

## Hang on to your hat Asian Wall Street Journal

Granting U.S. diplomatic recognition to Vietnam, like admitting to the Asean, was a gesture designed chiefly to serve the interests of the bestowers. The thinking in both cases was similar: That by enhancing the authority and confidence of the Hanoi government, Vietnam's neighbors and its former foes in Washington would create for themselves a more stable partner.

But when U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher alights on Hanoi this weekend, he may want to take a good look at the official faces bobbing about him. Because they are unlikely to have their jobs much longer than he will have his. Like Asean, Washington may be about to learn that when they put their eggs in the Vietnamese Communist Party basket, they also bought a pig in a poke.

The Clinton administration obviously acted under the pressure of American businessmen. Like all businessmen, they crave an operating environment of political stability: and they are betting that the present Vietnamese leadership, strengthened by diplomatic recognition, can provide it. So strong is this faith, in fact, that it persists despite the reputation Vietnam has earned since the U.S. trade embargo ended last February for widespread corruption, stifling bureaucracy, and the absence of any acceptable legal framework.

No doubt strategic considerations factored into America's equation. When Hanoi let it be known last November that Vietnam would welcome American "access" to Cam Ranh Bay, the visiting commander of the U.S. forces in the Pacific. Admiral Richard C. Macke, took the cue. Naval officers, he said, "are always looking for good ports." Last month, Senator John McCain of Arizona surely echoed the views of many other people in the American military establishment when he said that the U.S. needs "a strong Vietnam" as "a counterweight" to China's "disturbing pattern of behavior."

No one in Asean will say it out loud, but strategic considerations also head Asean's list of reasons for embracing as its newest member of a country led by the communists who once threatened virtually every nation of the region. From 1975 to Vietnam's accelerated entry into Asean last week, in fact, its leaders have never stopped proclaiming their faith in Marxism-Leninism. Inviting Vietnam into the Asean nest did not even promise to boost trade: Member states already enjoy privileged economic relations with Hanoi. That leaves only one compelling motive: military defense.

Hanoi's allure in this area is fairly obvious. If para-military forces are excluded, Vietnam's membership still adds some one million seasoned troops to the defense capabilities of Asean member nations, and effectively places a first defense zone 1,000 miles deep between the rest of the organization and any Chinese invading force. (Indeed, in recent years the first Southeast Asian soldiers and sailors to be killed in China's drive southward have been Vietnamese- although the recent encounters around the Paracel Islands have been only minor clashes.) Looked at this way, Vietnam offers advantages that offset any reservations Asean member may harbor about Hanoi's politics.

Still, it could turn out to be a poor investment. Busy integrating Vietnam into their economic and strategic plans, Washington and Asean appear to have overlooked an internal drama certain to shatter every contemporary dream of stability.

It began in earnest in January of this year, when half of the Central Committee reportedly voted against maintaining Vietnam's dictatorship of the proletariat- this in a milieu hitherto untainted by public dissent. Since the time, the people of Vietnam have witnessed a virtual explosion of violent criticisms of the party and its leadership. Named after the wartime Saigon party boss who resigned from the CPV in 1990 to conduct political warfare in the name of democracy, the "Nguyen Ho phenomenon" is gathering steam before the eyes of an incredulous and not fascinated nation.

Widely circulated tests not only call for the "total transformation" of the socialist system to a system of free enterprise and democratic elections supervised by the United Nations. They also demand that the party "repent," "apologize to the people, and "ask for forgiveness" for all the "crimes" it committed during the 65 years of its existence.

One of the most provocative documents was issued in March by a secret organization of party members calling itself the Brigade of the National Rising Dragon. Smuggled out of Vietnam and published in the July issue of the authoritative Paris-based "Thong Luan," the Brigade's manifesto warns that "the two pillars on which the power of the party rests, the army and the police, can no longer be counted on to serve as docile instruments of repression of the people." "If something should happen," it continues in a ominous reference to the late East German dictator, there will be "not one Honecker, but many Honeckers."

Faced with ever bolder challenges to its authority, the party leadership finds itself in a bind. It has ordered the arrest of several of its most prominent critics. But there are dozens more on the loose-

still speaking out without ear-and thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, who constitute the silent majority in the party. Above all, it cannot touch Nguyen Ho, because he has threatened to commit suicide if the police come for him, and surely his death in such circumstances would trigger Czechoslovak or Romanian type upheavals with unpredictable consequences not only for Vietnam, but in all Asia.

“Thong Luan” also reports that party authorities in Saigon have ignored orders from the politburo in Hanoi to arrest Nguyen Ho. While this underlines a north-south divide, it is most significantly a blatant example of the breakdown in party discipline. As the shadowy Brigade of National Rising Dragon predicted, the party can no longer enforce democratic centralism and preserve unanimity. And as anyone with a little understanding of Leninism-Bolshevism can tell you, when these two ideological pillars snap, the entire edifice is going to come down with them.

In an article written for the war anniversary commemoration of April 30, Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh warned cadres about the danger of “self (internal) peaceful evolution.” In CPV-speak, “peaceful evolution” is shorthand for “elimination of communism and the Party by peaceful means.”

Decades ago, the party was always accusing external forces, chiefly the United States, of plotting to impose “peaceful evolution,” or was without guns. Call it what you will: Vietnam’s leaders now admit that the danger comes from inside the party itself.

This should surprise no one. Like all dictatorial regimes, the CPV contains its own self-destruct device, which only the party leaders can activate. This is being done. The point, for those of us on the outside, is that Vietnam, with a future full of uncertainties, is bound to be a weak a partner in whom to invest economically and militarily.

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