

Vietnamese Expatriates and Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities

by Le Xuan Khoa

“The temple of silence and reconciliation where the enmities of twenty generations lie buried.” (Lord Thackeray, on the Westminster Abbey)

Quen, lạ, bạn, thù, chung giấc ngủ,
Chung lời thương tiếc khắc trên bia
*(Friends and foes are now sharing a peaceful sleep
and the words of regret inscribed on the tombstones)*
(Tô Thùy Yên)

In January last year, the Vietnamese bi-weekly *Ngay Nay* in Houston, Texas, interviewed eight overseas Vietnamese representing different political views from the United States, Canada and three countries in Europe. These people, including myself, were asked the following question:

“The confrontational posture between opposing regimes in Asia was recently subjected to significant changes, the most important of which was a movement towards normalization of relations between South and North Korea. In the meantime, both mainland China and Taiwan also made several efforts towards improving their relationship on various grounds. In such a new political environment, what do you think the Vietnamese Communist Party and the overseas Vietnamese community must change in their view on bilateral relationship in order to achieve democracy and lead the nation out of the current disastrous situation?”

One respondent, former Ambassador Bui Diem, made the point that since the Vietnamese communist leaders have been so determined in consolidating the communist party and practicing a socialist-oriented market economy while denouncing dangerous plots of adversary forces from the outside, “fighters for freedom and democracy have no choice other than to continue their fight with the firm belief that their just cause is strongly supported by the evolutionary trend of humanity.”

Two respondents, Vu Thu Hien and Pham Hoang, both dissident writers from North Vietnam now taking refuge in Europe, expressed bluntly that real changes in Vietnam will never happen unless the communist leaders are forced to yield by heavy pressure from the outside and serious threats of a general revolt. Both writers, however, emphasized that in this arduous struggle for freedom and democracy the overseas Vietnamese can play an effective role as supporters only and must take into account the moods and aspirations of the people inside the country.

Two other respondents, Le Duy Nhan and Doan Viet Hoat, held the view that democratization and globalization are essential in the post-Cold War era and that Vietnam must integrate fully into the international community in order to survive and

eventually become a developed nation. Dr. Hoat insisted that Vietnamese communist leaders must accept political opposition and initiate a dialogue with other political leaders from inside and outside the country. Mr. Nhan urged the overseas community leaders to engage in this dialogue when there is such an opportunity.

Three remaining respondents, Ton That Thien, Nguyen Gia Kieng and myself discussed the issue of reconciliation from slightly different perspectives. Both Professor Thien and I observed that the nature of relationship between the communist state of Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora is not the same as that which exists between two governments or two sovereign nations as in the case of the two Koreas, or between mainland China and Taiwan. But Professor Thien asserted that two Vietnams have existed in reality: at least half of the 78 million Vietnamese (at home and abroad) do not consider themselves as belonging to a Vietnam unified under communism. This reality manifested itself clearly during the state visit of President Clinton in November, 2000. To achieve true national reunification, the communist leaders must take appropriate actions conducive to national reconciliation instead of continuing to behave as a victorious North occupying an unwelcoming and unsubmitive South. Professor Thien also urged the “nationalist” Vietnamese to help resolve this national problem by showing clearly their willingness to bury the hatchet and participate in the reconstruction and development of their native country if the Vietnamese authorities truthfully agree to engage in a process of reconciliation, cooperation and normalization with the expatriate community.

Mr. Nguyen Gia Kieng, who has persistently promoted national reconciliation for the past twelve years, reasserted that under current global circumstances, reconciliation between former enemies is no longer merely a tactical option but has become a political philosophy of the civilized world. In the case of Vietnam, reconciliation is a powerful means for the expatriates to prevail over communism. The current regime is doomed to collapse if its leaders do not accept national reconciliation. According to Mr. Kieng and his colleagues in the Alliance for Pluralistic Democracy, Vietnam is in the midst of a transition from a totalitarian regime to a democratic society. The expatriate community must overcome their past rancor and engage actively in reconciliation and cooperation with people of good will in Vietnam so as to accelerate the transitional process and achieve their common goal in the shortest period of time.

My answer to the question posed by *Ngay Nay* was that a bilateral relationship has already existed between the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese expatriates, although this is merely a *de facto* relationship initiated by overseas individuals or groups, mostly for family, business or humanitarian reasons. In recent years, there have been contacts and consultations between senior Vietnamese government officials on missions abroad and small groups of Vietnamese expatriates to discuss issues of common concern “in a frank and constructive manner.”¹ Obviously, the Vietnamese leaders have realized the great potential of overseas Vietnamese in the industrialization and modernization of Vietnam and have initiated some policy decisions to enable this constructive relationship. Many of the expatriates have also come to believe that participation in the renovation process, not confrontation or violence, is the best way to bring prosperity, freedom and democracy to the country. However, many legal, psychological and political barriers still

exist, and only a small number of people have actually contributed their professional and technological skills to the development of Vietnam. For the sake of national interest and the welfare of the Vietnamese people, tremendous efforts to overcome these barriers must be made by both sides, but the first move towards achieving this goal is primarily the responsibility of the Vietnamese authorities.

It is evident that the majority of these opinions, with some difference in focus, have supported dialogue as a viable approach towards national reconciliation and constructive relationship between the Vietnamese government and the expatriate community. This article will elaborate on this approach with a view to promoting peace, democracy and development in Vietnam.

National Reconciliation as a Trap

Non-communist Vietnamese have never trusted, not without reasons, the good will or sincerity of the communist party leaders. Since Vietnam regained independence in 1945, history has recorded at least four harrowing experiences:

1. After the Japanese surrender to the Allies in 1945, the Allies assigned to nationalist China under President Jiang Jie Shi (Chiang Kai Shek) the task of disarming the Japanese army in Northern Vietnam. Two Chinese commanders in charge of this mission, Lu Han and Jiao Wen, were instructed to help install a Vietnamese nationalist government under the leadership of Nguyen Hai Than and Vu Hong Khanh, long time revolutionaries against the French and the Japanese, who had taken refuge in China. To salvage their fledgling power, Vietnamese communist leaders negotiated with the two Chinese generals who, after allegedly pocketing heavy bribes, forced the nationalists into a coalition government which included Nguyen Hai Than as Vice President. Using this coalition government as a smokescreen, the communist party eventually staged a ruthless campaign against all nationalist factions. For their own safety, Nguyen Hai Than and his nationalist colleagues had to flee to China or go into hiding.
2. In 1969, the communist party endorsed the creation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in South Vietnam as a neutralist political entity to compete with the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) for domestic and international credibility. The PRG action plan revealed that it “is ready to consult with the political forces representing the various people’s strata and political tendencies in South Vietnam . . . for the formation of a provisional coalition government based on the principle of equality, democracy and mutual respect. The provisional coalition government will organize general elections to elect a national assembly, to build a democratic constitution fully reflecting national concord and the broad unity of people of all walks of life.”² Less than three months after the fall of Saigon, both the PRG and its elder sibling, the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF), were disbanded by the northern unifiers, leaving their southern founders stunned and furious but incapacitated. As Party historian Nguyen Khac Vien subsequently explained, “The PRG was always simply a group emanating from the Democratic Republic

- of Vietnam (DRV). If we had pretended otherwise for such a long period, it was only because during the war we were not obliged to unveil our cards.”³
3. The Paris Agreement in 1973 included a Hanoi-instigated article which called for the creation of a Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, and which publicly proclaimed the commitment of all signatories to resolving Vietnam’s domestic problems through a peaceful process of political talks. As it turned out, fighting resumed almost immediately after the signing of the peace agreement. Taking advantage of the quick withdrawal of U.S. troops and the drastic cut of military assistance to South Vietnam by the U.S. Congress and the resignation of President Richard Nixon, Hanoi ignored the peace agreement, scrapped its own plan to achieve victory through political means, and conducted a series of military operations which accelerated the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975.
 4. At the May 15 victory celebration, Politburo member Pham Hung representing the Workers’ Party, solemnly appealed for national unity and reconstruction with these assuring words: “Only the American imperialists have been defeated. All Vietnamese are the victors. Anyone with Vietnamese blood should take pride in this common victory of the whole nation.”⁴ This statement sounded like a pre-announcement of a general amnesty resulting from the PRG’s professed policy of national reconciliation and concord. Therefore, when the new authorities called on all soldiers, officers, and officials of the old regime to undergo a period of reeducation “from three days to thirty days”, it was accepted as a magnanimous and humane treatment. In reality, the reeducation period was prolonged for up to fifteen years or more to those deemed “stiff-necked reactionaries”. As revealed by former PRG Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang, the thirty-day directive was only “a ruse intended to mask the Politburo’s real policy, which was altogether different and vicious and ultimately destructive to the nation.”⁵

In view of these bitter experiences with the communists, the term “national reconciliation” has become taboo to many Vietnamese expatriates. Some have become “allergic” to the term and automatically label as pro-communist those who want to engage in dialogue with Vietnamese government officials. With full understanding of and sympathy to these emotional reactions, I want to present my personal reflections on this issue in the firm belief that, despite failures in the past, true national reconciliation remains a prerequisite for a concerted effort by all Vietnamese, inside and outside the country, to successfully transform Vietnam into a prosperous and democratic nation and a respectable member of the international community.

National Reconciliation as the Ultimate Goal

The Vietnamese communist leaders have been known as treacherous in peace negotiations and ruthless in the treatment of their prisoners of war. But if they could prevail over the Vietnamese nationalists, the French and the Americans before and during the two Indochina wars, it was not simply because of treachery and brutality, since these traits are not exclusive to the communists, especially in a time of war. Other factors must also be taken into account including political fanaticism, military training, and massive support from the Soviet Union and Communist China.

Let us review briefly the Vietnamese communist-nationalist struggle for political power and for the independence of Vietnam. It was crystal clear that the communist party was better organized, their leaders better trained and united, and their cadres more disciplined than their nationalist rivals. As a result, they were able to seize power in 1945 and monopolize leadership in the war against France, and subsequently conduct another war against the United States. During the eight-year war against France, the communist leadership put their ideology under cover and successfully rallied the people under the banner of patriotism and national independence. In the meantime, as mentioned earlier, thanks to the two corrupt Chinese generals who were supposed to help the nationalists, the communists were able to break up opposing political parties and force their leaders to either flee the country or join forces with the French, who promised to support an independent Vietnam under a nationalist government—but never kept their words. After the partition of Vietnam in 1954, an all-out civil war occurred between the two regions, with China and the Soviet Union supporting the North and the United States buttressing the South. The war did not end until twenty-one years later.

France lost the war because its political leaders were antiquated colonialists who underestimated the strength of Vietnamese patriotism, were arrogant and dishonest in their dealings with Vietnamese political leaders, communists and nationalists alike. The United States, unlike France, truthfully wanted to support an independent and democratic Vietnam, but also made many mistakes in handling the war against communism and practicing inconsistent policies towards the Republic of Vietnam.

Indoctrinated with communist ideology and anti-imperialist teachings, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) engaged in combat with religious fanaticism and sustained physical deficiencies and losses of human lives with remarkable endurance.⁶ In addition, with continuing support from China and Soviet Russia, communist forces were well equipped and provided for, especially after the 1973 Peace Agreement. "The quantity of supplies transported along the transportation corridor from the beginning of 1974 until the end of April 1975 was 823,146 tons, 1.6 times as much as the total transported during the entire previous thirteen years . . . Compared with 1972, the quantity of supplies was nine times as high, including six times as high in weapons and ammunition, three times the quantity of rice, and twenty-seven times the quantity of fuel and petroleum products."⁷ The communist victory was almost guaranteed when, following the Fulbright-Aiken amendment which had cut off funding for all direct or indirect American support activities in the war zone, the U.S. Congress appropriated only \$700 million for South Vietnamese defense for the year ending 30 June 1975, down from \$1 billion that had been authorized and less than half of \$1.47 billion requested by the Nixon administration. "In a nakedly mean-spirited act, provisions were inserted prohibiting even the purchase of fertilizer for South Vietnam in FY 1975."⁸ Frustrated by this breach of faith, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker observed "Had we made good on our commitments, it could well have been a different story."⁹

This critical review of a painful period in history is not aimed at any participating party in the two Vietnam wars, even though some serious mistakes have been exposed. Since we cannot change the past, it is important to draw lessons from it with a view to building a

better future. Past mistakes cannot be changed but they can be corrected with new good deeds. Both wars ended decades ago and both France and the United States have normalized relationships with their former arch-enemy. But twenty-seven years after the end of the second Vietnam war, the relationship with Vietnam remains a highly complicated and controversial issue within the overseas Vietnamese community. It is not easy to forget the past, but we need to exert our moral strength to forgive and to work for the future. In the current global trend towards peace and cooperation among nations, the issue of reconciliation between former adversaries is of no less importance, albeit not so urgent, than the resolution of existing armed conflicts. In the case of Vietnam, for all the mistakes and suffering during the long war and its aftermath, it is time for all Vietnamese to seriously revisit this issue for the sake of Vietnam's future as a nation and a people. This is the greatest challenge facing both Vietnamese at home and abroad; it is also a unique opportunity for people of good will to make history.

Normalization of Relations

The ultimate goal—national reconciliation—should be defined as an effort to establish peace and cooperation between the Vietnamese government and the expatriate community, and concurrently between the government and some components of the Vietnamese society, including ethnic minority groups, religious organizations, political dissidents and members of the old regime (Republic of Vietnam). Although efforts should be made by all parties, the initial steps should be taken by those who hold the power. Within the scope of this paper, my discussion will be focused on the relationship between the Vietnamese government and the expatriate community. Under current circumstances, it would be more realistic to aim at normalization of relations as an immediate, more achievable goal.

Since the inception of the *doi moi* (renovation) policy in 1986, the Vietnamese government has realized the great potential of overseas Vietnamese in bringing about a bright future for the country. Top political leaders including new Party Chief Nong Duc Manh, President Tran Duc Luong and Premier Phan Van Khai and their predecessors have insisted that the overseas Vietnamese constitute “an inseparable part of the Vietnamese people” and appealed them to “close the painful chapter of past history and help achieve the goal for a prosperous people, a strong country, an equitable, democratic and civilized society.” In the wake of the recent Ninth Party Congress, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Dinh Bin, concurrently Chairman of the “Committee on Vietnamese Residing in Foreign Countries,” reaffirmed his appreciation for the capital and intellectual capacity of overseas Vietnamese. “Though having a different political viewpoint, they (overseas Vietnamese) always maintain their national pride deep in their heart and expect the country to become a developed country. . . . They are a precious internal force of the country, including capital and intellectual sources. They are becoming our potential partners in a near future,” he said.¹⁰

In fact, overseas Vietnamese have already made important contributions to the economy of Vietnam, mostly through friends and relatives. They have been a substantive source of support for Vietnam since its gloomiest years before *doi moi*. This assistance has been provided regularly and increased consistently. Last year, remittances by nearly three

million overseas Vietnamese, through both official and unofficial channels, were estimated at US\$3 billion, almost one-eighth of Vietnam's GDP. In business activities, overseas Vietnamese have invested in 533 projects worth \$252.6 million and opened 100 companies and representative offices in Vietnam. These figures would be much higher if Vietnam had put in place a reliable legal structure and an effective administrative system, at both local and national levels. In the long run, as the younger generations become less emotionally attached to their parents' or grandparents' native land, financial assistance to relatives and friends would be decreasing to virtually nil, but large amounts of money would likely be spent in investment, trade and other business ventures. The fact that the overseas Chinese account for 80 percent of all foreign investment in China¹¹ can shed light on the prospect of overseas Vietnamese doing business in Vietnam although the Vietnamese, by nature, are not so business-oriented and entrepreneurial as the Chinese.

In order to become an industrialized and modernized country, Vietnam is desperately in need of advanced knowledge and technological skills. Overseas scientists and other professionals are precisely "a precious intellectual source," as asserted by vice minister Nguyen Dinh Bin. However, they have not responded to Vietnam's appeals as positively as they have for humanitarian assistance and business activities. According to Mr. Bin, "around two hundred overseas Vietnamese scientists return to the country each year to provide training and technical assistance." This number remains far below the level expected from over 300,000 talented Vietnamese among the expatriate community. Greater effort must be made, primarily by Vietnam, to overcome psychological, legal and political barriers that hinder the intellectual contribution of the overseas Vietnamese. Meetings between government policy makers and overseas individuals or groups, which have already begun, should be continued and expanded to address issues of common concern in a frank and constructive manner. These exchanges of views, conducted in a spirit of mutual respect, would help smooth out differences, alleviate tensions and legitimize contributions of overseas Vietnamese toward the realization of "a prosperous people, a strong country, an equitable, democratic and civilized society." These goals, set by the Party and State, could be achieved only when words are translated into actions, promises into realities.

Reconciliation, rule of law, and democracy are the right solutions to the three psychological, legal and political problems mentioned above. Conciliatory gestures including recognition of some past mistakes and a genuine effort towards economic, administrative and political reforms by the Vietnamese leadership will be applauded not only by Vietnamese expatriates but also by the international community. Although political reform has long been resisted by Vietnam, democracy has recently been touted as a new national goal. A culturally appropriate form of democracy for Vietnam might need to be defined but the universal principles of democracy must be respected and put into practice. In the meantime, current ethnic and religious problems must be resolved on the basis of democratic principles in order to achieve national reconciliation and concord.

Vietnamese political leaders have been denouncing "peaceful evolution" as a "conspiracy of hostile forces." It is an odd accusation since peaceful evolution *per se* is beneficial to the country as opposed to "chaotic regression". If the Vietnamese government seizes the

initiative in implementing *peaceful evolution* instead of rejecting it as a threat, it could actually pre-empt hostile forces and prevent them from instigating chaos and violence. President John F. Kennedy once promoted “peaceful revolution” (repeat *revolution*) as a necessary socio-political approach to peace and development. “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable,” he said.

A young Vietnamese American physician, an eloquent advocate for humanitarian assistance to Vietnam, has rightly observed that “In nature, all change that is sudden is usually catastrophic... The examples in nature abound that gradual transitions, peaceful evolutions are always more productive than abrupt and violent transformations.”¹² This step-by-step process, however, must be steadily forward and, in the case of Vietnam, each step must be longer than the one made by other Southeast Asian countries, otherwise Vietnam will be permanently trailing far behind its neighbors.

Prospects for the Future

Last year, the Ninth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party selected Nong Duc Manh to be the new Party Secretary-general. It also restructured the Party leadership by deleting three advisory positions in the Politburo and replacing four politburo members. Central Committee membership was trimmed from 170 to 150 and included fifty per cent new and younger party cadres. The five-member politburo Standing Board was replaced by a nine-member Secretariat.

In his previous role as National Assembly speaker, Mr. Manh was considered by international observers as a reform-minded leader and a skilled consensus builder. In his acceptance speech as the new Party chief, Mr. Manh said the Ninth Party Congress opened “a new era” for national development. “The future of our nation is very bright, but there will be not a small number of difficulties and challenges... The success of the reform process depends on our ability to grasp opportunities and overcome dangers... Many strong solutions like supervision, scrutinization (sic), and administration reform, will be continued to implement democratic revolutions. The system has to be clean, strong and effective.” Mr. Manh also urged the party to “correct the mistakes and fight against negative phenomena, particularly corruption, bureaucracy, waste and social evils... This battle is a life or death struggle for the regime,” he affirmed.¹³ In a later interview with the daily *Saigon Giai Phong* (*Saigon Liberation*), the new party chief again emphasized the need for continued renovation, “I think that only by enhancing internal unity, continuing *doi moi*, taking advantage of intellectuals and developing democracy, can Vietnam overcome poverty and backwardness, and build an equitable, democratic and civilized society.”¹⁴

Despite these encouraging statements, the Party remains a closed political entity and international observers have been wondering whether Mr. Manh could live up to his reputation as a reformist and a consensus builder. With regard to the relationship with the overseas Vietnamese, Mr. Manh might have greater latitude to exert his skill as a bridge builder. In a meeting with a group of Vietnamese American professionals in Washington, DC on his way to the International Conference of Parliamentary Leaders in New York

City two years ago, the then National Assembly speaker reaffirmed the great potential of overseas Vietnamese in enabling Vietnam to become a developed country. He emphasized the need for consultation between country leaders and overseas intellectuals on issues of common interest. Appropriate measures would be taken in response to the constructive recommendations, even critical comments, of people in good faith. It was in this meeting that Mr. Manh announced the addition of “democracy” to the government’s national motto.

We look forward to more opportunities for such frank and constructive exchanges of views and active participation of overseas Vietnamese in the building of a prosperous and democratic Vietnam. One good reason to be optimistic about Vietnam’s future is the presence of thousands of Vietnamese students in foreign countries. In the U.S. alone, in addition to the regular flow of students admitted to a number of colleges and universities every year,¹⁵ a public law entitled “Vietnam Education Foundation Act of 2000” has been promulgated “to further the process of reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam and the building of a bilateral relationship serving the interests of both countries.”¹⁶ Students from Vietnam will sooner or later mingle with overseas Vietnamese students of the same generation. Unlike their parents, the younger generation has little or no painful memories of the past and can be more candid and productive in their work, cooperatively or separately. Most significantly, they can do wonders for Vietnam in the community of nations. They are just waiting for the right decisions from policy makers in Vietnam.

(Le Xuan Khoa is an adjunct professor and visiting scholar at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC)

This article is published on-line concurrently by the *Review of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 2, Nov. 2002 and the *YaleGlobal Online Magazine*, November, 2002 ([About Globalization/Academic papers](#)).

-
- ¹ Proposed as basis for discussion by Le Xuan Khoa and agreed upon by Vietnam’s Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Dinh Bin at a meeting at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, June 9, 2000.
- ² Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 336. Mr. Tang, former PRG Minister of Justice, fled Vietnam among the “boat people” in 1978. He is living in France.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- ⁶ By all accounts, North Vietnam lost more than 1.4 million of its soldiers in the war, as opposed to 58,000 Americans and 250,000 South Vietnamese.
- ⁷ Vietnam Military History Institute, *History of the People’s Army of Vietnam*, II: 473-475, quoted by Lewis Sorley in *A Better War* (San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc., 2000), p. 372.
- ⁸ Lewis Sorley, *op.cit.*, p. 367.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- ¹⁰ Investconsult Group’s website, *Vietnampanorama*, April 26, 2001.
- ¹¹ John Naisbitt, *Megatrends Asia* (New York, Touchtone edition, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997), p. 20.
- ¹² Nguyen Hoai Duc Tri, “Returning to Vietnam, an Alternate Perspective,” paper submitted to the Vietnamese Medical Association, 2000, p. 1.
- ¹³ *Vietnam Investment Review*, Hanoi, April 23, 2001.

¹⁴ *Saigon Giai Phong*, Ho Chi Minh City, April 25, 2001.

¹⁵ Currently, there are about 3,000 students from Vietnam in the U.S.

¹⁶ Public law No.106-554, 12/22/2000, section 206. According to this law, a Vietnam Debt Repayment Fund will be established to receive all payments made by Vietnam under the U.S.-Vietnam debt agreement. Beginning with fiscal year 2002, and each subsequent fiscal year through fiscal year 2018, \$5,000,000 of the Fund will be made available to the Vietnam Education Foundation to award fellowships to Vietnamese nationals to study at institutions of higher education in the U.S., and to U.S. citizens to teach in Vietnamese institutions in Vietnam