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## **Southeast Asia Some Observations and Reflexions**

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*The present paper is a slightly modified version of a talk given by Dr. Ton That Thien at Hainan University, Haikou, China, in early July 1991.*

I. I have been asked to speak on the problems of Southeast Asia. I have spent enough years studying these problems to realise that they are numerous and complex, and it would be presumptuous of me to want to cover them all in a few dozen minutes.

So, I shall only make a few observations and share with you a few personal reflexions on the theme: Southeast Asia was the object of international rivalry and conflict in the past, and it is the object of international cooperation and aid in the present. For the future, no one among us would be foolish enough to assert that he can make absolutely correct predictions, but we can make a few educated guesses.

On the past, there is no need to say much because all Asians of the present generation know at least the broad historical facts. More experience of the deep humiliation caused by their countries' incapacity to stop the tide of big power imperialism. I say big power and not western because the imperialists included Asian powers also.

However, incapacity to resist foreign military aggression is only one major cause of Asia's humiliation. Another one is the backward state of its economy and the abject poverty of its peoples, both the result of outdated institutions and especially outdated thoughts which prevented previous generations from meeting the needs of modern times.

The countries of Southeast Asia shared these two major weaknesses with the rest of Asia. As a result, they became victims of foreign covetousness. Since there were many imperialist powers, the Southeast Asian countries became the objects of the rivalry of these powers. Rivalry and the desire of universal hegemonism led to conflict. Thus, the countries of Southeast Asia became the objects of international conflicts. That is a situation which characterises the history of Southeast Asia in the last one hundred fifty years.

The result of the rivalry and conflict between imperialist powers – both western and Asian – is that Southeast Asia was divided. Until World War II the division was among the three main western imperial powers: Great Britain, France, and Holland. During World War II the European powers were displaced by Japan. After World War II the new hegemony seekers were the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Soviet-American rivalry plunged Southeast Asia in a state of great turmoil for four decades (1945-1985). It destabilized the area, cause turbulence and insecurity, thereby slowing down the development of the region. The area which suffered most was Indochina.

The development, especially the economic development, of the Indochinese countries was practically frozen, and this was obviously the result of their being caught in the Soviet-American fight for hegemony: they suffered war, devastation and disorganisation. Vietnam was the worst victim of this situation.

The lesson to be drawn from the above situation is that, for economic development – the main condition of all other developments – a country needs peace and a peaceful international environment, and this, for a long period of time. Without this condition, rapid and substantial development is impossible. We can illustrate this truth by comparing the situation of Vietnam and the two other Indochinese countries with that of the rest of Southeast Asia in regard to income per head and growth rate.

**Southeast Asian countries**  
**Income per head 1990**  
In US \$

Countries	Income
Singapore	10,521
Malaysia	2,050
Thailand	1,194
Indonesia	520
Laos	180
Vietnam	175
Cambodia	110

SOURCE: Asia Week, 8 April 1991

It would be interesting to have an idea on how well Southeast Asian countries fare compared to other countries (in US \$): Japan: 22,897; Italy: 15,055; UK: 14,675; Australia: 16,050; New Zealand: 11,389; Hongkong: 10,939; Taiwan: 7,990 \$; South Korea: 4,968; Sri Lanka: 407; China: 325; India: 320; Pakistan: 305; Burma: 275.

In terms of economic growth, the annual rates for 1990 are as follows: Thailand: 10 %; Malaysia: 9.2; Singapore: 8.3; Indonesia: 7; Philippines: 3; Laos: 4; Vietnam: 2.4; Cambodia: 0.

The rates for other Asian countries are: Bangla Desh: 5.8; China: 5; Hongkong: 2.3; India: 5; Pakistan: 5.2; Taiwan: 5.3; Burma 7.4; S. Korea: 8.6.

II. With the exception of Vietnam, the good situation enjoyed by other Southeast Asian countries is surely going to improve with the new international situation. This situation is a vast subject by itself and cannot be discussed fully here. Only the three most decisive developments should retain our attention.

1) The Situation of hard international confrontation is being replaced by a situation of real international peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Most people date this situation from the historic Bush-Gorbachev meeting at Malta on December 5, 1989, but in fact, the

international détente really started with the still more historic Shanghai Communiqué of February 28, 1972.

2) The Soviet Union is in a state of very serious crisis. It has been considerably weakened, and is no longer capable of pursuing a global, or even a regional, hegemonist, or even confrontational, policy. The Soviet Union will need time, and considerable foreign aid, or rather capitalist aid, - if it can get it in the amount needed - in order to redress its disastrous situation.

The same applies to the United States. In spite of appearances, including the spectacular success in the Persian Gulf War, the American giant is no longer a giant because its economy is out of shape, and the country will need two or three decades to make the necessary structural changes to conserve its position as an unquestionable world economic leading nation.

For the above reasons, both the United States and the Soviet Union will need peace and a peaceful international environment, for a long time - 20 years or more -, to sort out their internal problems. They will therefore refrain from embarking on any adventurist scheme abroad, and in addition, will see to it that no small nation will disturb this peaceful environment, either by refraining from encouraging or supporting regional conflicts, or, if necessary, by intervening to prevent such conflicts.

3) The most important feature of the modern time is the increasingly accelerating pace of scientific and technological progress. To take full advantage of this development, peace and a peaceful international environment are necessary. On the other hand, one of the consequences of the development of science and technology with its vast potential for improving people's lives is the demand of peoples all over the world for a fair share in the benefit of this development, and this is possible only with greater democracy. There will be therefore increasing pressure everywhere for more democracy. And the governments will have less reason to block this process because the development of science and technology will make it possible to increase the size of the GNP considerably; thus, those who have less can be given more without reducing the share of those who have.

The consequence of the three major developments described above is that the United States and the Soviet Union are obliged to renounce all thoughts of pursuing a strategy of confrontation and world hegemony, bury the cold war, and adopt a strategy of peace and cooperation. At the same time, the two superpowers will also cooperate to spread true democracy throughout the world. They would even bring pressure to bear on all governments to practice broader democratisation because they need a peaceful international environment throughout the world. For this, political stability throughout the world is necessary, and true democracy is a condition of this stability. Of course, they will have to help the economically weak countries to accelerate their economic development because a decent material existence - adequate food, clothing, shelter etc... - is also a condition of political stability.

III. The above international developments will naturally have very beneficial effects for Southeast Asia. This area will cease to be an object of rivalry and conflict, and become an

object of international cooperation and aid. Indeed. This process already began in 1975, with the withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam. However, in fact, the decision was made by President Nixon with the proclamation of his Guam doctrine in June 1971 and concretised in the Shanghai Communiqué in February 1972.

That was what happened on the American side. On the Soviet side, the world witnessed a period of wild hegemony seeking and confrontation by Brezhnev, which was marked by the vigorous backing of North Vietnam in its drive to seek total victory and open up Indochina to Soviet penetration (introduction of Soviet military advisers to Vietnam, establishment of Soviet air, naval and missile bases at Haiphong, Danang, Cam Ranh Bay). The effect of this policy was a rupture of the balance of power, a balance that is necessary for the maintenance of peace and tranquility in Southeast Asia.

It should be noted in this connection that the kind of forward policy practiced by Vietnam and the Soviet Union described above was not favoured by China precisely because it destroyed the balance of power in Southeast Asia and was a source of instability and turmoil which made the maintenance of a peaceful environment impossible. However, the Hanoi leaders, emboldened by Soviet support, ignored China's advice for moderation, went on a full scale offensive to seek total victory. With massive Soviet aid, North Vietnam achieved its goal of military victory in Vietnam, then embarked on a hegemonist adventure in Laos and especially Cambodia. In the process they got themselves mired in a disastrous situation – economic paralysis and diplomatic isolation – which is still with them today.

The Brezhnevian hegemonist and confrontational policy constituted a threat to Southeast Asia, and, incidentally, to China also. It made this area the object of international rivalry and conflict again. Even China was drawn in as a result of the Hanoi invasion of Cambodia. Hanoi had the active support of the Soviet Union, which was concretised by the economic integration of Vietnam into the Soviet bloc (Comecon) in June 1978 signing of the Soviet-Vietnam Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation of 3 November 1978.

Naturally, the Southeast Asia countries members of ASEAN had to intervene in order to preserve the balance of forces, with the backing of China and the United States and the European Community. They also had to defend the principle of the sanctity of nations, especially of small nations, against absorption or domination, especially by force, by stronger ones.

The continuation of the Cambodian conflict highlights the emergence of a new threat to Southeast Asia at the moment when the period of confrontation between the superpowers is drawing to a close. The major causes of this conflict can be briefly described as arrogance of power, encouragement by a superpower, and an incorrect assessment of the international situation and of history by the Hanoi leaders who tried to revive what the rest of mankind wishes to bury – war and confrontation – because it wants to get on with the more constructive task of building a new peaceful world with maximum development for the benefit of all as its goal.

Seen against this background, the Cambodian conflict – the attempt of a stronger nation to subjugate a smaller nation – is an anachronism. Fortunately, it is the last

convulsion of a world that is dying and that is being replaced by a better one. For the moment, Cambodia is still a hot spot, the last hot spot of Southeast Asia. But this situation will soon be ended because the big powers – including all the five members of the United Nations Security Council – have agreed to join their efforts to settle the matter peacefully and comprehensively in order to clear the way for the full emergence of a new world.

In this process, Southeast Asia is again becoming the object of international cooperation and aid. This is a very welcome development which caps the efforts of the various leaders of the region since the 1960s to build an organisation – ASEAN – for cooperation in the furtherance of peace and development.

This organisation has been the object of misunderstanding from many quarters. Until the mid-1970s China had strong mistrust of it, thinking that it was a military instrument of the western powers, especially of the United States. The United States did not like it much because it tried to maintain a certain detachment while the Americans were fully engaged in war in Vietnam. The Soviet Union, which sought to exclude China and the United States from the region, sought to sway it and bring it into its orbit.

For a time, from 1967 (date of the foundation of the organisation) to 1985 (date of the emergence of Gorbachev), the situation was not a comfortable one for ASEAN. But the situation has now eased considerably as a result of the international developments described above.

In another direction, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 had a positive aspect on ASEAN: this invasion has reinforced ASEAN's internal cohesion. The members of this organisation, scared by the show of force of a militant socialist state, overcame their misgivings to band together more closely politically whereas until then they had always taken care to stress the essentially economic nature of their organisation.

Closer political integration is certainly a positive development for ASEAN, as it makes this organisation stronger as a factor of peace and stability in Asia, and also in the world. Because ASEAN is now a large bloc of cohesive nations, the big powers are less inclined to try to bring it under their dominance. A power tempted to do this would have to take into account the reactions of this bloc as well as that of the other powers, which cannot afford to see this big bloc fall under the control of any power.

The members of ASEAN are known to have wished their region to become a ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality). Their chances of achieving this are now better than ever. This is all the more so as, since the mid-1970s, all the big powers have made it clear that they are prepared to respect the integrity of this organisation and are prepared to cooperate with it in the furtherance of peace, stability, and economic progress in the region.

The increasing cohesion and strength of ASEAN, and the recognition of this fact by all powers, are no doubt among the most positive developments in Asia, and indeed, in the world, in recent years. This augurs well for the future, especially in view of the increasing recognition that the XXI century will be the century of Asia and the Pacific. Since the members of ASEAN have become, or are fast becoming "tigers" – i.e. nations endowed with

a remarkable dynamism and enjoying very fast rates of economic growth - , we should expect this region to play a major role in the rise of the Asian-Pacific region to prominence in the coming decades. The only exception is Vietnam. But this a long story which will have to be told separately.

The future of Southeast Asia is naturally bound up with that of Japan, whose shadow is looming larger and larger over Southeast Asia. Obviously, precluded from projecting its power abroad militarily, yet determined to exert a bigger role in world affairs, and, in addition, pushed by the dynamics of its enormous economic power but meeting increasing opposition in America and Europe, Japan is bound to look at Southeast Asia as the natural region on which it can best project its power. This is all the more natural as the countries of this region find Japanese technology, and still more, Japanese capital, necessary for their development needs.

However, Japan encounters a major handicap in that the peoples of this region entertain mistrust of Japanese hegemonistic intentions and are resentful of Japanese pushy methods: the memory of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere is still present in many minds. Americans and Europeans also feel uncomfortable at the way in which the Japanese are trying to carve for themselves a lion's share of the economic pie in Southeast Asia. So, here, there is a source of possible conflicts, and in any case, of uneasiness. The Japanese governing circles have tried hard to calm Southeast Asian fears of pushy Japan, but the uneasiness persists.

Another source of not just uneasiness, but of instability, is Socialist Vietnam, where the leaders of the CPV continue to pursue a hard line policy although the world has abandoned confrontation in favour of cooperation. The Hanoi leaders have proclaimed their determination of pursuing a struggle to prove "who will beat whom" – i.e. to prove that socialism will defeat capitalism - . And they have even looked at almost everyone as enemies: the Americans were, and still are, considered "imperialists" bent on destroying socialism in Vietnam; the Chinese were until not long ago considered "reactionaries working in league with the imperialists"; now, even the Soviets are no longer reliable brothers but "reactionary revisionists" and "traitors" – as Gorbachev has been called in internal meetings of the CPV Central Committee.

The pursuit of the above mentioned hard-line policy has led Vietnam to a disastrous situation characterised by economic paralysis and poverty, and political and social chaos inside Vietnam on the one hand, and adventuristic hegemonism and a tough stance resulting in total isolation internationally on the other hand. This makes Socialist Vietnam a destabilising factor in Southeast Asia. So long as Vietnam is beset by leaders clinging to outdated ideas and objectives, the Southeast Asian countries cannot feel at ease, get on with normal business, and devote their full attention, energies and resources to the task of economic development for the greater benefit of their peoples.

This situation may change as there are strong pressures for change both from inside and from outside Vietnam. The opportunity for making the necessary changes will be the VII National Congress of the CPV.

## **Postscript**

This paper was written on the eve of the VII Congress, due to take place on June 24-28. It was hoped then that changes would be made at this congress. If such changes were made, that would be a positive development, and Southeast Asia would become fully an object of international cooperation and aid.

However, no clear new situation emerged at the end of that congress. A number of people considered radical conservatives like General Mai Chi Tho, the chief of security, were removed from the Politbureau, but the newly elected bureau, headed by Do Muoi reaffirmed its “unwavering determination” to pursue “pure” Marxism-Leninism, and to reject all thoughts of acceptance of pluralism or of giving up monopoly of control of the State and society by the Communist Party. This attitude remained unchanged, at least officially, even after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union. It is not clear at this time (September 1991) how long the Vietnamese communist leadership will be able to maintain this hard line.

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