

AN ANALYSIS OF POLICY FORMULATION AND ADJUSTMENTS OF INDOCHINA

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Between 1945 and 1975 Southeast Asia was not a major concern for the Indochina states. The government of these states had their hands full with the recovery of national independence, and, after 1954, with the problem of how to cope with their adversaries. This means, in the case of Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam, coping with the communist insurgents; and in the case of North Vietnam, with Mr Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors as well as with the Americans. Except in North Vietnam, the communists did not wield government power although they controlled large tracts of territory.

The picture changed completely in 1975. Then, all the Indochinese states were unified and under communist control. A completely new political situation emerged. Free from the major internal problem - that of seizing power - and having recovered full sovereignty - and with it full control of foreign policy - the Indochinese could now look outwards, i.e., first towards their immediate neighbours, the ASEAN countries.

As the newly installed governments of Indochina looked at ASEAN, they did not like what they saw. The ASEAN countries did not have revolutionary governments. In the eyes of the communist states of Indochina, this situation should be changed so that their neighbouring countries could join them in their march to World Revolution.

Vietnam - officially Socialist Republic of Vietnam - took the lead. This is natural, as the CPV had very definite ideas concerning Southeast Asia, and these ideas were made clear as early as 1949. It is natural also that the man who gave public expression to these ideas should be Ho Chi Minh, who had been an agent of the Communist International in the South Seas. In the late 1920's, under the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, he was assigned the task of promoting the cause of communism in Southeast Asia. This, he did with diligence and dedication from 1928, when he arrived in Thailand, to 1931, when he was arrested by the British police in Hong Kong.

At the Sixth Congress of the Party cadres in January 1949, sensing the approach of victory, Ho told his disciples: "We are an Indochinese party, but we have also the task of contributing to the liberation of Southeast Asia" (1- Ho Chi Minh, Tuyen Tap, I (Selected Writings, Vol I), 1980, Hanoi, Nha Xuat Ban Su That, p. 446). In September 1960, at the Third Congress of the Party, he put forward the idea of Vietnam being "the outpost of socialism in Southeast Asia" (2- ibid-, Vol II p 186). Liberating Southeast Asia and Outpost of Socialism in Southeast Asia have been the two basic ideas governing the CPV's policy towards Southeast Asia ever since. Under various forms, and on various occasions, they have been repeated by Ho's successors.

Thus, during the American-Vietnamese peace negotiations in Paris in 1968 - 1973, Le Duc Tho, member of the CPV politburo and Hanoi's chief negotiator, told Henry Kissinger that it was "Vietnam's destiny to dominate not only Indochina but all of Southeast Asia" (3- Henry Kissinger, White House Years, 1979,

Boston, Little Brown and Co, p. 441). According to Truong Nhu Tang, former Minister in the LFSVN, the Nguyen Ai Quoc School, the Party's training school for cadres near Hanoi, the high cadres openly talked about the Party's plan of establishing "a Soviet Republic of Southeast Asia" by the year 2000. (4- 97th U.S Congress, House of Representative, Committee on Foreign Affairs Hearings before the Sub-Committee on Asia and the Pacific, U.S. Policy Towards Indochina since Vietnam's Occupation of Kampuchea, October 15, 21 and 22, 1981, U.S Government Printing Office, 1981, p.4). In January 1974, three months before launching the offensive against Saigon, Le Duan, General Secretary of the CPV, in a letter to his comrades in the South, said: "This campaign will contribute to changing the situation of Indochina and of Southeast Asia "(5- Le Duan, Tho Vao Nam (Letters to the comrades in the South), 1986, Hanoi, Nha Xuat Ban Su That, p. 395). On June 6, 1975, five weeks after communist troops entered Saigon, Le Duan said that the defeat of the U.S. had ushered in "a new period with promising perspectives for Southeast Asia" (6- Nouvelles de la Republique democratique du Vietnam, Paris, June 15, 1975). In October of the same year, during a visit to Moscow, he assured the Soviet leaders that Vietnam was determined to be "an authentic forward post of socialism in Southeast Asia". (7- ibid -, November 6, 1975).

In February 1976, the ASEAN countries were told in no uncertain terms to change course, or expect trouble, not just from Vietnam, but from all the Indochinese states. This warning was made on the occasion of the visit of the Lao Prime Minister, Kaysone

Phomvihane, to Hanoi. The joint-communique issued on this occasion said that the two parties were determined to promote the brotherly friendship of "the three states" (of Indochina) "in the interest of revolution in Southeast Asia" (8- Vietnam News Agency, February 11, 1976). The Communique said that the two parties believed that "the revolutionary movement in Southeast Asia enjoyed great advantages", and the two parties accorded "total support" to the struggle of "the peoples" of the region in their struggle for peace, and will "actively" contribute to help the states of Southeast Asia become "genuinely independent, pacific, and neutral" ("genuinely"). The two parties further agreed to "coordinate closely" their actions against imperialism and against "the reactionaries in the pay of imperialism". (8- ibid-).

The Lao-Vietnamese meeting took place at about the same time as an ASEAN summit meeting in Bali, and Hanoi viewed this meeting as one "called at the instigation of the United States". (9- Quan Doi Nhan Dan (official organ of the Vietnamese Armed Forces), February 23, 1976). Through the voice of Laos, Hanoi made clear that it would not seek membership of ASEAN because this organization was "not aligned", that it was "an organization set up by the US imperialists following the dissolution of SEATO", and that "the real nature of ASEAN is to defend the interests of the US". (10- Vietnam News Agency, July 2, 1976).

As regards Cambodia, although it refused to accept subordination to Vietnam, it was also hostile to ASEAN and had to be prodded by China to establish good relations with ASEAN, especially with Thailand.

It is natural that a communist government emerging in Vietnam should want to aid and support "the peoples" of the ASEAN countries in their "revolutionary struggles" to replace the existing governments and turn their countries into "genuinely" independent and neutral countries, i.e, get rid of military bases on their territories, and terminate their close ties with the Western nations.

Of course, a termination of all military ties with the West, and the adoption of a "genuinely" independent and neutral policy by the ASEAN countries would make these countries vulnerable to Communist attacks - either directly through military aggression, or indirectly through subversion abetted and supported by Vietnam, the "outpost of socialism in Southeast Asia".

Fortunately for the ASEAN governments, that dilemma was resolved when Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia militarily, and directly threatened Thailand. The details concerning Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and its establishment of a puppet government there in 1979 do not concern us here. Only one aspect of it should retain our attention. That is the use of the puppet government of Cambodia, led by Heng Samrin, and the puppet government of Laos, led by Kaysone Phomhane, to resurrect in fact, although not in name, the Communist Party of Indochina and the Indochinese Federation, both under the control of the CPV. From now on, Laos and Cambodia would be tied to Vietnam in fact as well as in law.

The de facto domination of the Indochinese states was exercised through the comradely relations existing between the Vietnamese,

Laotian, and Cambodian communist parties. The Laotian and Cambodian communist leaders have frequently publicly acknowledged the common origin of the three Indochinese communist parties, the CPI. They also acknowledged that "Uncle Ho" was their common teacher and leader. And, as the Vietnamese cadres despatched to Cambodia had been told by their leaders, after the Indochina War, Vietnam would become "the Big Brother of Indochina", and "as a Big Brother we shall have to govern the younger brothers and not allow them to do anything they want" (11- In William Shawcross, Sideshow, Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia, 1979, New York, Simon and Schuster, p. 285).

The Big Brother/Younger Brothers relationship between Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia was institutionalised through treaties establishing "special relationship" between Vietnam and the two junior countries. A Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Laos and Vietnam was signed on July 17, 197~~6~~⁷, and a similar treaty between Cambodia and Vietnam was signed on February 17, 1979. Under these treaties, the policies of Vietnam and Laos and Vietnam and Cambodia were to be "coordinated", the coordinator being naturally Vietnam. This coordination applied particularly in matters of defense and foreign policies. Under article 2 of the Lao-Viet Treaty, for example, the two parties pledged "to do everything in their power to strengthen their defense", and under article 5, Laos pledged to give "cooperate" with Vietnam to "give support to the struggle of the peoples of southeast Asia for genuine independence, democracy, and peace, and neutrality". And Vietnam has said repeatedly that it was at the request of the Cambodian government under the Viet-Khmer Treaty that it had sent

volunteers" to Cambodia. (12- Texts of this treaty in Bulletin du Vietnam (Paris), special issue, September 1977; text of Vietnam - Cambodian treaty in Bulletin du Vietnam, February 15 -18, 1979). Coordination was also ensured at the three-state level. This was done at the bi-annual conferences of the Foreign Ministers of the three countries, and also at summit meetings of their heads of government. The first such conference, and a key one, was held in February 1983. This meeting established the formal framework for the coordination of the policies of the three countries. In particular it established a strategic alliance between them, and provided the legal framework for the dispatch of Vietnamese "advisers" and especially of "volunteers" to Laos and Cambodia as part of Vietnam's "internationalist obligations" towards these two countries. (13- See text in Pour la paix et la stabilite Asie du Sud-Est, 1983, Hanoi, Editions en Langues etrangeres).

At the same time, the above summit meeting was the occasion of the formal proclamation of the existence of an "Indochinese bloc". The existence of such a bloc had been claimed earlier by Vietnam as "an undeniable reality of Southeast Asia" (14- Le Courier du Vietnam, 1982, No.1). At the Conference of the Non-Aligned Nations of Havana in September, Premier Pham Van Dong had declared that the situation in Cambodia was "irreversible" (15- Le Devoir (Geneva), September 8, 1979), that is the Heng Samrin regime, which had been put into power in Phnom Penh by Vietnam, was there to stay, and Vietnam would not accept any challenge to its domination and control by Cambodia. As a result, there was no alternative for anyone, in particular for ASEAN,

except to accept the accomplished fact, and establish its relations with the Indochinese states on a Bloc to Bloc (or Group to Group) basis by the process of dialogue, all thought of changing this "reality" by force being excluded. Since 1981, Vietnam has ceaselessly called for "dialogue" with ASEAN while stressing that the Cambodian situation was "irreversible".

Vietnam's claim to "irreversibility" has been challenged from several quarters, however. First, by ASEAN. Although two members of ASEAN - Indonesia and Malaysia - were inclined to accept Vietnam's preeminence in the two Indochinese countries (under the Kuantan formula) the organization as a whole has refused to accept the principle of dominance of Laos and Cambodia by Vietnam by force, obviously because of the implications of such an acceptance for the rest of Southeast Asia. ASEAN has therefore waged a campaign to force Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia. The campaign aimed at denying formal international recognition to the Hanoi-installed Heng Samrin government and at isolating it so as to raise the costs of its occupation of Cambodia. This campaign has been highly successful, and has certainly been one important factor in the events leading to Vietnam's recent announcement (May 1988) of its intent to withdraw 50,000 troops by the end of this year, and to the Jakarta "Cocktail Party" in July.

Next, by the Cambodians who refused to accept Vietnam's occupation and domination of their country: the Cambodian Communists controlled by the ill-famed Pol Pot, dubbed "Khmer Rouge" by Sihanouk, a label which has gained wide international currency; Son Sann and his National Liberation Front of the Khmer

People (NLFKP), and Sihanouk and his followers. These three factions, under ASEAN and Chinese pressure, have joined together to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), opposed to Heng Samrin's People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and of course, and still more to Vietnam. Although the CGDK cannot hope to defeat Heng Samrin and the Vietnamese forces, they have continued to exist, thus denying Heng Samrin's and especially Hanoi's, claims that the situation in Cambodia was under their full control.

The CGDK has managed to survive thanks to ASEAN, and especially to Chinese support and aid. So long as this support and aid continues to be available, the position of the Heng Samrin government will remain precarious, and Hanoi cannot claim that its protege Heng Samrin is the legal and effective government of Cambodia, that the situation has become really irreversible. China, the third main party opposed to Vietnam's occupation and dominance of Cambodia, has made it clear that it refuses to accept irreversibility in Cambodia.

The fourth party opposed to irreversibility in Cambodia was the group composed of the United States, the European Community and Japan. Although they have kept a low profile, their decision to suspend all aid to Vietnam so long as Vietnamese troops remain in Cambodia has added weight to the international pressure against Vietnam, and contributed to make it impossible for the latter to have its way in Cambodia.

In leninist theory, when one form of struggle does not lead to the achievement of communist objectives, one must abandon it and

choose another more appropriate form without hesitation. This is the rule of holding firm to principle (strategic aim), while being flexible in regard to tactics. The CPV has repeatedly claimed that it was always careful to observe this rule strictly. Thus, in Cambodia, since it was clear in 1981 that military force and a confrontational attitude only led to rigid opposition from all quarters, the CPV decided to switch to a form of struggle more appropriate to circumstances: call for dialogue, soft words and broad smiles, but, in the meantime, holding on to its essential military and political gains. This is the policy adopted by the CPV in the last few years. Vietnam has reduced its military visibility and raised its diplomatic profile. Meanwhile, its protege government is still in Phnom Penh, and all of its troops have not yet withdrawn.

Hanoi announced in May that it would withdraw 50,000 troops starting in June and ending by year end. But as, Ngo Dien, Hanoi's ambassador in Phnom Penh, has explained to Paul Wedel of UPI, his government would not have withdrawn so many troops if the resistance were capable of serious threat. Besides, Vietnamese troops could always return if the Phnom Penh regime was in danger. (16- The Straits Times, July 22, 1988). This is really the crux of the matter. Hanoi has decided to withdraw its troops because it was convinced that the military situation in Cambodia was good, and if its protege' Heng Samrin is seriously threatened, it could always send troops back into Cambodia. It will probably be a long time before the four Cambodian factions could arrive at a full agreement among themselves, and a still longer time before there is a full political settlement of the

Cambodian problem. Thus, by emphasizing dialogue, Hanoi had everything to gain, and nothing to lose.

Vietnam has been forced to fall back on a rather defensive posture. It is also clear that its total and exclusive dominance of Cambodia has become increasingly questionable. Even its dominance of Laos appears less exclusive. Both Cambodia and Laos have been turning more and more to the Soviet Union, and Laos has shown greater willingness to improve relations with China. Indeed, a Federation of Indochina under the total and exclusive dominance of Vietnam looks less and less realisable in the immediate future. This is no doubt the result of pressure from ASEAN and China.

On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the international isolation campaign waged by ASEAN and China has been very successful and resulted in an intensification of the economic difficulties of Vietnam. To escape from its economic predicaments, Hanoi has to reduce its military burdens. And its two heaviest military burdens have been its war in Cambodia and its obligation to maintain military vigilance vis-a-vis China. ASEAN has been able to achieve this result because it has maintained its unity in spite of Hanoi's maneuvers to split its ranks. And China has been successful because it was wise enough to keep a low profile and let ASEAN play the main role in thwarting Vietnam's designs.

On the other hand, ASEAN and China have brought pressure to bear on the Soviet Union by making it clear to the latter that Vietnam's continued military presence in Cambodia was a major

obstacle to the improvement of their relations with Moscow. Since Moscow, as part of its broad strategy of weakening the U.S., has sought hard to wean ASEAN and China away from the U.S. and towards itself, had to pressure Vietnam to give up, momentarily, its plan for a Vietnam-dominated Indochinese Federation and a march forward in Southeast Asia.

Lastly, as Vietnam disengages from Laos and Cambodia, it will face charges of abandon from its allies. Besides, an economically exhausted Vietnam does not have the resources for large scale sustained aid to Laos and Cambodia. It is thus not surprising that these two countries have recently turned more and more to the Soviet Union for support and aid. Eventually also, as a result of bargaining between the Soviet Union and China, these two countries must put an end to total and exclusive relations with Vietnam and make room for at least some Chinese influence, which means, some Soviet countervailing influence also.

In the near future, Vietnam will have to adjust its objectives to match internal and external realities. But that does not mean that it will abandon its strategic aims in the long run. Ho Chi Minh, in his teaching, always insisted that his disciples observe the following rule: Our strategy never changes, but we must change our tactics constantly according to circumstances.