

# SECURITY ISSUES IN SOUTH EAST ASIA SINCE 1975

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After the capture of Saigon in April 1975 by communist troops from the North, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdul Razak bin Hussein, probably expressed the general sentiment in South East Asia when he said:

"Peace, essentially, has come to this area .... Never until now have we had the opportunity to create and establish for ourselves a new Southeast Asian world - - a world in peace and without foreign influence and domination, a world in which countries of the region can work for the common good "<sup>1</sup>

This hope was unfortunately not realized, because soon the bad news about Indochina would accumulate: dispute between Vietnam and China over sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands in 1975; genocide committed by the communists in Cambodia; Vietnam's takeover of Laos, accompanied by ominous declarations for South Asia in 1976; border clashes between Cambodia and Vietnam in 1977; dispute between China and Vietnam on the Hoas (Vietnamese of Chinese origin) in the middle of 1978; invasion and occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam in late 1978 and North Vietnam invasion by China in early

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<sup>1</sup> International Herald Tribune, May 14, 1975.

1979; Finally, guerrilla actions supported by China and the ASEAN countries against government and Vietnamese forces in Laos and Cambodia since 1979.

The problem of peace, security and stability in South Asia arises again, more acute than ever. What has happened? This is a question that is posed naturally by many people.

Those familiar with the history of Asia's pre-colonial period would shrug their shoulders and say, all this is déjà vu! Indeed, going back to 1840, the start of the French intervention in Indochina, we came across a country called Dai Viet (Great Empire of Annam) where the Emperor exercised suzerainty over the principalities that make up Laos today, as they desperately tried to consolidate control over Cambodia, the people led a war of resistance against the imposition of a protectorate which was also challenged and fought by Thailand. If one goes back 42 years, we find that in 1788 - the eve of the French Revolution - Viet Nam fended off the last great Chinese invasion, the seventh great invasion in 850 years, before enduring the French conquest.

The history of Asia seems to have simply resumed its natural course, where it was interrupted by the European incursion. However, there still are new elements. We can count five major ones:

- 1) For the first time, the countries of South East Asia other than Thailand (not to mention Laos and Cambodia, of course) feel threatened by Viet Nam;
- 2) For the first time, China actively opposes the establishment of a preeminent position for Viet Nam in Indochina;
- 3) For the first time the Russians, I mean the Russians, not the Soviets, to emphasize clearly that this is the first time in the history of Russia and the world that this happened, therefore the Russians have a presence direct and visible in South East Asia, and manage to establish military bases;
- 4) For the first time, communist states are at war - I'm not talking about border incidents --but in full scale, and it is in South East Asia that it happens; (Incidentally, this would make us throw the Marxist-Leninist theories on the war in the dustbin of history);
- 5) For the first time since 1940, the United States are completely outside the South East Asian sphere, and are playing a role of spectator, certainly interested, but only as an observer .

But it's still the disengagement of the United States which is, if not the cause, at least a catalyst to the other four. In any case, this disengagement has had significant effects on the region regarding the security issue.

Let us now, evaluate in detail, the effects of disengagement.

First, the ASEAN countries are divided into three groups.

The first includes the Philippines and Thailand, allies of the United States, members of SEATO. They participated in the war in Indochina alongside the US and feared Vietnamese reprisals. The second includes Indonesia and Singapore. The first, while not being allies of the United States, regarded China as a hostile nation, because it continued to support the communist rebels against the Indonesian government, whose leaders were the survivors of a failed Communist September 1965 coup. The second, Singapore, where 75% of the population were of Chinese origin, shared the distrust of Indonesia regarding China, but mistrusted the Soviet Union even more. The third group includes Malaysia, which occupied an intermediate position: despite having helped South Vietnam, it got out of it in 1968 and, while wary of China because of its substantial Chinese population (34%) and memories of the uprising under Chinese leadership between 1948 and 1960, it had already established diplomatic relations with China in 1974. However for any group belonging to the ASEAN countries, US disengagement posed a security problem for them.

For the Philippines and Thailand, the US withdrawal meant the loss now of a protective umbrella; secondly, the dramatic abandonment of South Vietnam and Cambodia by the United States at the most critical moment of their existence was a clear warning of what could happen to them too. Faced with this new situation, to ensure their safety, both countries were forced to make a change in policy.

As for the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos, in two remarkable speeches in Manila April 16, 1975 April 16, 1975 (the day before the fall of Phnom Penh) and 23 May 1975 (three weeks after the fall of Saigon), after coldly analyzing the situation in which his country was faced, concluded that treaties of mutual security with the United States were not a sufficient guarantee of security for his country, because these treaties were "ambiguous" and that the commitments made by the US president were no longer reliable, given that, following the passage of the "War Powers Resolution" of 7 November 1973, the implementation of these treaties is now dependent on the US Congress, whose mood is changing.

Therefore, to ensure the survival of the Philippines "we need, he says, reserve the right to make our own accommodation with the new realities of Asia." He advocated a new policy in six points, including the first two most important ones: 1) strengthening of relations with ASEAN; 2) pursuing "more vigorously" the establishment of diplomatic relations with the socialist countries, especially with the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. Relations with the United States - continuation of "healthy" relations with that country - were relegated to the sixth, and last, place. Further, Marcos stated that a revision and clarification of all agreements with the United States was required.<sup>2</sup>

To implement its new policy, Marcos flew to Beijing on an official visit June 7, 1975, five weeks after the victory of Hanoi. Two days later, a Sino-Philippine joint press release announced the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. On this occasion, Marcos said, during a banquet in his honor, that "we must revise our alliances, reassess our destiny ... reshape our thoughts and our actions," and praised Mao Zedong's<sup>3</sup> doctrine of "dependence on oneself". As said Philippe Pons *Le Monde*, Marcos' visit in China "is symbolic," and Manila "has changed its tune."<sup>4</sup>

Three weeks after the departure of Marcos, the Prime Minister of Thailand, General Kukrit Pramoij, landed in Beijing, and the next day, July 1, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Thailand is announced. Two months earlier, on May 1, twenty four hours after North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon, the Thai government asked the US to withdraw 27,000 men and 350 aircraft immediately, and everything else before March 1976. In response to the statement in which the Secretary of State for the US defense, James Schlesinger, said the US has obligations "of a moral character" to Thailand, Chartchai Choochavan, Thai foreign minister, offered this acid comment " Moral? The United States has no moral at this point. They have already withdrawn from Cambodia and Vietnam. So we will have to rely on ourselves."<sup>5</sup> And it is probably fitting that Deng Xiaoping during the banquet given in honor of Pramoij, said: "With this visit, a new page in the history of Thai-Chinese relations was turned."<sup>6</sup> He might just as well say, a new page in the Thai-US relations has been turned.

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<sup>2</sup> F. Marcos: [A Matter of Survival](#), 16 avril 1975, et [The Philippines in New Asia](#), 23 mai 1975. Manila, Department of Public Information, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> [Pékin Information](#), June 13 1975.

<sup>4</sup> [Le Monde](#), June 8-9 1975.

<sup>5</sup> [International Herald Tribune](#), May 1st, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> [Pékin Information](#), 4 juillet 1975.

While Marcos and Pramoiij found it necessary to seek assurances in Beijing, General Suharto, President of Indonesia - which had suspended diplomatic relations with the PRC following the Communist coup in September 1965 - had to make the same approach toward Washington, where he visited in early July 1975. According to the journalists who accompanied Suharto, Indonesia was deeply troubled by the speed and the finality of the US withdrawal, and the Indonesian President wanted to have a clear idea of the intentions of the United States in Southeast Asia. In this affair, Suharto got what he wanted, an assurance that President Ford's Vietnam tragedy "should increase, and in fact redouble" the interest of the US for the stability of South East Asia, and that US attached "great importance" to Indonesia.<sup>7</sup> This insurance was worth what it was worth in light of what was said by Marcos about the reliability of the commitments of American presidents and the fact that, on the eve of the Communist assault against Saigon in April, the same Ford declared "we turned the page on Vietnam." There was a time when Vietnam was more than "very important" for the US.

Like Indonesia, Singapore was disappointed by the US withdrawal because it would like to see some US presence maintained to ensure a sense of balance in South Asia. Singaporean leaders, like those from the Philippines, were deeply troubled by the fact that the US Congress was also making foreign policy--and that, separately from the president. Lee Kwang Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, believed in the domino theory - although it has been ridiculed in the US, in academic and journalistic circles - and thought that, after taking a breathing spell, the Vietnamese communists would intensify their insurgency in the region, and he was "far from being convinced" that the United States would not abandon South East Asia to its fate.<sup>8</sup> But he hoped to gain five to ten years of respite thanks to the rupture of the communist unity. He was well placed to know, because, according to Hanoi, it is through him that Beijing had tried to contact President Nguyen Van Thieu to try to save South Vietnam in 1975.<sup>9</sup>

Of all the ASEAN countries, Malaysia was the only one that did not consider itself too threatened by the new situation. It had already taken the lead by establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1974, and in addition enjoyed the

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<sup>7</sup> International Herald Tribune, July 7, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> - ibid - , July 17, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> See the white book La vérité sur les relations vietnamo-chinoises durant les trente dernière années, Hanoi, Ministry of foreign affairs, andt Courrier du Vietnam, 1987, November 7.

protection of Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, from which it was bound by a military agreement (Agreement Five, with Singapore) signed in 1971. It was concerned, certainly, that the new Vietnamese leaders would provide weapons to Malay rebels, but with a substantial Chinese population in its midst (3.7 of 11.3 million) it wondered whether China or Vietnam represented a greater danger. However, its safety was linked to that of Thailand, to which Vietnam represented a greater danger. Malaysia was therefore trying to navigate between two waters, and as we shall see later, will end up spending more than any other country to ensure its security.

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The withdrawal of the US and total victory of the Vietnamese Communist forces had as a second effect a reversal of the situation in Indochina, with obvious implications for security of Southeast Asia, such as China. The Vietnamese Communists were now in a strong position. Victory, so total, and apparently acquired with much ease, stimulated the revolutionary militancy of the Vietnamese Communist leaders, and they proclaimed it without ambiguity. The defeat of the United States, they said, opened "a new era with great opportunities for South East Asia."<sup>10</sup> Le Duan promises Moscow that Vietnam will now become "an authentic outpost of socialism in Southeast Asia,"--and forgetting or neglecting deliberately the susceptibilities, the sensibilities of Chinese leaders in the field--is committed to: supporting the Central Committee and the SUCP "in all outside activities."<sup>11</sup> And this, in October 1975. As for the ASEAN leaders, baptized as "reactionaries on US payroll," they were ordered to change their policy under penalty of being overthrown by the peoples of the region "whose peoples Vietnam fully supports the fight," said Nhan Dan, the VCP newspaper.<sup>12</sup>

It is on the occasion of the proclamation of the establishment of "special relations" with Laos in February 1976 that the new Vietnamese leaders made threats that caused concern in ASEAN countries. On February 11, during the visit to new Laos leaders led by the Prime Minister Lao Kaysonne Phomvihane (the

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<sup>10</sup> Nouvelles de la République démocratique du Vietnam (Paris), 25 juin 1975.

<sup>11</sup> - ibid - , 6 novembre 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Nhan Dan, 28 février 1976.

monarchy was abolished in December), a joint statement was issued in which it says that "both sides are determined to promote solidarity and fraternal friendship of the peoples of the three countries for the independence and prosperity of each country and in the interest of the revolution in Southeast Asia and the world."<sup>13</sup> The statement added that both parties are unanimous that the revolutionary movement in South East Asia "is in a very advantageous situation," and that the two sides agree on "full support" for the struggle of the peoples of the region in their fight for Peace ... and "will actively contribute to help the states of South East Asia become truly independent, peaceful and neutral ..." Both parties also undertake to "closely coordinate their actions against imperialism" (i.e. the US) and "reactionaries in the pay" of it.<sup>14</sup>

To clarify who these "reactionaries" were, Vietnamese civilian and military press would name them: Pranam Adiraksan (Thai Prime Minister at the time), and Lee Kwang Yew (Prime Minister of Singapore), according to the News of the Republic Democratic Vietnam,<sup>15</sup> and even all of Asean, according to Quan Doi Nhan Dan (Journal of the People's Army). For the latter, ASEAN "has always served the colonialist policy of the United States." It emphasizes that the struggle of the Thai and Filipino peoples was gaining ground, and that to consolidate and maintain its bases in Asia, the United States were using ASEAN "for which Indonesia is the main support" to rally pro-American counter-revolutionary forces against the "revolutionary movement" in South East Asia. These attacks were launched on the occasion of the meeting ASEAN summit in Bali on 23 February 1976 at a time when the Vietnamese and Lao leaders were celebrating the establishment of their "special relationship." The Bali meeting, Quan Doi Nhan Dan said, met "at the instigation of the United States."<sup>16</sup>

Laos has also joined in the attack, and declared that it would refuse to join this organization because it was not "non-aligned."<sup>17</sup> Following these attacks, the ASEAN leaders had obviously had to revise their position on the question : between China and Vietnam, which of the two is the biggest immediate threat to their security?

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<sup>13</sup> Vietnam News Agency, February 11, 1976.

<sup>14</sup> VNA - *ibid* - .

<sup>15</sup> NRDV, June 5, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> VNA, February 22, 1976.

<sup>17</sup> VNA, July 2, 1976.

Alongside the assault against ASEAN, the Hanoi leaders continued their efforts to set up Vietnam in a preeminent position in Indochina. These efforts bore their fruit on 18 July 1977, date on which a Vietnam-Laos "treaty of friendship and cooperation" and several others were signed--including the most important, the border treaty between the two countries. The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation legalizes the establishment of "special relationship" between the two countries, particularly in defense, and especially the posting of Vietnamese troops in Laos. Article 1 of the Treaty stipulates that the two parties undertake to "work with all their might to preserve and to develop special Vietnam - Laos's relations...", and Article 2, the two parties undertake to achieve "close cooperation in order to strengthen their defense ..."

But there is more: by section 5 the two parties agree to support the South East Asia's peoples struggle for national independence, democracy, peace and true neutrality.<sup>18</sup> The text of the treaty on the frontier line has not been made public, but according to Amphay Doré, a Lao official who defected, Hanoi has requested and obtained the transfer by Laos of a band of 15 to 30 kilometers wide area in Laos, along the Vietnamese border. This is the territory on which was built the famous "Ho Chi Minh Trail," which has served, and still serves to route in full security and secrecy men and war material from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, southern Laos, Cambodia-- and today through Cambodia, near the border of Thailand.<sup>19</sup> There is enough here to make the latter nervous.

The establishment of the Vietnamese control over Laos happened without making too many waves on the outside, but it is not the same regarding Cambodia whose leaders have, since 1954, always looked to Beijing rather than Hanoi as their big brother. Attempts by Hanoi to align the Cambodian government on Vietnam will encounter fierce resistance; it will lead to war and the military occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam, which, in turn, will cause an armed conflict with China, as well as ASEAN hostility.

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<sup>18</sup> Bulletin du Vietnam (Paris), special number, September 1977, includes the text of the treaty. The emphasis is ours..

<sup>19</sup> Amphay Doré, Le partage du Mékong, Paris, Editions Encre, 1980, 9. 211.



The current Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict, like all Vietnamese-Cambodian disputes, dates back to XVIIth century, when the Vietnamese began treading on Cambodian territory. But, if we confine that to recent times we can take the years 1966-1967 as a starting point. At that time, the North Vietnamese asked Sihanouk permission to use Cambodian territory as a rear base for military operations against South Vietnam. This request was supported by Beijing. Permission was granted, provided that the Hanoi and South Vietnam Liberation Front leaders formally undertake to recognize the borders of Cambodia at the time. This commitment was formally given to Sihanouk repeatedly by Huynh Tan Phat, President of the FLN, May 31, 1967; by North Vietnam Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister, on 8 and 25 June 1967; by Ho Chi Minh himself June 23, 1967.<sup>20</sup> It was again solemnly reaffirmed in statements by North Vietnam and the NLF, in a joint statement at the Indochinese summit conference held in Canton on 24 and 25 April 1970.<sup>21</sup> However, according to Beijing, after 1975, the attitude of the Vietnamese leaders changed "totally and completely." During negotiations with Cambodian leaders on the border issues in 1976, the Hanoi leaders disowned their commitments, stating that in 1966 they could not do otherwise, given the necessities of war.<sup>22</sup>

Cambodians demanded not only the recognition of pre-1975 borders, according to the Brévié line (named after the French governor general who designed it), but also the evacuation of Cambodian territory by the Vietnamese who were stationed there. The negotiations were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, according to the Vietnamese version, Cambodians have made inroads in the Vietnam border regions in 1975; from April 1977 important Cambodian forces of the order of several divisions with artillery support, attacked the border provinces of South Vietnam. Incidentally South Vietnamese and ethnic forces opposed to Hanoi also operated, in many of these same provinces. These forces took refuge in Cambodia in case of difficulties, like those of Hanoi had done before 1975.

The leaders of Hanoi, exasperated, decided to liquidate these trouble spots. In September 1977, the first major offensive was launched, with support of armored and aviation--penetration in Cambodian territory was to a depth of 20 kilometers along Highway 7, in the Mimot area of rubber plantations (once the

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<sup>20</sup> Pékin Information, 24 juillet, 1978. Voir aussi: Norodom Sihanouk, l'Indochine vue de Pékin, Paris, Seuil, 1972, pp. 51 et 95.

<sup>21</sup> Les peuples indochinois vaincraient, Hanoi, Editions en langues étrangères, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Pékin Information, 24 juillet 1978.

headquarters of the Vietnamese Communist forces). A second attack took place in January 1978 in the same region, at a depth of 30 km and a width of 20 km. These attacks were repulsed by heavily armed Cambodians, and supported by the Chinese.

But the Hanoi-Phnom Penh quarrel was beyond the scope of disagreement on the boundary line. The real dispute concerned, in fact, the complex nature of relations between the Communist parties and governments of these two countries. Hanoi wanted to establish the same kind of "special relationship" with Phnom Penh as those between Laos and Vietnam--a "border of friendship" similar to that between Laos and Vietnam, a "mutual aid in all areas, "i.e., a total alignment of Cambodia on Vietnam. Cambodian leaders, who did not recognize the preeminence of the Vietnam Communist Party as their own, rejected any subordination, and only wanted "normal" relationships.<sup>23</sup> Since 1975, they have already been aligned with Beijing. Indeed, during an official visit in Beijing in August 1975 - two months before the visit of Le Duan to Moscow - Khieu Samphan said: "Cambodian and Chinese governments have agreed to fight together against colonialism, imperialism, and "hegemonism."<sup>24</sup>

Hanoi apparently did not expect such a situation. As we have seen, the Lao-Vietnamese joint statement of 11 February 1976 was a matter of solidarity of the three countries. It was a tenuous assumption. In any case, in June 1977, Hanoi had already met with opposition, which it attributed to "a group," a malicious fraction, which wanted to harm the traditions of solidarity and fraternal friendship" between Cambodia and Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, Hanoi also thought it could change it from within. In fact, Cambodian leaders later accused Hanoi later of plotting six coups against the government in Phnom Penh between 1975 and 1978.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the Pol Pot group took drastic measures with their brutality now well known, to liquidate the pro-Hanoi people in their ranks. This led them, including Heng Samrin, to take refuge in Vietnam and Vietnamese leaders to decide on a change from the outside, by their now well-known method of creating a "front," powerfully supported by their troops.

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<sup>23</sup> Le Monde, January 7, 1978.

<sup>24</sup> Pékin Information, August 22 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Le Monde, January 7, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Beijing Information, March 19, 1979.

In February 1978, Radio Hanoi accused Phnom Penh "to act in favor of imperialism and international reaction,"<sup>27</sup> i.e. the US, China and ASEAN. In April, the same radio called Khmer military to rise up against their government.<sup>28</sup> In early December 1978, a Front of National Union for the Salvation of Kampuchea (FNUSK) - the equivalent of the late South Vietnam Liberation Front - was born. On 25 December, the troops of Hanoi struck in force, pushed on to Phnom Penh, where they hastened to install a puppet government headed by Cambodia Heng Samrin. Now Hanoi has the instrument of its policy in Cambodia. With Heng Samrin, it will sign on February 18, 1979 a "peace treaty of friendship and cooperation" on the model of the Lao-Vietnamese treaty of July 18, 1977; this treaty legalizes the presence of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and the Vietnam rule in this country. The latter is now, like Laos, completely Vietnam aligned. By Article 2 of the Treaty, the two parties undertake to "provide mutual support with all their heart as well as help in all necessary areas and shapes and forms" to strengthen their defense capability..."<sup>29</sup> Alliance of a clay pot with an iron pot, say Sihanouk.

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The Vietnamese forces not only occupied Phnom Penh, but pushed to the Thai border, throwing the alarm throughout ASEAN. Their capitals were "traumatized" by the conquest of Cambodia by Vietnam, RP Paringaux reported in Le Monde.<sup>30</sup> Rajaratnam, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, commented on the foundation of FNUSK in these terms: "We are concerned because we do not know if in two years they (the Vietnamese) will not find it necessary to establish National Salvation Fronts for ASEAN ..... This is happening today in Kampuchea, it could take place tomorrow at home ..." <sup>31</sup> Even the foreign minister of Malaysia said that "it smelled foreign intervention." <sup>32</sup>

However, the action in Vietnam was mostly a challenge to China. For this reason, Hanoi had launched the attack after receiving assurances from Moscow. On

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<sup>27</sup> Le Monde, February 22 1978.

<sup>28</sup> Le Monde, April 3, 1978.

<sup>29</sup> Text in Bulletin du Vietnam, February 15-28r 1979. TH emphasis is ours.

<sup>30</sup> Le Monde, February 12, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Beijing Information, January 8, 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Mohammed Mahatir, vice premier ministre de Malaisie, dans Malaysia, février 1979.

June 28, 1978, Vietnam joined the CMEA, and on November 3 of that year, it signed with the Soviet Union a "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation" which Beijing says it is directed against China, and its "smell of gunpowder is irrefutable."<sup>33</sup> Vietnam is going to be a security problem for China.

Why did the Hanoi leaders took an unpopular action with ASEAN countries, and so provocative toward China? In a statement issued on January 17, 1979, the Foreign Ministry of Vietnam explained that its action in Cambodia was an obligation to exercise its "right to self-defense" against the warmongering "Pol Pot," and "save the Cambodian people from the danger of extermination."<sup>34</sup> Later, Nhan Dan says with more candor that Vietnam intervened in Cambodia to help the Cambodian people "prevent genocide" and simultaneously "to guard itself against any future aggression." Aggression by whom?<sup>35</sup>

The plain answer to this question is given by the Foreign Ministers of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in their January and June 1981 statements, at the end of their regular meetings. It says without beating about the bush that "the presence of Vietnamese troops in Kampuchea is motivated by the threat of China."<sup>36</sup> Obviously, it is easy to guess the pen of the Vietnamese. For the Vietnamese leaders, it was a security issue and, obviously, not that of Cambodia, but that of South Vietnam. They wanted to protect this part of the country, newly conquered and far from being subjected, against a possible attack from China, as it is not in the Chinese war doctrine to send troops so far from their bases, or having forces from Cambodia supported by China. Nguyen Co Thach, Foreign Minister of Vietnam, later said that the "military cooperation" between Vietnam and Cambodia, is for Vietnam, "a matter of life and death," that for Vietnam, Cambodia is "a shield."<sup>37</sup> He might add that the same was true of Laos.

The Hanoi leaders were eager therefore to guard against an attack from Cambodia and Laos. Why? For both external and internal reasons, the two being inextricably linked.

Contrary to general expectation, the Vietnamese Communist leaders have not stopped to take a breath after capturing South Vietnam in April 1975, but

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<sup>33</sup> Pékin Information, November 27, 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Bulletin de la République démocratique du Vietnam, January 16-31, 1979.

<sup>35</sup> Bulletin du Vietnam, February 15-28, 1979. The emphasis is ours.

<sup>36</sup> Courrier du Vietnam (Hanoi), 1981, No 2

<sup>37</sup> Le Monde, January 7, 1983.

continued what Philippe Richer in Game of Four in South East Asia, called the policy of "forging ahead."<sup>38</sup> Internally, they wanted to accelerate the march of the Revolution - sacred word for them - and achieve the "socialist transformation" of Vietnam, particularly in the South, immediately. This was to include the firm and immediate removal of all traces of capitalism in the South. There they were met with strong resistance, not only in urban centres, but also in peasant communities. Not only did the Southern population refused, passively but effectively, to put up with the rythm of Hanoi; rather, it was the cadres sent by the North who submitted to the rhythm of Saigon, allowing themselves to be softened or corrupted in large numbers. Thus the anger of the leaders of Hanoi.

This anger was directed particularly against the Chinese, who have always been great masters in manipulating markets and in the art of corrupting Vietnamese officials. Hanoi decided to strike a blow to crush any resistance. This took place in April 1978. A spectacular aspect of this policy was the imposition of Vietnamese citizenship on Chinese nationals, readopting Mr Ngo Dinh Diem 1956 policy that Hanoi, the FLN and Beijing had all vehemently denounced. Consequently, this resulted in great personal tragedy in the tragic exodus of Chinese known as the "boat people."

The case provoked outrage and fury in Beijing because under a 1955 agreement between North Vietnam and China that for the duration of the war, Chinese and Vietnamese are treated equally, and the citizenship issue would be resolved definitively by both parties, on a basis of mutual agreement, once the war was over. More importantly, the Vietnamese decision, which was a unilateral decision, was considered as a use of force against China. It also made the government lose face in Beijing, to which looked 17 million Chinese living in South East Asia. Moreover, some 200,000 North Vietnam Hoas were expelled to China, causing large material and financial difficulties to Chinese authorities.

China-Vietnam negotiations on this issue led to nowhere, so on May 12, 1978, in retaliation, the Chinese government blocked some of its aid to Vietnam (21 projects); on May 30, it stopped the rest (51 projects), and in July it recalled all its aid personnel serving in Vietnam. It was a hard blow for the latter, being fully halfway of its five-year plan and struggling with many economic difficulties. China's act was "a unilateral decision of unprecedented severity in the relations between the two countries" whose objective was to "sabotage production, create

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<sup>38</sup> Philippe Richer, Jeu de quatre en Asie du Sud Est, Paris, PUF, 1982. p. 332

difficulties for the economy and the daily life of the Vietnamese people, "cried a statement from the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 17 June 1978.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, the conflict with Cambodia worsened. Cambodian leaders', feeling strongly supported by the Chinese, not only did not yield, but showed more belligerence. The Cambodian threat was paralleled by another: the resistance of the old South Vietnamese army and the hill tribes (the FULRO), unhappy because Hanoi had not kept promises of autonomy and others they had made. Finally, the Vietnamese leaders always suspected the US of seeking to destabilize Vietnam, revenge, supporting directly or through Thailand the rebel elements in Hanoi, and they did this in collusion with China. All this might be extended, and Cambodia could become a solid base for the armed forces of all kinds operating against the new Vietnamese regime, especially in South Vietnam. Hanoi knew something of it, for having itself practiced this game between 1954 and 1975. It had to hit before the danger becomes too great. The occupation of Cambodia is a consequence of the Hanoi leaders' policy of "flight forward" domestically.

Externally, instead of allowing their country to catch its breath after thirty years of war, the Vietnamese leaders wanted to fully play their role as "authentic outpost of socialism" and base of the "revolutionary movement" in South East Asia and help the peoples of the region achieve "real" independence and neutrality. This means, says Pham Van Dong, the countries of the region must get rid of the "American mantle."<sup>40</sup>

Vietnam considered itself as a "champion of the national liberation movement in South East Asia." This profession of faith is expressed candidly in a Courier of Vietnam editorial.<sup>41</sup> Hoang Tung, member of the Central Committee secretariat and editor of the Communist Party of Vietnam newspaper goes even further. "Our mission, he said, is defending South East Asia, although the South East countries have asked us to leave."<sup>42</sup> This is actually assuming the role that the US has been accused of in the past, to play the gendarme. Only now we are dealing with a new kind of gendarme, that of the Revolution, all imbued with his power. As a diplomat familiar with Asian affairs remarked: "Vietnamese leaders see themselves as messianic representatives of the purest revolutionary movement

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<sup>39</sup> Bulletin du Vietnam, July-August 1978.

<sup>40</sup> International Herald Tribune, December 18, 1982.

<sup>41</sup> Courier du Vietnam, 1982, No 1

<sup>42</sup> International Herald Tribune, December 22, 1980. The emphasis is ours.

in the world. They are affected, if you will, by the power of arrogance."<sup>43</sup> Ideologically, they regarded their socialism as authentic, and mocked other socialisms , especially the Chinese who, in their eyes, were only a "sinicized Marxism, maoicized, nationalized, opposing the existing socialist countries system", and said that if the "Deng clique" had a feat, it was to follow "the doctrine of the cat" (a reference to a Deng Xiaoping declaration that no matter what color the cat is, as long as it knew how to catch mice), and practicing "a communism that imperialism will tolerate."<sup>44</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the Hanoi leaders felt the need to help countries in the region, starting with the nearest neighbors of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, to have truly revolutionary regimes, "authentically socialist, "similar to theirs. This contributes to ensure the safety of Vietnam, and simultaneously to achieve its ambitions of being the traditional dominant power in the Indochinese peninsula, by establishing an "Indochinese bloc", which Vietnamese leaders say that it is "an indisputable reality." As for the situation in Cambodia, they repeated ad nauseam that it is "irreversible."<sup>45</sup>

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The principle followed by the Communist rulers of Vietnam, that we can take what belongs to others, and that once this is done the situation is irreversible, is unacceptable to ASEAN countries as well as China. The first rejected the fact, especially since it had been taken by force. They therefore did not recognize the Heng Samrin regime and decided instead to help its opponents - Sihanouk, Son Sann, and even Pol Pot -. They also persisted in claiming, in the UN and elsewhere, for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. For now, their action was limited to that since, as Lee Kwang Yew acknowledged, "the first admission that we unfortunately have to make is that for another ten years at least, there will be no combination of military forces capable of stopping or standing up to the Vietnamese in open conflict."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Time Magazine, March 5 , 1979.

<sup>44</sup> Courrier du Vietnam, 1982, No 11.

<sup>45</sup> - ibid -, 1982, No 1.

<sup>46</sup> Far Eastern Economic Review, October24, 1980.

Similar to ASEAN, and even more firmly, China refused an Indochinese fait accompli. It was determined not to allow Vietnam to "reign supreme in Indochina and act like Cuba in Africa," said the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs in Paris in October 1979.<sup>47</sup> When it was clear that Vietnam had deepened its pressure on Cambodia, Beijing took a clear position in favor of the latter, and made repeated warnings to Hanoi. During his visit to Bangkok in October 1978, Deng Xiaoping said: "We have decided to support Cambodia," and "if Vietnam attacked Cambodia massively ..... developments will not be limited to Cambodia."<sup>48</sup> After the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops, the Chinese government, in a statement dated 14 January 1979, said the government and the Chinese people solemnly reaffirm that they "invariably stand alongside the Kampuchean people and will make every effort to provide them with a multifaceted support and help,"<sup>49</sup> a declaration that is reminiscent of those that the Chinese government had done for North Vietnam when the latter was attacked by the United States in 1965. Such statements, Hanoi knew better than anyone, were always serious. That was why it had taken, as we saw above, insurance from Moscow before engaging in Cambodia.

But apart from Cambodia, there was a direct conflict between China and Vietnam, and this was another effect of US disengagement. We saw above that one of the causes of this conflict was the dispute over the status of the Hoas. This coincided with another, even more bitter dispute between the two countries concerning sovereignty over the Paracel Islands (occupied by the Chinese and claimed by the Vietnamese) and Spratly (occupied by the Vietnamese and claimed by the Chinese), the delimitation of the Tonkin Gulf waters (which contain oil and gas) and the delimitation of land borders between China and Vietnam. As in the case of the Hoas, negotiations led nowhere. Between the two countries, the tone became increasingly inflexible, more hostile, more insulting, while at the border incidents were becoming bloodier-- more than: 100 in 1974, 400 in 1975, 900 in 1976, 700 in 1977 and 1100 in 1978.<sup>50</sup> In the summer of 1978, the Vietnamese authorities, on the pretext of being "busy," broke the negotiations.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Conférence de presse de Huang Hua. International Herald Tribune, October 19, 1979.

<sup>48</sup> Le Monde, October 25, 1978.

<sup>49</sup> Beijing Information, January 22, 1979.

<sup>50</sup> Beijing Information, May 7, 1979.

<sup>51</sup> - ibid - , May 28, 1978.



According to Beijing, in this quarrel, as in others, Vietnam has shown itself to be "very arrogant."<sup>52</sup> In the negotiations, the Vietnamese authorities have displayed, Xinhua said a statement on order, "an inordinate arrogance" and took the restraint and aspiration to peace of the Chinese side for "a sign of weakness."<sup>53</sup> "To all our calls, advice and warnings, they have turned a deaf ear, said an editorial in Renim Ribao. They humiliated us to excess and we were pushed to the limit."<sup>54</sup> "Vietnam has a comical idea, said Deng Xiaoping to Thai journalists: It believes that its armed forces are the third in the world after those of the United States and the Soviet Union."<sup>55</sup> By implication, therefore, China ranks fourth, after Vietnam - .-an intolerable pretense that China will seek to "demystify." Finally, vis-à-vis China, Vietnamese leaders behave "with perfidy and cynicism," to turn a friend into enemy "by turning their guns against China" and to consider China today as "the number 1 enemy but also a historical ennemy" said Han Nianlong, head of the Chinese delegation to the negotiations with Vietnam.<sup>56</sup>

The Sino-Vietnamese conflict however was not strictly or primarily a bilateral conflict because behind Vietnam, China saw the Soviet Union. When China called Vietnam "the Cuba of the East" and spoke of "teaching it a lesson" for its invasion of Cambodia and for its "provocation" at the Chinese border,<sup>57</sup> it also was aiming at the Soviet Union, because the Soviet Union considered Vietnam as "a pawn for its own expansion in the Asia-Pacific region," and as "the vanguard in opposing China."<sup>58</sup> "Under the leadership of the great hegemony, the small hegemony wants to impose its will on others," said Deng Xiaoping.<sup>59</sup> The intensification of border conflicts "not only reflects the will of Hanoi but also of Moscow", said the Renmin Ribao Commentator (i.e. the Central Committee of CCP), "and if one leaves Moscow and Hanoi to act at will there will be no peace on the southern border of China."<sup>60</sup> That's the problem in terms of China's security. But ASEAN is not forgotten. "If we do not put a stop to the aggression of the oriental Cuba, added the Commentator, "the independence and security of ASEAN countries would be in danger." But Beijing says that the problem goes

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<sup>52</sup> Deng Xiaoping à Bangkok. Le Monde, October 25, 1979.

<sup>53</sup> Beijing Information, February 26, 1979.

<sup>54</sup> Cité dans Beijing Information, February 26, 1979.

<sup>55</sup> Le Monde, October 25, 1979.

<sup>56</sup> Beijing Information, May 7, 1979.

<sup>57</sup> Beijing Information, February 12, 1979.

<sup>58</sup> "Derrière le conflit sino-vietnamien," March 18, 1979, in Beijing Information, March 26, 1979.

<sup>59</sup> Pékin Information, November 20, 1978.

<sup>60</sup> Beijing Information, March 23, 1979.

beyond the borders of Cambodia, China and ASEAN, that it has a comprehensive global strategy. Some two weeks before the implementation of the "sanctions" against Vietnam, Deng Xiaoping said in Tokyo: "If we do nothing about the Cambodian situation, the Soviets will do other maneuvers elsewhere in the world,"<sup>61</sup> a remark clearly directed to the Americans.

For all the reasons mentioned, China has supported Cambodia, as did Thailand, to which Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang pledged "strong support" against any aggression.<sup>62</sup> For all these reasons also, China has sent its troops to invade and destroy Vietnamese border provinces neighboring China on February 17, 1979, despite the existence of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty. By this Beijing wanted to demonstrate to the Japanese and the Americans that they should not be afraid of Moscow-- that on that side, there would be "excessive language and bluff," but nothing more, as claimed by Li Xinian, Chinese Vice Premier in Tokyo on March 1, 1979.<sup>63</sup> However, Deng Xiaoping promised in Tokyo that China would be "prudent," it would not undertake "any unreasonable actions."<sup>64</sup>

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According to Article 6 of the Vietnam-Soviet treaty, "If one of the parties is attacked or threatened with attack, the two Contracting Parties shall consult each other immediately to eliminate this threat and take appropriate and effective measures to ensure peace and security in both countries."<sup>65</sup> However, on February 17, 1979, the day of the outbreak of the Chinese attack, the Vietnamese government issued a statement in which "the people and the government urgently call the Soviet Union and other socialist countries to support Vietnam ...."<sup>66</sup> The Soviet Union could not therefore play dead.

On February 23, Marshal Ustinov, the Soviet defense minister, declared that his country will "honor its obligations" to Vietnam, and Marshal Sokolov, Deputy

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<sup>61</sup> - ibid - , March 26, 1979.

<sup>62</sup> International Herald Tribune, February 8, 1979.

<sup>63</sup> - ibid - , February 2, 1981.

<sup>64</sup> Le Monde, March 3, 1979

<sup>65</sup> Bulletin du Vietnam, February 15-28, 1979.

<sup>66</sup> Le Monde, February 24, 1979.

Minister of Defense, declared that the Soviet Union will provide Vietnam with necessary aid."<sup>67</sup> The New York Times reported that an air bridge had been established between Moscow and Hanoi.<sup>68</sup> On February 26, three large Soviet ships were seen crossing the Tsugaru Strait off Japan, heading south. This is the Segavin flag ship of the fleet of the Soviet Pacific, a destroyer and a supply ship. On February 28, an article by Alexandrov (pseudonym of the Central Committee of SUCP) violently attacked the Chinese aggression, declared that the Soviet Union would fulfill its commitments, and said, "One thing must be clear: if a stop is not put to Beijing's aggression against Vietnam, if the abuser is not obliged to withdraw from Vietnam immediately, the flame of war will spread."<sup>69</sup> However, Alexandrov did not say who would compel the Chinese to withdraw.

No Soviet action was in fact taken against China, especially at the Sino-Soviet border, where 42 Soviet divisions, 650,000 men strong were stationed. The threats were not followed because the Chinese government repeatedly declared that its action was limited, and its troops began evacuating Vietnamese territory on March 5, and the evacuation was complete on March 16.

After the Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam, the Soviet Union continued to accelerate the deliveries of weapons, supplies, fuel to Vietnamese forces in Vietnam and Cambodia by air and sea. Between March and November 200 Soviet ships, 120 weapon carriers and 20 tankers have unloaded at Vietnamese ports and at Sihanoukville, Cambodia. The number of Soviet advisers was also increasing. But from then on, a the new fact was that the Soviets increasingly made use of extensive Vietnamese naval and air bases. Reconnaissance aircrafts for long-range Tu-95 (Bears) took off from Danang, and Soviet navy ships, including submarines, were seen in and out of Cam Ranh, the great naval air base built at great expense by the Americans before 1975. A large communications monitoring station was built in Cam Ranh, others in Danang and Hanoi. The Chinese claim that a naval base was built in North Vietnam, and a secret rocket launching base was built in Hongay, near the Sino-Vietnamese border.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, military installations and listening posts were also installed in North Laos.<sup>71</sup> Since 1979, Soviet warships, including submarines, going from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean

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<sup>67</sup> - *ibid* -.

<sup>68</sup> *Le Monde*, March 1, 1979.

<sup>69</sup> *Time Magazine*, July 3, 1978.

<sup>70</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, April 26, 1976.

<sup>71</sup> *International Tribune*, December 13, 1979, according to James Reston.

or returning, are resupplied at Cam Ranh; and airbases in Danang, Cam Ranh, Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, are increasingly used by Soviet air forces.

All this obviously was very much a matter of concern for the US and Japanese military circles, but since Americans no longer want, and the Japanese do not want, or cannot - because of their constitution - fight for South East Asia, the Soviets have free rein. For the first time in history - and this is also as an effect of US disengagement - the Russian Navy has a beautiful, wide and safe base in warm waters and in South East Asia, 4000 kilometers south of Vladivostok; also for the first time Russian aircraft can take off a land base to monitor Chinese, American, Australian, and New Zealand naval activities in the South Pacific.<sup>72</sup> In addition, for the first time, a Russian government is maintaining a large number of resident's advisors - 3000 to 5000 - in Southeast Asia.<sup>73</sup> And all this without getting booed in the world, without losing a single soldier, without firing a single shot! At least not yet! In any case, the military presence of the Soviet Union in Indochina is a new element and a sizable one in the new balance of forces in the region. Together with its alliance with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the policy of "flight forward" of the leaders of the latter, taking into account the US withdrawal and attitude of the public and the US Congress - which we can call "hands off in Southeast Asia" - this presence is a major destabilizing factor in the region and creates a feeling of insecurity. It is true that the Soviet Union had proposed to the ASEAN countries the creation of a "collective security system,"<sup>74</sup> but the idea was not accepted by these countries, and China sees it simply as a Soviet maneuver "serving only their policies of aggression and expansion."<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, the project of creating a "zone of peace, freedom and neutrality" (ZOPFAN) envisaged by ASEAN, for obvious reasons, will remain a dream for a long time.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, China, similar to ASEAN, really feels threatened by Soviet penetration and the revolutionary militancy of the new Vietnamese leaders. As for the role that the US could play in the region, it was well summarized by this Washington Post editorial:

"The United States gave up their capacity as well as their desire to influence the outcome of the power struggle in Indochina when it withdrew its forces and,

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<sup>72</sup> - ibid -, September 20, 1979.

<sup>73</sup> For this, see Sundershan Chawdla et al., Southeast Asia Under the New Balance of Power, New York Praeger, 1974.

<sup>74</sup> Pékin Information, August 15, 1975.

<sup>75</sup> Voir Chawla, op. cit., et Alison Broinowaki, Understanding Asean, London, Macmillan, 1982.

<sup>76</sup> Reproduced in International Herald Tribune, April 8, 1983.

later, its assistance in the 1970s. Now the US government can do no more than provide from time to time, and for free, observations from the sideline. The fate of the region is now in other hands."<sup>77</sup>

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This feeling of insecurity is reflected in the considerable increase in military efforts of countries in the region. Indeed, ASEAN military spending increased from 2.785 billion dollars in 1975 to 5.600 billion in 1980 and 7.622 billion in 1981, while the numbers of its armed forces increased from 440,000 people in 1975 to 715,000 men in 1980 and 723,000 men in 1981, not counting the paramilitaries.<sup>78</sup> Malaysia, which had tried to navigate between two waters, has increased its spending more than any other country: 385 million in 1975, 1.561 billion in 1980 and 2.055 billion in 1981. As for the strength of its armed forces, they rose from 61,000 in 1975 to 102,000 men in 1980 and 99,100 in 1982, but with 440,000 paramilitary.<sup>79</sup> For Vietnam, the regular armed forces increased from 600,000 in 1975 to 1,029,000 in 1981,<sup>80</sup> not counting the paramilitaries, which amount to 3,000,000. As to the financial burden if one counts only Soviet aid, they were of the order of 1.4 billion (over 700 million civilian aid) per year between 1979 and 1982.<sup>81</sup> Recently, Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnamese Foreign Affairs minister revealed in Bangkok that for the 1981-1985 period, Soviet aid will be quadrupled, meaning that the Soviet military aid to Vietnam amount to \$5.6 billion (and with Civilian help \$10.4 billion) per year.<sup>82</sup> Here, I cannot help but note that, ironically, Vietnamese leaders complain that the Vietnamese people live in miserable conditions because, under pressure from the US imperialists, Western countries have suspended aid to Vietnam.

It is clear, in any case, that insecurity will last in Southeast Asia as long as the Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict, i.e. Sino-Vietnamese, i.e. Sino-Soviet, will not be resolved. And it will not be anytime soon because the conditions required by the two sides are diametrically opposed--China demanding that Vietnam evacuates

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<sup>77</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, The Military Balance 1982-1983.

<sup>78</sup> - ibid - .

<sup>79</sup> - ibid - .

<sup>80</sup> Tokyo Research Institute Research for Peace and Security, Asia Security 1981.

<sup>81</sup> Tokyo Research Institute Research for Peace and Security, Asia Security 1981.

<sup>82</sup> Journal de Genève, December 14, 1978.

Cambodia totally and leave Cambodians to freely choose their government and their foreign policy; and Vietnam not accepting to evacuate that country as long as the Chinese threat persists and that China will not again become genuinely socialist. As all the parties involved in the Cambodian case seem to have infinite patience and are prepared to pay the price for their policies, i.e., in human lives, the conflict could last a very long time. We are dealing here not with Americans, but with Asians, for whom time and human life are not money. To illustrate the above aspects, the different parties are quoted below.

Cambodia. Pol Pot: "We are prepared to fight a protracted war, and it is on this basis that we have faith in victory and expect the Vietnam defeat."<sup>83</sup>

China. Huang Hua, Minister of Foreign Affairs: "the armed struggle must continue as long as necessary in Cambodia to make life impossible for the Vietnamese"<sup>84</sup>; and his colleague Deng Xiaoping: "Although it is not possible to solve the problems between China and Vietnam now, we will solve them in a decade. If it is not possible in ten years, we will solve them in the next hundred years."<sup>85</sup>

Vietnam. Several members of the VCP Central Committee, of which Hoang Tung and Nguyen Co Thach, respectively member of the Central Secretariat and alternate member of the Political Bureau of the Party:

Question: "When will you withdraw from Cambodia?"

Answer: "When the Chinese threat has ceased."

Question: "And that would be when?"

Answer: "We have waited a thousand years before in our history until the Chinese went away. This time, we'll beat them back again at the waiting game..."<sup>86</sup>

And since the Sino-Vietnamese conflict is one aspect of the Sino-Soviet conflict, let's include Mao Zedong. Under Khrushchev, the arch-enemy of China, when answering the question of how long it will take to resolve the Sino-Soviet conflict, Mao replied: "1,000 years."<sup>87</sup> After the death of Khrushchev and the

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<sup>83</sup> Le Monde, 10 mai 1980.

<sup>84</sup> Le Monde, 25 octobre 1978.

<sup>85</sup> International Herald Tribune, 22 décembre 1980.

<sup>86</sup> The Economist (Londres), 26 mars 1963.

<sup>87</sup> The Economist (Londres), 26 mars 1963.

advent of Kosygin, to the same question Mao replied: "1,000 years."<sup>88</sup> At this rate, i.e., at the power of 1/10, if there are two changes in Soviet leadership that proves acceptable to China, there will be peace, security and stability in Southeast Asia in ten years!

Rudyard Kipling, the great British writer, noted this epitaph on the grave of a white man: "Here lies a man who tried to hustle the East."

So patience please!

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<sup>88</sup> The Economist (London), March 26, 1963.