangers entailed. The reform strategy of liberalizing the domestic economy while maintaining a strict authoritarian government was aimed at maintaining the regime’s political legitimacy, preserving regime power and securing its mandate by minimizing social discontent through better performance. Focus on robust economic growth to augment the general well-being and living conditions of the masses was considered the best alternative to

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

maintain social stability and preserve power while progressing in the task of national development at the time. Yet Vietnam had not conceived of a clear strategy of breaking out of its diplomatic isolation.

### **Attempts to Improve Sino-Vietnamese Relations**

In January 1989, Vietnamese First Deputy Foreign Minister Dinh Nho Liem arrived in Beijing for private talks with his Chinese counterpart Liu Shuqing on the Cambodian question which could be called another breakthrough<sup>48</sup> in Sino-Vietnamese relations, as more contacts led to increasingly friendly disposition in their interaction. On January 14, Minister Dinh led a delegation to have talks with Chinese counterparts on issues of mutual concern.<sup>49</sup> On September 19, 1990, Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, one of the very few prominent figures left of the old guard attended the Asian Games in Beijing to express the traditional friendship of the two countries. China in response dropped the normal criticisms of Vietnam. Gu Mu, the Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Politics Consultative Conference told Vo Nguyen Giap, "We in China would like to see Sino-Vietnamese relations improve gradually until normalization is realized."<sup>50</sup>

Because the issue of ethnic Chinese residing in Vietnam was a major bone of contention in the past in Sino-Vietnamese relations, on 12 and 13 of January in Hanoi,

---

<sup>48</sup> *The Nation* in English, January 17, 1989, FBIS-EAS (January 18, 1989): 49.

<sup>49</sup> "Dinh Nho Liem Leads Delegation to PRC," Hanoi *VNA* in English January 17, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 18, 1989): 52.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "Vietnam Pays a High Level Visit to China," *NYT*, September 20, 1990.



the Party Central Committee Proselytizing and Front Department held a seminar on the Hoa (Vietnamese of Chinese descent) people and on the policies of the party and state toward them.<sup>51</sup> The head of the work subcommittee presented a thesis in which the contributions of the Hoa people were analyzed and modified policies toward the Hoa people were suggested in an effort to better assimilate them and to correct the treatment of the Hoa people from past problems. Thus, the Vietnamese authorities essentially pledged to once and for all treat the Hoa people with equal status as Vietnamese citizens and as a fully integrated minority group just as the many other minority groups that existed in Vietnam. This move was meant to appease China but at the same time reaffirm the identity of the Hoa as Vietnamese citizens.

Several high-level visits to China by Vietnamese officials transpired over the course of a short couple of years. On September 12, 1991, Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam also visited China where “a joint statement was issued saying Vietnamese leaders would visit that year and the visit would lead to full normalization”<sup>52</sup> of relations. It seems that Vietnam was again being deferent to China as there was no talk at all about sensitive issues such as the Spratly Islands<sup>53</sup> dispute which was purposely omitted. In Vietnam, workers, staff and members of “8 March” textile mill held a meeting to celebrate the 42<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), attended by

---

<sup>51</sup> “Seminar on Ethnic Chinese Held in Hanoi,” *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, January 18, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 18, 89): 52.

<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “Hanoi Leaders to Visit China as Ties Revive,” *NYT*, September 13, 1991.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

several prominent Vietnamese officials.<sup>54</sup> Zhang Dawei, Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam said that the peoples of the two countries “have a long relationship of close friendship.”<sup>55</sup>

Such “symbolic gestures” of goodwill culminated in a summit meeting of top leaders of both countries namely Secretary Jiang Zemin, Premier Li Peng, Secretary Do Muoi and Premier Vo Van Kiet between November 5 and 7 of 1991 in Beijing where several agreements were signed.<sup>56</sup> In this month, the two countries officially marked the normalization of their relations. Mr. Jiang and Do Muoi even walked happily side by side.<sup>57</sup> Jiang was quoted as saying, “This is a meeting that concludes the past and opens up the future”<sup>58</sup> by the official New China News Agency. Since then, there continued to be numerous high level visits between the two countries as well. For example, in 1992, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng went to Hanoi. Then, in November 1993, Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh also visited China.<sup>59</sup>

However, when China and Vietnam normalized relations, their new friendly relationship did not amount to an alliance in the likes of the 1950s and 1960s. In fact more disputes and outstanding underlying problems were brewing even after this official normalization. It was mainly because of a common need to secure a peaceful environment in which to focus on national development, since both countries were facing

---

<sup>54</sup> “PRC Ambassador on ‘Rapid’ Improvement of Ties,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in Mandarin, October 1, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 2, 1991): 65.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas Pike, “Vietnam in 1991: The Turning Point,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (January 1992): 81.

<sup>57</sup> Sheryl Wudunn, “Hanoi Officials Arrive in Beijing,” *NYT*, November 6, 1991.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Thayer and Amer., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 108.

a changing new world order where a large swath of the communist world had collapsed or on the verge of collapsing.

Irritations in Sino-Vietnamese relations occurred despite restraint attempts. At the back of their mind, the Vietnamese remembered that in March 1988, while Vietnam was in the process of seeking better relations and was quite vulnerable in its position, a serious naval clash occurred between the Chinese and Vietnamese navies in which two Vietnamese warships were sunk, and which itself was a serious reminder of the 1974 Chinese occupation of the Paracels. The traditional love-hate relationship between the two countries therefore persisted.

Then, in 1992, an action the Chinese took reinforced Vietnamese historical fears of China. China declared a new law on its territorial waters asserting that the Paracel and Spratly Islands were all parts of China's territory. China even unilaterally signed an agreement with Crestone Energy, a US company to explore the Spratly's. These events, together with past disputes and conflicts certainly had an effect on Vietnamese thinking about future Sino-Vietnamese relations. Vietnamese distrust of China's motives are often palpable even today; there is a common vernacular amongst Vietnamese civilians about Chinese ulterior motives as well which indicates deeply entrenched Vietnamese suspicion of China<sup>60</sup> even among ordinary Vietnamese.

---

<sup>60</sup> This is based on informal conversations with a number of Vietnamese residing in the US. Some Vietnamese have said China wants to retake control of Vietnam or that war between the two countries was inevitable.

Thus even though Vietnam was at a time when it was ready to make new concessions in exchange for better relations with the international community, Vietnamese strategic calculations certainly included the potential threat from China, its traditional northern rival, and Vietnam was nonetheless wary of Chinese assertiveness in the Indochinese region. It became a significant reason for Vietnam to move closer to ASEAN which was the most relevant regional grouping at that time. And ASEAN also had a strategic reason to integrate Vietnam and other Indochinese countries into the regional institution. In fact, “certain ASEAN countries want to use Vietnam to balance China in Southeast Asia.”<sup>61</sup> Countries such as the Philippines also had a stake in the issue and there were already acknowledgements in 1988 that the territorial dispute was no longer just one involving China and Vietnam but also other ASEAN countries.<sup>62</sup>

### **Climate of Improved ASEAN-Vietnam Relations**

Even though ASEAN could not provide any sort of military balancing role, joining ASEAN was a way to be a part of a group, to gain a new identity, to make new friends and to create a new image. ASEAN did possess significant diplomatic clout and some level of international prestige. At this time, Vietnam was still in the early stages in the process of moving towards normalized relations with the US, and ASEAN was actually also an avenue through which to achieve that end.

---

<sup>61</sup> “Aspects of SRV’s Joining ASEAN Examined,” Bangkok *The Nation* in English, January 30, 1992, (February 5, 1992): 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Kuala Lumpur International Service* in English, April 22, 1988, FBIS-EAS (April 26, 1988): 35.

During the Cambodian crisis however, US interest in the Southeast Asian region was less than enthusiastic. Only the sustained US-led Western economic embargo on Vietnam was exerted which proved to be effective enough in forcing Vietnam to relent. But Vietnam's interest in securing friendly relations with the US had grown, partly due to the acknowledgement that the US would be a strategic stabilizer that would be favorable for Vietnam's own security vis-à-vis China but mostly due to the overwhelmingly important economic resources the West had to offer.

Apart from pulling out of Cambodia, Vietnam made renewed efforts to provide full accounting of Vietnam War POWs and MIAs and cooperated actively with US personnel. On March 2, 1988, "Vietnam had returned 28 American MIA remains to the US side since the last visit to Hanoi in August 1987 of General John Vessey, special envoy of the US president." Apparently, according to Vietnamese sources, "at a handover ceremony, a representative of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center highly appreciated Vietnam's humane policy and goodwill of the Vietnamese government."<sup>63</sup> By January 1989, four series of joint searches between American and Vietnamese teams had been conducted over three or four months "in four provinces in the Hanoi region namely Bac Thai, Vinh Phu, Ha Son Binh and Son La and in the central Vietnamese province of Binh Tri Thien."<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> *Vietnamese International Service* in English, March 2, 1988, FBIS-EAS (March 2, 1988): 33.

<sup>64</sup> Hong Kong *AFP* in English January 18, 1989, FBIS-EAS (January 18, 1989): 51.

Yet, even though improvement of Vietnamese-US relations did happen at some level, it still fell far short of normal relations because of the lingering sensitivities toward the Vietnam War. Apparently, even today, thousands of people still flock to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC each year for great emotional outpouring.<sup>65</sup> As Do Muoi himself said of what American senators told him, “the issue of normalization with Vietnam is a sour question for Americans.” But Vietnam’s opening up and quest to join the international community could not be considered complete until sound relations with the West especially the US were genuinely established. Thus, in Vietnamese calculations, ASEAN might have had significant utility in the quest for such a foreign policy prize because of its close relations with the US.

Yet Vietnam had some bright prospects. New pressures were building in the US to normalize relations with Vietnam. Humanitarian groups, certain veterans and even religious organizations were calling for the US government to lift the embargo on Vietnam and establish normal relations with Vietnam. As early as 1990, one particular religious organization, CALG petitioned the US Congress to lift the embargo on trade with Vietnam as a first step of normalization of relations citing that Vietnamese troops had been withdrawn from Cambodia and Vietnam had been cooperative with the MIA issue.<sup>66</sup>

### **Vietnam’s Rationale**

---

<sup>65</sup> A comment made by Donald D. A. Schaefer, chair of a panel at the 2010 MPSA Conference in Chicago.

<sup>66</sup> *Vietnam News Agency*, May 29, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (June 1, 1990): 55.

Escape from international isolation and embargo and gaining peaceful relations with neighbors and far-off countries were critical for there to be far reaching progress. ASEAN therefore became more and more attractive economically as well as diplomatically as Vietnam had an avenue from which to project a friendly image as a new Vietnam to which foreign companies, multinational corporations and foreign countries would flock to. ASEAN's ideological difference with Vietnam no longer constituted such a major source of friction as Vietnam itself was no longer anti-West.

In fact, Vietnam found many similarities with the Southeast Asian neighbors not just in terms of economic interests and national development but even political governance. Many ASEAN countries also believed in stable, authoritarian governments to allow progress in economic development while relations among states should be respectful of sovereignty and based on restraint from interfering with another state's internal affairs. Vietnam undoubtedly found a sense of commonality with ASEAN countries in these respects as it was still concerned about conspiracies to topple the Vietnamese regime through peaceful evolution<sup>67</sup>.

Vietnam's situation associated with reform initiatives was similar to that of China in the early post-Mao period. Vietnam certainly had made inroads by studying China's progress closely. However, Vietnam was still unable to avoid or effectively manage the same expected problems of inflation, inequality and corruption that China had faced.

---

<sup>67</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung, *Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN*, Contemporary Southeast Asia, Vol. 29, No. 3: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2007).

There was more to learn for Vietnam and it had to look elsewhere for inspiration. Meanwhile, ASEAN countries had many similarities with Vietnam and were ideal cases that provided fresh learning material for Vietnam to benefit from. Of course none of the original ASEAN countries needed to do away with a faltering command economy and inject and jumpstart the economy with private industry for the first time. But the course of development these Southeast Asian neighbors took is relevant to Vietnam especially in matters of size, geography and resources. Vietnam particularly found former Singapore prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew to be of particular high caliber in advising Vietnam on how to transform Vietnam the way Singapore had been transformed itself from a small, vulnerable backward city state into an economic powerhouse.

Besides, the question for Vietnam had always been and still is: how could it deal with its mammoth neighbor, China? If Vietnam wanted economic development, a tense relationship with China would not be helpful. Then, at the same time, were normal relations only with China sufficient? The answer would certainly be no because their relations were not returning to that of the alliance heyday. There had to be more diverse relations with other countries in the world. The dilemma for Vietnam was how it could clarify its new foreign policy doctrine and how to go about achieving it. ASEAN's performance in the Cambodian crisis so far had an unintended effect on Vietnamese psyche and convinced Vietnam that ASEAN had substance as a regional organization and could help act as a bridge towards better relations and a platform from which to project a



new friendly image. China, with the recent Tiananmen incident was not in the position to help Vietnam build this new image and identity.

Then in fact, Vietnam had to find a way to keep relations with China in check by having other actors involved; the US being the case in point. But to be sure, Vietnam still preferred multilateral security arrangements to unipolar order. Even though it did seem to favor US role as a regional stabilizer, it had not welcomed an overly conspicuous US presence. Vietnam generally preferred to free ride on multilateral security architecture than be sandwiched by great power play. It is important to note that Vietnam had previously been extremely reliant on its relations with the Soviet Union in which Vietnam occupied a subordinate position. For example, Vietnam's trade with the Soviet Union constituted seventy-five percent of its total foreign trade in the late 1980s.<sup>68</sup> But difficulties in the Soviet Union then compelled it to trade with Vietnam based on world prices and in hard currency. This was a severe disadvantage to Vietnam and added further hardship to the Vietnamese situation. It was one of the many hard lessons Vietnam had learned that it did not wish to repeat.

With its superpower ally gone, who could Vietnam lean to, even if not in an alliance sense? ASEAN was therefore a good avenue for finding comfort in a number of different ways, not just for material gains or economic benefits. Keeping the balance of forces present without being drawn into any great power struggles would be Vietnam's best bet while it pursued a strategy of *détente* to secure the conditions conducive for its

---

<sup>68</sup> Hong Kong *AFP*, October 31, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 1, 1990): 52.

own development. At the same time, it was helpful to hedge against future unknowns much like the way ASEAN had been behaving. The dynamics between China and US and even Japan were still shifting in a way to which ASEAN had been adjusting itself for maximum regional security and stability.

In a way, that was why the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established. It was meant to engage the great powers in a multilateral setting without antagonizing or ostracizing any important actor that exerted great influence there and at the same time allow their interaction to promote cordial and workable relations. That was why ASEAN was seen as “far more than a paper organization. Informal ASEAN seminars have encouraged cooperative development of disputed areas in the Spratlys and promoted exchange of military information, along with joint training exercises to build up confidence and damp down paranoia.”<sup>69</sup>

In many ways, ASEAN’s strategy to force Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia had succeeded. While ASEAN did not achieve it on its own, its sustained united front despite some level of sporadic division had garnered the desired international support and UN involvement. But ASEAN also sensed that future Southeast Asian security should begin with regional integration rather than division which would render its rather weak bargaining position vis-à-vis, China, the US and all other major world players, even weaker.

---

<sup>69</sup> David C. Unger, Editorial Notebook; “Get Ready for the ARF,” *NYT*, April 4, 1994.

Even Do Muoi, General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party said, “Southeast Asia will play a very important role in the 1990s which would be a great interest to extra-regional powers” and “the important thing is that countries in this region should work together in order to jointly develop this region.”<sup>70</sup> So, there were tangible benefits for Vietnam to join ASEAN by “integrating Vietnam’s security with the security of the whole of Southeast Asia, thus creating an external environment favorable for economic development”<sup>71</sup> but it was in ASEAN’s interest as a step towards consolidating the unity of Southeast Asia as a region. Since the late 1980s, there had been a strong but not yet unanimous ASEAN position to take Vietnam in as an ASEAN member yet. But the momentum was building up from the resounding desire for Southeast Asian regional reconciliation.

Small gestures of goodwill and Track 2 diplomacy were already actively played out by ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries since the late 1980s. The Malaysian King, Sultan Iskandar al-Haj stated that “Malaysia and Vietnam were close neighbors having warm relationship which was based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity,” during his meeting with and when he presented credentials to Vietnamese Ambassador to Malaysia, Cao Duc Hung on January 16, 1989.<sup>72</sup> There was also an amendment agreed upon by all member ASEAN countries in the ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation so that it

---

<sup>70</sup> *Jakarta Post* in English, October 22, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 2, 1990): 55.

<sup>71</sup> Carlyle Thayer, “Vietnam and ASEAN,” Conference on Vietnam: Prospects for Economic and Social Progress (2001).

<sup>72</sup> Hanoi *VNA* in English, January 17, 1989, FBIS-EAS, (January 18, 1989): 53.

would be open for signing by any Southeast Asian country in preparation for possible expansion of ASEAN.<sup>73</sup> “ASEAN member countries have advocated for Vietnam and other Indochinese countries’ participation in the organization since progress has been made in the settlement of the Cambodian issue.”<sup>74</sup>

A spokesman for the Vietnamese foreign ministry announced in early November, 1990 that Indonesian President Suharto would pay an official visit to Vietnam later that month. “Speaking at a press conference, the spokesman announced that this is the first Vietnam visit of an Indonesian president in the past 30 years and also the first Vietnam visit of a state leader in Southeast Asia since 1975.”<sup>75</sup> In 1990, Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Amnuai Yotsuk said in Bangkok that “Thailand had agreed to start economic ties with Vietnam with the setting up of a joint Vietnamese-Thai commission.”<sup>76</sup> During his visit to Vietnam in September 1991, Thai Foreign Minister Asa Sarasin said, “Vietnam’s participation in ASEAN will be welcomed and supported by the organization’s member countries. This only depends on a suitable time.”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> “Protocol Amending the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia,” Philippines, 15 December 1987, <http://www.aseansec.org/1218.htm> (accessed November 2009).

<sup>74</sup> “Relations with ASEAN Member Countries Viewed,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English, October 7, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 15, 1991): 72.

<sup>75</sup> “Spokesman Confirms Suharto Visit in November,” *Hanoi International Service* in English, November 2, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 5, 1990): 71.

<sup>76</sup> “Thailand Ready to Strengthen Economic Ties,” *VNA* in English, November 4, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (November 5, 1990): 69.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet visited a number of different ASEAN countries including Thailand and then Singapore<sup>78</sup> as well as Indonesia between 1991 and 1992. Many mid-level Vietnamese ministers traveled to other Southeast Asian countries to discuss trade and diplomatic relations. For example, the Vietnamese Minister of Trade and Tourism went to Singapore on an official visit and called on Deputy Premier Lee Hsien Long.<sup>79</sup> Vietnam made clear gestures in these visits to indicate its intent to transform relations with its close neighbors and also explored the possibility of Vietnam joining ASEAN.

Many ASEAN officials also visited Vietnam in a flurry of diplomatic activities in reciprocation to Vietnamese initiatives. In 1991, a Malaysian Senate delegation arrived in Hanoi<sup>80</sup> for a visit. In early 1992 alone, Hanoi was visited by Thailand's Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad and Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. These were all political heavyweights in the region and their visits one after another served to consolidate improved relations with Vietnam and gave Vietnam fresh feelings of goodwill at a time of diplomatic high.

There was even a communiqué declared in Singapore at the 1992 ASEAN summit envisaging that "ASEAN shall forge a closer relationship based on friendship and

---

<sup>78</sup> "Premier Vo Van Kiet Continues on ASEAN Tour, Meets Thai Businessmen," Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam Network*, October 29, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 30, 1991): 58.

<sup>79</sup> *Singapore Broadcasting Corporation* in English, October 3, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 4, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> "Malaysian Senate Delegation Arrives for a Visit," Hanoi *VNA* in English, November 16, 1991, FBIS-EAS (November 18, 1991): 54.

cooperation with the Indochinese countries, following the settlement on Cambodia.”<sup>81</sup>

Many Vietnamese officials have stated Vietnamese intent to join ASEAN sooner rather than later. For example, Vice Foreign Minister Vu Khoan in an interview said Vietnam “is ready to join ASEAN as soon as possible.”<sup>82</sup> He said “it is better to learn and catch up with ASEAN as a member rather than be an outsider looking in.”<sup>83</sup>

And by 1994, there had already been an approval among all ASEAN states that Vietnam could join the association in the following year. In Bangkok, “the six members of ASEAN agreed on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1994 to take a more forceful role on security and economic cooperation and said they were ready to accept Vietnam as a member.”<sup>84</sup> There had not been such an international climate in which it was clear that a time for genuinely better relations was being called for. ASEAN and Vietnam both sensed that and ASEAN continued its forward charm offensive on Vietnam who took the world changes as well as ASEAN’s overtures receptively. Even though Vietnam’s motivation was grounded on material reasons, the genuine goodwill, honest exchange and mutual consultations generated were unprecedented.

ASEAN’s overtures presented an offer that Vietnam found hard to refuse at a time when Vietnam found itself left out alone in a sea of enormous change in the global strategic landscape even though there was significant ambivalence within its political

---

<sup>81</sup> Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*.

<sup>82</sup> “Aspects of SRV’s Joining ASEAN Examined,” Bangkok *The Nation* in English January 30, 1992, FBIS-EAS, (February 5, 1992): 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> “Asian Group Willing to Include Vietnam,” *NYT*, July 24, 1994.

elite. In fact, it was out of this ambivalence that ASEAN became more and more attractive as part of an alternative foreign policy plan. Vietnam's desire for economic benefits and payoffs were obvious- some of the more successful ASEAN states were way ahead of Vietnam in terms of development-it paid now to cooperate with and learn from them. It also made sense because of their proximity, similarity and common identity and interests. The doi moi reforms needed further fine tuning and deliberation. And one wise step was to have the most successful neighboring countries enjoin their economies with Vietnam so as to transfer technical know-how and capital to a backward nation with potential labor and natural resources.

### **ASEAN's Utility**

Vietnam also wanted to position itself in a new way not necessarily to heighten its security but to give it cushion diplomatically. ASEAN did not provide hard security benefits but nonetheless made it feel less alone and more secure in a "coming out party". Vietnam needed a new concept and arena from which to enhance and project a new image after being a pariah for so long-ASEAN membership could help boost its relations with the world and Vietnam's new international "nametag" would contain the words: ASEAN member. Yet, ASEAN was not the be all and end all either; it was the integration with the wider international community that Vietnam coveted, but it was ASEAN that served as one important avenue for such an outcome to be realized.

The presence of ASEAN therefore allowed the marriage of interests of this sort and therefore gave the opportunity for Vietnam to execute its diversification of relations well. It is hard to imagine, in what frame, would Vietnam be able to sell its new image better had ASEAN not been present and present with open arms to Vietnam. It was from this base that Vietnam wished to rebuild its image again in the international community in a post-Cold War world, as a Southeast Asian country. ASEAN could be said to be a springboard for expanded foreign relations, especially with the West and particularly the US, which ASEAN was well-connected with.

And Vietnam tried to put up this image before a world audience. At the 46<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly session held at the United Nations New York Headquarter Mr. Tran Quang Co, SRV Deputy Foreign Minister and head of the SRV delegation said, “To Vietnam, a developing country, still having to cope with untold difficulties, it is a top priority to have diversification in its foreign policy, which is aimed at creating conditions for tiding the country over the present crisis so it can steadily achieve development.”<sup>85</sup> He went on to say, “The goal of Vietnam’s foreign policy is to achieve equitable and mutually beneficial cooperation with all nations, irrespective of differing political and social systems on the basis of the principles of peaceful coexistence. At this important forum, Vietnam wishes to respectively reiterate its statement that it wants to befriend nations in the world community in the struggle for peace, independence and development.”

---

<sup>85</sup> “Chief Delegate Speaks at United Nations 1 October,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam Network* in Vietnamese, October 3, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 10, 1991): 45.



Indonesia's President Suharto visited Hanoi in late November 1990 to "discuss measures to promote bilateral relations and exchange views on international and regional issues of mutual concern."<sup>86</sup> A month prior to that, an Indonesian delegation of many professionals including social scientists and businessmen and journalists visited Hanoi. In the meeting with Do Muoi, the "Indonesian editors pressed him to state clearly if he would request Jakarta to play a role in speeding up the process of normalizing of the Hanoi-Washington diplomatic ties." Do Muoi appeared excited and said "if Indonesia would help us in this, we would be very grateful" and "we hope that our friends will help to solve it."<sup>87</sup> In this respect, ASEAN helped to put Vietnam on track with opening up to the world. In 1995, Vietnam's opening to the outside world was concretized with normalization with the US and official entry into ASEAN later in the same month. And more benefits naturally came later following these historic events which truly symbolized great regional and international reconciliation.

Vietnamese Vice Minister of Planning and Investment, Tran Xuan Gia said that the open door policy of Vietnam to welcome foreign countries to be involved in the Vietnamese economy was an important step towards achieving billions of dollars of foreign direct investment (FDI) and the normalization of relations with the US was a highly significant step in this regard.<sup>88</sup> US businesses keen on investing in Vietnam were joyful when the US was finally loosening its embargo on Vietnam later on. However,

---

<sup>86</sup> *Hanoi International Service* in English, November 2, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 5, 1990): 71.

<sup>87</sup> *Jakarta Post* in English October 22, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1990): 55.

<sup>88</sup> Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*. 238.

there was apprehension about entering the Vietnamese world where infrastructure and a friendly business environment were terribly wanting. In a way, the Southeast Asian businesses took the lead in setting the trend of foreign investment entering Vietnam. Many of the Southeast Asian businesses have had experience dealing with a poor and backward East Asian country and could cope better with the initial difficulties of setting up in Vietnam's business environment. (Later on, more on the dynamics and processes out of which the US embargo would finally be lifted and US-Vietnamese normalization would be realized, will be discussed.)

Lee Kuan Yew's reputation of shrewdness and pragmatism as a political statesman and problem solver moved Vietnam to invite Lee to become an adviser to Vietnam. Needless to say, Lee must have had ASEAN and Southeast Asia and of course Singapore as major elements in the contents of his advice to Vietnamese elites.<sup>89</sup> But streamlining the bureaucratic processes for foreign companies to do business in Vietnam was something the Vietnamese government had to do in order for it to be more investor-friendly, according Singapore Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng who went to Hanoi for a three day visit.<sup>90</sup>

A number of countries in Asia and Southeast Asia have become the biggest trade partners of Vietnam. By October 1991 Thailand had invested 36.8 million US dollars,

---

<sup>89</sup> Stephanie Balme and Mark Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order* (New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 37.

<sup>90</sup> "Relations with ASEAN Member Countries Viewed," *Hanoi Voice of Vietnam* in English, October 7, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 15, 1991): 72.

Singapore, 17 million dollars and Indonesia, 13.8 million dollars.<sup>91</sup> “These figures were vivid manifestations of the development of the cooperation between Vietnam and countries in Southeast Asia, the most economically dynamic region in the world.”<sup>92</sup> By 1992 however, Singapore had already become one of the biggest investors in Vietnam and “Singapore was Vietnam’s largest trading partner with total annual trade exceeding US\$1 billion and nearly 40 percent of Vietnam’s exports going to Singapore.”<sup>93</sup> By 1993, total cumulative investment itself reached US\$ 314.64 million.<sup>94</sup> Singapore’s Temasek Holdings, the foreign investment arm of the government had invested in many projects in Vietnam. Up till today, many new projects have been continuing; in Vung Tau, an oil industrial port city bustling with various foreign companies, about two and a half hours drive away from Ho Chi Minh City, an international school run by Singapore opened last fall.<sup>95</sup> Singapore has been infusing into Vietnam its culture of education, commercial practices, and residential building styles and so on. Malaysia was also one of the biggest investors in Vietnam. Trade turnover with Malaysia also reached about \$100 million.<sup>96</sup>

Like any other organizations, ASEAN had its own norms. Vietnam was already getting exposed to such norms through the regular summit meetings and so on at least as an observer in preparation for potentially joining ASEAN. Vietnam receiving new modes of thinking about the conduct of foreign relations and more engagement in ASEAN

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> *The Straits Times* in English, October 22, 1992, FBIS-EAS (October 29, 1992): 54.

<sup>94</sup> “Country “Top ASEAN Investor” in SRV Singapore,” *The Straits Times* in English December 9, 1993, FBIS-EAS (December 10, 1993): 59.

<sup>95</sup> This is based on informal phone interviews with Vietnamese residing in Vung Tau, Vietnam.

<sup>96</sup> *The Straits Times* in English, October 22, 1992, FBIS-EAS (October 29, 1992): 54.

activities as an ASEAN member portended further influence of those norms with peaceful dispute settlement being one of the most important. In 1992, soon after the 1991 Paris Peace Accord of the Cambodian issue, Foreign Minister Ali Alatas suggested having more ASEAN “mechanisms for continuous dialogs and consultations to anticipate and resolve problems before they reach crisis levels.”<sup>97</sup>

ASEAN’s general philosophy of seeking peace, renunciation of conflict, non-interference in another country’s internal affairs and focus on economic development rather than war also found a common chord in Vietnam’s current thinking. It was indeed a time for Vietnam to renounce war and to free itself from isolation. At no other time did Vietnam have such a clear desire to emancipate itself and join the world community and no other time when ASEAN delivered the perfect strategy to convince a receptive past foe to befriend and integrate with them.

Vietnam with such a long history of uninterrupted fighting and warring would come to be less prone to resorting to force in solving problems and instead finally have a golden opportunity to be more focused on economic development and eradication of poverty which had been so acute in Southeast Asia, especially its mainland. In fact war has become less and less of a viable option in Vietnam’s approach to foreign dealings. That is not to say that intra-ASEAN territorial disputes and problems don’t exist today but the ASEAN framework has definitely had some utility in abating the intensity of old problems and mitigating that of newly created ones that came from the eventual

---

<sup>97</sup> Kuala Lumpur *Bernama* in English, October 29, 1992, FBIS-EAS (October 29, 1992): 39.

establishment of ASEAN-10. The whole of ASEAN today is therefore greater than the sum of its parts.

Vietnam has been in the international spotlight these days and given numerous opportunities to project diplomacy and goodwill. Hanoi was the site of last year's ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) and the different Southeast Asian countries reaffirmed their commitment to regional peace and cooperation there. Only recently, Hillary Clinton, the current US secretary of state visited Vietnam to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vietnam-US normalization of relations, credited to former US President, Bill Clinton, her own husband. Incidentally, this former president was extremely popular amongst the local Vietnamese expatriate population in the US and his decision to normalize relations with Vietnam has had the effect of more reconciliatory attitudes amongst all sides including these overseas Vietnamese who tended to be unforgiving to the communist Vietnamese regime.

Once again, this is the sharp contrast with North Korea's situation where the recent sinking of a South Korean ship brought tension into the region and sparked fears of imminent military showdown. The unstable relations between North Korea and US-ROK had been ongoing for a long time and always flared up sporadically due to new issues and incidents. The Cheonan sinking and Yeonpyang Island shelling incidents shows just how far North Korea is from following Vietnam's trail. In the next chapters, more details on how US-Vietnam relations evolved towards normalization and how ASEAN played a facilitator role in bridging relations will be further discussed.

### **Partial Success in Process of Foreign Policy Reorientation**

When ASEAN and China were loudly protesting Vietnamese intransigence in Cambodia, the US took their side even though it did not seek a leading role in condemning Vietnam. But continued US-led sanctions strengthened the resistance efforts along the Thai border, leading to a stalemate. But years passed even as the destructive policies of the Vietnamese government brought more misery to the country. The failure of Vietnam's economic planning was clear as was explored in previous chapters. Its state industries were unproductive and unprofitable. There was still an acute starvation and malnourishment problem because there was really not enough food production due to poor economic management, and lack of incentive to produce that were also exacerbated by bad weather and natural disasters such as typhoons and floods.<sup>98</sup>

There was a continuous destructive cycle that led to extensive suffering spiraling down to the different population sectors. Even the military had to suffer from intense austerity measures. Only the most privileged could use their leverage to secure the material for comfortable living. It took a long time for Vietnam to come to its senses and realize that a reversal of its destructive policies had to happen. Doi moi was this turnaround domestically and economically but not politically or in foreign policy. After 1986, did the Vietnamese economy improve as a result of doi moi? Yes, but not to the extent that Vietnam's development would become self-sustaining. Vietnam was still so

---

<sup>98</sup> "Minister Calls for Meeting on Rice Shortage," *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, October 31, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 1, 1990): 54. Vietnam had to overcome its past destructive policies just like China, which did so earlier with reforms and opening up under Deng Xiaoping.

inadequate in various respects and needed foreign economic inputs, lots of it, be it capital, technological know-how, financial loans, all of which Vietnam was denied because of the heavy punitive sanctions on it by the international community that had proven to be so damaging<sup>99</sup>.

The economic reality of Vietnam was therefore a truly strong impetus that ultimately generated the determination to really reintegrate with the world which became stronger, and this time around, the decision was buttressed by the realization that external opening up was imperative in order to survive even though the Vietnamese elites were almost clueless as to the way to go about it. At the beginning of doi moi, the Vietnamese leaders took small steps to free up the economy to encourage the people's enterprising spirit. However, even those minor steps were taken with so much fear of losing control. The motivation to open up externally came with even more apprehension and it could not have been fully realized without the dynamic interaction with international forces, actors and diplomatic initiatives that characterized the beginning of the 1990s.

But this did not happen before the knee-jerk reaction the Vietnamese elites had in the face of all the chaos that ensued in the other parts of the socialist world in the years around 1989 which turned the Vietnamese conservatives toward a verbal attack mode against the US.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the evolution of Vietnam-US relations also has to be understood in the context of the changing Cold War situation at the time. There were renewed attacks

---

<sup>99</sup> Singapore, *The Straits Times*, November 1, 1989, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1989).

<sup>100</sup> Douglas Pike, "Vietnam in 1990: The Last Picture Show" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (January 1991).

by conservatives on the ongoing reform initiatives because of the Tiananmen incident and Soviet Union's troubles but Do Muoi had to constantly play the neutral referee between the conservatives and reformers at home. Nguyen Co Thach was Vietnam's reformer, still taking pains to secure better relations with the US in the late 1980s.

Do Muoi was well aware of the importance of this matter for the country's success but he also saw the potential backlash. He pondered very carefully and took very cautious steps to placate and pacify the opposing conservative forces that were still trading verbal jabs with pro-reform factions and advocates of friendly relations with the West and lambasting US policy on Vietnam. The conservatives purported that US policy veiled the intent of bringing down the Vietnamese regime and accused the US of the plot of "peaceful evolution"<sup>101</sup>. Yet even while conservative voices blared at home, Vietnamese foreign ministry officials still managed to cooperate and work with the US on MIA issues. Even though this did not mean that the reformers had somehow won or that the conservative voices were finally silenced, it did signal that the balance of power within the Vietnamese power circles tilted towards the determined path of opening up and taking of risks and acceptance of costs in order to achieve it.

In an atmosphere of factionalism<sup>102</sup>, the conservative group in the higher echelons of Vietnamese political circles lashed out against the US with strong words that emanated in the domestic scene with accusations of conspiracies in the form of peaceful

---

<sup>101</sup> Thayer and Amer. *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 182.

<sup>102</sup> Thayer and Amer. *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 175.



evolution<sup>103</sup> even while the reformers pressed on their efforts to gain US favor. Even Secretary Nguyen Van Linh had to not only censure the continuation of free expression in the domestic front but also to take a stand in condemning perceived efforts of the US to rollback communism in Indochina<sup>104</sup>. The persistent effort of Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach to convince the US that Vietnam's intent was to bury the hatchet and look forward to a new relationship with the US was done against such a backdrop. In his agenda, normalization of relations, trade and financial assistance and investment were highly sought after.<sup>105</sup> Yet, his efforts were exerted in the midst of a stormy debate in the higher echelons of the communist party over the dangers the regime was facing and the best course of action to take.

Vietnamese leaders consulted with ASEAN leaders and asked if there could be ways to improve ties with the US. Even in 1990, Do Muoi had made measured comments to express his frustration towards the pace of change in the US position toward Vietnam. He wanted better relations with the US but he had to show his comrades that there was benefit and good in such a move.<sup>106</sup> As the VCP general secretary since 1991, he did not want to allow criticisms and castigation like what happened to Nguyen Co Thach immediately after Vietnamese pullout from Cambodia to be repeated.

Ultimately, the conservatives did not win or bring down the cause of reforms; the change of times had become too clear. Vietnam had to make a corresponding major

---

<sup>103</sup> Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 182.

<sup>104</sup> Hanoi *VNA*, October 3, 1990, FBIS-EAS (October 3, 1990).

<sup>105</sup> Pike, "Vietnam in 1991: The Turning Point," *Asian Survey*.

<sup>106</sup> *Jakarta Post* in English October 22, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1990): 55.

adjustment to be able to break out of its isolation even while guarding against domestic political instability. So, the economic imperative to improve all-sided relations especially with the US was all the stronger, but Vietnam no longer wanted to be boxed in with limited progress in relations with the US. Where and who could Vietnam turn to? Initially, Vietnam capitalized on relations with ASEAN countries because of geographic proximity, similar historical experience, similar country characteristics and common interests. At least ASEAN could perhaps be able to quickly appreciate Vietnam's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia and reciprocate goodwill gestures more quickly which it showed it did. Vietnam tested to see if there could be sound advice, useful lessons and benefits to its image and reputation by leaning towards ASEAN.

Vietnamese leaders also understood that the geographical proximity with China and its potential to create problems for it meant that it had to maintain friendly relations with China as well before any sort of forward progress could be sustained. Vietnam had also realized from its years of fighting and siding with one party that such an approach could get it into unnecessary imbroglio<sup>107</sup>. Embracing this pragmatic and constructive new foreign policy thinking was truly a major turning point, but the underpinning motivation had been generated through many years of disastrous mistakes made and difficult lessons learned. Fortunately this time, the international climate could actually be made favorable so long as Vietnam had the right attitude. And this attitude in no small

---

<sup>107</sup> Hanoi *VNA*, May 30, 1991, FBIS-EAS (May 30, 1991).

measure closely copied from ASEAN rhetorical vocabulary paid off to give Vietnam a makeover in its international image.

Vietnam therefore proclaimed in 1991 its desire for diversification of relations and of befriending all countries.<sup>108</sup> It was a turning point for Vietnamese foreign policy; however, without having the blessing from the US and without being officially a member of ASEAN, this process of reorientation would have been less than complete. But ASEAN had long been ready to take Vietnam into its mold<sup>109</sup>; the date for accession to ASEAN membership was much later but the plans had already been in the making.<sup>110</sup> And China's normalization with Vietnam was rather a marriage of convenience but the two parties accepted the reality and acknowledged the need for normalized relations which were quickly accomplished almost as soon as both sides saw this need. However, the US decision to normalize with Vietnam took longer time, only after a protracted process.

But Vietnam's genuine integration with the world community hinged upon US's blessing; yet, the above paragraphs together with later chapters will show that Vietnam did fairly well to compensate for what had not been achieved with the US by trading with

---

<sup>108</sup> [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB) (accessed July 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Singapore, *The Straits Times*, October 22, 1992, FBIS-EAS (October 23, 1992).

<sup>110</sup> Even as early as 1973, ASEAN states had considered reconciliation with Indochinese states which had been delayed by more than two decades. A joint press statement in the 1973 ASEAN foreign ministers meeting said that "every effort should be made towards establishing and furthering contacts and promoting 'Interlocking relationships amongst these countries. In addition, the meeting was of the view that it was desirable to expand the membership of ASEAN at the opportune time to cover all the countries in Southeast Asia and agreed that the trend of developments gave cause for encouragement that this may so on be achieved." See "Joint Press Statement of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting to Assess The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam and to Consider Its Implications in Southeast Asia," Kuala Lumpur, 15 Feb 1973, <http://www.aseansec.org/1255.htm> (accessed June 2010).

many other non-communist countries in Southeast Asia and Europe and reaping the corresponding benefits. So, Vietnam was able to select a few Southeast Asian and European countries to satisfy its immediate need for trade relations and economic benefits. Yet Vietnam chose to be “friendly” to all countries in the world, a rhetoric that was dramatic and signaled this desire for greater integration with the international community and for international peace and cooperation rather than just partial integration that was merely more tactical.

Also, even though Vietnam’s diversification strategy was beginning to bring in dividends, its behavior showed that it valued normalization with the US the most<sup>111</sup> as the greatest foreign policy prize in recognition of the importance of having good relations with the US. This also signaled a more sincere intent to normalize relations with the US. But as will be shown later, this did not come easy. However, its identification with ASEAN was at least partly a springboard for such an eventuality.<sup>112</sup> This new face of Vietnam was evidently grounded on a pragmatic strategy for procuring maximum benefit from foreign policy openness but few countries in the world with such a problematic past chose to adopt such a major shift in foreign policy. So, Vietnam serves as a truly good case for the analysis of a bellicose regime turning cooperative.

---

<sup>111</sup> See Avery, “Win Some, Lose Some,” 72 and “Ministry Hails Significant Progress With US,” *Hanoi Voice of Vietnam Network* in Vietnamese, July 3 1993, FBIS-EAS, (July 6 1993): 65.

<sup>112</sup> Vietnamese leaders had many times consulted with ASEAN leaders about the possible ways to expedite the improvement of relations with the US. See “Do Muoi Discusses Suharto Visit, US Ties,” *The Jakarta Post* in English, October 22, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 2, 1990): 55.

## CHAPTER 7: NEW INITIATIVE TO CULTIVATE US-VIETNAM RELATIONS

### Major World Events

The end of the Cold War certainly facilitated a new strategic climate between the US and Vietnam. Vietnam could now be judged and taken at face value, rather than as a former war adversary aligned with a superpower rival. Even though not particularly strategically important, there were significant reasons to be engaged with Vietnam, one of which was business. For Vietnam, it could no longer construct its foreign policy based on its international identification with the socialist world, which was crumbling.

The Gulf War had a major psychological effect in influencing the different parties concerned and their relations with one another. For the US, the overcoming of the Vietnam Syndrome also paved the way for moving towards establishing friendship with its former enemy. It was however, a wake up call for the Vietnamese. Since reunification and Vietnamese communist military victory, the world had moved far ahead and its former adversary had advanced so much in its technological and economic supremacy while Vietnam was mired in such a terrible predicament. So, apart from the collapse of the Soviet Union, many events showed that a new strategic realignment was underway. The US was now the only superpower in the world with the fall of the Soviet Union, and having easily defeated Iraq in the Gulf War the US convinced not just other countries but also itself of its sole superpower status.

The countries of maritime Southeast Asia which had mostly developed their economies peacefully through the Cold War period by free-riding on a vast US security umbrella had to make out where it currently stood. But it was clear that since the end of the Vietnam War, the US had become less engaged in the affairs of Southeast Asia except in the Philippines where the US military bases still stood. And with the end of the Cold War, there was also a weaker strategic rationale for the US to have a forward presence there. Then in 1992 after being “gravely affected by the Mt. Pinatubo eruption,”<sup>1</sup> the ending of the Philippines Subic Bay and Clark Air Base by the Philippines Senate vote seemed to turn the US even further away from the attention on Southeast Asia and increased the perception that the US was disengaging completely from Southeast Asia.

This had a major impact on general Southeast Asian countries’ perception that the future security of Southeast Asia might be at risk. The Philippines Senate opposition voted for the ending of the base but it was not welcomed by other Southeast Asian countries. Singapore wanted to help make up for the loss by offering its facilities for servicing the US military and giving it “right to a bit more ship maintenance”<sup>2</sup> so as to encourage some level of US role as a stabilizer in the region because “in Southeast Asia, US military presence is regarded as crucial for the maintenance of unrestricted trade routes.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> “US Decision Whether to Keep Bases.” *Manila Broadcasting Company* in Tagalong, June 19, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (June 20, 1991): 31.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Erlanger, “The World: The Search for a New Security Umbrella,” *NYT*, May 12, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Malaysia was eager to fill in the vacuum as well. It was thought that the US Pacific Fleet was likely to become the first foreign customer for the newly corporatized Lumut Dockyard.<sup>4</sup> Chairman Datuk Nasruddin Bahari told the Malaysian News Straits Times, “We have the capacity to undertake repairs, refitting, and other maintenance works to cater to the needs of American warships.”<sup>5</sup> Thailand too voiced the benefits of the maintenance of US military presence and considered the possibility of “allowing the US military to use the facilities here in the wake of the imminent US pullout of the Philippines.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Southeast Asian Woes**

Southeast Asia therefore displayed quite clearly its concerns about the uncertain prospects. Singapore was particularly explicit in this respect when Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that with “Moscow inward, the US reducing its military presence, Japan, China and India are showing signs of wanting to play a more assertive role.”<sup>7</sup> His remarks ruffled some feathers, but many Southeast Asian leaders indeed harbored these feelings. In fact, Vietnamese leaders shared them as well. Vietnam had always had a historically delicate relationship with China and a US strategic retreat was not entirely welcome news for Vietnam either. Singapore’s agreement to allow American military use of its facilities could only make up for so much. Soviet demise actually freed up China

---

<sup>4</sup> “Lumut Dockyard Prepares for Use by US Fleet,” Kuala Lumpur *News Straits Times*, November 21, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (November 27, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “Military Leaders Mull the Benefits of US Presence,” Bangkok *The Nation in English*, October 2, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 2, 1991) 95.

<sup>7</sup> Erlanger, “The World; The Search for a New Security Umbrella,” *NYT*.

from a northern threat and gave it more leeway in asserting its power in the southern peripheries and this had manifested in the promulgation of the Chinese Law on the Territorial Seas in 1992. So while the US was at the height of its global power with the demise of the Soviet superpower, China's regional power was actually growing.

A Malaysian commentary on the South China Sea dispute partly said "All of a sudden, the whole world has become aware of the Spratly Islands. They are an entire group of little islands in the South China Sea region, known to have rich resources of oil and natural gas and it is in the middle of important shipping routes and it sparked off intense rival claims. China and Vietnam have come to blows on this territorial dispute.<sup>8</sup> The Vietnamese perception is that China is domineering and this accounts for Vietnam's close ties with the Soviet Union and India and both had not had particularly good relations with China."<sup>9</sup>

There were therefore fears that increased arms procurement of ASEAN countries signaled a militarization of Southeast Asia to cope with fears of an uncertain future. However, Singapore Defense Minister Dr Yeo Ning Hong said that "increased defense expenditures and procurements by the six members of ASEAN did not constitute a regional arms race."<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, he cautioned that if an arms race was to be averted,

---

<sup>8</sup> "Commentary Views SRV-PRC Spratly Islands Dispute," *Kuala Lumpur International Service* in English, April, 22, 1988, FBIS-EAS (April 26, 1988): 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "Defense Minister Says No to ASEAN Arms Race," *The Straits Times* in English, November 20, 1992, FBIS-EAS (November 23, 1992): 22.



the administration of President-elect Bill Clinton should remain committed to maintaining a strong US military presence.<sup>11</sup>

“International relations in Asia and Southeast Asia were therefore at a transitional point of change provoked by readjustments of international politics, big-power politics and internal movements in the region.”<sup>12</sup> Indonesia’s past fears and age-old suspicions of China resurfaced. The perceived long term threat of China’s ambitions over Southeast Asia seemed to be turning into reality in this changed geopolitical environment. Economic competition with China loomed and the potential conflict in the Spratly Islands issue showed grim prospects. This precipitated the ASEAN motivation to strengthen regional unity that stopped short of a military alliance and to hedge against future unknowns in a geopolitical arrangement that was still evolving. These events later led to the formation of the ASEAN Regional Forum and also accelerated ASEAN-10 integration.

In fact, “changing perceptions and interests among the old ASEAN members” on Vietnam also played a part in securing Vietnam’s ASEAN membership. The factors influencing Vietnam’s change were many and ASEAN was a substantial factor. However, the resulting Vietnam-ASEAN cooperation had as much to do with changing perceptions of ASEAN toward Vietnam as Vietnam’s changing perception of ASEAN. In other words, it was a two-way street of the new open channels of communication

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Magazine Reviews Cambodian Issue-Solving Moves,” *Hanoi Domestic Service* in Vietnamese, October 30, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 5, 1990): 70.

between Vietnam and ASEAN and their altered perceptions about one another through intense diplomatic interaction that led to their augmented relations and behavior with one another. And clearly for Vietnam, this changed behavior had even greater international implications, substance and significance.

### **ASEAN's Strategic Rationale**

From previous chapters, it is evident that there had already been an active program to bring Vietnam into ASEAN's mold and active attempt to construct an ASEAN that was inclusive of Vietnam and Indochina. ASEAN's purpose was twofold: to neutralize a Vietnamese security threat and prevent possible future threat from it by keeping it integrated with Southeast Asia and enmeshed in its norms. Secondly it was to create in Vietnam and Indochina a useful buffer area against the perceived possible security threat from the giant China. Such an arrangement would be to mitigate the worst case scenario; a departed US role and an aggressive China asserting its power in the region. Many of the private conversations of ASEAN circles took all these security interests into concern.<sup>13</sup>

According to Malaysian Foreign Minister Ahmad Badawi, "Vietnam's membership in ASEAN will strengthen the grouping as well as regional cooperation. Before this, Southeast Asia was still considered an area divided in two-between the ASEAN countries and the Indochinese countries and between the communist and

---

<sup>13</sup>A Filipino PhD candidate from California who presented at the 2010 MPSA conference in Chicago had been in ASEAN policy-making circles-the debate over whether to take Vietnam in was often intertwined with future Southeast Asian security concerns.

noncommunist countries. With Vietnam joining ASEAN, this division will disappear. Vietnam's membership in ASEAN will encourage the other countries in Southeast Asia- Cambodia, Laos and Burma to create a region that is more peaceful and stable and will increase cooperation for the common good in all fields of economy, politics and the like. Vietnam's membership will hasten the process of creating a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia."<sup>14</sup> Based on this explanation, ASEAN-10 was also a sort of diplomatic deterrence to secure future peace and stability in the region.

At the Fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore in 1992, different ideas had emerged as to when and how Vietnam should integrate and become an ASEAN member. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was the first ASEAN leader to say confidently that Vietnam would be able to join ASEAN within the next five years. Both Thailand and Singapore had been saying that Vietnam's future in ASEAN would be determined by its economic performance. They said "it will depend on how successful Vietnam is in carrying out its economic reforms."<sup>15</sup> Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said in his opening speech at the summit that "the day is not far off when the Indochinese countries develop extensive economic links with ASEAN."<sup>16</sup> He said Vietnam was pursuing economic reforms to promote economic development.

---

<sup>14</sup> Foreign Minister Views Regional Issues, Kuala Lumpur Utusan Malaysia in Malay 20 Jul, 95, FBIS-EAS, 24 Jul 95, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Aspects of SRV's Joining ASEAN Examined, Bangkok the Nation in English 30 Jan 92, FBIS-EAS, 5 Feb 1992, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The Thai Prime Minister had repeatedly said that “Vietnam’s membership to ASEAN is inevitable once it is integrated into the international economic system.” Indonesia and the Philippines thought that “Vietnam can be absorbed right away in certain areas.”<sup>17</sup> At that time, ASEAN was still trying to push itself towards further economic cooperation which was beset by institutional inertia. “Setting the tone of the meeting of ASEAN economic ministers in Kuala Lumpur as host,” Mr. Mahathir urged his ASEAN allies to push cooperation “forward and fast”<sup>18</sup>

Jusuf Wanandi of Indonesia’s Centre for Strategic and International Studies who attended the summit said that Vietnam can participate in certain areas of ASEAN cooperation such as functional cooperation in promoting better understanding among member countries. He said that by the next summit to be held in Bangkok in early 1995, modalities and timing of the actual steps for Vietnam’s ASEAN membership should be clear. But according to Vietnamese academics, Vietnam was already “trying to add ASEAN studies as well as other aspects of Western social science to the curricula used by the country’s top Foreign Service schools –Institute of Foreign Relations and the Nguyen Ai Quoc Institute.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> ASEAN Said Not Serving Manila’s Interests, *The Chronicle in English* 10 Oct 91, FBIS-EAS, 10 Oct 91, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

ASEAN also took the initiative by forming the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 in light of its security concerns.<sup>20</sup> “The First Meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum was held in Bangkok on 25 July 1994 in accordance with the 1992 Singapore Declaration of the Fourth ASEAN Summit, whereby the ASEAN Heads of State and Government proclaimed their intent to intensify ASEAN's external dialogues in political and security matters as a means of building cooperative ties with states in the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>21</sup>

ASEAN also made preparations and arrangement to form ASEAN-10 consisting of all the Southeast Asian countries, which was fully accomplished by 1999. The declaration by China of its laws on the South China Sea in the early 1990s gave Vietnam a greater incentive to enter the ASEAN orbit even though it was not yet a member at that time. Moving away from its past inclinations of siding with one great power, although not explicitly stating its security interests, Vietnam adopted the strategy of banding with similar countries regionally while seeking peaceful and goodwill relations globally.

ASEAN truly beckoned Vietnam at the right moment. When Vietnam was crafting its plan to open up relations with the world, ASEAN was also revamping and re-

---

<sup>20</sup> The participants of the first ASEAN Regional Forum meeting “held a productive exchange of views on the current political and security situation in the Asia-Pacific region, recognizing that developments in one part of the region could have an impact on the security of the region as whole. It was agreed that, as a high-level consultative forum, the ARF had enabled the countries in the Asia-Pacific region to foster the habit of constructive dialogue and consultation on political and security issues of common interest and concern. In this respect, the ARF would be in a position to make significant contributions to efforts towards confidence-building and preventive diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region.” See The Chairman’s Statement the First ASEAN Regional Forum, <http://www.aseansec.org/2105.htm>, viewed Jan 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Chairman’s Statement The First ASEAN Regional Forum, Bangkok, 25 July 1994, <http://www.aseansec.org/2105.htm>, viewed Jan 2010.

envisioning its purpose and objectives in a post-Cold War world. There were palpable feelings that it was a time of reconciliation, integration and focus on economic development particularly in Southeast Asia but broad multilateral security initiatives were needed to secure such a trend for Southeast Asia<sup>22</sup> In a way, ASEAN truly took off as a major institution in the aftermath of the Cambodian crisis, when its significant diplomatic victory gave it renewed confidence in expanding membership and forging an even greater entity even though this decision was also motivated by cold strategic realities.

But the timing was quite right for both parties as it was mutually advantageous for ASEAN and Vietnam and the greater Indochinese region to merge together. Even though ASEAN knew at that time that incorporating the Indochinese countries came with numerous challenges and would potentially drag the region's economic progress because of the development gap between the maritime ASEAN states and the rest of Southeast Asia, consolidating this new Southeast Asian architecture was in the interest of future Southeast Asian security in a post Cold-War world.

### **Some Initial Advances in US-Vietnam Relations**

In the late 1980s, the prospects of US-Vietnam relations looked bleak. Yet, there were already struggles to resolve the thorny MIA/POW issue at that time. The Vietnamese had already made a number of concessions to bring about progress on the

---

<sup>22</sup> Donald E. Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*. His book title consists of the phrase, "The Struggle for Autonomy". Southeast Asia's past diplomatic exertions had been geared towards such the objective of regional autonomy. So, this title makes sense and accurately describes Southeast Asia.

matter. 1751 cases were still missing in Vietnam but 168 remains had already been secured through the joint US-Vietnamese efforts and “identified by the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in Hawaii.”<sup>23</sup>

This prompted some on the Vietnamese side to hint that the US had not done its share in moving relations forward. Thanh Bham, an attaché at the Vietnamese Mission to the UN said that his country had tried many things in the last fourteen years to resolve the problem including returning all military and civilian personnel taken prisoner in the war, repatriating others who had remained in Vietnam and “devoting great efforts for seeking information” about Americans still missing. He said, “I think all these facts demonstrate the efforts and sympathy of Vietnam towards the American people and American concerns on this issue, although Vietnam has hundreds of thousands of its own soldiers missing in action.”<sup>24</sup>

The Cambodian issue remained unresolved and the US stood with its ASEAN friends in forcing Vietnam to comply. At the same time, domestically for the US, the MIA issue remained a political tinderbox. Thus, when Vietnam pulled out of Cambodia, even though ASEAN was moving towards a climate of détente with Vietnam, the US offered few signals of rapprochement largely because of the MIA issue which had been greatly politicized and given rise to many conspiracy theories that surmised that the

---

<sup>23</sup> Presumed MIA Remains to be Returned, Hong Kong AFP in English 18 Jan 89, FBIS-EAS, 18 Jan, 89 p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Washington Talk: Issues with a Tenacious Hold; The Politics of Hope on Americans Missing in Vietnam, NYT, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1987

Vietnamese kept live Americans or refrained from giving full accounting on American remains in order to have more leverage in bargaining.

But the Vietnamese vehemently denied any wrongdoing and insisted that it did not have control over any living Americans missing in action from the war according to John Vessey, the US special presidential envoy for the POW/MIA affairs since 1987.<sup>25</sup> Even Senator John McCain agreed that “this entire MIA issue has been exploited very badly by some people, including those trying to get funds for so-called Rambo efforts, people trying to inflame passions unnecessarily, charlatans, in some cases, who see this as a profit-making opportunity.”<sup>26</sup>

In any case, some improvement did indeed happen with the announcement of the opening of dialog on the Cambodian peace process in Paris on July 18, 1990. US Secretary of State James Baker stated that the US would remove certain restrictions on the supply of humanitarian aid to Cambodia. However, the economic embargo on Vietnam, Cambodia and North Korea would continue in the so-called Trading with the Enemy Act. This presidential extension of the embargo prevented the automatic expiration of the embargo and dashed the hopes of American business interests looking to cash in on the prospects of doing business in Vietnam.

President George H. W. Bush indicated clearly that the Gulf War would be conducted in the memory of the Vietnam War. The success of the Gulf War redeemed the

---

<sup>25</sup> Hanoi Says It Keeps No Live Americans Missing in the War, NYT, Aug 11, 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Vietnam War defeat and removed once and for all the Vietnam Syndrome that the US had been suffering from. So, to a great extent, not only were the great factors of the end of the Cold War, the pullout of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia or the progress in MIA issue causing the change in US position towards Vietnam but this major historical event paved the way for the US to be able to better accept further diplomatic interaction with Vietnam.

As the Gulf War's combat phase came to a close, President George H W Bush could victoriously declare that the Vietnam Syndrome had ended.<sup>27</sup> This was no small feat because the hangover from the Vietnam War debacle had been a baggage for the US as a superpower. This quick and complete Gulf War victory was not only a victory for Bush's presidency but redemption for the US defeat in the Vietnam War.

President Bush was then riding high in the polls. He made history as the US easily won the Gulf War while an epic history was almost simultaneously being made as the US finally won the Cold War when the Soviet Union disintegrated in the same year of 1991. It was a winning streak for the US as the sole superpower and allowed it to manifest more magnanimity to its former foe in Vietnam and polls taken at the time also showed that a large percentage of the US population favored removing the economic embargo on Vietnam.

### **Slow Pace of Progress**

---

<sup>27</sup> Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome, Washington Post, March 4, 1991.

Indeed there was progress in relations with Vietnam; US Envoy General John Vessey conducted negotiations with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach on the issue of POW/MIA that achieved significant breakthroughs leading to the US decision to open an office in Hanoi specifically meant to serve the purpose of facilitating work on the POW/MIA issue. Another piece of welcomed news for Vietnam was that a million dollars of aid donation would be provided to Vietnam through aid agencies, private organizations and NGOs for the purposes of the production of prosthetics.<sup>28</sup>

However, the gains were coming too slowly for Nguyen Co Thach who became the casualty of his own political wars at home. Nguyen Co Thach was replaced as a result of the political fallout from the conservative backlash. Some leadership changes at the time were expected as the factional groups in the Vietnamese elite sought a new balance. The new foreign minister, Nguyen Manh Cam continued the previous effort to secure American favor that still remained limited. He was a former Ambassador to Moscow and was “thought to be convinced that Gorbachev would continue to cut aid to Vietnam and Hanoi must therefore broaden its ties with other countries.”<sup>29</sup>

The US was highly encouraged by these major changes in membership in Vietnam’s leadership echelons. Senior US administration officials said that “major Cabinet reorganization in Vietnam improved the prospects for settling the Cambodian civil war and accelerating the thaw in relations with Washington.”<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile,

---

<sup>28</sup> Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Krauss, “US is encouraged by Hanoi Cabinet,” *NYT*, August 18, 1991.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

American business interests constituted an increasingly powerful force in the pressure to normalize with Vietnam. Their desire to gain access into the Vietnamese market had been long denied.

The Vietnamese had also made major concessions by 1991, with combat troops completely gone from Cambodia amongst others. It had agreed to enhance cooperation with the US in missions to find new information on those past American military personnel unaccounted for. It also stepped up its efforts in the Vietnamese immigration process. “Following a meeting between Vietnamese and US officials in early September 1990 to discuss the implementation of the HO Program (Humanitarian Operation: Resettlement of Former Reeducation Camp Inmates) and the ODP (Orderly Departure Program), the IOM (International Organization for Migration) convened subsequent meetings in Bangkok for the representatives of the Ho Chi Minh City External Affairs Office, Air Vietnam, IOM, UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees), the US, Australia and Canada-the three countries of resettlement to discuss travel arrangements and other technical problems to guarantee good implementation of the 1991 resettlement program.”<sup>31</sup>

The delegates in these meetings evaluated the 1990 performance and “unanimously agreed that Vietnam had been very cooperative with representatives of the resettlement countries, IOM and UNHCR in arranging interviews, medical checkups and

---

<sup>31</sup> “More Refugees, Immigrants to Leave under ODP,” *Saigon Giai Phong* in Vietnamese, October 11, 1990, FBIS-EAS (November 5, 1990): 71.

departures.”<sup>32</sup> Within just the first nine months of 1990, the Vietnamese helped organize the departure of more than 51,000 people, in addition to which another 19,000 people were scheduled to leave in the last three months of the year. The total number of people who were scheduled to leave in that year due in large part to efforts on the Vietnamese side therefore exceeded 70,000.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the obstacles remained with the POW/MIA issue being the thorniest, most politicized and stubborn barrier to normalization of relations. It was emerging as the main obstacle to the establishment of diplomatic ties between Washington and Hanoi, now that Washington’s primary precondition to normalization-resolution of the Cambodian conflict appeared imminent.<sup>34</sup> The US President George Bush had even signed an order extending for another year the economic embargo that has been in place against Vietnam since the late 1970s.<sup>35</sup> So, progress was slow even though significant gains came about in the aftermath of John Vessey’s negotiations with the Vietnamese. Both Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam met with John Vessey soon after being appointed to their posts at a meeting after which a communiqué was issued.<sup>36</sup> John

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Vessey, Completes Visit.” Hong Kong *AFP* in English, October 2, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 3, 1991): 62.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Joint Communiqué Issued on Vessey’s Visit,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam Network* in Vietnamese, October 2, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 3, 1991): 53.

Vessey also said that Washington and Hanoi had agreed to speed up efforts to account for US MIAs.<sup>37</sup>

There were also pressures from human rights groups to push for normalization of relations with Vietnam. For example, a religious organization in the US called CALG<sup>38</sup> petitioned the US government to lift the embargo. It stated that the two main obstacles namely the MIA issue and the presence of troops in Cambodia were no longer relevant. Therefore for the sake of both countries' well-being, the lifting of the embargo and a swift progress towards normalization of relations was called for. CALG released the petition that said, "The lack of normal relations between the US and Vietnam harms peoples in both countries. It prevents cooperation on issues of shared concern. The troops have been withdrawn and Vietnam has been very responsive to US concerns about the US servicemen missing in action. We call upon the Congress of the United States of America to lift the embargo on trade with Vietnam as a first step toward the normalization of relations."<sup>39</sup>

However, the US mainly provided rehabilitation aid to Vietnam as a gesture of its humanitarian concerns. It provided "1.3 million dollars to pay for artificial limbs and rehabilitation services for war victims in Vietnam. The US Agency for International

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "US Religious Group Urges Lifting of Embargo," Hanoi *VNA* in English, May 29, 1990, FBIS-EAS, (June 1, 1990): 55.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Development said that World Vision, a private organization would get a grant to expand its prosthetics services to 20 Vietnamese provinces.”<sup>40</sup>

In early 1991, the Bush administration concretely introduced the four-step roadmap towards full normalization. This roadmap consisted of a number of steps all of which emphasized the continual progress on the POW/MIA issue. Phase 1 dealt with the final peace agreement in Cambodia which was critical before any genuine move towards improvement of relations could be achieved. Major progress in the POW/MIA issue was also of paramount importance. In exchange, there would be the easing of travel restrictions to Vietnam. Phase 2 depended upon a genuine end of hostilities in Cambodia and also further progress on the POW/MIA issue. Phase 3 would necessitate that the UN peacekeeping force, UNTAC had been in Cambodia for more than six months. Finally, with UN-sponsored and supervised elections allowing Cambodians to exercise self-determination plus continued progress on the POW/MIA issue would lead to the dropping of restrictions on international lending to Vietnam and normalization of relations with the US in Phase 4.<sup>41</sup>

Vietnamese leaders were obviously not delighted with the conditions they had to accept in order to move forward in relations with the US but they were bargaining from a weak position and had to follow through. The POW/MIA issue was particularly irksome as the Vietnamese leaders found it irrelevant or strange for it to be tied to this embargo.

---

<sup>40</sup> “US Reported to Fund Rehabilitation Services, Hanoi,” *VNA in English*, September 30, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 2, 1991): 64.

<sup>41</sup> Information on the roadmap here is based on Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, 163.

In any case, the Vietnamese went out of their way to accommodate the US so that there could hopefully be some genuine forthcoming rewards. For example, soon after Vo Van Kiet was elected by the National Assembly to be the new prime minister, “he declared that Hanoi and Washington must put the war behind them by quickly opening relations” and as a token of his commitment, “he promised to press the search for American servicemen who are still unaccounted for.”<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, the US State Department publicly “shrugged off Vo Van Kiet’s plea and demanded that Vietnam withdraw its 5,000 remaining advisers from Cambodia as part of the peace settlement.”<sup>43</sup>

Vietnam was already facing a huge loss of aid as the Soviet Union was cutting back on providing foreign aid and moving towards liquidation. To be sure, Vietnam was making up for losses by increased trade with ASEAN countries and certain countries in Europe which were all opting to drop bilateral sanctions and make way for normal trade relations with Vietnam. However, the exigency of the time was to improve the country’s infrastructure that had largely been decimated in the Vietnam War. However, only large amounts of capital could finance such mammoth projects but the American-led embargo precluded some of the best ways of doing so.<sup>44</sup>

In order to solve the country’s infrastructure problems, Vietnam needed to hire international companies with such expertise; many of these were American companies that were still barred from engaging in such activities in Vietnam due to the economic

---

<sup>42</sup> Krauss, “US is encouraged by Hanoi Cabinet,” *NYT*, August 18, 1991.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, 164.

restrictions still in force. Many other international companies from elsewhere, including Japan were also unwilling to take part in such reconstruction projects because their governments were still honoring the US-led embargo or they did not want to risk souring relations with the US. There were not too many other alternatives but even if there were, Vietnam needed the money either through foreign aid or international lending.

Vietnamese officials knew that what they needed was foreign investment<sup>45</sup> and hard foreign currency<sup>46</sup> but was so short of it. Because of this shortage, imports of many important goods had to be cut back.

Japan had shown interest in Vietnam by the high-level official visits there. For example, Keizo Obuchi, former secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party (of Japan) paid a visit to Vietnam at the invitation of the External Relations Commission of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee.<sup>47</sup> Yet, even though Japan would have provided handsome sums of aid for such major projects it was still initially reluctant whereas loans from lending agencies such as the IMF and World Bank could not be secured because of the same restrictions that were still in effect from the American-led sanctions. That was why the punitive economic actions of the US were a major reason that Vietnam remained in an inferior economic and political position in the late 1980s. However, when the continuation of such an embargo went on even after the Cold War,

---

<sup>45</sup> Without changing its image, no investors would be willing to enter Vietnam to invest. In 1995, when Vietnam achieved major diplomatic strides, Vietnamese officials hoped that foreign investment would finally start pouring in. But that showed how dire the situation had been for a while. See David E. Sanger, "Vietnam's Budding Market: What Role for US?" *NYT*, August 9, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> "Vietnam Plans Cut in Imports," *NYT*, December 25, 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Hanoi *VNA* in English, November 28, 1991, FBIS-EAS (December 2, 1991): 66.



pressures built up domestically as well as internationally on the US to relieve the economic stranglehold on Vietnam.

### **Continuing POW/MIA Problem**

A continuing major bone of contention was the POW/MIA issue. This issue had clearly been politicized so as to prop up the reasoning to not normalize with Vietnam. But the national sentiments even though still strongly anti-Vietnamese gave way to the desire for reconciliation and closure. For Vietnam, it was a chance to show sincerity and it did cooperate actively with US personnel to resolve the issue after much effort. But whatever sincerity Vietnam had to show did not immediately bring about dividends, given the powerful voices of the POW/MIA lobby made up of many veterans and organizations including the National League of POW and MIA Families headed by its executive director, Ann Mills Griffiths.<sup>48</sup>

The problem of the POW/MIA issue was that it was an extremely controversial and divisive issue for the US public. That was why there was such a cloak of uncertainty and seeming mystery that the issue was shrouded in. What were the US and Vietnamese authorities doing? Was the US upfront about it and truly concerned about it? Were the Vietnamese also being upfront and truthful about all they had to reveal about their knowledge of the missing? The American public wanted to know and the veterans also wanted forthcoming answers. Whether to normalize fully with Vietnam, its former bitter

---

<sup>48</sup> "Washington Talk: Issues with a Tenacious Hold: The Politics of Hope on Americans Missing in Vietnam," *NYT*, July 31, 1987.

enemy was for the US truly an internal issue that required deep soul searching. It had been a deeply emotional and divisive issue. There were many in the US who could not accept normalization with communist Vietnam and continued to keep the MIA issue a bone of contention between the two countries.

The Vietnamese on the other hand seemed to feel as if this Second Indochina War was merely a short interlude amongst the many wars that Vietnam had been continuously engaged in. So, to the Vietnamese, it was difficult to comprehend what the difficulty was for the Americans. The Vietnamese leaders felt that if the US cared about the well-being of Vietnamese people, then the embargo would be a most unjust policy to enforce any further. They believed that Vietnam had become open to the US and shown the sincere desire for friendly relations; the US was the party that had to decide whether a fruitful outcome would be realized. But US attachment to the POW/MIA led to considerable frustration in the Vietnamese elite which initially thought that withdrawal from Cambodia would by itself ultimately lead to normalization of relations with the US. In the years soon after the Vietnamese pullout from Cambodia, when it was clear that negotiation was not going to bring about quick normalization of relations, Nguyen Co Thach was the first to be removed.

So, Vietnamese officials saw that the POW/MIA issue continued to be a barrier that separated Vietnam from all that the US had to offer. There had been expressions of dismay and confusion and the emotional tying of this issue to the progress in relations. In Vietnam's eyes, it had done its utmost to resolve the issue and exhausted all possible

concessions and accommodations. Yet, the lifting of the embargo and normalization of relations had not come. But on the US side, more creative approaches were being suggested to provide more ammunition to the search efforts. Greater access to live sighting locations and immediate clearance for entry of American personnel even in militarily sensitive areas were requested. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese accommodated, determined to display earnest goodwill. Subsequent diplomatic activities showed that the Vietnamese patiently and scrupulously took up the task of satisfying every next condition needed to normalize relations with the US, indicating the importance they attached to relations with the US. Hanoi even “agreed in principle to let US Defense Department researchers use US helicopters for their search missions here (in Vietnam), on the condition that they were piloted by Vietnamese.”<sup>49</sup> For this reason, Senator John McCain gave the Vietnamese a lot of credit<sup>50</sup> and suggested that it was indeed time to close the Vietnam chapter and allow normal relations to be established. And other American officials themselves admitted that there were signs that Vietnam’s foreign policy was already shifting<sup>51</sup> and deserved attention.

So, Vietnamese efforts were truly being tested and they did overcome several hurdles. And it became more widely agreed that Vietnam deserved to be rewarded. Some breakthroughs occurred just before the end of Bush senior’s tenure; the US and Vietnam cooperated even more intensely on the MIA issue, setting a more steady course towards

---

<sup>49</sup> “Vessey Completes Visit, Communique Issued,” Hong Kong *AFP* in English, October 2, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 2, 1991): 63.

<sup>50</sup> Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*. McCain made many comments citing that the Vietnamese cooperation represented unprecedented sacrifice in order to smooth the MIA effort.

<sup>51</sup> Krauss, “US is Encouraged by Hanoi Cabinet,” *NYT*, August 18, 1991.

expected normalization. Some easing of restrictions was allowed. At least travel restrictions to Vietnam from the US were lifted. The US also agreed to provide some aid for prosthetics and humanitarian aid. Subsequent years during President Clinton's tenure also saw further improvement in cooperation between both sides in resolving the MIA issue. General Secretary Do Muoi welcomed Senator Bob Smith's visit to Vietnam in 1993 and stressed that Vietnam would continue implementing its consistent policy to closely cooperate with the US in effectively solving the MIA issue.<sup>52</sup>

### **Viet Kieus**

Actually the resistance against reconciliation with Vietnam came from many quarters including the Vietnamese themselves, those Viet Kieus who made it to the US and who still harbored hatred toward the communist regime. They proudly hoisted the South Vietnamese flags here and even longed for a time when the communist regime could be overthrown. Many Viet Kieus in the US constituted a strong voice against reconciliation with Vietnam under the SRV.<sup>53</sup>

The younger Viet Kieus inherited the resentment towards communist Vietnam. However, their minds were more open and they were eager to visit a land they had left when they were very little or had never been to before. This generation of Viet Kieu also

---

<sup>52</sup> "Do Muoi, US Senator Smith Discuss MIA Issue," Hanoi *VNA* in English, July 11, 1993, FBIS-EAS, (July 12, 1993): 65.

<sup>53</sup> There are many Vietnamese organizations in the US that continue to reinforce opposition to the communist regime in Vietnam that is considered illegitimate by them. Even though they have become more conciliatory in attitude after US decision to normalize relations, they maintain no official political contacts with the regime in Vietnam.

became a force for reconciliation. But pragmatically speaking the Vietnamese government was willing to tolerate Viet Kieus despite buried feelings of resentment, envy and suspicion so long as they returned with major investment capital. This often led to corrupt behavior; corruption would begin once Viet Kieus entered the airports in Vietnam; once identified to be Viet Kieus, the Vietnamese officials would tax as much as they could from them and pocket the money.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, it was natural that a negative image and feelings of resentment toward communist Vietnam persisted for those who had escaped it and their descendants. Yet, some if not all ethnic Vietnamese in America had learned to forgive and forget. Notwithstanding the fact that their skepticism toward the communist government remained unabated, they took advantage of the improvement of relations between Vietnam and the US to contact their families and relatives and even to invest in a newly developing Vietnamese economy. Their cash power allowed them to make lucrative investments and also to visit and tour Vietnam cheaply.

So, the Vietnamese government has up till today been making an effort to bridge differences and mend fences. Quite recently, “a number of laws have been amended and supplemented to meet the demands and interests of Overseas Vietnamese. After the Law of Nationality was amended, Overseas Vietnamese are able to keep their Vietnamese nationality while also holding another nationality. The amendment and supplement to the Laws of Housing and Land also enable more Overseas Vietnamese to buy houses and

---

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Viet Kieus.

land in their homeland.”<sup>55</sup> Viet Nam Today”, a new program of the Vietnam Television’s International Channel-VTV4 was also launched on July 15, 2010 to “provide an overall picture on Vietnam’s economy, culture and society, and it will target overseas Vietnamese as its main audience.”<sup>56</sup>

### **More Talks on the Roadmap**

In early 1991, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon made the announcement to Congress that if the Vietnamese cooperated well with the ongoing plan based on the roadmap, normalization could occur sooner than expected. Vietnamese cooperation had been forthcoming and many in the US administration were hopeful that efforts from both sides would likely bring about the realization of all steps in the roadmap. However, Congressional members were giving a somewhat different picture. In fact, some of the main figures who would be in the forefront in bringing about the fruition of normalization initially had criticisms against the policy of improving Vietnamese-American relations.

At first, Vietnam veterans John McCain from Arizona and John Kerry from Massachusetts disagreed that a lasting peace in Cambodia could be achieved without

---

<sup>55</sup> “Party Resolution Benefits Overseas Vietnamese Community,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns101105095414#0QRUwOWiBxTf>, (accessed November 2010).

<sup>56</sup> “New TV Program for Overseas Vietnamese,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns100617094554#8uWXqzn9L90T>, (accessed November 2010).

dismantling the Khmer Rouge.<sup>57</sup> Vietnam had been tied to this Cambodian issue by initially toppling the Khmer Rouge in the first place with the objective of completely eradicating it. But Vietnam now wanted to free itself but was therefore tied down in the Cambodian quagmire even further because it was unwilling to renounce responsibility in Cambodia without having control on the conclusive outcome of the Khmer Rouge's anti-Vietnamese resistance.

This dilemma put Vietnam in a hostage position in regards to the hope of moving forward in relations with the US. Vietnam was not allowed to make further incursions to militarily clamp down on the Khmer Rouge but at the same time, a satisfactory political fate of Cambodia which remained in the air was tied to Vietnam's freedom from its responsibility for the Cambodian situation. So, detaching from Cambodia, a US precondition that had been put on Vietnam before any progress in relations with the US could be made, and which Vietnam was in the end willing to comply with, was more difficult and rancorous a process than expected.

Yet Vietnam had not been vindictive; indeed, it clearly was in no position to be; however, Vietnam also pragmatically and cordially put up a new front of friendliness internationally. At first, the sincerity of Vietnam was still suspect for many quarters in the US, including veteran groups and members of Congress but as the POW/MIA issue wore on, Vietnam was already making up for lost time and opportunities with the US by signing on to various deals involving countries in Southeast Asia, China and Europe.

---

<sup>57</sup> Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*.

Indeed, France as well as other allies kept calling on the US to drop harsh economic embargo policies on Vietnam which Japan was still nominally supporting. However, by 1992, Japan was also fervently hoping its persuasion would turn this US policy around.

In October 1991, Minister of Foreign Affairs Gareth Evans and Minister of Trade Negotiation Neal Blewett of Australia declared that the Australian government had decided to resume its direct aid to Vietnam. The first aid package would begin in June 1992 focusing on infrastructure construction, personnel training and finance.<sup>58</sup> The United States was thus “becoming increasingly isolated over its uncompromising stand on trade embargo on Vietnam as international pressure mounted for restoring financial aid to Hanoi.” “The whole world is waiting for the United States to make a decision and change its position,” said Lennart Bage, the Swedish foreign ministry’s assistant undersecretary for international aid.<sup>59</sup>

### **Advocates of Reconciliation**

John Kerry and John McCain had softened their stance on Vietnam, believing that the time to reconcile with Vietnam had come unlike some of their colleagues. In their minds, there was the conviction that Vietnamese gestures of goodwill evident in their increasing cooperation in the search for MIAs had to be reciprocated and that such reciprocation would lead to even greater results in the ongoing POW/MIA efforts. In fact

---

<sup>58</sup> “Australian Government to Resume Direct Aid,” *VNA* in English October 10, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 10, 1991): 45.

<sup>59</sup> “US Under Growing Pressure on Aid to Vietnam,” Hong Kong *AFP* in English, October 11, 1991, FBIS-EAS, (October 15, 1991): 1.



they were at the forefront in leading the charge in Congress to push for normalization of relations. John McCain was a particularly celebrated war hero from the Vietnam War; he had been captured and tortured by the Vietnamese communists and his conduct during his capture served to give him lasting honors in military circles. His words therefore struck a chord with major veteran groups and the administration. His decision to change course with respect to relations with Vietnam emanated a strong voice calling for reconciliation and forgiveness.

McCain became a strong advocate for reconciliation. He felt that it was time to bury the hatchet and let a new era of US-Vietnamese relations take hold. His position became a clarion call to many others who had been strongly resistant to such an event. The difficulty was truly immense because it went beyond politics. For many veterans, it was a matter of rationalizing the emotional depths of the issue; the lost comrade-in-arms and the costs and sacrifices of war.

Even though the contentious MIA issue was important, it did not override what was more important at that time which was to reconcile with the former foe. His initiative was motivated by a humanitarian sense of concern for the Vietnamese people but also to give the veterans a sense of relief and rationalization that would bring them peace. Several other veterans became a strong voice for reconciliation as well, Republicans and Democrats, on Capitol Hill: Senators Bob Kerry of Nebraska, John Kerry of

Massachusetts, and former POW Pete Peterson of Florida<sup>60</sup>. Peterson later became the Ambassador to Vietnam.

John Kerry himself made a trip to Vietnam as the Chairman of the US Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA affairs to lead a US Senate delegation in 1992 to conduct research and study documents related to Americans missing or killed in action during the Vietnam War. Kerry held an international news conference to make public the results of his work<sup>61</sup> in which he said “The United States Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs has the responsibility of explaining to the American people the truth about the MIA/POW issue. We came here to Vietnam a few days ago to accelerate the process of finding the truth about the fate of Americans missing in action in Vietnam.”<sup>62</sup>

He went to say, “During a meeting with President Le Duc Anh, we received permission to begin a process of direct contacts between American war veterans and ex-soldiers of the Vietnam People’s Army. It can be said that we have made a leap forward. I must say a leap forward rather than a step forward because there are efforts from many components, including our Select Committee, as well as efforts from the US executive body. All these have paved the way for the reestablishment of relations between the two countries. The cooperation given by Vietnam is not momentary but rather long term cooperation. An example of this is that on December 12 we will together conduct a large scale search. Only a year ago, we had no evidence of on MIAs, nor any permanent

---

<sup>60</sup> See Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, Chapter 10, The Painful Art of Reconciliation.

<sup>61</sup> “Hanoi Radio Reports Kerry’s 18 Nov News Briefing,” November 20, 1992, FBIS-EAS (November 23, 1992): 51.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

officials in Hanoi or in various archives, nor any documents with which to study reports on live sightings of Americans and so on. Now we have all these things. This is significant progress. But it can be said that we have not reached the ultimate goal that is to fully reestablish relations between the two countries. I hope this day is not far away.”<sup>63</sup>

Because of Vietnamese cooperation and apparent sincerity in helping to resolve this thorny issue, the US rewarded Vietnamese behavior with further loosening of restrictions on Vietnam short of the lifting of economic embargo and a full official diplomatic recognition and normalization. For example, in 1993, President Clinton decided that “the US will no longer protest other countries helping Vietnam clear its debts to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).”<sup>64</sup> The momentum was increased with prominent figures giving voice to the initiative. Even though the obstacles remained, the trend was mostly towards greater improved relations. The US allowed telecommunication links with Vietnam to be established. It gave further aid to Vietnam to help with disaster victims, the orphaned, and those most affected by the war.

### **American Business Lobby**

However, as mentioned earlier, one important component within the US that advocated for the lifting of the embargo and the pursuit of normalization of relations with Vietnam was none other than the powerful business lobby. As the US continues to shut Vietnam out by delaying diplomatic relations, American businesses would be at “a

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “Ministry Hails Significant Progress with US,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam Network* in Vietnamese, July 3, 1993, FBIS-EAS (July 6, 1993): 65.

competitive disadvantage”<sup>65</sup> while their “European and Asian rivals”<sup>66</sup> were moving ahead to gain what Vietnam had to offer. Many US companies therefore quietly told Republicans and Democrats that the embargo was hurting American business.<sup>67</sup>

There were many reasons why the US business community was so enthusiastic about entering the Vietnamese market. Vietnam was a poor country but its potential was enormous; first and foremost, a highly industrious and cheap labor force would provide the backbone for cheap labor-intensive factory production. Vietnam would certainly be an excellent candidate for the production chain in Asia. Also, the Vietnamese people were known to be highly literate, entrepreneurial and enthusiastic about improving their lot. Given some time, the Vietnamese would constitute a formidable market with millions of inhabitants with disposable income to spend on goods that they would quickly come to love.<sup>68</sup> Vietnam was also a major destination for tourists who were now looking for tourist spots there with modern amenities. Foreign companies knew that the potential need to build the logistical, entertainment, infrastructural and service-oriented amenities was so strong.

Several companies vying for entry into the potentially lucrative Vietnamese market which was called “one of Asia’s hottest markets”<sup>69</sup> argued vehemently that the logic for embargoing Vietnam no longer held water. If Vietnam was to be watchful of

---

<sup>65</sup> “Recognize Vietnam,” *NYT*, May 23, 1995.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Steven Greenhouse, “Senate Urges End to US Embargo Against Vietnam,” January 28, 1994.

<sup>68</sup> Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*. The author talks at length about the potential of the Vietnamese market that international corporations were eyeing at.

<sup>69</sup> “Recognize Vietnam,” *NYT*.

human rights, it had to be exposed to globalization; isolating it further was counterproductive and gave the Vietnamese people no chance of truly enjoying the fruits of the free market and private enterprise, both of which the Vietnamese elite was already incorporating since the doi moi days.

However, the debate continued as to whether or not dropping the embargo would take away the leverage that the US had on the Vietnamese as far as the POW/MIA issue was concerned. There were also various conspiracy theories about the possibility of Vietnamese duplicities in this regard that verged on the extreme. However, much of the authenticity of these claims was disproved even though the damage from the media coverage of such extremities slowed progress in relations further.

Yet, embargoing Vietnam would deny Vietnam the exposure to the very American ideals that the US was championing, and the POW/MIA issue itself could not be dealt with in a vacuum. There had to be cooperation at all levels of Vietnamese society which were largely understandably closed to American interests at that time because of the lack of normal relations amongst the two countries. The Vietnamese masses had to be cooperative in the MIA search endeavor in order for the overall effort to be effective and that could not happen when the relations between the two countries were closed. Vietnam had to at least be rewarded incrementally and assuredly in accordance with

commensurate Vietnamese cooperation in order to encourage steady and accelerated progress on the POW/MIA issue.<sup>70</sup>

And indeed, the Vietnamese did do their part, at least behaviorally. Some of the efforts in the MIA searches involved some major sacrifices on the Vietnamese side. Whether the Vietnamese were sincere or not, the actions allowed for the US personnel verged on what would have been threatening to national security and constituted a major concession. For example, US helicopters were allowed to take part in the search deep, into Vietnamese territories<sup>71</sup> where Vietnamese military installations were located. But in order not to allow the spectacle of large numbers of US military personnel to the Vietnamese public, many of them were allowed into deep villages to search in the nights for possible MIA based on reports of live sightings.

The progress in moving through the roadmap was somewhat stalled temporarily for many reasons in no small measure due to the complications of the MIA issue and the continuing dilemma for the Bush administration in advancing relations with a country that continued to give the US bitter feelings and memories. However, Vietnam had agreed to pick up on improving live-sighting investigations and making a national broadcast to encourage Vietnamese people at all levels to turn over evidence of any sort that could lead to progress in the MIA investigation. The Vietnamese elites reasoned that their cooperation would eventually bring about the desired results.

---

<sup>70</sup> See Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, 179-180.

<sup>71</sup> "Kerry Sees Help on Americans Missing in Asia," *NYT*, August 24, 1991.

In 1992, it was palpable that the Bush administration was making good of its commitment to the roadmap it prepared. There were sanguine hopes that full normalization of relations and all the implications it entailed were within reach. However, the time had come for presidential elections to be held and the world including Vietnam was watching closely to see who would undertake the US presidential leadership position soon. Yet, for Vietnam, there was at some level, the aspiration to complete the roadmap process by the end of 1992 so that whoever took the White House by 1993 would not be able to nullify it.

However, the US-Vietnam relations remained at the Phase 2 level and before long, a new US president had indeed been ushered into the White House; he was none other than Bill Clinton. Yet, despite the slow pace of continued progress in rapprochement, the fear that a new administration might nullify the roadmap process was unfounded. Bill Clinton stayed on with the roadmap and honored the previous progress that had been made by the Bush administration. However, for Bill Clinton, an awkward problem existed; he was one of those who dodged military drafting during the Vietnam War.

The Vietnamese seemed to have little lingering animosity towards the US perhaps out of expediency or sheer pragmatism, the Vietnamese elite and people alike seemed perfectly able to let bygones be bygones. Vietnamese leaders as well “seem quite ready to

forget the long nightmare of war with the US.”<sup>72</sup> They just recognized the clear utility of forming a cooperative relationship with the US and benefit from its favor. Without normalized relations with the US, there could be no genuine integration with the global community. And Vietnam did not want to be confined to any particular region; it wanted to be a member of the global community.

Pressure had already built up a great deal for the Bush administration to accelerate rapprochement with Vietnam. The many arguments advocated by the POW/MIA lobby were no longer relevant. On many counts, Vietnam had done its share as many US officials had argued. It was the US's turn to reward Vietnam's cooperative behavior accordingly. Many Congressional hearings had been held on the issue of relations with Vietnam. However, even by the end of 1991, many Congressional representatives already had changed opinion about the issue. So, by Clinton's era, many had been convinced that the embargo no longer had any logic.

In fact, in 1993, it did not even have that much effectiveness any more because Vietnam was indeed making strides in its relations with other countries since its adoption of an omni-directional foreign policy and declaration of friendly stance towards all countries in the world. Vietnam was also already trading with several countries in East Asia and European countries. So, although the US was the most important economic actor in the world, Vietnam had other alternatives that provided the economic gains it

---

<sup>72</sup> “Editorial on Normalization of US-SRV Ties,” *The Jakarta Post* in English, July 14, 1995, FBIS-EAS, (July 21, 1995): 49.



was in dire need of as mentioned in the last chapter, rendering the embargo more of a rigid impediment rather than a useful tool. For example, even in 1991, “a \$3.9 million joint venture was to be set up between South Korean Steel Company and Vietnam Steel Company.”<sup>73</sup> “Six among the seven biggest South Korean corporations have gotten permits to open their representative offices in Vietnam. Besides giants such as Samsung, Hyundai, Lucky, Goldstar, Daewoo, and Niu Sung, 17 medium and small companies are already trading in Vietnam.”<sup>74</sup>

Western European countries had also gone ahead to do business with Vietnam. Even as early as late 1989, “the British firm, Tootal and the Phong Phu textile factory under the Ministry of Light Industry had invested in setting up a joint venture producing sewing thread from polyester fiber.”<sup>75</sup> Then a digital microwave telecommunication station was built and put into operation in Gia Rai District in the southernmost province of Minh Hai.<sup>76</sup> By 1993, the UK was already training “a number of Vietnamese economists, managers and scientific and technical workers and broadening relations with Vietnam,”<sup>77</sup> being “one of the first Western European countries”<sup>78</sup> to have opened relations with the SRV. Vietnam and the European Community (EC) were already on the

---

<sup>73</sup> Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam*, November 25, 1991, FBIS-EAS (December 2, 1991): 71.

<sup>74</sup> “Economic Cooperation with South Korea Reported,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English (September 30, 1991): 67.

<sup>75</sup> “Joint Ventures with Foreign Countries Reported,” Hanoi *VNA* in English, December 19, 1989, FBIS-EAS (December 20, 1989): 67.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> “Talks Held, Delegation Departs,” Hanoi *VNA* in English, July 6, 1993, FBIS-EAS (July 6, 1993): 66.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

way to finalizing the cooperation framework agreement for broadening multi-form cooperation.<sup>79</sup>

The World Organization for Public Opinion and the Continental Airlines of the United States held a public poll on the abolition of trade embargo against Vietnam. Sixty-eight percent of the interviewees, especially businessmen, intellectuals, and veterans voiced their support for the lifting of the US sanction against Vietnam.<sup>80</sup> Public opinion in the US and other countries was also calling on the US administration to lift its trade embargo against Vietnam. Meanwhile, in a letter to the editor of the New York Times, Jay Robinson who was a member of Vietnam's Chamber of Commerce and collaborator of a law company in New York noted that President Bush's refusal to lift the US trade embargo on Vietnam before leaving the White House was an irresponsible act insulting the American businessman. Mr. Robinson noted that while many businessmen from Japan, Australia, China, Germany and France had invested in Vietnam, American businessmen were banned to do business there.<sup>81</sup>

There was the sense amongst the American business interests that the world was leaving the US behind for Vietnam. At the same time, Vietnam remained committed to its overtures to the US; it said that the normalization of relations without any preconditions

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "Hanoi Calls for Lifting of US Embargo," Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English, January 29, 1993, FBIS-EAS, (February 2, 1993): 68.

<sup>81</sup> "US Public said Against Embargo," Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English, February 1, 1993, FBIS-EAS (February 2, 1993): 68.

between the two countries benefits both sides.<sup>82</sup> This also illuminated Vietnam's serious desire to establish normal ties with the US as it was no longer out of pure economic desperation that good relations with the US were sought after. Even when there were voices of dissent against any moves forward in the relations between the US and Vietnam, they were countered by those advocating reconciliation. For example, when Texas billionaire, Ross Perot testified in the Senate on Americans missing in Southeast Asia in Washington, McCain said of Mr. Perot, "I have heard he is very convinced that there are still numbers of Americans being held against their will in Southeast Asia, and I am very interested in knowing what led him to hold that view."<sup>83</sup>

So, the argument went that the best way to deal with Vietnam now was to expose it to democratic principles and to integrate Vietnam with the global economy so that the US could have genuine influence on Vietnamese society. It would be unfortunate to deny the American business community the opportunity to play a part in the rebuilding of Vietnam when other countries in the world were already getting the first hand in playing a part and clinching lucrative deals and benefiting from this uncharted economic territory. The perceived leverage based on American embargo no longer truly existed, and remained as a self-deceptive argument that served as an unnecessary impediment to improvement of relations, as even the closest allies were already setting up their own bilateral trade agreements with Vietnam who was a beneficiary from these trends. All

---

<sup>82</sup> "Hanoi Calls for Lifting of US Embargo," *Hanoi Voice of Vietnam in English*, January 29, 1993, FBIS-EAS (February 2, 1993): 68.

<sup>83</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "The 1992 Campaign: Candidate's Round; Perot to Testify in Senate on Americans Missing in Southeast Asia," *NYT*, January 5, 1992.

these played a hand in convincing the US that the time for further progress in rapprochement had come. US perception of Vietnam's participation in ASEAN activities also added the rationale for advancing and deepening US-Vietnam relations.

### **The ASEAN Connection**

Meanwhile, Vietnam sought to expand foreign relations in a way guided by this principle and it had truly earned Vietnam numerous benefits. It was self-perpetuating and drew on a momentum that was building up more and more. Vietnamese elites such as Premier Vo Van Kiet did not go on a tour around other countries, particularly ASEAN countries just to build better relations or secure economic benefits. Rather they took the opportunity to learn from others and seek useful advice on policy-making and development strategies. Singapore was one country that really had an impact on Vietnamese impression. Singapore's own development from a position with a virtually zero resource base into a global economic hub was achieved through pragmatic thinking and enterprising spirit. ASEAN also provided the arena to learn cooperative diplomacy. And Vietnam came to design its foreign policy approach along those lines.

Some countries such as Malaysia also highlighted the new "mood" in Southeast Asia to the international audience. For example, in the course of his official visit to Mexico and later in his address to the United Nations, all of Dr. Mahathir's public statements "had contained useful reminders to North American businessmen of the rapid

changes sweeping the entire Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>84</sup> “There are credible moves toward free enterprise and acceptable political changes in the Indochina region. All the ASEAN governments and their people welcome this change. There are excellent prospects for dynamic economic growth and for the enhancement of the quality of life on the people of the three countries. It would be extremely surprising if their leaders did not respond enthusiastically to ASEAN.”<sup>85</sup> He also added that “today, people in ASEAN take for granted the fact that there is an ASEAN identity in world affairs.”<sup>86</sup>

In January 1992, the fourth ASEAN summit was held in Indonesia where Vietnam formally acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)<sup>87</sup>, one of ASEAN’s main political documents. Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) had been having a busy schedule as it had been given much leeway in the pursuit of better foreign relations. Since further restructuring of the government institutions, the Vietnamese state had been given more powers and authority in deciding affairs critical to the regime. Even though the party was consulted before the accession, the foreign ministry just as other ministries had become more functionally relevant. Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam therefore rode on propitious times in its push to improve diverse foreign relations. At the twenty-fifth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1992, in Manila, Vietnam was given the observer status within ASEAN.

---

<sup>84</sup> “Commentary Discusses Possible Expansion of ASEAN,” *Voice of Malaysia* in English, September 30, 1991 (October 1, 1991): 35.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia Indonesia,” February 24, 1976, <http://www.aseansec.org/1217.htm>, (accessed January 2010).

However, Vietnam had expressed its desire to be admitted into ASEAN sooner rather than later. After observing AMMs for a while, Vietnam felt confident and ready to join ASEAN and enquired whether ASEAN had come to a decision as to when Vietnam could most appropriately ascend to ASEAN membership. Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh posed this question to his Indonesian counterpart when he visited the country in April 1994.<sup>88</sup> At the same time, there were already clear indications that ASEAN also did not just want Vietnam to be an observer and as such preparations and discussions were already in progress to decide the eventual inclusion of Vietnam as an ASEAN member.

There was also the US-ASEAN Business Council, a Washington-based trade group that represents American companies doing business in the Southeast Asian region, an authoritative body that has strong relations with countries in Southeast Asia.<sup>89</sup> In the course of the process of change of relations between Vietnam and the US, the council had analyzed the business prospects of expanding American business activities in Vietnam and the potential was truly great.

Robert E. Driscoll, President of the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council,<sup>90</sup> said that among Southeast Asians, "There is a cachet to owning American." And "Vietnam, with 70 million people and a well-educated, low-wage labor force, is widely thought by foreign investors to be on the verge of an economic boom that will accelerate if President Clinton follows through on hints that he will lift, at least partly, an American trade

---

<sup>88</sup> Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order*, 71.

<sup>89</sup> "US-ASEAN Business Council Inc.," <http://usasean.org/index.php> (accessed November 2010).

<sup>90</sup> Philip Shenon, "Missing Out on a Glittering Market," *NYT*, September 12, 1993.

embargo that dates from the Vietnam War.”<sup>91</sup> In 1994, a survey by the council “suggested that they have already identified \$2.6 billion in potential sales to Vietnam by 1995 and over \$8 billion in sales by 1998.”<sup>92</sup> Many of the affiliated Southeast Asian countries in this council also prodded more progress in the US approach to Vietnam and such prodding indirectly resulted in heightened perceptions of business benefits of trading with Vietnam.

### **Lifting of Economic Embargo**

Meanwhile President Clinton was still vacillating because of concern about the political fallout of lifting the embargo on Vietnam. But Clinton was given political cover to make this decision. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1994, “two decorated Vietnam veterans pushed through a bill in the Senate to forgive the one-time enemy.”<sup>93</sup> This bill was mainly sponsored by Massachusetts Senator John Kerry who said that “it was time to put the war behind us”<sup>94</sup>; he, together with Arizona Senator John McCain were those two Vietnam veterans who pushed this bill so that Clinton had the political ammunition to lift the embargo. The Senate voted 62-to-38 to urge that the trade embargo against Vietnam be lifted soon.<sup>95</sup> Senator McCain said that ending the embargo on Vietnam would be “a

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Goodman, Allan E., “Vietnam in 1994: With Peace at Hand,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (January 1995): 97.

<sup>93</sup> Steven Greenhouse, “Jan 23-29: Kerry and McCain; Clinton Gets Political Cover to End Vietnam’s Embargo,” *NYT*, January 30, 1994

<sup>94</sup> Steven Greenhouse, “Senate Urges End to US Embargo Against Vietnam,” *NYT*, January 28, 1994.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

natural consequence of the vote in the Senate which gave the President sufficient political cover to move forward.”<sup>96</sup>

Also, the dropping of restrictions on lending agencies allowed Vietnam to obtain loans for the large infrastructure projects mentioned earlier; however, a commensurate lifting of American trade embargo had to follow in order for American business companies to be able to bask in on the cash ready Vietnamese elites looking for eligible corporations in this business. The pressure was thus extremely heavy upon President Clinton who could not ignore the scenario that major corporations based in other countries would be clinching those lucrative deals if American businesses were not allowed to compete for the bid.

So finally, in the beginning of 1994, President Clinton lifted the American embargo on Vietnam.<sup>97</sup> This brought a flurry of activities from the business community which immediately set forth negotiations and clinched deals in Vietnam. For example, the United Airlines made the announcement that it was prepared to start flight services from Los Angeles to Ho Chi Minh City. Both Pepsi and Coca Cola began extensive advertising in Vietnam and distributed free samples to segments of the Vietnamese population where the potential consumer market laid. Clinton emphasized that he did not abandon the cause to account for every US MIA; rather, there had been great strides in this effort and to finalize the resolution of all the other cases would require larger, broader Vietnamese

---

<sup>96</sup> “Clinton Reported to be Ready,” *NYT*, February 2, 1994.

<sup>97</sup> “Vietnam Welcomes US Decision on Embargo,” *NYT*, February 5, 1994.



national effort that could not be secured without a new set of relations between Vietnam and the US.

Vietnam was already making headlines again for good reasons due to its new limelight from increasing activities related to ASEAN. Indeed, the upcoming ASEAN membership was already improving Vietnam's image and standing amongst Western countries, including the US which had a number of allies in the region. That was why Vietnam later on stated that its ASEAN membership raised its international prestige and its regional and international integration.<sup>98</sup> Vietnam also took the initiative to resolve outstanding issues with neighboring countries in order to make good of its commitment to befriend all countries. Such rhetoric had to be turned into concrete action that Vietnam wanted to demonstrate quickly to its immediate neighbors as well as the US. Apart from cooperation in the MIA issue, Vietnam also moved to resolve problems of displaced Vietnamese refugees, territorial disputes with maritime Southeast Asian countries. Such actions on Vietnamese part served to wind down the historical legacy of suspicion and distrust between Vietnam and the other Southeast Asian countries.

Many scholars believe that Vietnam had learned the hard way that one-sided relations tended to get Vietnam in trouble. So this new pursuit of integrating with ASEAN and in the world was to enhance Vietnam's position through multilateralism. In 1990, Vietnam desperately needed new sources of capital as the Soviet Union cut back on aid to Vietnam and the US was perceived to be of paramount importance. But it came to

---

<sup>98</sup> See Vietnamese Embassy in the US website, <http://vietnamembassy-usa.org> (accessed December 2010).

be clear that seeking the favor and friendship of its erstwhile adversary would be the most difficult one and would require overcoming the legacies of the war between the two countries.

Thus, stopping short of normalizing relations and setting up of ambassadorial offices in the respective countries, Clinton went on to conduct negotiations on the setting up of liaison offices respective capitals in order to coordinate further efforts on the POW/MIA issue. This step was meant to set the stage for eventual normalization of relations when actual embassies could be established but which could not be realized temporarily because the voices of dissent at home from veteran groups were still strong and generating remaining barriers to diplomatic recognition and normalization of relations. The US liaison office in Vietnam which was opened after the lifting of the embargo for example would not function in a way as a substitute for consulate services because of pressures by veteran groups; although some standard services would be provided, its main functional component involved coordination with the Vietnamese side on the pursuit of fullest possible accounting of MIAs.<sup>99</sup> The liaison office was not set up with the purpose of masking a quasi-embassy that was to appear as just a liaison office that would appease both the pro-normalization as well as anti-Vietnamese voices in the US. Rather, this was indeed an office established as part of the conditions that had to be satisfied before further improvement in relations could be expected. Therefore, the Vietnamese did not perceive that they stood to gain much from this liaison office.

---

<sup>99</sup> See Allan E. Goodman, "Vietnam in 1994: With Peace at Hand," 97.

But the American hurdle was clearly one that Vietnam had to overcome eventually because Vietnam would not have genuine integration with the international community without the US's blessing. Vietnam acknowledged this fact and took pains and went to great lengths to give in to and satisfy its requests and demands in the hope for quicker reconciliation. From this, it was also clear that Vietnam was genuine about integrating with the global community and was willing to embrace the status quo rather than harbor even the slightest revisionist intents at the regional level.

The Vietnamese showed they were determined to embark on an irreversible course towards more peaceful, cooperative international climate which they specifically indicated was the main criterion for their national development. It is useful to draw a parallel with Japan. After its defeat in World War II, Japan pragmatically reasoned that for the sake of national survival, it had to radically turn its foreign policy around and to focus on pacifist economic development. So many years have passed since then and Japan seemed to have been committed to this non-militaristic outlook and remained a staunch US ally. It remained to be seen if Vietnam would continue to develop well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be a cooperative participant of the international community. (Vietnam's relations with the US have indeed advanced by leaps and bounds as will be shown later.)

### **Momentum towards Normalization**

In the beginning of 1995, the prospects looked mixed for Vietnam; the timetable for Vietnam's accession to ASEAN as the 7<sup>th</sup> member had already been set to be on July 22<sup>nd</sup> of the year when the next ASEAN Summit would be held at Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei.<sup>100</sup> The US embargo had already been lifted and restrictions on international lending to Vietnam had also been removed; it was up to Clinton if the final push towards normalization would be given. However, the main obstacle to full ties was because of the manipulation of the POW issue by Republican politicians, beginning with Richard Nixon at the time of the Paris Peace Accords.<sup>101</sup> And even though their voices had been overtaken by advocates of reconciliation, they had not completely submerged.

Two presidential aspirants, Phil Gramm and Bob Dole, joined Senator Robert Smith to propose legislation instructing the president not to normalize until Vietnam disclosed all information about the 1619 Americans still listed as MIA.<sup>102</sup> Naturally, the people who supported full ties had their say as well. Senator John McCain said he believed that "this condition is never likely to be met because the vast majority of the names on the list represent probable combat fatalities in which no body was ever recovered."<sup>103</sup>

On May 29, 1995, in Washington, President Clinton promised to "leave no stone unturned" in accounting for prisoners of war and troops missing in action in Vietnam and

---

<sup>100</sup> "Declaration of the Admission of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations," Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, July 28, 1995, <http://www.aseansec.org/2090.htm> (accessed January 2010).

<sup>101</sup> Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*.

<sup>102</sup> "Recognize Vietnam," *NYT*, May 23, 1995.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

he praised Hanoi for cooperating in such efforts more “than ever before.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, he reaffirmed his commitment to the POW/MIA issue to placate the raw emotions pertaining to the issue but at the same time signaled a “conciliatory”<sup>105</sup> attitude towards Vietnam, apparently hinting of the coming of normalization. By then, “most of Clinton’s senior diplomatic, military, economic and political advisers favored the move to grant the former enemy full diplomatic recognition.”<sup>106</sup>

In the end, Clinton made the decision by quickly announcing on July 11<sup>th</sup> that the US was to establish formal diplomatic relations with Vietnam. President Clinton said that time was at hand to “bind up our wounds” and let it “be a time to heal and a time to build.”<sup>107</sup> The opponents of normalization immediately denounced Clinton’s decision; for example, Senator Bob Dole said that the President had not addressed whether Vietnam intended to withhold information on the MIA.<sup>108</sup> Some opponents threatened to block the funding of the US embassy in Vietnam. However, advocates of normalization lashed back at them; Senator Bob Kerry, part of whose leg was lost in Vietnam, expressed that he would say “shame on you” for people who tried to do so.<sup>109</sup>

For Vietnam, it was indeed great news; normalization with the US had finally come. Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet in a broadcast statement said that Vietnam would

---

<sup>104</sup> Todd S. Purdum, “Clinton Promises Full Effort to Account for MIA,” *NYT*, May 30, 1995.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Todd S. Purdum, “Clinton on the Spot on Vietnam Issue,” *NYT*, June 26, 1995.

<sup>107</sup> Allison Mitchell, “Opening to Vietnam: The Overview; US Grants Vietnam Full Ties; Time for Healing, Clinton Says,” *NYT*, July 12, 1995.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

negotiate with the US to set up the framework for the relationship between the two countries.<sup>110</sup> The Vietnamese people welcomed Americans greatly; trips by the Clintons first by President Clinton in 2000, then by his wife as Secretary of State, twice in 2010 showed how the Vietnamese celebrate the visits and presence of Americans. As Secretary Clinton remarked, “As some of you know, this is my second visit to Hanoi this year and it is a sign of the importance that the United States places on our relationship with Vietnam, with Southeast Asia and with the entire Asia Pacific region. This week marks the first time ever that the United States has participated in an East Asia summit and I would like to thank Prime Minister Dung for inviting me to be a guest of the Chair at this gathering.”<sup>111</sup>

It really seems that the Vietnamese of any generation, whether residing in north or south of Vietnam, favor Americans and harbor seemingly no hard feelings about the historical war with the US.<sup>112</sup> Official Socialist Republic of Vietnam statements also consistently reinforce such an outlook towards the US. In the Vietnam MOFA website, under foreign policy, these statements can be found: “Consistent with its foreign policy, Viet Nam is ready to shelve the past and look forward to the future in its relations with the United States. We believe that many Americans wish to do so as well. We should let

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> “Remarks by Secretary Clinton, Vietnam Foreign Minister Khiem,” <http://www.america.gov/st/texttransenglish/2010/October/20101031105353su0.604421.html&distid=ucs#jxzz19YQkErec> (accessed October 2010).

<sup>112</sup> The interviews with Vietnamese who spoke about how the Vietnamese population generally feels about the Vietnam War and the US very much confirm this. There is no apparent anti-American sentiment whatsoever even amongst North Vietnamese who now flood into Ho Chi Minh City in search of jobs. In Lamb, *Vietnam Now, A Reporter Returns*, 43, David Lamb says that “every American I have met in Vietnam, whether tourist, businessperson or former GI, had the same reaction: The Vietnamese liked Americans. They had forgiven if not forgotten.”

bygone be bygone as history cannot be re-written while the future definitely belongs to us.”<sup>113</sup>

July 1995 proved to be a joyous month for Vietnam, scoring a number of diplomatic successes, marked particularly by formal entry into ASEAN membership and normalization of relations with the US which were very different reasons to celebrate over from twenty years earlier in 1975. And Vietnam was reaping the rewards; soon after, “over 120 US organizations and companies have officially opened representative offices in Vietnam, 43 projects between US and Vietnam are underway with total capital of over \$1 billion.”<sup>114</sup> American officials remarked that “cooperation between the two countries was rapidly developing.” But it did not stop Vietnam from following its commitment to the MIA issue. Even soon after normalization, new progress on the MIA issue was achieved. On July 27<sup>th</sup>, it was announced that four new sets of MIA remains had been identified making the total of seventy sets that have been identified since joint search efforts began in 1992.<sup>115</sup>

The process to achieve normalization with the US was a difficult process indeed. But ASEAN helped smooth it and helped Vietnam achieve an omni-directional foreign policy orientation. ASEAN membership did translate into real benefits as ASEAN’s position toward Vietnam had significant effect on the US policy on Vietnam. When

---

<sup>113</sup> “Vietnam's Diplomacy for Peace and Cooperation in the 21st Century,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/pbld/ns04111170905#A9zyDHQWowHw](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/pbld/ns04111170905#A9zyDHQWowHw), (accessed November 2010).

<sup>114</sup> “Commentary Hails Seminar on US Economic Ties,” Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English, October 2, 1995, FBIS-EAS (October 2, 1995): 81.

<sup>115</sup> “World News Briefs; Four MIAs are Identified, US Says,” *NYT*, July 28, 1995.

ASEAN decided to take Vietnam in as a member, the US was encouraged to normalize with Vietnam in the midst of pressure from all sides, including allies, the international community, humanitarian groups and most of all, the business community as well as the US-ASEAN Business Council.<sup>116</sup> It was clear that it was not just Vietnamese interests but the interest of many different actors in complex ways that allowed this Vietnamese foreign policy orientation to take root. The US decision to improve relations with Vietnam paved the way for Vietnam to truly reorient its foreign policy as this was the greatest foreign policy prize sought after for long, and by having US friendship and diplomatic recognition, Vietnam could move towards making its proclamation to befriend all nations qualitatively a reality.

---

<sup>116</sup> It is a curious why the US decided to have normalization with Vietnam at a date so close to the date that had been set to usher in Vietnam to be an ASEAN member. It appeared that it was not a coincidence.



## **CHAPTER 8: EVOLUTION OF VIETNAMESE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS DIVERSIFICATION, REGIONALISM AND INTEGRATION**

As the previous chapters show, Vietnam's foreign policy had indeed undergone a major transformation. Its years of involvement in violent conflicts, proxy wars and civil war had finally ended to usher in a time and environment of peace which Vietnam was also making an effort to maintain by reaffirming its commitment to peaceful international cooperation. It is helpful to explore again in light of previous chapters how Vietnamese foreign policy evolved through time to finally reach its current design.

### **Old Vietnamese Worldview**

The Vietnamese Communist Party had traditionally had a very strong communist ideological worldview underpinned by powerful nationalist sentiments. This combination of nationalism and orthodox Marxist-Leninist thinking had shaped the perceptions of their identity and their relation to the world. Ancient historical struggles for independence had built this fierce nationalism that often combined with communist fervor in sometimes dangerously militant ways.

For communist Vietnam, there had been many instances in which ruthless, aggressive tendencies to use deadly force clearly influenced its actions. General Vo Nguyen Giap, chief military architect of communist victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu was known "for his ruthlessness and willingness to sacrifice great legions of his men

without apparent guilt<sup>1</sup>.” Vo apparently said, “The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots, means little<sup>2</sup>.” When he was charged with the task to purge non-communists, thousands of nationalists were exterminated with no qualms whatsoever<sup>3</sup>. He also said to a French officer, Major F. F. Fonde, “Destructions...what does it matter! Losses... a million Vietnamese, no importance at all...”<sup>4</sup>

Even Ho Chi Minh himself, who was known to have been austere and incorruptible, had exhibited the same sort of ruthlessness as well as cunning to succeed in his objectives and goals. In 1945, he said he was “determined to achieve his ends, even if Vietnam, from north to south, would be reduced to ashes, even if it meant the life of every man, woman, and child” and that he was “prepared to trade ten Vietnamese for one Frenchman<sup>5</sup>” He was also more than willing to betray a fellow nationalist leader, Phan Boi Chau,<sup>6</sup> a Confucian scholar who advocated modernization through external aid, in order to gain a monopoly of the Vietnamese nationalist movement<sup>7</sup>. Ho Chi Minh invited Phan Boi Chau to a meeting to discuss the future of Vietnamese nationalist endeavors to

---

<sup>1</sup> Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, 147-148.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>4</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 62.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 33. According to Thien, Phan Boi Chau's capture by French agents helped rouse the Vietnamese people against the French while ridding an influential noncommunist nationalist leader who could have been a threat to the Vietnamese Communists.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

lure him out. As a result, French officers informed of his whereabouts by Ho, captured Phan who until the 1920s, “was considered the country’s greatest national hero.”<sup>8</sup>

In communist Vietnam’s history, it had generally acted with opportunism even towards allies. It had strived to amass resources and consolidate its power when it could, for example by asserting its power over Indochina where Laos and Cambodia were weaker so as to assure its regional hegemony. When they were in a weaker position, the Vietnamese communists had unabashedly used deceptive tactics in its conduct of war, external relations and domestic propaganda. In relations with great powers, the communist elites of Vietnam had always pitted one against another in order to benefit themselves.

If we look at Vietnam’s history of foreign policy strategy, there seems to be no lack of Vietnamese engagement in the skillful use of power balancing. In its struggle for independence from France, it played the Americans against the French; then during the Vietnam War, it played the Soviets and Chinese against the Americans; when the Vietnam War was over, it played the Soviets against the Chinese; and when the Soviet Union was weakening, it seemed to have initially made an effort to play Southeast Asian countries against China. Vietnam had exhibited deeply entrenched power politics thinking and calculations in its foreign policy behavior.

---

<sup>8</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 2.

The wars in modern history that Vietnam endured were just a small, flitting part of centuries of national liberation struggles and fighting against powerful adversaries, particularly China. Yet, the military success at Dien Bien Phu and reunification of Vietnam on SRV's terms added to the Vietnamese psyche the perception of their special role in international revolutionary communism. They were also highly optimistic that the former Soviet Union would succeed in trumping the United States in terms of material production and economic strength based on this revolutionary worldview. Even when trends clearly showed that the capitalist world was the one gaining ground and advancing further, the Vietnamese did not feel deterred in their ideological adherence.<sup>9</sup>

Its success in reunifying the country under the banner of communism made its adherence to socialist doctrine even stronger and the belief that they had "the truth" in their hand. There has always been a sense amongst the Vietnamese that they are special<sup>10</sup> and it had in the past translated into the belief in their special role as a communist revolutionary vanguard under Soviet leadership within the superior socialist camp. With such deeply entrenched thinking, their ideological fervor and outlook had always been more optimistic than reality would suggest.<sup>11</sup>

Such perceptions characterized Vietnamese foreign policy thinking up till the early 1980s. Problems with China and the Khmer Rouge did little to alter this thinking and only reinforced the Vietnamese belief that their foreign policy position was true to

---

<sup>9</sup> See Porter, *Vietnam, The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 189

<sup>10</sup> Murray, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Eero Palmujoki in Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*.

their ideological principles and that they belonged to the correct and superior side.<sup>12</sup>

There was no doubt that problems with China had ancient historical roots but Vietnamese ideological thinking had no problem in seeing its conflict with communist China in ideological terms as well; when China pursued détente with the US and Sino-Vietnamese relations were deteriorating, the Vietnamese conceived it as a defection to the imperialist camp.

As mentioned earlier, Vietnam had historical hegemonic ambitions towards all of Indochina and regarded the special relationship with Cambodia and Laos as its right as the preeminent Indochinese power. In this respect, deeply entrenched ideological views were again reconciled with its deeply imbued ambitions to pursue power. This regional hegemony was justified by the reasoning that Ho Chi Minh was the father of the Indochinese communist revolution. So, Vietnam's record reflected very strong realpolitik as well as ideological characteristics. And even though it had primarily been most concerned about survival and achieving national interest goals, it was able to craft its policy action in ideological and nationalistic terms. However, Vietnam's Machiavellian tendencies had not been tempered by a good deal of "normal" foreign relations experience except with the Soviet Union and other communist countries and confined Vietnam to a mindset divorced from an emerging post-Cold War world.

### **Doi Moi Era**

---

<sup>12</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 189.

The revolutionary optimism and ego of the Vietnamese elites were greatly deflated over the mid-1980s when it was clear that nearly a decade after reunification, Vietnam remained in dire straits. The forced imposition of socialism on the southern half of the country and the general ineffectiveness of socialist economic principles often brought about disastrous results. The basic problem of feeding the population adequately had not been solved and actually worsened a lot. A string of natural disasters had also amplified the hardships of the general population. As we saw in previous chapters, Vietnam's predicament was indeed characterized by extreme material and economic hardship.

The "doi moi" policy instituted in 1986 was in response to all these problems and reflected the leadership's desperate attempt to rectify the problems at home but it did not automatically constitute foreign policy reforms; neither was it really intended to. However, it set the stage for it because the need for foreign policy reforms to underpin a more holistic domestic development truly came to light. Of course this realization did not come about before Vietnam faced a moment of crisis in the midst of the doi moi reforms that were not entirely successful. In a way, this foreign policy change that really took off in the early 1990s could be seen as an extension of the 1986 doi moi. On the other hand, this foreign policy change was not codified in the 1986 doi moi policy; in fact, the 1986 doi moi specifically only addressed domestic issues and referred mainly to domestic reforms. Vietnam's foreign policy change witnessed in the early 1990s could therefore be

classified as “doi moi” (which literally means new change) on the foreign policy front and could thus be considered a “foreign policy doi moi” in its own right.

### **Limited Reforms in Foreign Policy**

Nguyen Van Linh was mainly a reformer domestically but not in foreign policy; therefore, he could not be overly credited for the subsequent relaxation of foreign policy. In fact, after the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, Nguyen Van Linh still used orthodox ideological language in foreign policy proclamations. Even though he had made statements in favor of a “wide open foreign policy”<sup>13</sup>, Nguyen Van Linh’s focus during his tenure had definitely been on the domestic realm from the outset. What he tried to achieve was indeed to use market reforms to generate productivity and induce self-correction of economic problems.

However, there was also a certain tinge of self-sufficiency in his plan of action in that he did not give particular attention to external economic openness as a strategy to give a much needed boost to local economic development. And Vietnam remained inflexible on the foreign policy front. Vietnam still refused to compromise in terms of its position on Cambodia and continued to lean towards the Soviet Union and reaffirm its revolutionary zeal and loyalty to international communism.

Yet, as we saw in the previous chapters, the onset of reforms and the complications that it engendered plus the punishing results of isolation by the

---

<sup>13</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, 159.

international community made the Vietnamese leadership rethink their foreign policy agenda. Nguyen Co Thach was not just reformist in the domestic arena; he gave equal if not more emphasis on the need for a commensurate foreign policy change. As a foreign minister who was also a Politburo member, he was the chief negotiator with other interested actors in the region on finding a mutually agreeable solution on the Cambodian question.

In 1989, Nguyen Co Thach invited the Thai Foreign Minister Sitthi Sawetsila to Hanoi and even addressed him as a “big brother” at a news conference and signaled a reciprocation of a warm reception to his Southeast Asian counterpart through accommodation. By then, the decision to quicken the schedule for withdrawal of troops from Cambodia was already underway.<sup>14</sup> The Indonesian foreign minister went to Hanoi to have lengthy discussions about the possible ways of resolving the Cambodian crisis on the basis of equality. Nguyen Co Thach asserted Hanoi’s desire to have broader foreign relations based on an open door foreign policy. He added that “Vietnam wants to be friendly with all countries in the world and strives for peace, independence and development”<sup>15</sup>

But the effects of domestic reforms coincided with international forces to give the conservative faction a strong reason to cut back on domestic reforms or too rapid a course of the opening of external relations. Party skirmishes often ended with casualties to either

---

<sup>14</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, January 11, 1989, FBIS-EAS (January 12, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> *Hanoi Voice of Vietnam*, June 26, 1991, FBIS-EAS (July 2, 1991).



of both sides. For example, Nguyen Van Linh and Nguyen Co Thach, the two important reformists were dropped in the 1991 Party Congress. Do Muoi took over the secretary general position to replace Nguyen Van Linh while Nguyen Manh Cam, a technocrat replaced Nguyen Co Thach as foreign minister. It was widely understood that Nguyen Van Linh had stepped down because he was blamed for the complications caused by his reform initiatives. Dropping Nguyen Van Linh and ushering in Do Muoi was sort of the middle ground between the conservative camp which could not be ignored because it remained a strong voice and the reformist camp which could not be slighted either because of the strength of its argument.

### **Foreign Policy Reforms Persisted**

Fortunately Do Muoi was also in agreement to the continuation of foreign policy reforms. In fact, he also played a part in allowing Vietnam to open up in external relations. According to Porter, “Do Muoi emphasized the need to expand relations with foreign countries to develop markets for Vietnamese products, attract increased foreign investment, and obtain access to foreign technology.”<sup>16</sup> Also, other reformist leaders had over time climbed up the ladder of success as well. Vo Van Kiet for example became premier in 1991 to fill the opening left by Do Muoi.

---

<sup>16</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*.

Time was on Vo's side to pursue further foreign policy reforms. The 1991 Congress proclamation of Vietnam's "desire to be friends with all countries"<sup>17</sup> coincided with many other conditions that were conducive to further loosening of Vietnam's approach to foreign relations. 1992 was when a new Vietnamese Constitution was promulgated that specifically gave greater autonomy to the state organs to run the country's day to day administrative activities. The state and governmental agencies and ministries including the foreign ministry had been given greater power and authority in their functioning. Rather than allowing an overly intrusive party over state relations of the past, a more genuinely functional government bureaucracy had been empowered to perform executive duties. According to Dorothy R. Avery, despite the "jealously guarded monopoly on power, the party's influence appears to be diminishing"<sup>18</sup>

The initial reluctance and inertia associated with the Cambodian issue was overcome because of the sustained efforts of the UN, ASEAN and the major powers. Because the US made it a precondition that Vietnam pulled out its troops before any possibility of normalization could be realized, Vietnam was eventually forced to concede. Yet, even before the 1991 political resolution of the Cambodian issue, ASEAN did not wait to act and made several overtures to Vietnam to have meaningful and candid discussion on regional and extra-regional relations.

---

<sup>17</sup> "Vietnam Foreign Policy," [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB) (accessed December 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy R. Avery, "Win Some; Lose Some," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (January 1993).

The resolution process of the Cambodian problem was wrenching and marked an extremely vulnerable time for Vietnam's leadership which was broaching frantically for a solution amidst an outer appearance of stability. The lack of immediate dividends from such actions as pulling out of the troops from Cambodia added more reluctance to change and fear of loss of prestige. The changing global conditions of the time threatened to bring about a conservative backlash that could have halted external reforms altogether. However, ASEAN saw this as very much a turning point in Vietnam's regional relations and sought to do more than just bringing a satisfactory conclusion to the Cambodian issue and took further steps to reach out to Vietnam.

### **ASEAN's Overtures**

Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir indicated in 1988 that "ASEAN could accept Vietnam as a member of the grouping in the future should it subscribe to the ideas of ASEAN".<sup>19</sup> In early 1989, Indonesian Armed Forces Commander in Chief, General Tri Sutrisno stated that ideology would not be an impediment to Vietnam's membership in the association.<sup>20</sup> In January 1990, Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Chunnhawan publicly stated his support for the incorporation of Indochina into ASEAN but only after the Cambodian conflict had been settled. In November 1990, President Suharto of Indonesia became the first ASEAN head of state to pay an official visit to Vietnam. In March 1991,

---

<sup>19</sup> Carlyle Thayer in Thayer and Amer., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Malaysia's Prime Minister proposed the initiation of a dialog between ASEAN and the non-member states of mainland Southeast Asia.

Thus, while Vietnam was frustrated and disappointed with the foreign policy outlook when normalization with key countries such as the US still could not be achieved and tumultuous events were ongoing in the communist world and the domestic conservative undercurrent was strengthening, ASEAN countries intensified their charm offensive on Vietnam. Vietnam followed ASEAN's overtures closely and found itself drawn towards it in the midst of this time of confusion. Vietnam began to find that ASEAN did not pose as a threat to it.<sup>21</sup> Despite vacillations and seemingly purely rhetorical proclamations of diversification of foreign relations, Vietnam clearly wanted to provoke real change in its standing in the international community. This is indicated by a shift in foreign policy thinking as early as 1989 when Vietnam decided in its Sixth Central Committee Plenum Resolution to engage in fruitful cooperation with its Southeast Asian neighbors through trade and economic investment.<sup>22</sup> By 1990, more than a hundred foreign investment projects had already been approved.<sup>23</sup> Do Muoi also pledged that "Vietnam would seek to expand ties to "escape" from years of economic stagnation and avoid foreign military adventures."<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Nguyen, "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN," 491.

<sup>22</sup> *Hanoi Domestic Service*, FBIS-EAS, (April 28, 1989): 81. Also see *Vietnam News Agency*, January 11, 1988, FBIS-EAS (January 12, 1988): 47. Vietnam was already beginning to be moved by ASEAN's overtures to adopt more liberal investment codes that allowed countries like Singapore and other ASEAN countries to take up investment projects in Vietnam.

<sup>23</sup> *Vietnam News Agency*, June 18, 1990, FBIS-EAS (June 20, 1990): 83.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Shannon, "Vietnam Appeals for Foreign Help," *NYT*, June 28, 1991.

### **Intensive Activities**

This was a time when the ASEAN-Vietnam relations were really taking off as Vietnam began to participate in ASEAN activities and to learn and see for itself ASEAN's functional purpose and operational norms. New opportunities also arose with the conclusion of the Paris Peace Accords as the Cambodian issue could finally be put to rest as far as relations between Vietnam and ASEAN were concerned. ASEAN leaders wasted no time in continuing the efforts to build on the momentum of Vietnam's change by instituting a number of other confidence-building measures (CBM) through a number of ASEAN-Vietnam exchanges.

In August 1991, right after the Seventh Party Congress in which Vietnam proclaimed its friendly foreign policy stance, an international symposium called Interaction for Progress: Vietnam's New Course and ASEAN Experiences was co-hosted in Hanoi by the Vietnam Institute of Social Science, the Central Institute of Social Science, the Central Institute of Economic Management and the Information and Resource Center of Singapore.<sup>25</sup> The seminar was addressed by Pham Van Kai, first Vice Chairman of the Council of Ministers, who signaled Vietnam's desire to cooperate with ASEAN members. In September, during the course of a visit to Hanoi by Thailand's Foreign Minister, Arsa Sarasin, Vietnam expressed its willingness to accede to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and then followed up by officially notifying Philippines

---

<sup>25</sup> "Shared Destiny-Southeast Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group.

of its intention.<sup>26</sup> The year 1991 was thus considered a major turning point for Vietnam-ASEAN relations.<sup>27</sup>

Continuing with the momentum of ASEAN-Vietnam interaction, in 1992, Vietnam started to join the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings (AMM) as an observer and officially acceded to the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC)<sup>28</sup> and effectively renounced the use of force to settle territorial disputes. If we take a look at the TAC, it contains a great deal of rhetoric about promoting cooperative relations and adherence to justice and rule of law as well as high common ideals international peace and stability. Some of the rhetoric ran counter to Vietnam's old foreign policy tenets of socialist superiority<sup>29</sup> but Vietnam read it and signed it. Vietnam must have categorically agreed to its contents to do so.

Politburo heavyweights such as General Secretary Do Muoi and Premier Vo Van Kiet were given regular updates on ASEAN-Vietnam relations through the foreign ministry. They were therefore able to look at such constructive ASEAN-Vietnam relations and take away some changed notions about foreign policy. Their changed perceptions from Vietnam's interaction with ASEAN had in effect translated into some effects on Vietnam's own foreign policy.

### **Influence on Vietnam's Thinking**

---

<sup>26</sup> Carlyle Thayer in Thayer and Amer., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Pike, "Vietnam in 1991: The Turning Point"

<sup>28</sup> "Overview," <http://www.aseansec.org/64.htm> (accessed June 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Eero Palmujoki in Thayer and Amer., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*.

In fact, they took their own initiatives to find out more about ASEAN and ASEAN countries themselves. For example, Vo Van Kiet led a high delegation of officials to tour ASEAN countries in 1991 and 1992. Vo Van Kiet “was so impressed by Singapore”<sup>30</sup> that Vietnam as such was receptive when ASEAN members “lobbied Vietnam to accept, at least partly, the Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) model of development in order to participate in ASEAN cooperation”<sup>31</sup> implying a focus on economic growth rather than class struggle and allowing at least gradual political reforms to follow economic development.<sup>32</sup> Do Muoi on the other hand visited Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand in 1993, when he stated that “Vietnam plans to improve multi-sided relations with all individual ASEAN member states and with ASEAN as a regional organization. Vietnam is ready to join ASEAN at the appropriate time”<sup>33</sup>

Vietnam joined many functional cooperation projects and CBM activities which included intensive Track 2 diplomatic activities within a short time frame in which Vietnam found its own self convinced of the clear benefits of regional as well as international cooperation. Rather than adopting a militant stance internationally that could have been detrimental and devastating to Vietnam’s future, the Vietnamese leaders realized that cooperation was truly the way to solve a lot of its domestic woes that were deeply worrisome to the regime at that time.

---

<sup>30</sup> Avery, “Win Some; Lose Some,” *Asian Survey*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Eero Palmujoki in Thayer and Amer., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung in Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order*, 54.

Understanding that cooperation with other countries was beneficial rather than threatening to the overall well-being of Vietnam and could be achieved so long as the right steps were taken toward developing workable and friendly external relations was why the VCP decided that actually, the real threats to the regime were underdevelopment, backwardness and isolation<sup>34</sup> instead of external threats by foreign actors. This was a very significant change in Vietnam's understanding and perception of its current interests. It became more convincing and clear that it was in Vietnam's interest to adopt a friendly posture internationally in order to augment its own domestic socioeconomic development. Understanding this had not been immediately achieved in the stubborn ideological psyche of the VCP leadership. It took much persuasion and diplomatic influence to help Vietnam realize and mentally tabulate what was truly in its interests and truly beneficial to it.

In 1992, a task force called the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group comprising officials, scholars and practitioners from ASEAN countries as well as Vietnam to promote cooperative and mutually beneficial ASEAN-Vietnam relations was established. Vietnam was highly supportive of this group that was tasked with the mission to envision an evolved relation between ASEAN and Vietnam, analyze and report on the actual conditions and progress of the relations and prescribe policy implementation to improve ASEAN-Vietnam relations as well as integrate Vietnam with ASEAN. It was widely

---

<sup>34</sup> Nguyen, "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN".



understood within ASEAN circles<sup>35</sup> that one purpose of this group was also to prod Vietnam towards a non-threatening stance that would be conducive to the future of Southeast Asian security. However, if this effort turned out to be successful which it did, the natural side effect for Vietnam would also be a more proactive and peaceful stance in relation to the world as well.

### **ASEAN Confidence-Building Efforts**

There was no doubt ASEAN was trying to persuade Vietnam to adopt a different mental attitude toward the other Southeast Asian countries. Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysian Minister of Finance, said in reference to relations between ASEAN countries and Vietnam that “since time immemorial our societies have evolved separately. There had been interactions, peaceful or otherwise, but each considered its destiny on separate paths. But globalization has rendered this attitude anachronistic. Our prospects and prosperity have never been so intertwined as they are today. It is only by some measure of sleepwalking through our turbulent times that we could fail to realize that a shift in our thinking is imperative.”<sup>36</sup>

He also added “Old mindsets could be our greatest enemy. We must not allow the bitterness of our recent histories to cloud our judgment. The main purpose of this

---

<sup>35</sup> In Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Acharya speaks of ASEAN extending its norms; this is very true in that ASEAN thought carefully about incorporating Vietnam and the other Indochinese states. ASEAN was concerned that Indochinese detachment from ASEAN founders would put maritime Southeast Asia in a more vulnerable and insecure position. Despite difficulties economically and politically, an ASEAN-10 would hedge against the uncertain future of Asia-Pacific security.

<sup>36</sup> “Shared Destiny-Southeast Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group.

Interaction for Progress program is to allow Vietnam to understand us and for us to understand Vietnam. Mutual understanding and confidence are necessary building blocks in the regional cooperative endeavors. Through such interaction- the essence of cooperation- a better future can be secured.”<sup>37</sup>

But the question is: did ASEAN succeed? Did it positively influence Vietnam in its foreign policy reorientation? Had ASEAN’s effort led to or enhanced Vietnam’s foreign policy change? Was there evidence that Vietnam subscribed to ASEAN’s behavior that substantiate the argument that this foreign policy change was at least partly due to ASEAN’s diplomatic and persuasion efforts that led to a new mindset of the Vietnamese elite? We are reminded that Vietnam’s change was one from a position of hostility and ideological militancy to one seeking regionalism, peacefulness and integration with the world community. This regionalism and integration included becoming more proactive in regional and international affairs and striving for peaceful development and cooperative relations.

Why did Vietnam find comfort in ASEAN and decide to join it? If it did not find its interests and sense of identification merged with ASEAN or if ASEAN was deemed to be a sort of threat to Vietnam, would a country as suspicious and distrustful as Vietnam be willing to join an organization that had been known to be staunchly anti-communist? The extensive interaction between Vietnamese officials and ASEAN leaders at a time when Southeast Asia was undergoing a strategic realignment and experiencing the

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

formation of a new geopolitical predicament that was still unfolding helped build mutual understanding between Vietnamese and ASEAN leaders who were already becoming particularly receptive to one another then. The visits by these leaders in Hanoi and in ASEAN capitals served to reinforce mutual reassurance and reaffirmation. A very different Vietnamese foreign policy outcome might have resulted if not because of this period of fence-mending<sup>38</sup>, confidence-building<sup>39</sup>, back-patting<sup>40</sup> and identity-making.<sup>41</sup>

Because it would feel it was in an unsafe neighborhood, it would not have wanted to be part of ASEAN. What would have been Vietnam's political proclivities if it did not integrate with ASEAN? One could imagine and expect and extrapolate all sorts of possibilities. However, it would have been less likely that Vietnam would be as open as it came to be. And formal membership of ASEAN in 1995 consolidated the gains from that period of rigorous interaction and ensured its continuity towards the future.

ASEAN's successful efforts in isolating Vietnam gave Vietnam a changed impression of its capabilities. Notwithstanding some bruised feelings, it also made Vietnam gain some respect for it because it demonstrated that it had diplomatic clout, and that it mattered in the wider international arena. Therefore, the "backpatting" by ASEAN would matter to Vietnam when ASEAN tried to reach out to it. It was therefore helpful

---

<sup>38</sup> The phrase used to describe the nature of Premier Vo Van Kiet's tour of ASEAN countries in the early 1990s.

<sup>39</sup> This is one of the main purposes of preventive diplomacy activities that ASEAN regularly holds.

<sup>40</sup> Alastair Ian Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 84. The term backpatting is a useful one to describe the way ASEAN had been treating Vietnam since the resolution of the Cambodian crisis. ASEAN no longer treated Vietnam as a foe; in fact, Vietnam was highly commended and "backpatted" to its pleasure.

<sup>41</sup> ASEAN has also been aiming to forge a sense of ASEAN identity. With the incorporation of the CLMV countries, this identity covers a wider region.

that ASEAN gave an impression to Vietnam that it had substantial international standing so much so that the Vietnamese and Chinese came to compete for support of ASEAN states.<sup>42</sup>

Many people also believed that the US decided to normalize with Vietnam because Vietnam was going to become an ASEAN member. Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi echoed such a view when he said “I believe the country’s admission into ASEAN at the upcoming 28<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) is one of the reasons why the United States decided to reopen diplomatic ties with Vietnam.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, ASEAN was in many ways indeed not just a springboard for Vietnam to establish friendly relations with the world but also helped to bring Vietnam’s comprehensive foreign policy reorientation to fruition. Without normalized relations with the US, this change could not be deemed to have been completed.

### **ASEAN’s Engagement Efforts and the Creation of We-Feelings**

No state or particular grouping of states wooed Vietnam the way ASEAN did at this very vulnerable period of time when its usual policy thinking faced enormous challenges. Many Southeast Asian leaders who carried a lot of political weight in the region went to Hanoi to try and convince its leaders that they wanted to be friends and

---

<sup>42</sup> See Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Chapter 6, ASEAN and Asia Pacific Security. Also, according to Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, 47-49, the PRC also sought to allay Southeast Asian fears and seeking their friendly feelings, particularly in the 1990s through more engagement in ASEAN activities.

<sup>43</sup> “Foreign Minister Views Regional Issues,” Kuala Lumpur *Utusan Malaysia* in Malay July 20, 1995, FBIS-EAS, July 1995, 70.

that there was no need to put on a hostile stance and that opening up was the wisest course of action. There was concerted collective confidence-building measure (CBM) effort that also functioned as peer pressure. In some way, Vietnam was grateful for the outreach initiatives of ASEAN and felt obligated to respond in kind.

ASEAN had been very good at promoting the sentiments of mutual identification and “we-feelings” that have gotten into Vietnam’s psyche.<sup>44</sup> So, ASEAN-Vietnamese interaction actually paid off this time. (Unlike in the earlier episode of early post-Vietnam War period when Vietnam was flushed with victory and was too proud to relent to others’ arrangements) This time around however, Vietnam was in a vulnerable period of time but it was also in its most receptive state of mind. ASEAN’s continuous overtures and interaction with Vietnam constituted a sort of soft influence that coaxed Vietnam to see things differently. Vietnam realized that ASEAN was not a threat to its security and furthermore, there were many worthy things to learn from ASEAN countries and there were many similarities, joint concerns and common goals. In that sense, Vietnam’s thinking had changed to a high degree and Vietnam felt freer to move away from a security dilemma mode of thinking.

In the late 1970s, Vietnam attempted to capitalize on ASEAN’s weaknesses and internal divisions to break it; however, time had proved that the initial effort had been overly optimistic. And because of ASEAN’s solidarity and staunch anti-communist

---

<sup>44</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 25.

stance, “Vietnam reversed its earlier hostility.”<sup>45</sup> So, ASEAN emerged in the beginning of the 1990s to be a rather valuable organization to join given the stated mutual desire for reconciliation and integration. Otherwise, ASEAN would not have been as effective and attractive as an institution to shower Vietnam with tantalizing honors and prestige and move it towards concession and cooperation. It was like a social outcast being invited as a VIP to an occasion of great social grandeur. And this past outcast would feel so honored that he would get himself a good outfit and enter the event with the best behavior.

In fact, there was a particular change in the perception of Vietnam’s international role and therefore also its identity; in the past, it had championed the cause of being the Indochinese leader and had a perceived identity tied to its Indochinese communist leadership and hegemony. It never considered itself part of a larger Southeast Asia that included the maritime Southeast Asian states. It felt strongly that there was a special relationship with Laos and Cambodia and had a very possessive attitude towards them against other countries such as Thailand which had also been a traditional regional rival.

ASEAN had been actively promoting a Southeast Asian sense of identity amongst its members for a long time. Around the time when the Cambodian issue was resolved, it sought to impart it to the Indochinese countries including Vietnam and to persuade it to follow certain norms and adopt certain values and to engage Vietnam to take more proactive cooperative positions. This ASEAN effort of non-coercive diplomatic

---

<sup>45</sup> Yahuda, *The International Politics of Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995*, 205.

engagement to promote a Southeast Asian identity and regionalism and integration of Southeast Asian countries which “are at peace with our selves and with the world”<sup>46</sup> has been the very core of ASEAN activities till today.

There are many examples of integration in Southeast Asia. The case of nation-building in Singapore is a good example. Why does it have the shape and structure the way it does now? Because of demographic factors with mostly ethnic Chinese in this tiny island in a sea of a Malay world, Singapore had to adopt a creative approach in building the fledgling nation and its new identity. Singapore has an ethnic Chinese majority with Malay and Indian minorities. It is surrounded by Malay states such as Brunei and Malaysia and Indonesia which harbor a possessive attitude towards the Malay minority in Singapore.

It was imperative therefore that Singapore based its national identity in awareness of racial sensitivities. It decided to adopt English as the main administrative language out of practicality because this would be deemed fair to all and unite the different ethnicities together. It took great leadership skills for former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to mold Singapore into its current form by convincing different racial groups with deeply entrenched, ancestral “mental terms of reference” to work towards his vision of “a parliamentary, democratic, and non-communist society in a multiethnic, multiracial Singapore.”<sup>47</sup> Many Southeast Asian countries are melds of different races and had to

---

<sup>46</sup> “ASEAN Vision 2020,” <http://www.ascansec.org/1814.htm> (accessed June 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Kuan Yew Lee. *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Edition Pte Ltd, 1998), 280.

forge identities in a creative but sensible manner. Over time, these identities take root and social cultural settings have set Singaporeans apart from Malaysians or Thais regardless of race and ethnicity, regardless of whether they are Chinese, Indian or Malay.

In the larger Southeast Asian community, there is also the aspiration to forge a Southeast Asian identity that is differentiated from South Asians or Northeast Asians; so, there is a sense of being Southeast Asian regardless of whether you are Singaporean, Malaysian or Cambodian or whether you are ethnic Chinese, Malay or Indian. This “we-feeling” is lauded by ASEAN and is also embraced by the Vietnamese now who find it an attractive label to define its place in the international realm. There is an especial sense of solidarity that Vietnam feels with ASEAN as its prestige has been enhanced by having its international identity merged with that of ASEAN. In order to unite the ASEAN states together, once again English was chosen as the official language medium.

Today, Vietnam considers itself a part of the whole of Southeast Asia without the slightest reference to any past negative divisions or cleavages with other Southeast Asian countries. It even showed quite openly that it was very enthusiastic about embracing such an identity as an integral part of Southeast Asia rather than the natural leader of Indochina. Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung even considered the ASEAN community to be like a “dai gia dinh,”<sup>48</sup> meaning one big family. And this change of perception had certainly been part of the continuing effect of Vietnam’s overall foreign policy change in the early 1990s. ASEAN amongst many factors had a hand in turning

---

<sup>48</sup> Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Membership of ASEAN”.



Vietnam from being a Southeast Asian regional threat to a subscriber of Southeast Asian regionalism.

### **Helping Overcome Ideological Baggage**

One problem Vietnam also had to overcome was some of its ideological baggage. Vietnam's past belief in its identity as a unique champion of revolutionary communism stood as a huge inertia that prevented a more pragmatic thinking from dominating its foreign policy approach. For a long time especially after successfully taking over South Vietnam, the regime perceived it had a special role in exporting revolutionary communism. In at least Indochina, it had been possessive towards its regional communist leadership role and was determined to assert its self-proclaimed hegemony. That was partly a factor that induced Democratic Kampuchea's resentment towards Vietnamese patronizing and Vietnamese anger with Cambodia's insubordination<sup>49</sup> that led to the invasion of Cambodia.

As time went on, Vietnam's resources were depleted and not replenished because of declining Soviet aid; near the end of the Cambodian crisis, Vietnam no longer had the wherewithal to maintain its regional hegemonic ambitions. It also was in a state of soul-searching as it felt lost in its international role and identity. It could no longer attach itself to an Indochinese hegemonic identity let alone a unique exporter of revolutionary communism. Within and without, Vietnamese leadership suffered difficult challenges and

---

<sup>49</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, Chapter 7.

could not find an easy solution to all of its problems.<sup>50</sup>

Statements from Vietnamese Communist Party Congresses had almost always been crafted in a way that rationalized actions and policy implementations with Marxist rhetoric which was considered a “wonderful weapon”.<sup>51</sup> The rationale could often be tautological and overly dramatic as well. Sometimes, almost anything went, so long as you could square the circle with Marxism-Leninism. But it became harder to square the circle this time with the mounting problems at home and abroad. Domestic reforms since the official *doi moi* promulgation had counterproductive effects and the conservative backlash was similar to those in China after the Tiananmen incident. The same sense of “I told you so”<sup>52</sup> were used to attack the reformists and even the reformists themselves had to rethink whether to rein in on the brakes or face “social and political collapse” that China was worried about.<sup>53</sup>

Vietnam had had to place economic development, peaceful international environment and legitimacy through performance as the ways to placate the negative feelings within the leadership, the bureaucracy and the people; yet the major risks and dangers were clear. Foreign policy however was perhaps even more complicated as there were many more uncertainties present about relations with other countries especially the great powers. Should there be reforms in the direction of openness to the outside world?

---

<sup>50</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, Chapter 4 , Economic Crisis and Organizational Failure.

<sup>51</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*, 88.

This was a question that deeply plagued and weighed heavily on the Vietnamese leadership.

### **Leadership Receptivity**

However, interaction with ASEAN countries facilitated a more flexible approach in its thinking in this regard. “Unlike the post-reunification period, Hanoi was receptive to ASEAN’s overtures.”<sup>54</sup> The trust and assurance built from it strengthened the reformists’ resolve to reorient Vietnam’s foreign policy. And from then on, the Vietnamese elite launched a rigorous study of ASEAN’s approach to foreign relations. If we scrutinize some of the speeches and statements made during Vietnam’s transition towards a new foreign policy stance, there appears to be substantial change in the language and emphasis at the same time when ASEAN and Vietnamese officials were having the greatest interaction.

There was even a “transition from orthodox Marxism to ASEAN strategy.”<sup>55</sup> Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach expressed the need for Vietnam to choose between economic development and an old-fashioned interpretation of sovereignty and became more open to the ideas of interdependence and regionalism<sup>56</sup>. Thus Vietnam was able to look beyond isolation and half-hearted internal change to major external change and opening up. According to Palmujoki, “some basic ASEAN ideas were already accepted in certain circles of the Party even before the solution of the Cambodian issue that finally

---

<sup>54</sup> Henderson, “Reassessing ASEAN,” 24.

<sup>55</sup> Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam’s New Order*, 126.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

provided Vietnam with an escape from its international isolation.”<sup>57</sup>

Some of these newer reformist Hanoi leaders who visited or hosted ASEAN leaders were top tier leadership figures with a lot of clout at home to enact change just as Deng Xiaoping had in China in the past. Vo Van Kiet, was an example, a second generation leadership figure in Vietnam who was a Politburo member and who visited Singapore in 1992. In that encounter, Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said, “A new relationship between Vietnam and ASEAN is emerging.”<sup>58</sup> Vo Van Kiet was closely associated to Nguyen Van Linh and Nguyen Co Thach, who were all reformers with a lot of influence at home.<sup>59</sup> The presence of such leaders were important because if the old generation leaders such as Vo Nguyen Giap still held such key positions, successful encounters with ASEAN would have been difficult and this transformation would have been unlikely.

Some of the exacerbating problems at home in the 1980s that made leaders pay more attention to finding a new model for development came from seeing the increase in protests from farmers, students and other interest groups. Unauthorized political protests sprang up sporadically at a time when other communist countries faced similar problems,

---

<sup>57</sup> Eero Palmujoki in Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order* made a thorough analysis of Vietnamese elite's rhetoric in Chapter 7 of *Vietnam's New Order*, including its vocabulary usage that had changed towards becoming strikingly similar to ASEAN rhetoric. ASEAN countries' ways of thinking were particularly influential because of their similar conditions to Vietnam and had particular resonance to Vietnam's predicament at the time when it needed to break out of isolation. Even the idea of globalization and participation in the world economy, even though not the brainchild of ASEAN could have been transmitted to Vietnam through ASEAN as ASEAN regimes survived by their early acknowledgement of the need to participate in the global market.

<sup>58</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, Chapter 3.

causing deep anxiety in the ruling elite.<sup>60</sup> One example was that, “in 1989, Saigon students organized “teach-ins” to air complaints about their curriculums and living conditions”<sup>61</sup> and this had previously been rare in Vietnam. The leadership could not ignore the potential of internal dissent spiraling into chaos and disorder.

In 1991, Nguyen Van Linh gave a speech at the Seventh Party Congress, and talked about a “new way of thinking”<sup>62</sup> including foreign policy thinking. It was since this congress that a “multidirectional foreign policy to be friends with all countries” began to be adopted.<sup>63</sup> Because there was a small tight-knit Politburo leadership that had the absolute decision-making authority, if some of these key Hanoi leaders were convinced, it was not too hard to effect some change in the foreign policy direction more agreeable for the entire Politburo even though the conservative group’s opposition within the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) was still strong so long as there was balance in the final negotiated outcome which Do Muoi had been playing a part in reaching.

Its changed attitudes and perceptions about norms of openness, mutual consensus, and rationale of cooperative behavior had at least manifested in Vietnam’s more proactive behavior. In any case, it had completely rescinded its role as exporter of communist revolution. It felt that there was no threat in shedding its previous belligerent

---

<sup>60</sup> Graham Wilson talks about the power of interest groups in Graham Wilson, *Interest Groups in the United States* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 5. In Vietnam’s case, interest groups had never really had much power or momentum to cause change; however, in that period of time when Vietnam faced a changing geo-strategic environment, those minimal protests by interest groups were enough to give a sense of “creeping pluralism” as Porter calls it, on p. 164.

<sup>61</sup> Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, 163.

<sup>62</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, Chapter 6.

<sup>63</sup> “A Brief Diplomatic History of Vietnam,”

[http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng\\_vietnam/nr040810155433/#99vswzaOtzTD](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng_vietnam/nr040810155433/#99vswzaOtzTD) (accessed November 2010).

stance and could adopt a new thinking and approach without endangering its national security. It found that it was after all a Southeast Asian nation with similar interests of economic development and regime survival. Having this ASEAN membership offered not just a good payoff but also a new sense of identity<sup>64</sup> within a Southeast Asian community with an internationally reputable institution as well as a new rationale and a greater sense of purpose such as to be a regional arbiter of peace in Indochina and responsible player beyond the defunct role of regional communist revolutionary champion.

### **ASEAN-Vietnam Group Report**

The report of ASEAN-Vietnam group also assessed Vietnam's foreign policy evolution. It observed that Vietnam had lessened its ideological rhetoric in official statements. 1990 and 1991 were the watershed years. In September 1990, Vietnam implemented the policy of military disengagement. It was also equally clear that the years "1990-1991 heralded a new era in ASEAN-Vietnam ties. Thus one challenge, central to Southeast Asian efforts to promote lasting peace and prosperity through regional cooperation," had been and remained to be "integration or sustained, systematic and deepening involvement-of Vietnam into regional cooperative frameworks in all fields of endeavor."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung argues that the end of the Cold War made this need for a new identity particularly important for Vietnam in Nguyen, "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN"

<sup>65</sup> "Shared Destiny, Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group".

The report also emphasized that it was truly imperative that Vietnam and the Indochinese countries be integrated into the ASEAN institutional environment that fostered regional peace for the sake of the future of Southeast Asian security. “Or to be more precise, the ASEAN countries and Vietnam must endeavor to be engaged in common regional cooperative frameworks with one another, as well as with the rest of the region. This integration is not a matter of choice. Nor is it a luxury rendered affordable by the present trends. It is a necessity arising from the fact of shared destiny”

The report also stated that “the legacy of lack of information concerning one another, caused by lengthy periods of adversary relationships untempered by regular, frequent, and substantive diplomatic, social and economic interactions between the two sides; and the legacy of disparities in the levels of economic development, engendered by the ASEAN countries’ increasingly active involvement in the global economic system on the one hand and Vietnam’s exclusion therefrom on the other.”<sup>66</sup> There was a beginning of shared understanding from 1990 onwards that these realities could no longer be ignored and progressive actions had to be intensified and accelerated to transform Southeast Asian political dynamics.

“Over the last few years, the legacies (of historical enmity and suspicion) have lost some of their saliency. More regular, frequent and substantive diplomatic, social and economic interactions have begun to change some of the mindsets and to increase

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

familiarity with one another. The expanding lists of official dialogs and have served as a means of confidence building between the two sides.”<sup>50</sup> Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Khanh also added his own take on the matter. The Vietnamese came to believe that “multi-sectoral cooperation between ASEAN and Vietnam” had been yielding “highly effective results”. This thinking seemed to be translated into a multi-directional foreign policy orientation. The increased familiarity with one another served to increase Vietnam’s receptivity to ASEAN’s approach.

Nguyen Khanh further added, “Clearly conscious of this, in recent years, especially since 1992, we have applied active policies and measures to contribute to further promoting international relations in general and relations with Southeast Asian states in particular. While continuing with the stimulation of our open and diversifying foreign policy in the spirit of Vietnam wishing to befriend all countries in the international community, striving for peace, independence, and development”, “we give priority to the implementation of regional policy, not only because of our geographical proximity but also because of our cultural-historical similarities and our common need for peace, stability, cooperation and development.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Vietnam’s Statements, Changed Rhetoric and New Foreign Policy Vocabulary**

It is clear that there had been positive influence on Vietnam as ASEAN continuously exercised powers of persuasion to try to coax Vietnam towards constructive

---

<sup>68</sup> Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh in 1992, documented in “Shared Destiny, Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group”



change even though Vietnam was inexperienced and unfamiliar with the so-called “ASEAN Way” in foreign relations that was premised on “good neighborliness rather than expansionism, pragmatism and developmentalism<sup>69</sup> rather than ideological fervor.”<sup>70</sup> There may not be clear explicit statements from Vietnam admitting that its foreign policy change hinged directly upon the ASEAN factor but there had therefore been many statements as shown above where Vietnam showed that it was learning or interested in learning from ASEAN. Another example that points to this was the statement by Deputy Prime Minister Phan Van Khai in 1993 that “we should adopt the developmental strategy of the ASEAN models.”<sup>71</sup> And development models of ASEAN countries had been premised on maintaining friendly foreign relations which include trade relations and so on.

A Vietnamese official, Pham Van Tiem also said “ASEAN can become the bridge between Vietnam and the world”.<sup>72</sup> This statement is a very strong indication of how much Vietnam valued ASEAN at that time especially in its quest to find a breakthrough in the trying situation it was in. ASEAN made Vietnam willing to open up because it had confidence in ASEAN in serving as such a bridge, without which Vietnam might not have been able to find an alternative avenue and as a result of which Vietnam’s vacillation as to whether or not to open up could have ended in a negative, less desirable

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. There is the focus on “self-reliance, independence, peace, cooperation and development” instead of self-destructive behavior.

<sup>70</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 96.

<sup>71</sup> Nguyen, “Vietnam’s Membership of ASEAN,” 491.

<sup>72</sup> Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 3.

way. It is no surprise if Vietnam was crafting its foreign policy mode by following what it had been learning and observing from the other more diplomatically experienced, individual ASEAN countries as well as ASEAN itself as an institution.

So the above Vietnamese statements clearly showed ASEAN's influence on Vietnam, and that Vietnam felt closer to ASEAN in the beginning of the 1990s and came to perceive the ASEAN countries as fellow Southeast Asian nations due to a shared understanding as well as common interests which had been newly identified. And Vietnam came to subscribe to regionalism, a new vocabulary for Vietnam's foreign policy rhetoric and which ASEAN had always advocated. Vietnam most likely did not come to adopt this sort of language by itself especially when it was so similar to ASEAN's traditional rhetoric which had always been immensely loaded with words about being peaceful, being non-coercive and having strength or unity in diversity. Vietnam clearly had learned a thing or two in its interaction with ASEAN to craft a new foreign policy approach modeled on ASEAN.

It seemed that Vietnam's foreign policy proclamations went beyond what was needed to create a favorable international environment for national development. Vietnam could have just normalized relations with those countries from which it could gain substantial material benefits and left it as that. For example, it could have just stopped at achieving normalization of relations with the US, China and certain ASEAN countries; instead, Vietnam's dramatic foreign ministry proclamations to reorient its

foreign policy stance seemed to reflect the way ASEAN had always propounded its seemingly idealistic worldview concerning peace and unity.

Even though Vietnam had been less experienced with cooperative foreign relations when it began to participate in ASEAN's operations and activities, it sought to learn fast. The learning was useful preparation for Vietnam's desired participation in the international community. Provision of an institutional environment where a different approach of foreign policy was conducted was what ASEAN could offer on a certain level but Vietnam itself could be credited for its zeal in embracing it. Vietnam wanted to develop itself and secure a peaceful international environment and engaging with ASEAN was a way to test the waters and also a conscious and deliberate attempt to restructure its foreign relations. So even though ASEAN did persuade, and enmesh Vietnam, Vietnam had made that choice on its own to expose and open its own self to new behavioral ways.

Thus, in the process of multi-directional improvement of foreign relations in the 1990s and by no longer championing its position as a revolutionary vanguard, Vietnam's new foreign policy direction needed new vocabulary to give it a sense of meaning and purpose that came from an evolved worldview and identity. Thus, Vietnam needed a new linguistic rationale that ASEAN was so rich with. Today, Vietnam proudly conducts its foreign policy and foreign relations as an ASEAN member-its speeches, proclamations and style resemble ASEAN official rhetoric and it often highlights its ties to ASEAN.<sup>70</sup> Yet, even in the mid-1990s, its foreign policy language had already become much more

different than that of the late 1980s when there were still assertions denouncing the work of “imperialist forces” seeking to overthrow the revolution through “peaceful evolution.”

Today, Vietnam often uses the phrases such as “open door foreign policy” and “friendly with all countries in the world”<sup>74</sup>. In its Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, it states that Vietnam follows the foreign policy of “openness, multilateralization and diversification”<sup>75</sup> of international relations. Proactively and actively engage in international economic integration while expanding international cooperation in other fields. Vietnam is a friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community, actively taking part in regional and international cooperation.”<sup>76</sup>

Some of these statements seem strikingly similar to ASEAN’s own declarations such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, revealing an ASEAN stamp on them.<sup>77</sup> It is easy to identify the stark similarities between ASEAN statements on cooperation and Vietnamese foreign policy proclamations. There are other authors such as Eero Palmujoki who also notice this.<sup>78</sup> Vietnam also seems genuinely happy with ASEAN based on its

---

<sup>73</sup> Vietnamese people themselves often admit that Vietnamese tend to be able to copy things very well and then call them their own. I wonder if this is the reason why Vietnam seemed to use very similar foreign policy rhetoric as ASEAN in a way as if it came from Vietnam itself.

<sup>74</sup> “Vietnam Foreign Policy,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB) (accessed December 2010).

<sup>75</sup> “A Brief Diplomatic History of Vietnam,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng\\_vietnam/nr040810155433/#TzoRuQLttNKw](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng_vietnam/nr040810155433/#TzoRuQLttNKw) (accessed December 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> The Vietnam MOFA website offers many glimpses of Hanoi’s official foreign policy proclamations. Similarities can be found with those in the ASEAN official website. For example, proclamations of being peaceful with the world are not unusual for ASEAN but it would have been unusual for Vietnam about twenty years ago. Now it appears quite a lot in Vietnam’s rhetoric. For example, see <http://www.ascansec.org/64.htm> and [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB).

<sup>78</sup> Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam’s New Order*, 121.

uncharacteristically excessive praise and compliments for ASEAN in many of its documented Vietnamese MOFA statements now as well as in the past.<sup>79</sup> For example, in the early 2000s, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien stressed ASEAN principles at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Cebu, the Philippines.<sup>80</sup>

The Vietnamese foreign minister underlined “the need to uphold major principles agreed upon by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the key to raise the group's prestige for the benefit of itself and each member as well.”<sup>81</sup> “The principles are consensus, non-interference into each other's internal affairs, the maintenance of solidarity and friendship between the group's member countries based on the five principles for peaceful co-existence, and the employment of negotiations to settle disputes.”<sup>82</sup> It is no surprise that it was learning from its Southeast Asian peers that it was comfortable with and had a liking for. The similar sort of foreign ministry proclamations, the pro-active attitude on Vietnam’s part within the institution and the desire to follow ASEAN’s models of development show a lot of copying on Vietnam’s part.

Vietnam’s immersion in ASEAN activities also gave much practical utility for its conduct of foreign relations with other countries and larger international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) which Vietnam entered only a few years ago. Many of the Vietnamese observers and officials who attended ASEAN gatherings and

---

<sup>79</sup> Many pages in Vietnam MOFA website reveal Vietnam’s satisfaction with its membership of ASEAN.

<sup>80</sup> “Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien Stresses ASEAN Principles at Group's Meeting,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105001/ns050413103505#3QlmcMpWUmyV>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 15.

meetings tended to be awkward and less engaged at first. However, they have become much more sophisticated today and are more confident in their participation in ASEAN activities, even in those where they act as hosts. ASEAN participation had thus given them some training experience especially also in the English language which has been the language medium of ASEAN and which has subsequently come in handy in their current more active participation in international forums where the primary communication is also based on the English usage.<sup>78</sup>

There was definitely a foreign policy learning value for Vietnam to be part of ASEAN. Vietnam's active involvement in ASEAN's more cosmopolitan values and norms translated well into Vietnam's general conduct of foreign relations. And in Vietnam's engagement in world trade, it submitted itself to economic interdependence and its pacific effects on state behavior. If we look only at relatively recent history of Vietnam and its violent past, it would seem incredible to hear anything about Vietnam being peaceful; yet today, Vietnam speaks very often, more often than is needed sometimes about its peaceful nature and its peace-loving people which at the same time are reminiscent of ASEAN rhetoric. For example, Vietnam says that its people are "truly peace-loving and wishes to have peaceful relations with the world" while official

---

<sup>84</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung in Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order* speaks of Vietnam's initial awkwardness in attending ASEAN's gatherings and meetings partly because most Vietnamese officials spoke little English while these forums were all based on the English language. However, Vietnam began to learn more of the language and had their representatives trained in it at ASEAN's courses. Soon after, Vietnam became more comfortable not just because of overcoming the language barrier but also because it began to see ASEAN's benign activities. The learning of English language is now highly valued in Vietnam and can undoubtedly be a positive sign for its greater international integration.

ASEAN rhetoric refers to its members as “being at peace with ourselves and with the world.”<sup>79</sup>

Another example is the similarity between ASEAN’s fundamental principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and Vietnam’s foreign policy declarations. The fundamental principles of ASEAN’s TAC are “mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations, the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful manner; renunciation of the threat or use of force; and effective cooperation among themselves.”<sup>84</sup> Vietnam’s foreign policy proclamations include “independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development, respect for each other's independence; sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's international affairs; non-use or threat of force; settlement of disagreements and disputes by means of peaceful negotiations; mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit, cooperation and friendship between ours and other peoples.”<sup>85</sup> Even though these may be general principles, it is more than just a coincidence that Vietnam’s foreign policy rhetoric is so starkly similar to ASEAN’s.

---

<sup>85</sup> Vietnam MOFA website, <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en> and ASEAN website, <http://www.aseansec.org>. Such pronouncements can be found in several places in these websites.

<sup>86</sup> “Overview,” <http://www.aseansec.org/64.htm> (accessed June 2010).

<sup>87</sup> “Vietnam Foreign Policy,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB) (accessed November 2010).

Vietnam's foreign policy statements, activities and behavior exhibit the endeavor for not just negative peace but also positive peace where quality cooperative initiatives would be present rather than just the absence of conflict. Vietnam highlights this especially in relations with other ASEAN countries. At least in its rhetoric of multidirectional and diversified friendly relations, an unprecedented departure from past hostile behavior had come to fruition. Even though such radically changed behavior might be a result of overzealousness, it is at least radical in a positive direction. Up till today, since the period of Vietnam's reorienting of its foreign policy, there has not been any action on the Vietnamese record that shows that it is retracting from this path.

North Korea however, is a stark contrast; there had been so many ups and downs in dealing with North Korea that one major step forward in progress would almost certainly lead to a subsequent major setback. Even when it seemed hopeful that some positive change was at hand for North Korea, a major backlash would occur again at some point soon after dashing all previous efforts until enough new energy was gathered to give it another try. Such a pattern went on and on for North Korea that now no one could point optimistically to a positive prospect with North Korea and no one could trust North Korea's words any longer. Regardless of how genuine Vietnam's change had been, it was definitely something the international community would prefer to and value more than North Korea's duplicity and unpredictability.

### **Combination with Material Factors in Process of Change**



In retrospect, if Vietnam was not in such trying material conditions, it might not have been willing to take such a step. This change towards more constructive and cooperative behavior was due to very serious material conditions that weighed heavily on Vietnamese calculations.<sup>88</sup> Even though the SRV succeeded in reunifying the country in 1975 and won what it considered independence from foreign powers; it had lost even more by becoming isolated and left behind by the rest of the world. The material paucity of the Vietnamese regime made it one of the poorest nations on Earth. It was thus undeniable that the devastating economic situation forced Vietnam to make necessary foreign policy adjustments.

However, ASEAN was a major factor that connected this condition to the best alternative course of action. Vietnam's situation did not automatically point it in the direction of friendly and cooperative behavior. This process of responding to negative conditions by taking a positive course of action was not definite or certain; it was the dynamics involved that led to such a favorable end and outcome. ASEAN's frontline role in the Cambodian crisis gave Vietnam a sense that ASEAN carried some clout and that was also why Vietnam found it worth interacting with and perhaps even joining as a potential road out of its dilemma at that time which it eventually did. In fact, Vietnam found this membership a source of comfort, prestige and strength and had stated that its decision to join ASEAN had been a correct one.

---

<sup>88</sup> Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*, 179.

The process of change in Vietnamese foreign policy was therefore not an easy or smooth-sailing one. It was also not an overnight change and actually faced a lot of friction and obstacles even though ASEAN played a role in lubricating the process. It was also not a result of a sudden euphoria; it actually took a very long time, after so many mistakes and so much harm being done before the Vietnamese leadership realized that such a change was extremely necessary. However, when the decision was made, the change was quite fast and swift especially with respect to the long stretch of violent and turbulent Vietnamese history, and it was very significant when compared to other deviant cases like North Korea.

Vietnam initially faced a dilemma between moving ahead with reforms and maintaining control at home, between changing rhetoric on friendliness and openness and preventing socialist ideology from being completely jettisoned and between improving the Vietnamese society and progress and safeguarding the power and relevance of the communist party. Thayer says that Vietnam had a loss of orientation, direction and paradigm.<sup>89</sup> There was “confusion and stalemate with a continuing search for the right form of words, especially for the political report, the key document pointing toward the future that will be adopted at the next Congress.”<sup>90</sup> Vietnam had the intention to change in a positive way because of the material necessity but did not have as much clarity about how to go about doing it at first. That was why, in January 1991, a VCP member said,

---

<sup>89</sup> Carlyle Thayer in Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 18. This loss of orientation reflected Vietnam’s confusion about its next steps. If concessions did not lead to certain rewards, what was to be done? Therefore, assurance signals were important and ASEAN was able to provide some of that to the benefit of Vietnam’s relations with other countries.

<sup>90</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Vietnam Leaders Reported Deeply Divided”, *NYT*, January 31, 1991.

“This is the biggest crisis in the socialist camp since 1917”<sup>91</sup> and “Right now, the leadership just doesn’t know what to do.”<sup>92</sup> Another party member also said that the leaders “know how angry people are”<sup>93</sup> (referring to the Vietnamese population) but “they don’t have the answers.”<sup>94</sup>

However, ASEAN played a part in helping it find a new acceptable orientation and also keep firmly to it in the midst of a changing global geopolitical situation that drove powerful security dilemma tendencies. The strengthening connection with ASEAN made Vietnam able to reorient itself in a more comfortable and reassuring way. If ASEAN had not been an active part of the equation, Vietnam would probably have had a lot more hesitation and dilemma and less speed in achieving its constructive foreign policy transition if it would be achieved at all. ASEAN was sort of like lubricating oil to smooth Vietnam’s transition to its new way of conducting foreign relations. It can be said that this axle would still turn except that more friction would be present but the jarring could be so terrible that the movement could be so seriously thwarted. So ASEAN was not a sufficient condition but a necessary one for Vietnam to make its foreign policy change come to fruition the way it did.

Vietnam held deeply entrenched characteristics such as Marxism-Leninism, Machiavellianism and militant use of force that were opposite to those of ASEAN such as peaceful settlement of dispute, mutual consultation and consensus and non-interference

---

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

before it entered ASEAN's diplomatic environment. But when their doors opened to one another, Vietnam naturally became greatly exposed and receptive to ASEAN norms because of its greater proximity with ASEAN, its recognition of its Southeast Asian identity and the intense interaction with ASEAN. Vietnam's change to become more cooperative became even more prominent given how recent its very hostile stance was and how soon after, that it abandoned that hostility.

Vietnam had learned to trust its neighbors and embraced a more open door foreign policy without a crippling concern about national security threats that led to inflexible behavior in the past. ASEAN's continuous prodding had seemingly helped maintain an atmosphere of confidence and trust that minimized the tendency for defection and incurring high costs from security dilemmas and maximized the potential for cooperation and its absolute gains. Conflict management and dispute resolution allowed the members to address issues with a sense of fairness and reason through consensus and mutual consultations.

Thus, the process of intense and accelerated engagement between ASEAN and Vietnam was a factor that helped strengthen Vietnam's commitment to a foreign policy path of openness to the world. The sense of mutual identification and the reassessment of its foreign policy goals and interests could not have been as clarified if not for Vietnam's interaction with ASEAN and identification as a member of the Southeast Asian community. In other words, Vietnam's sense of being a Southeast Asian nation and its adoption of the ASEAN foreign policy model helped to dislodge substantially the

confusion and complication of its foreign policy transition and therefore made this process more tractable. That is why “ASEAN is like Vietnam’s bridge to the world.”<sup>95</sup> This statement implied that Vietnam had been making use of ASEAN to get closer with the other countries in the world but it also meant a process through which new norms, values and political language were adopted through ASEAN to help make the position of a newly defined Vietnam more in line with the regional and international framework. In any case, ASEAN as an institution definitely made it easier for Vietnam to integrate with the region and also with the world.

### **Perceived Security Benefits in Joining**

There were many different aspects in Vietnamese security policy-making thinking that changed. For example, Vietnam felt threatened by China over territory (the South China Sea territorial conflict) and US over possible “peaceful evolution” and lack of progress towards normalization; so ASEAN was a major source for Vietnam from which to draw confidence and assurance instead of insecurity, by tying itself to a regional community that addressed Southeast Asian issues of interest collectively and that promoted the themes of nonuse of force and noninterference. Vietnam wanted to secure a peaceful international environment for regime survival and economic development but did not know how to go about it especially in its time of crisis. ASEAN’s reaching out to Vietnam provided a golden opportunity, a real alternative to any sort of self-isolating

---

<sup>95</sup>According to Nguyen, *Vietnam’s Membership of ASEAN*, 490, Pham Van Tiem, Chairman of State Price Committee made this statement.

behavior.

Indeed, Vietnam gradually felt that by being part of ASEAN, it could protect its national sovereignty and regime survival because one of ASEAN's main precepts was respect for sovereignty. This aspect was one of the most attractive to Vietnam as it was initially apprehensive about opening relations for fear of inviting hostile or destabilizing forces. ASEAN promoted regionalism but firmly emphasized restraint from infringing upon the sovereignty of members while at the same time not allowing rigid sovereignty-oriented thinking to hamper meaningful dialog and consensus-making. Understanding this, Vietnam went on to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and renounced violence while proclaiming a desire to conduct its foreign relations in the spirit of mutual cooperation. It gained new insights and skills in conducting its foreign policy in a more sophisticated manner. China and the US still dealt with Vietnam on a bilateral basis for certain issues but Vietnam's increasing affinity with ASEAN and its sense of belonging in the Southeast Asian community made it comfortable and confident in building good relations with other important non-ASEAN states.

Its security interests could be tied to Southeast Asia's security interests and any concerns could be put on the ASEAN platform. The Spratly Islands dispute was one good example. Because of competing territorial claims over the South China Sea involving so many ASEAN members, Vietnam did not have to pursue the matter on its own. Rather, ASEAN took the initiative as a collective whole to voice its concerns in the Manila

Declaration.<sup>96</sup> By becoming part of this Southeast Asian community and eventually ASEAN as an institution, Vietnam thus found it less costly and risky to address security issues with other countries.

### **Economic Benefits**

There was certainly an economic impetus to open up trade with ASEAN nations. It was very receptive to other Southeast Asian countries' gains in economic progress after its representatives visited the newly industrialized countries such as Singapore and Thailand. Like Deng Xiaoping when he visited these same countries, Vietnamese officials were impressed by the stark advancement in levels of development and standards of living and were convinced that adopting a similar model and approach would be of benefit on the Vietnamese economic home front. And since 1988-1989, when ASEAN's collective effort to isolate Vietnam quickly turned into a collective effort to usher in Vietnam due to Vietnam's pledge to unconditionally withdraw from Cambodia, ASEAN-Vietnam interaction, a major part of which was economic, really took off.

Chatichai Choonhavan, then premier of Thailand, the frontline Southeast Asian state in combating Vietnamese expansionism in the past and a truly historic rival even declared its desire to "turn the Indochinese battlefields into marketplaces."<sup>97</sup> Singapore, despite its initial hesitation and apprehension, quickly became the biggest Southeast

---

<sup>96</sup> Hoang, "Outward and Beyond: Institutional Change in Southeast Asia," 221.

<sup>97</sup> Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 104.

Asian investor in Vietnam.<sup>98</sup> So, of course these were clear economic benefits; Vietnam was very pleased with all this development and found itself persuaded to follow their footsteps: economic liberalization and trade openness. The ASEAN countries' economic successes left a particularly vivid impression on Vietnam because they were very similar to it in terms of size, geography, presence of resources and the types of problems faced.

But once again, Vietnam's change of attitude to ASEAN should not be pigeonholed as just a result of the need to improve its economy because this need to respond to its dire situation should not have necessarily led to the opening of good relations. Notwithstanding the economic benefits and learning about economic management and development from interacting with ASEAN, it was also ASEAN's desire to mainly think of trade with Vietnam rather than trade itself that made Vietnam gain greater comfort in its dealings with ASEAN.

### **Trust and Comfort beyond Economic Benefits**

Vietnamese leaders were persuaded that ASEAN did not have any intention to topple their regime<sup>99</sup> and the desire to trade above all else and seemingly without any political condition gave them a deep sense of assurance that there was no underlying malicious, ulterior political motive. In any case, the trade relations and the trust built between Vietnam and the original ASEAN countries served the purpose of regional

---

<sup>98</sup> "SRV Premier Ends Visit, Departs for Singapore," *Bangkok Army Television*, Channel 5 in Thai, October 30, 1991, FBIS-EAS (October 30, 1991): 53.

<sup>99</sup> Nguyen, "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN" According to Nguyen Vu Tung, through time and intensive interaction, Vietnam came to trust the ASEAN states.



cooperation tremendously. This “we just want to do business and make friends” attitude was a reassurance to Vietnam of ASEAN’s commitment to its declared underlying philosophy.

Another reason to believe that Vietnam did not just emphasize the material benefits from trade with ASEAN is the fact that not long after joining ASEAN, Southeast Asia was hit by the 1997 East Asian economic crisis but Vietnam remained committed to ASEAN. Commercial activities between Vietnam and other ASEAN countries at that time actually shrank rather than grew. (Actually there were ups and downs; foreign investment by ASEAN shrank while exports to Vietnam grew.<sup>100</sup>) Yet Vietnam had no inclination to dissociate from ASEAN and showed no signs of regret in joining ASEAN. Vietnam could have been much tempted to pull out of its ASEAN membership in the wake of the crisis which lasted a few years but it actually increased its participation and interest by reinforcing its commitment to the TAC and taking initiative in other socio-cultural programs during that time to for example highlight Vietnamese culture and so on. It just went on to participate heavily in many of the sort of ASEAN projects and activities that promoted cordial engagement and closeness in relations without any signs of abating.

### **Giving Face in Reconciliation**

An important point to note is that the whole reconciliation process between ASEAN and Vietnam was also a lot about face. As far as the Cambodian issue was

---

<sup>100</sup> “ASEAN on Greater Mekong,” <http://www.aseansec.org> (accessed January 2010).

concerned, Vietnam could have been said to be a defeated foe in many ways, as it was forced to relinquish its occupation of Cambodia, unconditionally pull out all its troops by September 1989 and also allow UN-sponsored elections to be held to determine Cambodia's political future. As a side effect, it was also forced to withdraw its troops stationed in Laos, as a sign that its Indochinese hegemony had come to an end. ASEAN won through its diplomatic strategy and that helped to generate the international isolation of Vietnam. The choice was whether or not to patch back relations and how, if it was to be done. ASEAN took the initiative by offering its hand to Vietnam in the hope of ensuring long term Southeast Asian security much like what European states did in the Congress of Vienna for the purpose of securing long term peace and order that depended upon France's participation and cooperation, and the rebuilding and rehabilitating of devastated Japan to check the expansion of communism in the Western Pacific.

These are historical precedents of political reconciliation that avoided humiliation and helped establish lasting peace. In the Congress of Vienna<sup>101</sup> example, the Western powers refused to compromise until the aggressor France was defeated. After France was finally defeated, they felt that it was too important to be obliterated and opted to rehabilitate and reincorporate it back to the European society of states, but with preconditions. Only a rehabilitated France could be accepted; structural arrangements and

---

<sup>101</sup> It is interesting to note that Vietnam seems to be following the same fate as its former colonial master, France. France went through the French revolution and Vietnam also rose in revolt against the French. France was the aggressor to its neighboring countries in Europe and invaded Austria and so was Vietnam in Southeast Asia as it invaded Cambodia. France was defeated in the end by its neighbors and so was Vietnam albeit diplomatically. In the end France was rehabilitated in the Congress of Vienna and so was Vietnam by their respective neighbors through ASEAN.

legal enmeshment prevented France from easily being able to rearm and be a threatening aggressor all over again.

A face-saving way to give the defeated foe a peaceful option to continue to exist within the larger system was offered and it was accepted. France's response was basically a genuinely cooperative behavior, a *quid pro quo* for the magnanimous act of reconciliation by its peers. The action at the time by the winning powers were partly based on the balance of power but at the same time there was the premise that there could be learning, sense of gratitude as well as appreciation in the relations among nations and states.

Another example is post-World War II Japan. There was no reason to trust the Japanese after the war as Japanese military forces launched one of the most potent surprise military attacks in history by striking hard on Pearl Harbor. Japan's attack was clearly an underhanded move and reminds Allied forces to be <sup>102</sup>wary of it. It also committed such ferocious militant aggression and some of the most atrocious deeds that perhaps only Hitler's Germany could match. Yet, after defeating Japan, the US gave it a

---

<sup>102</sup> In Lee, *The Singapore Story: Lee Kuan Yew's Memoirs*, Lee Kuan Yew talks about the Japanese invaders in Chapter 3. The extent of Japanese brutalities and torture reached almost every country it occupied. In Singapore, horrifying stories of treatment of those detained by the Japanese kept many politicians in the older generation deeply prejudiced towards the Japanese. Many people still hold this historical hatred towards the Japanese today in contrast to seeing them as polite and cultured people. Perhaps, if the US did not rehabilitate Japan after the war and rehabilitate it well, it is hard to imagine what it could look like today and the effects in East Asia. Some of the most egregious were changed in the past; so, why not Burma, North Korea or even Iran? Nonetheless, Japan's case also confirms that it had to be defeated without compromise first. That was why, the question of whether or not Japan would have unconditionally surrendered without dropping the atomic bombs there had to be weighed greatly by Truman. In Vietnam's case, there had to also be hard material conditions that forced its receptivity first, although it did rest entirely on military enforcement. Just what level of material coercion is first needed is something that needs to be treaded carefully.

chance by helping it rebuild and by rehabilitating it.

This took a lot of work, as well as a lot of magnanimity; first of all to defeat it without compromise as a hard physical condition and then giving it its place, then influencing it and molding it towards what it is today. The US deserves a lot of credit for transforming Japan. It defeated Japan but did not insist upon such a fact; rather, it helped the country move on and even become a responsible and loyal ally. This is a classic example of how to turn enemies into allies. How about Vietnam? How much more can we expect? It is interesting to note and incredible that Vietnam says it is allies with the US<sup>103</sup> today. Even though such proclamations may be questionable, it is hard to imagine North Korea saying the same thing.

Of course there was a real need to rehabilitate Japan for strategic reasons just as there was very real reason to rehabilitate Vietnam; or else any security problem there could have had major spillover effects to Southeast Asia later on, and if Vietnam did not integrate with greater Southeast Asia, it would have been hard to be certain that it would not lean towards other countries or reassert its Indochinese hegemony or change the balance of power in the region that might have had adverse effects on Southeast Asian security and the larger East Asian security.

Were there instances of historic acts of reconciliation where it did not turn out

---

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.bridgew.edu/Newlog/index.cfm> (accessed November 2009). Le Cong Phung, Vietnamese Ambassador to the US gave a speech at Bridgewater State College on Monday November 2, 2009 to highlight Vietnam-US relations. He said that there were past "misunderstandings" between the US and Vietnam but the two countries "have decided to get over the past and look at the present and into the future" He also said specifically that the two countries "were once enemies but are now allies"

well? Yes, the Versailles system after World War I, and the League of Nations fell apart as Germany<sup>104</sup> recuperated and rearmed to fan the flames of war again, this time more ferocious ones. So, trying to seek peace can often pose even greater danger to peace itself. Being gullible or careless can easily be counterproductive and lead to violence, bloodshed and grave damage to national and international security instead. ASEAN did not take Vietnam in lightheartedly; it was well aware of the implications and there was heated debate within as to whether Vietnam should be taken in as well as the timing of integration.

Taking things only at face value or taking words for granted can be dangerous. Peace and reconciliation therefore cannot be rushed either. Vietnam in the 1970s would have made a very lousy member of ASEAN because it was very much engaging in pugnacious thinking and bargaining while making deceptive attempts to reassure. The repercussions would have ended the association if it allowed a member of such malignance to enter. It was wise that ASEAN waited and maintained a steadfast anti-communist bulwark against a Vietnam that still harbored a revolutionary communist role at that time.

Only when it was forced to be more receptive and change its stance was there room for compromise. ASEAN was circumspect to test Vietnam's sincerity while

---

<sup>104</sup> Walter Clemens, *Dynamics of International Relations* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 69.

engaging in persistent diplomatic efforts to persuade<sup>105</sup> Vietnam to adopt this pragmatic, moderate and open attitude, for ASEAN's "constructive engagement is often intended to use gentle persuasion to prod regimes into political liberalization."<sup>106</sup> Compared with other countries similar to itself in many ways, such as North Korea or Cuba, Vietnam fares much better in terms of its new foreign policy stance that seeks to be friendly with all countries in the world, a stance which it continues to assert today. And it does not seem likely that it would go back to its past hostile stance for any foreseeable reason. Even though Vietnam's words cannot only be totally taken at face value either, it has been for more than a decade now that it became an ASEAN member, and even though Vietnam may still be far from having the sort of democratic, open and free society, it has not reneged on its commitment to the terms of membership within ASEAN and normalization with other countries. Trust and commitment had been built, albeit cautiously and gradually.

Some of the historical examples above show that strength and magnanimity together can build lasting peace and order. ASEAN also achieved something similar through persistent diplomacy that avoided the condemnation of an opponent it was trying to reconcile with. As was mentioned above, prominent leaders went to Hanoi to personally work to improve relations with Vietnam and also invite it to join ASEAN

---

<sup>105</sup> According to Amitav Acharya, ASEAN countries considered very carefully Vietnam's position before actually deciding to incorporate Vietnam into ASEAN. The lack of trust was part of the reason why many ASEAN leaders kept visiting Hanoi; it was as much part of the effort to test the waters with Vietnam, investigate Vietnam's genuineness, further influence Vietnamese policy and obtain Vietnam's assurance of a bona fide relaxed foreign policy posture.

<sup>106</sup> Henderson, "Reassessing ASEAN," 26.

activities without humiliating it in any way. Such gestures of goodwill allowed Vietnam to move towards integration with ASEAN and concurrently as well as subsequently with the world, partly through the ASEAN channel, without losing face. In fact, ASEAN gave Vietnam much international limelight by showcasing Vietnam's reciprocation of goodwill instead of embarrassing it by joining with great powers in coercing Vietnam into reluctant actions.

Giving a foe a chance without insulting it certainly can help turn it into a friend; this is even more so for Vietnam given its "deep-seated concern for face and the desire to gain prestige."<sup>107</sup> ASEAN's diplomatic skills were indeed sensitive towards bruised feelings. There is no doubt Vietnam must have felt honored and grateful for such thoughtful overtures which it felt compelled to respond to in kind.

### **New Enthusiastic Vietnam**

It should not be surprising then to note how much of an enthusiastic member Vietnam had been since becoming closer to and joining ASEAN. Of course Vietnam had not become a member in many other international organizations because of its years of isolation, but as a new ASEAN member, compared with the other ASEAN newcomers, Vietnam had shown a lot of interest and commitment. According to K. J. Holsti, "a country's level of involvement in various international issue areas is often the expression

---

<sup>107</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 32.

of its general orientation toward the rest of the world.”<sup>108</sup> Likewise, Vietnam’s proactive role in ASEAN shows its commitment to it. ASEAN has influenced Vietnam a great deal and Vietnam has embraced ASEAN’s modus vivendi and attached to it great importance.

Vietnam even particularly showed that it cherished its relations with the US. Even though some of its words such as commitment to peace, fairness, friendliness, trade, diversity and so on can sound perfunctory and superficial, they are such a contrast to its past declaratory positions and some of the very hostile statements that come out of North Korea. Counterfactually speaking, if the interaction with ASEAN did not exist, Vietnam could have still been a lot more rigid in its foreign policy and there could have been more friction and difficulty in trying to establish normal and cooperative relations with other countries. Indeed, when Vietnam felt compelled to improve relations with the US in particular, it was not very certain about how to achieve it and renew a balanced relationship with it. ASEAN as a grouping served in a way as a springboard for Vietnam to highlight its importance to the US and at the same time proclaim through various channels its sincere desire to forge new Vietnam-US relations.

Indeed, many signs point to the vastly improved US-Vietnam relations. In mid-2010, Vietnam ranked “27<sup>th</sup> out of the countries that export to the US, earning over 4 billion USD, a year-on-year increase of 13.5 percent while Vietnam’s imports from the US stood at over one billion USD, an increase of 33.4 percent over the same period last

---

<sup>108</sup> K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework of Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), 98.



year.”<sup>109</sup> The US-Vietnam relations in the past more than 15 years has been a long and complicated road but the last ten years has been very good for both countries,” said Senator Jim Webb, Chairman of the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee of US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.<sup>110</sup>

In an interview granted to Vietnam News Agency-Washington D.C. based reporter on the 15th anniversary of the Vietnam-US diplomatic relations, Senator Webb said, “Vietnam is playing a very strong role not only in ASEAN but also in East and Southeast Asia right now.”<sup>111</sup> Senator Webb stressed that, “Vietnam and the United States are natural friends. The Vietnamese are an industrious culture, they are warm to the people from outsiders, they have strategic reasons for the United States, it is important. I believe the presence of the United States is important economically but also East Asia needs the balancing force, too many wars happen in the past because of the confrontation among the big powers. The United States is good for balance of East Asia and we are natural friends, we just need to work to iron out all of the differences.”<sup>112</sup>

Since diplomatic relations between the US and modern Vietnam were established in July 1995, US-Vietnam relations have become more impressive; “both the depth of the relationship and the outlook for continued deepening,” a local newspaper reported. “Not

---

<sup>109</sup> “Vietnamese Exports to US Continue to Rise,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns100701110800#tP4tzmyCUriz>. (accessed November 2010).

<sup>110</sup> “US-Viet Nam Relations Very Good for Both Countries, Says Senator,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns100706093135#6piZX8nUB5Tp> (accessed November 2010).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

only have our two countries signed a historic bilateral trade agreement,” said Undersecretary of State for Economic, Energy, and Agricultural Affairs Robert Hormats, “but this agreement has increased trade more than 700 percent from just over 2 billion USD in 2001 to nearly 16 billion USD in 2009.”<sup>113</sup> According to “The Hill”, “Vietnam has moved ahead on a variety of other fronts, becoming a leader in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, serving a successful stint at the United Nations Security Council and working hard on broadening its relationship with the US beyond trade.”<sup>114</sup>

Vietnam had “cooperated with the US on accounting for the many missing US servicemen from the war.” “Vietnam had always taken the MIA issue as a humanitarian problem, not a military or diplomatic one. National Security Adviser Gen. James Jones recognized that the relationship started with the great amount of help and compassion that the Vietnamese government showed in all our efforts to recover those who were missing in action.” Also “the political, security and defense dialog, among others, has become an annual event that helps fortify the framework for bilateral relations. Military cooperation today addressed multiple arenas, including peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, maritime security, counterterrorism and counternarcotics cooperation, border security, nonproliferation, and exchanges of high-level visits.”<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> “US Paper Highlights US-Vietnam Relationship,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns100715110019#qNpb6fWGHxLG> (accessed Nov 2010).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

A news report in late 2010, around the completion of Vietnam's role as the ASEAN Chair, stated, "Looking back at the past year, it could be seen that along with contributions in terms of content to speed up the building of the ASEAN Community, enhance regional connectivity and upgrade ASEAN's relations with partners to a new level, Vietnam's organization of major activities have contributed greatly to its successful tenure. These moves also promoted the image of a peaceful, stable, cooperative and dynamically developing Vietnam and improve its position and prestige in the regional and international arenas, thereby contributing to the national construction and defense. In addition to the successful hosting of 15 summits as well as a series of ministerial-level conferences and senior officials' meetings, Vietnam has put forth initiatives and ideas, and taken the lead in drafting ASEAN important documents and coordinating the bloc's cooperation operations."<sup>116</sup>

### **Vietnam's Commitment to New Foreign Policy Orientation**

The moment of crisis and desperation was really intense for Vietnam in the late 1980s and served as a lightning strike that awakened the Vietnamese elites to the reality of the situation and made them scramble for solutions and become more receptive to them, in order to survive and survive well. ASEAN itself was part of the effort to first uncompromisingly create a dire situation for Vietnam by taking a hard-line stance against it when it violated international norms and the UN Charter. ASEAN was one of the main

---

<sup>116</sup> "Vietnam Successfully Assumes ASEAN Presidency," <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105001/ns101227095734#c3rytcDRysAt>.

initiators that kept international attention and pressure on the Cambodian situation through the auspices of the UN and preventing it from becoming a fait accompli. Only when there were signs that Vietnam's stubborn resistance waned was a softer approach employed. Vietnam therefore learnt that ASEAN was effective and had some clout albeit of a diplomatic nature; this is one reason why it found it worthy to join and become part of it later on.

Vietnam's difficulties were very acute and that was why ASEAN was able to be a pivotal factor, influencing the course of events so that what could have been potentially negative turned into a positive outcome. Stripped of its power, identity, resources and international goodwill, Vietnam had to change and redefine itself. ASEAN left an opening here for Vietnam to choose a positive route. We must remember that Vietnam had historically compromised on certain occasions because of an unfavorable situation and then switched to a militant stance soon after, as shown just prior to the beginning of the Third Indochina War. Since the end of the Cambodian crisis however, Vietnam made an unprecedented change towards diversified cooperative behavior and the prospect of reversal in this behavior seems highly unlikely today. Instead of switching back to a militant stance, Vietnam opted to maintain friendly and open foreign relations and follow through in similar foreign policy directions of its fellow ASEAN members.

Of course there may be quarters in Vietnam that have advocated more hawkish military stances or have more conservative inclinations to rollback on reforms. This is something that continues to be a source of tension within the leadership and issue that

worries observers, but the character of a belligerent Vietnam dominating or seeking to dominate Indochinese politics and threaten weaker neighboring states is no longer as acute as before if it still has any significance at all.

Even though it is not impossible that such militaristic bellicosity has resurgence, depending on changing circumstances that continue to unfold, there is very much the sense that “times have changed” and this sort of militaristic or aggressive thinking has very much given way to a more peaceful, development-focused and pragmatic stance. That is why Palmujoki says that Vietnam’s “official foreign policy thinking and concrete policies have broken away from older ideologies.”<sup>117</sup> Of course that does not mean that domestically, genuine reformist initiatives would ripple through evenly in the Vietnamese society or even within the Vietnamese policy-making circles.

However, the Vietnamese Communist Party today gives more authority to the state organs such as the National Assembly and Foreign Ministry that are more committed to constitutional rule of law and subscription to ASEAN’s way in external relations to solve issues peacefully and so on. Vietnam is definitely not like North Korea or Iran today that are sporadically openly threatening to defeat the US or something along those lines. We can find no such language in Vietnamese official statements for a very long time now and this is very important. Even when there had been any sort of disagreement that arises from intellectual debate or trade dispute, Vietnam’s statements of protest are often very mild. It definitely does not have the same sort of diehard mindset

---

<sup>117</sup> Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam’s New Order*, 122.

manifested in the Vietnam War anymore.

Vietnam, given the limelight within the ASEAN framework today is more obligated to be cooperative in its external dealings that prevent the exacerbation of any friction or disputes, and given its opening up to tourists, businesspeople and government officials, it would be counterproductive to stamp down on its people with an iron fist. It would look very bad and put the country on an awkward spot. So, ASEAN had been a useful diplomatic environment to maintain general attention on member activities alive which keep mutual constraining influence active. As Holsti says, “it is clear from review of diplomatic relations between governments belonging to pluralistic security communities that the results of responsiveness and other characteristics creating bonds of unity have imposed restraints on national behavior that did not exist previously.”<sup>118</sup> And Vietnam has indeed been actively involved in those sorts of ASEAN activities that deeply institutionalize Vietnamese involvement and engagement since the 1990s up till now without respite.

There are numerous examples. “The Vietnamese National Assembly Standing Committee headed a report of the activities of the National Assembly delegation to the 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Organization (AIPO)”<sup>119</sup> in 1995 soon after Vietnam’s official ASEAN membership. The Committee said, “A solemn ceremony was held on September 19, 1995 to admit the National Assembly of the

---

<sup>118</sup> Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework of Analysis*, 492.

<sup>119</sup> “Assembly Standing Committee Meets 26-28 September,” Hanoi, *Voice of Vietnam Network in Vietnamese*, FBIS-EAS, October 1, 1995, FBIS-EAS (October 2, 1995): 81.

Socialist Republic of Vietnam to AIPO. The committee unanimously agreed that the Vietnamese National Assembly's full AIPO membership would create more favorable conditions for our country to make a worthy contribution to the cause of peace, security, stability, cooperation, sustainable development and prosperity in the region as well as in the Asia-Pacific region and other parts of the world."<sup>120</sup> And many years after, in 2010, Vietnam remained committed to such involvement; it played the Chair of ASEAN which actively "embarked on plans of action and cooperation program in various spheres."<sup>121</sup> Pham Quang Vinh, Assistant to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of Vietnamese Senior Officials to ASEAN, made the comment, "Ensuring regional peace, security and cooperation is the major goal of politics-security cooperation among the ASEAN nations and between the bloc and its partners."

ASEAN has been pluralistic in the sense of mutual consultation and consensus-building in various aspects of its function including dispute resolution. Vietnam has immersed enough in this environment where it observed how other members have resolved certain territorial disputes cordially and reasonably, setting an example to Vietnam and leaving it genuinely impressed. As a result, it has become a lot more restrained about irredentist claims in the recent past and more attuned to peaceful resolution of conflicts.

### **Peaceful Resolution of Conflicts**

---

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> "ASEAN Politics-security Cooperation Ensures Regional Peace," <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105001/ns101228091401#ZuCVTJqp2B5r>.

There are certain ASEAN norms that veteran ASEAN states slowly embraced over time in their regional relations such as peaceful resolution of conflicts and consensus building. There is evidence that Vietnam had been positively influenced the same way through immersion in ASEAN's framework and became willing to demonstrate it in practice. Vietnam is today a full member of ASEAN that accedes to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and subscribes to the minute details of ASEAN's norms and activities. It has in fact been pursuing openness, preventive diplomacy and peaceful resolution of conflict in ways copied from other veteran ASEAN states and is proactively trying to increase its legitimacy as a member of ASEAN and national prestige by initiating programs such as the Hanoi Program of Action<sup>122</sup> and not withholding any effort in taking the initiative to participate actively.

Other ASEAN countries also demonstrated peaceful resolution of disputes based on ASEAN ways by example. For instance, Indonesia and Malaysia had an outstanding dispute over the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan. Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas asserted, "Should we send in troops to throw them out? How could we do that, we don't live in times like that anymore, we're friends. We have many interests in common with Malaysia. This is a problem and we're going to solve it but in an amicable way. We're in ASEAN together."<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Vietnam MOFA website, <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en> and "Ha Noi Plan of Action," <http://www.aseansec.org/687.htm>.

<sup>123</sup> "More Talks on Island Dispute with Malaysia." Jakarta *KOMPAS* in Indonesian, January 29, 1994, FBIS-EAS, (March 31, 1994): 44.



Thus, even with respect to the islands in the South China Sea where multiple claims with members as well as non-members exist and a clash between Chinese warships and Vietnamese freighters had occurred even as late as March 14, 1988<sup>124</sup>, Vietnam even in the mid-1990s had learned not to be unduly hasty and aggressive about seeking rectification even though there had been incidents that could have caused otherwise. On July 20, 1994, “China deployed two warships into the South China Sea to blockade a Vietnamese oil rig built on a site of competing claims.”<sup>125</sup> It was unclear if the Chinese warships used an explicit threat of force but those ships were frigates. Chinese Foreign Ministry said, “Vietnam’s daily activities in the area have greatly encroached upon China’s sovereignty and maritime interests.” A spokesman for the Vietnamese Embassy in Beijing, Nguyen Hong Hai said embassy officials were “very concerned about reports of the blockade”<sup>126</sup> but gave no further comments that would aggravate the situation.

Vietnam chose not to be reactive; in fact, it had been more patient and allowed the ASEAN mechanism to work things out over this thorny issue. ASEAN responded to this situation by making a joint statement on March 18, 1995. The ASEAN foreign ministers declared, “We, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, express our serious concern over recent developments which affect peace and stability in the South China Sea. We urge all concerned to remain faithful to the letter and spirit of the Manila Declaration on the

---

<sup>124</sup> “SPK Urges PRC to Stop Provocations against SRV,” *SPK* in English, March 19, 1988, FBIS-EAS, (March 21, 1988): 25.

<sup>125</sup> Philip Shenon, “China Sends Warships to Vietnam Oil Site,” *NYT*, July 21, 1994.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

South China Sea which we issued in July 1992 and which has been endorsed by other countries and the Non-Aligned Movement. The Manila Declaration urges all concerned to resolve differences in the South China Sea by peaceful means and to refrain from taking actions that de-stabilize the situation.”<sup>127</sup>

Many important global trade routes and sea lanes are located in Southeast Asia; it was not just in the interest of Southeast Asian countries that the freedom of navigation would not be hampered. It seemed that ASEAN’s statement paid off; exactly two months later, on 18<sup>th</sup> of May, 1995, China issued a statement saying that “its territorial claim to a group of islands in the South China Sea is not meant to impede freedom of navigation or the safe passage of aircraft.”<sup>128</sup> A few months after that, Chinese ambassador to the Philippines Guang Deng Ming said yesterday, “Beijing is now opening its doors to other Spratly claimants to discuss their overlapping claims in the disputed islands in the South China Sea, as it pledged not to use force to resolve the dispute.”<sup>129</sup> ASEAN also made the “Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone declaration which included its members’ 200 mile exclusive economic zones,” sending “a particular message to China, whose sea and island claims in the South China Sea extended well into ASEAN economic zones.”<sup>130</sup>

These examples demonstrated that ASEAN had progressed beyond just a talk forum but had become a diplomatic organization with substantial clout that could display

---

<sup>127</sup> “Statement by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers on the Recent Developments in the South China Sea,” March 18, 1995, <http://www.aseansec.org/2089.htm> (accessed October 2010).

<sup>128</sup> Patrick E. Taylor, “China Pledges Safe Passage Around Isles,” *NYT*, May 19, 1995.

<sup>129</sup> “Envoy: PRC ‘Now Willing’ to Discuss the Spratlys,” *The Manila Chronicle* in English, September 29, 1995, FBIS-EAS (October 2, 1995): 69.

<sup>130</sup> Philip Bowring, “While ASEAN Advances, APEC is Slowing Down,” *NYT*, December 20, 1995.

solidarity and functional purpose when they were called for. That was also why Vietnam's entry was desirable to consolidate this regional solidarity even though it would be a "drag to economic integration."<sup>131</sup> In any case, ASEAN had since including Vietnam's membership been "pushing for trade liberalization"<sup>132</sup> and a common market in Southeast Asia, even as ASEAN moved forward towards ASEAN-10 integration and beyond, so that there could be accelerated economic progress that would assuage the detrimental effects of the development gap and also so that the region could "face China from a position of strength," as two ASEAN leaders, Goh Chok Tong of Singapore and Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand said.

That was why China had chosen to court ASEAN; on Oct 7, 2003, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made his first appearance before Southeast Asian leaders announcing that his government would encourage greater investment in the region by Chinese companies. His message was "don't fear us, love us"<sup>133</sup> as China represented a big market and a big investor, and its very size would "help lift all boats,"<sup>134</sup> referring to Southeast Asian countries still recovering from the 1997 Asian financial crisis. China's approach towards Southeast Asia was thus characterized by many as a "charm offensive."<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Jane Perlez, "China Promises More Investment in Southeast Asia," *NYT*, October 8, 2003.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> "China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia,"

<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18678> (accessed December 2010).

The US had also renewed its interest in ASEAN. During the George W. Bush administration, it sent “the first American envoy, Scott Marcial, a career foreign service officer,”<sup>136</sup> to ASEAN; the US was “the first country to ever make such an appointment.”<sup>137</sup> The US recognized that “because countries in Asia have few formal links, ASEAN stood out as the leading regional talk forum on economic, security and political issues.” Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, a “foreign policy wise man”<sup>138</sup> led the charge back in 2006 for such an appointment which was believed to “help elevate American attention and standing in the region.”<sup>139</sup>

As for Vietnam, the example of tensions on the South China Sea issue had also given it a chance to demonstrate its more restrained approach. Unlike in the past Cambodian issue when it usually had a tendency for “quick fix” and “use of force”<sup>140</sup> policies, today, Vietnam has had many border disputes solved peacefully.<sup>141</sup> In the 1990s itself, a number of border negotiations led to many resolutions and agreements. For example, “a joint development agreement in an area of bilateral dispute at the Gulf of Thailand was reached with Malaysia in 1992.”<sup>142</sup> Then “in 1995, Vietnam and the Philippines agreed on a code of conduct to be observed by the two countries in the South

---

<sup>136</sup> “The Editorial Board, Strengthening Ties with Southeast Asia,” *NYT*, May 1, 2008.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Nguyen Vu Tung in Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order*, 55.

<sup>141</sup> Ramses Amer and Nguyen Hong Thao in Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order*, 81.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

China Sea. The negotiations between Thailand and Vietnam eventually resulted in maritime boundaries of 1997 in areas of bilateral dispute in the Gulf of Thailand.”<sup>143</sup>

According to Amer and Nguyen, “the resolution of the Cambodian conflict in October 1991 was a watershed moment for resolution of border disputes with other Southeast Asian countries. Prior to that, Vietnam had only resolved border disputes with Laos.”<sup>144</sup> Since then, Vietnam had been pursuing peaceful management of territorial disputes and avoided any escalation of tensions that would lead to potential military conflict. Where disputes could not be immediately or quickly resolved, Vietnam had opted for taking time to use talks and dialog to facilitate mutually agreeable resolutions and agreements. Vietnam had declared that it would not want to engage in any foreign military adventure but it had also subscribed to ASEAN’s dispute resolution approaches and the commitment to peaceful management of conflict which lies at the heart of ASEAN’s philosophy.

And because of Vietnam’s ASEAN membership, “for reasons of conscience, prestige and self-interest,” Vietnam conducts its external relations “in accordance with the commonly accepted rules of the game.”<sup>145</sup> One other aspect is also its changed identity that has been built by its sense of “regionalism.”<sup>146</sup> Of course Vietnam has learned and will continue to learn from others as well, including China, in problem-solving, economic development and so on, but ASEAN was critical as far as opening up

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>145</sup> Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework of Analysis*, 440.

<sup>146</sup> Balme and Sidel, *Vietnam's New Order*, 122.

was concerned since the end of the Cold War. During that tumultuous time, it was ASEAN who gave Vietnam an alternative identity and framework to fall back on, in which it could redefine itself in its relations with other countries.

Before, Vietnam adhered to this unique identity as a vanguard of revolutionary communism (which China also thought it was, under Mao) in the developing world and subscribed to the leadership of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union was declining and disengaging from the region in the late 1980s, China and the US still seemed hostile to Vietnam. It was only ASEAN that Vietnam could really identify with and that personally courted and made overtures to bring Vietnam into its mold.

### **Dealing with Historical Animosity with Viet Kieu**

There is this lingering distrust and fear amongst the Vietnamese people, especially expatriates and those who reside in southern Vietnam today towards the current ruling regime. There are many Vietnamese who directly escaped from the Vietnam War or are descendents of those who did, residing in the US and who still harbor deep feelings of anger and hostility towards the communist regime. Some of them establish Vietnamese associations and centers here in the US that hoist the pre-1975 flag of South Vietnam and harbor feelings of nostalgia towards the old non-communist southern Vietnam.

Many in the younger generation born to Vietnamese expatriates or Viet Kieu that did not experience the Vietnam War are also being brought up feeling the same way.

When one young Vietnamese student was asked what would happen if the Vietnamese

communist flag was hoisted at any of such centers here in the US, he said immediately that it would be torn down.<sup>147</sup> These overseas Vietnamese continue to travel back to Vietnam from time to time to visit existing relatives, do business or just have a vacation but harbor distrust toward the Vietnamese government or even the northerners.

In a way it is not surprising that there is still such raw division and hatred amongst the Vietnamese themselves. After all, the Vietnam War was relatively recent. There are many other examples in which past events cause lingering feelings of distrust, discord and unchanging prejudice. Chinese distrust of Japanese, Russian distrust of Germans and many other world examples show how historical enmities take time to be completely resolved.

But Vietnamese expatriates are right to be concerned if their concern is about Vietnam's political governance. Speaking about freedom, civil society and pluralism in Vietnam, there is indeed still a long way to go. There are many fundamental issues that need to be addressed and challenges that need to be overcome so that apart from behavioral change, genuine intrinsic rectifications are incrementally realized. Vietnam still ranks very low on the Human Development Index; its position is at no. 113<sup>th</sup> in 2010 just as in 2009.<sup>148</sup> With this benchmark, it would seem as if Vietnam had not changed much and still retains its old character.

---

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Vietnamese students in a UMass Boston's Vietnamese Students Association in Boston, MA.

<sup>148</sup> <http://www.lookatvietnam.com/2010/11/vietnams-human-development-index-2010-unchanged.html>, (accessed March 15, 2011).

One problem is also that, as far as domestic issues are concerned, the central government had been more focused on the need to get the people fed. To get things to go on functioning, the leadership has had to be tolerant of corruption at some level. The legal structure is only nascent and has not become an apparatus for administering social justice yet. Many actually take justice into their own hands. That is why there were still figures such as Cam Nam who had gang control over Saigon<sup>149</sup> and who took advantage of the often divided loyalty of police and government officials to the Party and to the law.

This gang leader held so much power that he was able to rival even Communist Party bosses in Hanoi. He had many businesses in Saigon under his control and collected protection money from many business owners. Many of the law enforcement officers and party officials in the vicinity had been corrupted by him so that he went on with his activities with impunity. Even though he was once arrested, he somehow managed to regain freedom through the influence of senior officials who secured his release.<sup>150</sup> The legal structure in Vietnam is thus still at its infancy and the outpouring of monetary assistance to Vietnam to help create a viable institution of justice has not been met with clear encouraging results.

But Vietnam had started from a very low base and given time, there is hope that eventually, real improvement will happen in these respects as well. There are many positive signs that Vietnam have indeed been focused now on socioeconomic

---

<sup>149</sup> Mark Sidel, *Law and Society in Vietnam: The Transition from Socialism in Comparative Perspective*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 198.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.



development and improving the livelihood of common people.<sup>151</sup> And it is also trying to develop better relations with the expatriates as it welcomes them to go back home to invest. Based on one news report posted on the Vietnam MOFA website for example, various activities for overseas Vietnamese (OV) to help them understand and have a stronger attachment to the home country are regularly held.<sup>152</sup> “Deputy PM Khiem had asked relevant ministries, agencies and localities to continue effectively executing policies to further attract OV.”<sup>153</sup>

“In addition to Instruction 135 that exempts overseas expatriates of Vietnamese nationality from visa requirements for a duration of five years, a series of regulations regarding residence, repatriation, investment, and business also give more incentives to OV to return home either for visit or business.”<sup>154</sup> Vu Thi Ha, Vice Chairwoman of the Society of Vietnamese Women in the Czech Republic also said “Resolution 36 has created more favorable conditions for OV to come back to the homeland for settlement or investment as well as supported them in preserving national cultural identity.”<sup>155</sup>

And there have been positive signs even since the mid-1990s which prompted Senator Jim Webb, Chairman of the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee of US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to say “The major changes that I see come from

---

<sup>151</sup> This is based on an interview with two international students from South Vietnam.

<sup>152</sup> “Party Resolution Benefits Overseas Vietnamese Community,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns101105095414#0QRUwOWiBxTf>, (accessed December 2010).

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

the mid 1990s, 1994, 1995, and 1996 when I was bringing American companies into Vietnam. The biggest changes that I see from then I think are that the Vietnamese have learnt more about business, about market-oriented economy and your government has made easier for companies to do business in Vietnam than before, and that is a very healthy sign. I think that the openness of Vietnamese society has been improved great deal: the use of internet, the business relationship, and travels in and out have all been very positive."<sup>156</sup> Vietnam is today still far from where it could be but life there is considerably freer.

The Vietnamese leadership has become much more open to foreign influences, even from the West. It has actually been welcoming and rejoicing in the attention the world pays to it. Just by walking around Saigon, Vung Tau or Hanoi<sup>157</sup>, some of the major cities in Vietnam, one can see many foreigners including Westerners hiking and touring. Vietnam welcomes foreign presence; it no longer seems very concerned or uncomfortable at all about foreign presence. Indeed, Vietnamese are able to mix freely with foreigners and restrictions on such social exchange have been virtually non-existent for a long time now.<sup>158</sup>

The new experience in international cooperation that Vietnam has been

---

<sup>156</sup> "US-Viet Nam Relations Very Good for Both Countries, Says Senator," <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns100706093135#6piZX8nUB5Tp> (accessed October 2010).

<sup>157</sup> These are some of Asia's most popular tourist destinations and many have testified to the presence of and free association with foreigners including Westerners.

<sup>158</sup> David Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, p. 139. Interview with a Vietnamese taxi driver who makes money driving foreigners around in Vung Tau, Vietnam.

undergoing needs more time to set in so that in various other aspects, it could also make more successful progress, including respect for human rights, law and freedom, the ideas of which Vietnam is more exposed to now through international interaction. There may be a long way to go but Vietnam has taken the right first steps in the right direction by becoming more open to the world.

Also, even though Vietnam's foreign policy reorientation was substantial and it is unlikely that this change would be reversed, it is important to be vigilant to ensure that the path of reform towards maintaining peaceful and cooperative relations and becoming a country with higher standards of political governance will be pursued firmly for times to come. Continuing interaction and positive diplomatic influence are necessary. Tension in external relations such as that with China needs to be monitored and assuaged through preventive diplomacy. A war can easily nullify this spirit of peace and cooperation that Vietnam has been cultivating and enjoying. Peer pressure from ASEAN's constructive engagement that is gradually intensified should help improve Vietnam's domestic performance, accountability and governance standards. A more regionally and internationally popular and image-conscious Vietnam today within a conducive regional institution will significantly be more receptive to such advice over time.

### **Vietnam's Continued Pro-active Engagement**

The good news is Vietnam seems committed to such a path. Southeast Asia was small in terms of economic resources while China and the US especially were economies

that could serve as huge markets for Vietnam's export-led growth. Yet Vietnam gave priority to economic dealings with ASEAN countries through bilateral agreements or through ASEAN auspices such as the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA). Even after becoming a member of ASEAN and Southeast Asia suffered enormous setbacks in the 1997 Asian economic crisis, Vietnam continued to subscribe to ASEAN's initiatives and revealed no intention of a calculated, strategic retreat from its association with ASEAN. In fact, it weathered the storm with ASEAN and showed solidarity with it.

Only two years after joining ASEAN, the 1997 Asian financial crisis caused major disruptions in the Southeast Asian economy. Even though Vietnam was largely unscathed because its domestic economy had not been greatly liberalized yet, it did suffer some downturns. But there was no hint of its repudiation of ASEAN or even the slightest disparaging. Rather, it went on faithfully to support ASEAN as if it had long held the identity of a fellow Southeast Asian nation.<sup>159</sup> Vietnam was known for its stubborn resistance in the face of external threats on its survival. Why did it not choose to dig in like before and end up like the current North Korea that has shown mostly volatile, provocative behavior and only unpredictably sporadic goodwill? Or why does it not at least follow Burma's lead to be obstinately indifferent to the outside world?

Notwithstanding Vietnam's still unimpressive domestic democratic record, it has shown

---

<sup>159</sup> ASEAN had for a long time tried to promote the idea of a distinct Southeast Asian identity much like South Asians or Northeast Asians partly in order to keep up with the Northeast Asian economy. According to Lee Hsien Loong, the Prime Minister of Singapore, son of famous former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew gave a speech to an audience of ASEAN ministers that Southeast Asia has to work together in order to be competitive with rising economies such as China and India and not lag behind globally. The priority for Southeast Asian trade cooperation has thus been a major initiative to achieve this goal, underpinned by this Southeast Asian identity which also comes from very materialist concerns.

maintenance of its new foreign policy posture even up till today. It has not reneged on its promise and continues to be deeply engaged and enmeshed in ASEAN and its open door philosophy.

The government is devoted to moving forward from an extremely low level of development in order to significantly reduce poverty and move towards a market-oriented economy. Its GDP growth averaged around 9% per year from 1993 to 1997 and 6.8% per year from 1997 to 2004 even in the midst of the Asian financial crisis and a global recession, and growth hit 8% in 2005 and 7.8% in 2006.<sup>160</sup> And this comes from the positive benefits that improved relations with the US had been bringing. “The Hill, a US congressional daily on its July 14 issue reviewed historical milestones in bilateral relations. Since February 14, 1994 when President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo, the United States has become Vietnam’s biggest market. Economic reforms have lifted millions out of poverty in what is one of the world’s outstanding records on poverty reduction.”<sup>161</sup>

Vietnamese authorities have reaffirmed their commitment to economic liberalization and international integration. It joined the World Trade Organization in January 2007, following a decade long negotiation process. This should provide an important boost to the economy and should help ensure the continuation of liberalization

---

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/vn.html#Econ> (accessed October 2009).

<sup>161</sup> “US Paper Highlights US-Viet Nam Relationship,” <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105039/ns100715110019#qNpb6fWGHxLG> (accessed November 2010).

reforms.<sup>162</sup> The Vietnamese market is also an emerging one. As a country in Southeast Asia, it may be a good place to get a foothold of the vast market for multinational businesses. Even though it is not as well to do as the more developed countries like Malaysia and Singapore, it is actually significantly more advanced than its immediate neighbors such as Laos and Cambodia while offering all the advantages that those neighbors have.

Vietnam today has broadened its constructive engagement with many countries around the world. ASEAN's lingua franca is English as it is the common language for the diverse states in the region; even though Vietnam is still improving its foreign ministry apparatus, young, new, forward- looking personnel trained in the English language and more adept at diplomatic skills are becoming the new face of Vietnam and they are applying their skills not just toward ASEAN countries; ASEAN continues to be a springboard for Vietnam to demonstrate more sophisticated foreign policy conduct in larger international arenas.

It was mentioned in the chapter on Vietnam's historical background that Vo Nguyen Giap has been a celebrated war hero in Vietnam but today in his old age, despite his reputation, he currently has little influence on the ongoing of Vietnamese politics.<sup>163</sup> He represents the era of Vietnam's belligerence. Even some of the younger ones, a generation after Vo, had already stepped down. Vietnam still has a long way to go in

---

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/vm.html#Econ> (accessed October 2009).

<sup>163</sup> David Lamb also talks about how prominent historical figures remain respected publicly but a whole new generation of Vietnamese leaders with very different mindset has taken over the higher echelons rendering the thoughts of the old generation less relevant. See Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*.

improving its political governance and human rights record but it could improve a great deal if the later generations continue to be positively influenced not just by ASEAN but also by the whole international community.

The wars and bloodshed and bitterness of the past could all be a figment of the past while the future rests on more progressive, pragmatic, cosmopolitan sort of leaders. The younger Vietnamese generation seems to be moving forward and not looking back.<sup>164</sup> Apart from practicing restraint, Vietnam has also taken steps to be a constructive player that seeks to engage in mutually beneficial cooperative endeavors. Vietnam has become the new rotational ASEAN Chair last year in 2010 and there was every sign of how enthusiastic Hanoi had been in its effort to work towards the fulfillment of ASEAN's goals as Vietnam held that position.<sup>165</sup> It embraced this chance with honor. It has learned to find glory in the victory of cooperation rather than in the victory of war.

---

<sup>164</sup> See Lamb, *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*, Chapter 9: Awaiting the Passing of the Torch.

<sup>165</sup> See "Toward an ASEAN Community," <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/nr040807104143/nr040807105001/ns100407090146#O6ApwSmk1boJ>, (accessed December 2010).

## CHAPTER 9: ASEAN'S UTILITY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Assessment of ASEAN

International and domestic conditions often have to coincide to generate the right response and outcome of foreign policy change. A country like Burma has always had the same leadership that is stubbornly indifferent to prodding by other international actors. It may not be within ASEAN's means to bring about the sort of changes the world wishes to see in Burma.<sup>1</sup> A crucial point about Burma is that has not had as much of a material desperation to change, brought about by as punishing or as sustained sanctions that Vietnam faced and as a result, it has not had the same receptivity for change that Vietnam had.

Burma might not have been as affected by the fall of Soviet Union because it was not overly dependent on it even though it had always had cordial relations with Soviet Union and then Russia. But it has been in dire straits for a long time; why has it not turned to opening up when there is a serious need to do so or that rationally speaking, opening up could help? As we learned from Vietnam's case, having the impetus to change may not necessarily lead to the change in a positive direction. For one, the

---

<sup>1</sup> ASEAN has found Burma's indifference exasperating; however, it does what it can by supporting UN initiatives such as talks between UN representatives with the junta government to allow a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi. In 2007, Syed Hamid Albar reassured UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari that ASEAN stood behind UN's mission to coax the Rangoon government to reconcile with the pro-democracy opposition government.



thinking of Burmese leadership did not favor the sort of opening up that would expose it to what it would consider undesirable foreign influences. Such preconceptions and thinking had led Burma to reject help especially help that its leadership deems exposes it to what it considers hostile elements.

The Burmese leadership has always had a tendency for anti-foreigners and anti-West stance. Its xenophobic thinking has been there for a long time. Indeed, due to some ideational motivation not primarily caused by any systemic shock, General Ne Win plunged the country into deep political isolation.<sup>2</sup> The junta leadership's erroneous thinking and mindset fed into its stubborn refusal to change and nullified many of ASEAN's past overtures. Thus Burma has a hard time embracing ASEAN's norms fully, as far as being open in foreign relations is concerned. The Burmese leadership has mostly been content with staying in control above all and in the past decades largely comprised the same sort of military-oriented figures which pro-democracy dissidents continue to struggle against. The junta government thus rules with an iron hand and seems hardly affected by the plight of its poor and impoverished.

When Cyclone Nargis struck and killed more than a hundred thousand people there, the junta government rejected help from a US ship that was stationed nearby and rather left the people to their plight. Countless more could have been saved if timely help got there. China in contrast welcomed outside help for the 2008 Sichuan earthquake

---

<sup>2</sup> Hermann, "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy" gives examples of how countries make or don't make the choice to redirect their foreign policy and this is one example where the Burmese government chose deep isolation instead.

which was also one of the worst disasters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is mind-boggling to see how Burma lags so far behind in almost every aspect as a decent nation although it is clear the nature of the Burmese leadership is the cause of it.

In any case, when difficult circumstances arise, a country is poised to do something about it; what exactly it will do depends on many things and the leadership thinking is of great relevance. When there is a receptive mindset towards opening up, the opportunity for it to do so will likely spur such an outcome. For Burma, the difficulties might have been great but perhaps not as acute as Vietnam in the late 80s. Vietnam faced greater adversity internally and externally.

That is why countries such as Burma could not be changed as positively as Vietnam because this receptivity was not present and there is not much ASEAN could do about it. Burma is clearly a backward and failing state but its government seems not too concerned about it so long as it has firm control over it. However, being receptive would not be of much use if there is no available avenue for guidance, rehabilitation and change. It is sort of like punishments, after tasting it, a person may realize his fault and be willing to change but he may still need to be rehabilitated to correct his behavior or even nature. ASEAN therefore served such a function for Vietnam, but not as much for Burma because the exigency for change was not as acute there. If receptivity is present, then the presence of an influential institutional environment would be of help.

Besides, ASEAN as a diplomatic institution is of course no magic bullet. ASEAN

itself also has a mixed record of its diplomatic achievements. It had not always been able to generate the sort of concerted influence it had wanted. There is still an ongoing debate within ASEAN about the norm of non-interference and whether there can be room for “constructive engagement”<sup>3</sup> when human rights concerns are at stake. This debate among others is testing the institution’s solidarity, functionality and purpose.

To a great extent, ASEAN states think of sovereignty based on the UN Charter to be of utmost importance because it gives the “international guarantee of freedom from outside interference”<sup>4</sup> which allows states to seek progress, development and the “good life”<sup>5</sup> without fear of reprisal. They still strongly subscribe to this thinking although there have been international pressures for a change in approach in the face of human rights problems particularly in Burma, thus complicating ASEAN’s conduct of intra-mural relations as well as its relations with the West.<sup>6</sup>

However, without some change to this rule, it might be all the more difficult if not impossible to coax Burma to change and for ASEAN to achieve Vision 2020 that it has kept. Vision 2020<sup>7</sup> envisions an ASEAN that is a caring and contented community, peaceful within and with the world and that is free from poverty or violent conflict. Obviously, without more developed political governance that includes oversight on the respect for human rights, it would be premature to speak of a contented community. But,

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.aseansec.org> (accessed January 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, *Global Covenant: Human Conduct in the World of States*, 373.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson, *Global Covenant: Human Conduct in the World of States*, 293.

<sup>6</sup> Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> “ASEAN Vision 2020,” <http://www.aseansec.org/1814.htm> (accessed June 2010).

the tendency to defer to a member country's sovereign rights would largely handicap initiatives to use mutual influence to serve this purpose. Peer pressure would then only bring about limited results given its limitations on the basis of adherence to sovereignty-oriented ideas. ASEAN may thus truly still have a need to "reinvent itself"<sup>8</sup> but it remains to be seen how and to what extent it can do so without destabilizing the current intra-ASEAN relations. It may take much longer for some of the less progressive states in ASEAN to ever make the leap towards creating the society envisioned by ASEAN.

Nonetheless, ASEAN recognizes that without some change to this strict adherence to the sovereignty principle, it would be almost impossible to meaningfully prod one another towards genuine progress in political governance. ASEAN today has to deal with the question of to what extent sovereignty and non-interference is relevant and whether or not to promote constructive engagement in the face of many transnational problems such as pollution, piracy, terrorism, deforestation, and human rights violations. Without candid discussion on these issues and a more intrusive approach to dealing with matters, it is hard to imagine ASEAN's Vision 2020 being realized.

In any case, at the pace of economic development in Laos and Burma, it would first of all be overly optimistic to see poverty completely eradicated by then. Laos for example still lacks the diplomatic capacity to be as actively engaged as some others.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, violent crackdowns in Burma or Thailand make genuine peace and

---

<sup>8</sup> Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Jeannie Henderson, "Reassessing ASEAN," *Adelphi Paper* 328 (1999): 25.

improvement in human rights standards hard to realize. Finally, in the face of so many transnational problems that individual members' negligence can be attributed to and the tendency for ASEAN to sweep thorny problems under the carpet, ASEAN's efficacy may be threatened if it did not itself also make the appropriate reforms as an institution.

Many of the Southeast Asian countries especially Burma, Laos and Cambodia remain locked in their economic stagnation and impasse and a string of disasters and crises have in the past decade befallen the region. Thailand in recent years faced a successful coup, yet bombs exploded just after, prompting speculations that political rivals disadvantaged by the coup were behind them, indicating the far from secure political state of this country. Indeed, Thailand has yet to show national stability after so many political firestorms disrupted the country since last year.

Only in 2008, there was a Thai-Cambodian standoff in which troops from both countries attacked each other sporadically over a famous ancient temple that is located awkwardly along the Thai-Cambodian border. Because of the popularity of the temple to the religious population of both sides, this small piece of territory was bitterly contested. When ASEAN tried to intervene by offering to mediate the matter peacefully, it was rebuffed. Eventually, the situation cooled over but it has come to show that ASEAN's framework does not guarantee absence of inter-state conflicts either as much as it trumpets its peacefulness. Its conflict mediation mechanism is also irrelevant if the contending parties refuse to abide by it. The state of anarchy without an overriding authority is still very salient even in this small area of ASEAN that subscribes to

way to finalizing the cooperation framework agreement for broadening multi-form cooperation.<sup>79</sup>

The World Organization for Public Opinion and the Continental Airlines of the United States held a public poll on the abolition of trade embargo against Vietnam. Sixty-eight percent of the interviewees, especially businessmen, intellectuals, and veterans voiced their support for the lifting of the US sanction against Vietnam.<sup>80</sup> Public opinion in the US and other countries was also calling on the US administration to lift its trade embargo against Vietnam. Meanwhile, in a letter to the editor of the New York Times, Jay Robinson who was a member of Vietnam's Chamber of Commerce and collaborator of a law company in New York noted that President Bush's refusal to lift the US trade embargo on Vietnam before leaving the White House was an irresponsible act insulting the American businessman. Mr. Robinson noted that while many businessmen from Japan, Australia, China, Germany and France had invested in Vietnam, American businessmen were banned to do business there.<sup>81</sup>

There was the sense amongst the American business interests that the world was leaving the US behind for Vietnam. At the same time, Vietnam remained committed to its overtures to the US; it said that the normalization of relations without any preconditions

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "Hanoi Calls for Lifting of US Embargo," Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English, January 29, 1993, FBIS-EAS, (February 2, 1993): 68.

<sup>81</sup> "US Public said Against Embargo," Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam* in English, February 1, 1993, FBIS-EAS (February 2, 1993): 68.

However, educational policies are a crucial factor, for a huge part of the young population currently has no incentive in going to school and the government does not provide feasible options for them. Thus a vicious cycle continues as the level of educated masses in the region and the number of promising individuals to help the economy and nation remain low. In order to break this cycle, new public policy strategies need to be enacted. Currently, there have been many dialogs, change initiatives and cross-regional agreements launched by ASEAN but not enough to bring about the sort of change to the underlying conditions that might have been a drag to the collective progress of the institution. ASEAN's need to reinvent itself is not an understatement because there is constantly a need to rejuvenate the energies of an institution in the midst of changing times.

ASEAN has always proclaimed its desire for autonomy and neutrality. However, it can never be completely autonomous. The US, Japan and China will continue to have clout and influence over the region. In a way, this position on autonomy and neutrality is only asserted on paper. ASEAN is aware of the need to engage the great powers and maintain their involvement and role. For one, the US role in maintaining stability in the region is crucial for there to be continued order out of which the ASEAN states can pursue their national development and regional cooperation. As Borthwick correctly observes, "the rest of Southeast Asia has been far more disinclined to see a significant reduction of the American military presence" and ASEAN has "long taken it for granted

as the primary security umbrella for the region.”<sup>11</sup>

The ASEAN countries will also be economically dependent on trade relations with the US, Japan and China. That is why ASEAN, while wanting to be autonomous, actively seeks peaceful great power relations in the region. That is also the reason ASEAN extended its regional role to a wider multilateral context by forming the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). However, according to Michael Leifer, the ARF is “an embryonic venture in multilateralism within a region that exists more as a category of convenience than as a coherent framework for inter-governmental cooperation.”<sup>12</sup> It also “reflected the desire to underpin US engagement and encourage China’s participation as a responsible power.”<sup>13</sup>

### **In Defense of ASEAN’s Policy of Enlargement**

Despite the potential problems and challenges however, it is my belief is that the decision of ASEAN to take Vietnam in was the right one. Otherwise, even if Vietnam was influenced by ASEAN but did not formally join ASEAN, the gains from it would not have been consolidated for the long term. Vietnam might have reverted back to clinging solely to its revolutionary communist identity and would eventually perhaps find commonality only with its other communist brethren. Vietnam’s becoming a member of ASEAN enforces its Southeast Asian identity as well as its commitment to ASEAN norms which it would not have had to commit to if it did not become a member. The

---

<sup>11</sup> Borthwick, *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*. 392.

<sup>12</sup> Leifer, “The ASEAN Regional Forum,” 53.

<sup>13</sup> Henderson, “Reassessing ASEAN,” 21.



identity aspect was important in shaping and reinforcing its changed foreign policy outlook.<sup>14</sup>

Vietnam's entry into ASEAN also served as a prelude for all the rest of Southeast Asia to become part of ASEAN. As a Thai official who was a member of the Thai delegation at the Fourth ASEAN Summit in Singapore said, "Without Vietnam being the first non-ASEAN country to cross the border that used to divide ASEAN and Indochina, and becoming an ASEAN member, the talk of a new Southeast Asia is premature<sup>15</sup> If ASEAN did not seek to integrate Vietnam into ASEAN, the whole of Indochina might have been truly 'lost' then. Instead, including them in this ASEAN institutional environment ensured that there was at least a chance that they could be enmeshed in this diplomatic process. The task of drawing the new ASEAN members towards ASEAN norms and framework underpins the effort to safeguard the future of Southeast Asian security and autonomy. ASEAN's decision to include all Southeast Asian countries to form ASEAN-10 was correct in this regard.

Who would Vietnam and Indochina lean towards if they did not join ASEAN? ASEAN founders took this issue into serious consideration; they were afraid to lose Indochina to completely unfavorable international political arrangement otherwise. ASEAN is far from perfect, but it is the best possible existing regional organization that seeks wider cooperation in the international order and community. East Asia has no other

---

<sup>14</sup> Nguyen, *Vietnam: A Long History*, 499.

<sup>15</sup> "Aspects of SRV's Joining ASEAN Examined," Bangkok *The Nation* in English, January 30, 1992, FBIS-EAS, (February 5, 1992): 3.

viable regional political institution such as this.

ASEAN's intention to incorporate all ten members was born out of strategic thinking; the security situation of Southeast Asia had just begun to stabilize in the advent of the conclusion of the Cambodian crisis and the end of the Cold War. An enlarged ASEAN would reinforce these gains; if it is able to "demonstrate renewed cohesion and to speak with a single voice, it might also enjoy greater influence within the wider Asia-Pacific enterprise." Yet of course, incorporating the four new members would change the way countries outside this system view its basic orientation. To ASEAN, this seemingly contradictory arrangement is indeed problematic but it seeks to reassure other countries of its firm commitment to its norms. Being an association that includes Burma as a member has become sort of a blotch to its reputation for peace, freedom and neutrality. But ASEAN has been adamant about moving forward with this arrangement, hoping that its decision would be exonerated over time.

In actuality, ASEAN as a peace-seeking organization had taken steps to codify this orientation<sup>16</sup> and it seeks to impart this political culture intra-regionally as well as extra-regionally by enmeshing crucial countries such as Vietnam for Indochina and China for Northeast Asia. ASEAN's resources are limited to match its ambitions but US involvement in the ASEAN Regional Forum for example would be crucial for it to have any clout to maintain a platform for having dialog with and influencing some of the non-

---

<sup>16</sup> An ASEAN Charter has very recently been launched and ASEAN has intensified the efforts to make its lofty aspirations closer to reality.

ASEAN states in the Far East. It is wishful thinking for ASEAN for instance to try by its own self to exercise powers of persuasion on a country as geographically remote and detached as North Korea.

ASEAN heavily emphasized diplomatic initiatives from the outset to “secure the future of Indochinese peace and stability.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Vietnam was pivotal in determining the future of Indochinese security. That was why ASEAN was helpful in developing strong ASEAN-Vietnam relations by removing previous feelings of suspicion and imparting a Southeast Asian regionalist thinking that assuaged security dilemma thinking to the Vietnamese as well. If Vietnam allowed its hostile and security dilemma tendencies to dominate, Thailand would have continued to be very much a regional threat and rival to Vietnam that competes for hegemony over weaker Laos and Cambodia, which are both sandwiched by these traditionally more powerful regional actors, Vietnam and Thailand.

This is not to say that material, security and territorial considerations did not enter Vietnamese calculations; in fact, the material reality was the most salient aspect in the minds of the Vietnamese elites but the approach to mitigate material difficulties by focusing on economic growth and national development through cooperative behavior had become the more enlightened paths chosen in response to this material consideration. Diplomatic assurances and interaction played a crucial part in moderating aggressive, irredentist or revisionist tendencies and generated more peaceful and cooperative attitudes.

---

<sup>17</sup> Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*.

There had also been material concerns for ASEAN that made regional unity an important goal for it. ASEAN wanted to remain competitive and keep the region as a whole to be on a level playing field in the face of other emerging economies. In fact, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Long said in a speech at an ASEAN gathering a few years ago that Southeast Asia needed to unite in order to remain competitive in the face of powerful emerging economies such as China and India.<sup>18</sup> In terms of security, the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group stated that there could not be two Southeast Asias<sup>19</sup> because the security of Southeast Asian countries was intertwined. Thus, whether it was for material or political security, regionalism was something that had been trumpeted by ASEAN for a long time and had to be imparted to Vietnam as well as the other new ASEAN members.

As far as Vietnam's commitment to regional peace and unity is concerned, ASEAN's goals had been met. Official visits such as those by the Vietnamese delegation, led by "National Assembly Chairman Nong Duc Manh, to the Republic of Indonesia and the Republic of Singapore from 11-23 of September 1995"<sup>20</sup> were valued by the Vietnamese as well as the leaders of other ASEAN countries because these activities "have contributed to the strengthening of friendly and cooperative ties"<sup>21</sup> between the parties involved. Thai Prime Minister Banhan Sinlapa-Acha also welcomed "Vietnam's

---

<sup>18</sup> "Speech by Lee Hsien Long," <http://www.aseansec.org/20820.htm> (accessed January 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Shared Destiny, Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group.

<sup>20</sup> "Assembly Standing Committee Meets 26-28 September," Hanoi *Voice of Vietnam Network* in Vietnamese, October 2, 1995, FBIS-EAS (October 2, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

success in the foreign affairs area including its full membership into ASEAN.”<sup>22</sup> He said this was “an event of great significance, promoting the trend of peace, stability, cooperation and prosperity in the region.”<sup>23</sup> The diplomatic exchanges involved in ASEAN’s activities were able to influence relations in a particularly reconciliatory and rehabilitative way that resulted in increasing comfort levels that became self-generative and self-sustaining so much so that Vietnam internalized a great deal of ASEAN’s rationale and operational approach that had substantial spillover effects on Vietnam’s conduct of relations with countries beyond ASEAN.

Today’s Vietnamese official foreign affairs rhetoric contains quite dramatic words of friendliness and openness and commitment to regional peace and cooperation<sup>24</sup>. Vietnam now subscribed to Southeast Asian regionalism and “aims at building good friendship with neighboring countries on the basis of equality, mutual benefit, cooperation, mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and non-interference into each other’s internal affairs” as “close neighboring countries are much related to the security and development of Vietnam.”<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> “Discusses Claims and Loan,” *Bangkok Post* in English, October 2, 1995, FBIS-EAS, (October 2, 1990): 77.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “Vietnam Foreign Policy,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs\\_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/#iqyK42khS1TB) (accessed November 2009).

<sup>25</sup> “A Brief Diplomatic History of Vietnam,” [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng\\_vietnam/nr040810155433/#TzoRuQLtNKw](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/bng_vietnam/nr040810155433/#TzoRuQLtNKw) (accessed November 2009).

The word neighbors here could perhaps mean China but I suspect it is strongly referring to ASEAN countries given that the word, neighbors was in the plural. There is an emphasis here on Vietnam’s regional identity and regional values that closely resemble ASEAN’s rhetoric.

We can safely say that ASEAN influence on Vietnam has a spillover effect that promotes an outlook that favored integration with the world. This is of no surprise because ASEAN has always asserted that it was not an alliance against anyone and that its purported goal of regionalism has always meant becoming more integrated with the world rather than becoming more detached from the world. It has been a grouping that sought to include rather than exclude.

### **Future Influence on Vietnam**

The ASEAN founders have always been open countries that embraced the international community; ASEAN was instituted with such principles in mind; Vietnam on the other hand was not. The close and intense interaction between the two parties, ASEAN and Vietnam gave Vietnamese ministers and officials a chance to explore new foreign policy tenets and rhetoric. Vietnam is like a ship for which the propeller pushes it forward but ASEAN serves as a rudder to keep its path on track against the waves that may throw it off course and helps Vietnam's powerful impetus to progress to be more firmly aligned in a desirable direction.

As a member of ASEAN today, Vietnam has been more active in ASEAN activities and the continuous engagement and interaction are still ongoing if not more intense now. Vietnam continues to be committed to ASEAN and is much more active internationally. Last year in 2010, Vietnam took up the chairmanship of ASEAN and completed it proudly. And Vietnam has been reaping the benefits of participation in

But the American hurdle was clearly one that Vietnam had to overcome eventually because Vietnam would not have genuine integration with the international community without the US's blessing. Vietnam acknowledged this fact and took pains and went to great lengths to give in to and satisfy its requests and demands in the hope for quicker reconciliation. From this, it was also clear that Vietnam was genuine about integrating with the global community and was willing to embrace the status quo rather than harbor even the slightest revisionist intents at the regional level.

The Vietnamese showed they were determined to embark on an irreversible course towards more peaceful, cooperative international climate which they specifically indicated was the main criterion for their national development. It is useful to draw a parallel with Japan. After its defeat in World War II, Japan pragmatically reasoned that for the sake of national survival, it had to radically turn its foreign policy around and to focus on pacifist economic development. So many years have passed since then and Japan seemed to have been committed to this non-militaristic outlook and remained a staunch US ally. It remained to be seen if Vietnam would continue to develop well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be a cooperative participant of the international community.

(Vietnam's relations with the US have indeed advanced by leaps and bounds as will be shown later.)

### **Momentum towards Normalization**

Again, there is no denial that Vietnam's foreign policy change does not mean an overhaul to its standards of governance. But, diplomatic influence and peer pressure do help to improve it. No matter how superficial words and statements from the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs may be, they can be used to remind the Vietnamese of their promise to keep the country going in the right direction. And even communist regimes can be persuaded and prodded to change in a desirable way, given the right source of influence and the right receiver of influence. Mikhail Gorbachev himself was visionary enough to not let ideological baggage bog down its hopes for genuine changes and Ronald Reagan saw in him a friend under no disguise. A bona fide dialog with communist Vietnam today is also possible as well as frank suggestions for change. And even though ASEAN has not been designed to press for domestic changes, the opportunities are there as the leaders of Southeast Asia have a non-threatening forum in which to maintain friendly contacts and to exchange views and opinion that become more candid over time at a comfortable pace.

Foreign policy openness might have turned out to be less threatening to regime stability than domestic openness but there is great potential that such external openness would eventually lead to greater internal domestic changes through forces very different from penned up frustrations due to lack of food, basic necessities, abject poverty and stark paucities that made everyday life a misery, forces that are more benign and less threatening to the ruling regime. The serious domestic problems and economic failures of the past were deemed truly dangerous to the control of the ruling party and the most



serious threat that the VCP wished to avoid and actually deflected albeit under a great sense of insecurity and uncertainty. It was fortunate for the VCP that domestic calls for pluralism did not lead to the type of mass uprisings that might have undermined or even toppled the regime.

With this external openness, the new forces that would be created are curiosity with and interest in the outside world and the enterprising desire to move forward and progress that would facilitate Vietnam's receptivity to foreign influences and expose them to more cosmopolitan values that reach the very core of Vietnamese society. After all, it would be from the society that new generations of Vietnamese officials and leaders will come from. The creation of a mixed economic system comprising a dynamic nationwide market made possible by the construction of a modern communication network and infrastructure has allowed an enthusiastic and enterprising Vietnamese society to enjoy a new socioeconomic vitality that can ultimately produce changes in a domestically more acceptable way that the old destabilizing forces of material paucities and economic inadequacies did not.

Even this basic progress could not have been achieved without opening up to the outside world and the import of new ideas that are also mixing with indigenous traditions and values. New cultural factors and the concepts of liberalism and democracy are also becoming more acceptable to the Vietnamese in general. Even though some confusion and tension will surface, the Vietnamese people in general are embracing an attitude of

negotiate with the US to set up the framework for the relationship between the two countries.<sup>110</sup> The Vietnamese people welcomed Americans greatly; trips by the Clintons first by President Clinton in 2000, then by his wife as Secretary of State, twice in 2010 showed how the Vietnamese celebrate the visits and presence of Americans. As Secretary Clinton remarked, “As some of you know, this is my second visit to Hanoi this year and it is a sign of the importance that the United States places on our relationship with Vietnam, with Southeast Asia and with the entire Asia Pacific region. This week marks the first time ever that the United States has participated in an East Asia summit and I would like to thank Prime Minister Dung for inviting me to be a guest of the Chair at this gathering.”<sup>111</sup>

It really seems that the Vietnamese of any generation, whether residing in north or south of Vietnam, favor Americans and harbor seemingly no hard feelings about the historical war with the US.<sup>112</sup> Official Socialist Republic of Vietnam statements also consistently reinforce such an outlook towards the US. In the Vietnam MOFA website, under foreign policy, these statements can be found: “Consistent with its foreign policy, Viet Nam is ready to shelve the past and look forward to the future in its relations with the United States. We believe that many Americans wish to do so as well. We should let

---

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> “Remarks by Secretary Clinton, Vietnam Foreign Minister Khiem.” [http://www.america.gov/st/texttransenglish/2010/October/20101031105353su0.604421.html&distid=ucs#i\\_xzz19YQkErec](http://www.america.gov/st/texttransenglish/2010/October/20101031105353su0.604421.html&distid=ucs#i_xzz19YQkErec) (accessed October 2010).

<sup>112</sup> The interviews with Vietnamese who spoke about how the Vietnamese population generally feels about the Vietnam War and the US very much confirm this. There is no apparent anti-American sentiment whatsoever even amongst North Vietnamese who now flood into Ho Chi Minh City in search of jobs. In Lamb, *Vietnam Now, A Reporter Returns*, 43. David Lamb says that “every American I have met in Vietnam, whether tourist, businessperson or former GI, had the same reaction: The Vietnamese liked Americans. They had forgiven if not forgotten.”

approach to Vietnam and Vietnam has embraced them; now its ASEAN membership seems like a source of pride with which it carries in its foreign relations.

There are many challenges and difficulties that ASEAN will face but it seems determined to overcome them. It takes a lot to make a country change, a country like Vietnam from deep hostility and belligerent stance to a more cooperative and relaxed posture. But persistent diplomatic interaction and efforts can help make good habits emerge, keep good habits alive and prevent old habits from returning.<sup>28</sup> There will be tradeoffs such as slower progress due to economic disparity but in the end the sacrifices are worthwhile because in exchange, there can be long term security to vouchsafe the development of more even and wider prosperity that can eventually be enjoyed. Vietnam may not have transformed holistically but diplomatic effects on its external behavior is merit enough to say that institutions matter, agents matter and as much as the international world is anarchic, it is also a social world, for the world of states is after all a world of human beings.

---

sinking of Cheonan, a South Korean warship and then also the North Korean attack on Yeonpyong Island in late 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Bert, *The United States, China and Southeast Asian Security* (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 168-169. Wayne Bert agrees that “interests and identities can be recast” even though it is a “long term process”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Acharya, Amitav. *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2001.

Balme, Stephanie and Sidel, Mark. *Vietnam's New Order*. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Beeson, Mark and Bellamy, Alex J. *Securing Southeast Asia*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2008.

Bert, Wayne. *The United States, China and Southeast Asian Security*. New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

Borthwick, Mark. *Pacific Century: The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992.

Chan, Steve. *East Asian Dynamism: Growth, Order and Security in the Pacific Region*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993.

Clemens, Walter. *Dynamics of International Relations*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.

Cohen, Raymond. *Negotiating Across Cultures*. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1991.

Dang, Dinh Quy. *Vietnam in the World, from Friend to Reliable Partner*. Center for Strategic and International Studies: Southeast Asia Bulletin, 2008.

Do, Hien Duc. *The Vietnamese Americans*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Dosch, Jorn. "Vietnam's ASEAN Membership Revisited: Golden Opportunity or Golden Cage?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* (2006).

East, Maurice A. in Kegley Jr, Charles W., Raymond, Gregory A., Rood, Robert M., and Skinner, Richard A. *International Events and the Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1975.

Fewsmith, Joseph. *China since Tiananmen: From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao*. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Fisher, Roger. *Getting to Yes: Negotiated Agreement Without Giving In*. New York, New York: Penguin Group, 1991.

Funabashi, Yoichi. *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Nuclear Crisis*. Washington D C: Brookings Institution Press, 2007.

Gallicchio, Marc. *The Cold War Begins in Asia: American East Asian Policy and the Fall of the Japanese Empire*. New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Gill, Indermit, Huang, Yukon and Kharas, Homi. *East Asian Visions*. Washington DC: The World Bank and Institute of Policy Studies, 2007.

Henderson, Jeannie. "Reassessing ASEAN." Adelphi Paper 328. New York, New York: Oxford University Press (1999).

Hermann, Charles F. "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy." *International Studies Quarterly* 34, No 1 (1990): 3-21.

Hixson, Walter. *Leadership and Diplomacy in the Vietnam War*. New York, New York: Garland Publishing, 2000.

Hoang, Haco. "Outward and Beyond: Institutional Change in Southeast Asia." PhD Dissertation (2002).

Hodge, Homer T. "North Korea's Military Strategy." (2003).

Holsti, K. J. *International Politics: A Framework of Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967.

Horowitz, Shale, Heo, Uk and Tan, Alexander C. *Identity and Change in East Asian Conflicts*. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

lure him out. As a result, French officers informed of his whereabouts by Ho, captured Phan who until the 1920s, “was considered the country’s greatest national hero.”<sup>8</sup>

In communist Vietnam’s history, it had generally acted with opportunism even towards allies. It had strived to amass resources and consolidate its power when it could, for example by asserting its power over Indochina where Laos and Cambodia were weaker so as to assure its regional hegemony. When they were in a weaker position, the Vietnamese communists had unabashedly used deceptive tactics in its conduct of war, external relations and domestic propaganda. In relations with great powers, the communist elites of Vietnam had always pitted one against another in order to benefit themselves.

If we look at Vietnam’s history of foreign policy strategy, there seems to be no lack of Vietnamese engagement in the skillful use of power balancing. In its struggle for independence from France, it played the Americans against the French; then during the Vietnam War, it played the Soviets and Chinese against the Americans; when the Vietnam War was over, it played the Soviets against the Chinese; and when the Soviet Union was weakening, it seemed to have initially made an effort to play Southeast Asian countries against China. Vietnam had exhibited deeply entrenched power politics thinking and calculations in its foreign policy behavior.

---

<sup>8</sup> Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 2.

Lamb, David. *Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns*. New York, New York: Public Affairs, 2002.

Lee, Yong Leng. *Southeast Asia Essays in Political Geography*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1982.

Lee Kuan Yew. *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. Singapore: Times Edition Pte Ltd, 1998.

Lechner, Frank J., Boli, John. *The Globalization Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.

Leifer, Michael. *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1989.

Leifer, Michael. "The ASEAN Regional Forum." Adelphi Paper 302. New York, New York: Oxford University Press (1996).

Lind, Michael. *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict*. New York, New York: Free Press, 1999.

Lovell, John P. *Foreign Policy in Perspective*. New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970.

Manyin, Mark E. "The Vietnam-U.S. Normalization Process." CRS Issue Brief for Congress (2005).



Martini, Edwin, A. *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*.

Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.

Morley, James W. *Security Interdependence in the Asia Pacific Region*. Lexington, MA:

D.C. Heath and Company, 1986.

Morley, James W. and Nishihara Masashi. *Vietnam Joins the World*. New York, New

York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1997.

Murray, Geoffrey. *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*. New York, New York: St. Martin's

Press, 1997.

Nguyen, Khac Vien. *Vietnam: A Long History*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2009.

Nguyen, Vu Tung. "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN: A Constructivist Interpretation."

Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol. 29, No. 3: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (2007).

O'Neil, Andrew. *Nuclear Proliferation in Northeast Asia: The Quest for Security*. New

York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Palmer, Ronald D., Reckford, Thomas J. *Building ASEAN: 20 Years of Southeast Asian*

*Cooperation*. New York, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987.

Papp, Daniel S. *Vietnam: The View from Moscow, Peking, Washington*. Jefferson, North

Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1981.

Park, Kang H. "Does North Korea Follow Vietnam's Path?: Institutional Constraints." Paper Submitted to KIEA Conference (2009).

Pempel, T.J. *Remapping East Asia: The Construction of a Region*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Porter, Gareth. *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Rust, William J. *Kennedy in Vietnam*. New York, New York: US News and World Report, Inc., 1985.

Putnam, Robert. *Making Democracy Work*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Shale, Horowitz, Uk Heo and Alexander C. Tan. *Identity and Change in East Asian Conflicts*. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Scobell, Andrew. *China's Use of Military Force*. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group. "Shared Destiny-Southeast Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group." (1993).

Sidel, Mark. *Law and Society in Vietnam: The Transition from Socialism in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Simmons, Robert. *The Strained Alliance: Peking, Pyongyang, Moscow and the Politics of the Korean Civil War*. New York, New York: Free Press, 1975.

Stanfield, R. Brian. *The Art of Focused Conversation*. Toronto, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2000.

Stern, Lewis. *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Sullivan, Michael P. *Theories of International Relations: Transitions vs. Persistence*. New York, New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Thayer, Carlyle. "Vietnam and ASEAN." Conference on Vietnam in 2001: Prospects for Economic and Social Progress (2001).

Thayer, Carlyle and Amer, Ramses. *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Thien, Ton That. *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam*. New York, New York: Taylor and Francis New York, Inc, 1989.

Weatherbee, Donald E. *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009.

Wilson, Graham. *Interest Groups in the United States*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Wurfel, David and Burton, Bruce, eds. *Southeast Asia in the New World Order*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Yahuda, Michael. *The International Politics of Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1996.

Yamaoka, Kanako. "Comparison of Two Remaining Socialist Countries-Cuba and Vietnam: Possibility of Economic Reform in a Socialist Society and Its Possible Impact." Program on US-Japan Relations Working Paper (2007).

### **ONLINE SOURCES**

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) official website,  
<http://www.aseansec.org/>

Bridgewater State College, <http://www.bridgew.edu/Newlog/index.cfm>

Country Fact Book, <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/vm.html#Econ>

New York Times (NYT) Archives website, [www.nyt.com](http://www.nyt.com)

Vietnam Embassy in the US, <http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org>

Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) official website,  
<http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en>

### **MICROFILM**

Foreign Broadcast Information Service East Asia (FBIS-EAS) Daily Report

**JOURNALS**

Asian Survey

**INTERVIEWS**

Informal face to face interviews conducted with Vietnamese residing in Springfield, MA and Dorchester, MA, Vietnamese visitors to the US and phone interviews conducted with Vietnamese residing in Vietnam

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Mr. Beck Hing Lee  
P.O. Box 692392  
Quincy, MA 02269-2392  
Tel: (617) 849-4277  
Email: [liboxin1088@yahoo.com](mailto:liboxin1088@yahoo.com), [bhlee@bu.edu](mailto:bhlee@bu.edu)

### EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

#### Boston University, Boston, MA

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science (September 2007-May 2011)  
Major in International Relations  
Minor in Comparative Politics  
Area of Concentration: East Asia

#### University of Massachusetts-Boston, Boston, MA

Master of Business Administration (September 2006-June 2007)  
Concentration on International Management  
Graduated *summa cum laude*

Master of Arts in Critical and Creative Thinking (January 2006-August 2006)

Bachelor of Arts (September 2002-December 2005)  
Major in Economics, Major in Political Science, Major in Philosophy, Program in  
International Relations and Program in Science, Technology and Values  
Dean's List for several semesters

#### Springfield Technical Community College, Springfield, MA

Associate of Science in Business Administration (January 1999-May 2002)

### EXPERIENCE

University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth-North Dartmouth, MA  
Lecturer of Political Science (September 2010-present)  
Teach courses on Comparative Politics and East Asian Politics

Josiah Quincy School, Boston, MA  
 After-school Program Instructor (September 2010-present)  
 Teach physically challenging activities  
 American Translation Partners, Raynham, MA  
 Medical and Legal Interpreter (October 2009-present)  
 Provide translation services for Mandarin and Cantonese speakers

Edco Youth Alternative-High School Program Boston, MA  
 Substitute Teacher (October 2009-present)  
 Substitute teach classes on Humanities, Math and Science

University of Massachusetts-Boston, Boston, MA  
 Graduate Assistant (January 2007-June 2007)  
 Sort out World Bank data for major project on relationship between corruption and economic growth  
 Translate important information on the Chinese Academy of Sciences  
 Substitute teacher for undergraduate Marketing classes and proctor for exams

Dragon Club, Boston, MA  
 Head Instructor (October 2006-present)  
 Founder of club's martial arts and lion dance demonstration team that performs for multifarious functions  
 Teach martial arts, lion dance, health exercises, meditation and martial philosophy  
 Manage and organize cultural performances for festive events, community work, grand openings and so on

Quincy High School, Boston, MA  
 Math Substitute Teacher (October 2005-December 2005)  
 Substitute teach Math classes

Kwong Kow Chinese School, Boston, MA  
 Martial arts instructor for the youth program (June 2000-June 2005)  
 Train youths in self-defense techniques and martial arts discipline

#### PAPER PRESENTATION and PARTICIPATION

Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) Annual Conference, Chicago, IL  
 Paper Presenter and Panel Discussant (April, 2010)

American Political Science Association (APSA) Annual Conference, Boston, MA  
 Participant (August 2008)

Harvard Project on Asian International Relations (HPAIR) Conference, Cambridge, MA  
BU representative and performer (April 2008)

Northeast Malaysian Students Forum Cambridge, MA

Participant (March 2008)

Boston University Graduate Student Conference on East Asia, Boston, MA

Paper Presenter (Nov 2007)

MIT Leadership Conference, Cambridge, MA

Participant (Feb 2006)

### SPECIAL SKILLS

Multi-linguist:

Proficient in five different languages namely, English, Malay (Indonesian) and three different dialects of Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese and Foochow) and fluent in simple conversational Vietnamese

Martial artist:

Years of training in various martial arts styles, self defense techniques and physical combat skills

Experienced in cultural arts performance items including Kung Fu, traditional weapons, fighting choreography, lion dancing and drumming

Have intimate knowledge of traditional health exercises, internal healing arts, meditation arts and their philosophical foundations