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Recognition by Clinton and admission by ASEAN are little help for a CPV leadership faced with rising discontent within ranks

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Granting diplomatic recognition to the Hanoi government and admitting it to ASEAN, designed to serve American and ASEAN interests, may turn out to be bad investments for they are investments in the wrong people: a CPV leadership in deep trouble.

The avowed, or unavowed, theory behind the decisions concerned was that a diplomatic triumph for the Hanoi government would bring prestige to the present leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, enhance its authority and confidence, thereby ensuring greater political stability, and this would serve American and ASEAN interests well.

The Clinton administrator has obviously acted under the pressure of American businessmen. These, like all businessmen, want political stability, the more of it the better. So, businesswise, strengthening the present Vietnamese leadership makes good sense. On the other hand, those who rushed into Vietnam after the lifting of the trade embargo in February, discovered to their chagrin that investing in Vietnam under the prevailing conditions – widespread corruption, stifling bureaucracy, and especially lack of any acceptable legal framework – presented too big risks, and they had to cover eventual losses by tapping the various funds under the guaranties provided by the American government, and these guaranties can be give only if there are official relations between the two countries.

But strategic considerations have also been part of the picture. The U.S. Navy, through the voice of the commander of the U.S. forces in the Pacific, Admiral Richard C. Macke, has shown interest in Hanoi's statement that it welcomes American "access" to the famous Cam Ranh Bay. Naval officers, the admiral said, "are always looking for good ports". And Senator John McCain of Arizona surely echoed the views of many other people in the American military establishment in saying that the U.S. need "a strong Vietnam" as "a counterweight" to "a disturbing pattern of behaviour" on the part of the Chinese.

Such strategic considerations were surely foremost also in the minds of the ASEAN governments when they decided to accelerate the entry of a Vietnam led by communists once considered a threat to the nations of the region, although these communists have repeatedly proclaimed since 1975 that they intend to remain firmly faithful to Marxism-Leninism. Since the members of ASEAN are already enjoying privileged economic relations with Vietnam, the only obvious motive remaining for them to welcome Vietnam into their midst is military.

Excluding para-military forces, Vietnam's membership adds over one million seasoned troops to the defence capabilities of the organisation, and places a first defense zone one thousand miles deep between them and any Chinese invading force. Indeed, in recent years, the first Southeast Asian soldiers and sailors to have been killed in China's drive southward have been Vietnamese. Admitting Vietnam is therefore a tremendous advantage which overwhelmingly offsets any fear that the nations of the region may entertain about a Vietnam ruled by an orthodox communist leadership.

The ASEAN nations need no longer fear Vietnam, even under a communist leadership, because obviously Vietnam itself is having its hands full currently: it is facing a Chinese threat, which is not merely potential, but has already materialised, although so far in the form of small naval clashes in the Paracel islands area. There is, however, another more serious reason, which seems to have escaped the attention of the ASEAN and the U.S. governments alike: the present leadership of the VCP is threatened by a worse danger which has been looming larger and larger.

This danger became obvious last winter, ballooned rapidly in the spring, and there are ominous signs that in the coming months, it will grow to such proportions as to become unstoppable, and in a not too distant future, will sweep away both communism and the party itself, the first and principal victims being its present leaders. This danger is very difficult to cope with because it comes from within the party itself, and the trouble makers are not some disrepute, insignificant, or mentally unbalanced party members, but well-known and highly respected veterans. Some had occupied very high positions in the command structure of the party in the past; some are still occupying such positions at present.

Divergences of views within the party are known to exist in the past. They were referred to broadly as differences between "reformists" and "conservatives". And under the working rules and the very strict discipline of the party, they were considered internal affairs of the party and prevented from reaching the public's ears and eyes. But that is now a thing of the past. Since the half-term meeting of the Central Committee in January this year, the leadership of the party has been unable to enforce democratic centralism and preserve unity. These are the two major pillars of the party. Anyone knowing something about Leninism-Bolshevism can conclude immediately that when these two pillars crack the whole edifice is bound to collapse very soon thereafter.

What the Vietnamese inside and outside Vietnam, and the two million member strong Vietnamese Communist Party, have been watching with disbelief and fascination since the beginning of this year, and unbeknownst foreigners, is what has been termed "the Nguyen Ho phenomenon". This is the fearless, open, voicing of violent criticisms and condemnation aimed directly at the VCP and its leaders, and at socialism, in writings which are distributed widely, openly, and publicly not only outside, but also inside the country – and are also read openly, avidly, and with delight by large numbers of the people there –, and the persistent calling for a "total transformation" of the socialist system – its form, its nature, its methods, its policies – and its replacement by full capitalist free enterprise, pluralist democracy, multiparty system, the recognition of all human and democratic rights, and free elections supervised by the United Nations.

The authors call also on the Party to “repent”, “apologize to the people”, and “ask for forgiveness” for all the “crimes” committed by it during the 65 years of its existence. They call on the party leadership to act fast, “or else” – it will be too late --. One document, issued by a secret organisation of party members – a premiere – which calls itself “The National Rising Dragon” suggests that “the two pillars” on which the power of the Party rests, the army and the police, may no longer accept to be docile instruments of repression of the people “if something should happen”, and says that in this case there will be “not one Honnecker, but many Honneckers”.

All the above agitations have been given the name of “the Nguyen Ho phenomenon” because, following the example of Nguyen Ho, a growing number of people, especially party members have refused to bow to the pressures and threats of the Party leadership. Nguyen Ho is 79 and has devoted 54 of those years to the faithful service of the Party, and has risen to the very important position of chief of the party organisation controlling the Saigon-Cholon area during the war. In 1990 he became thoroughly disillusioned with socialism and was in total disagreement with the line pursued by the present party leadership. He resigned from the Party, and since then has been conducting an open war against the Party and socialism, and become a champion of capitalism, democracy, and true national reconciliation of communists and anti-communists.

And increasing numbers of members of the Party have expressed approval and support for his position and adopted his fighting method. They include, among others, a man who for 30 years was head of the Agency for the Protection of the Party; a member with 24 years’ membership, who was assigned to keep Buddhists under control, but became disgusted and resigned; another who had been chief of the police and former vice-minister of the Interior of North Vietnam; a retired two star general and former head of the Central Committees’ Arts and Culture Section. And, of course, there are half of the Central Committee, some 80 members, who voted against maintaining the dictatorship of the proletariat at the January meeting. The Central Committee being divided 50%-50% between democrats and communists, all it takes now, says Nguyen Ho in an interview by the French radio station RFI on April 30, is “one drop” to tilt the balance and ensure victory for democracy in the Central Committee, and he expects this to happen at the coming National Congress two years from now at the latest.

What is remarkable is that the present leadership finds itself in a real bind. It is a situation of “I’ll be damned if I do, and I’ll be damned if I don’t”. It has ordered the arrest of several of the critics of the Party, but there are dozens of others on the loose – and still speaking out without fear --, and thousands, hundreds of thousands, who constitute the silent majority in the Party. And 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 a Czechoslovakia or Romania type of upheaval whose consequences are unpredictable not only in Vietnam, but beyond, in Asia. And so, the Party authorities in Saigon have abstained from executing the Politburo’s order to arrest him. This is another example of blatant break of party discipline, which confirms the predictions of the Brigade of National Rising Dragon. It is also a pointed reminder that northerners and southerners, even communists, do not always see things the same way.

In an article written for the commemoration of April 30, Le Duc Anh, president of Vietnam, warned about the danger of “self (internal) peaceful evolution”. “Peaceful evolution” is the VCP term for “elimination of communism and the CPV by peaceful means”. The CPV leaders used to accuse external forces, in particular, the U.S., of plotting “peaceful evolution”. Now, they admit that the danger comes from inside the Party itself. This should cause no surprise. Like all dictatorial regimes the VCP contains its own self-destruct device, which only the CPV leaders can activate. This is being done, and when the regime goes, the U.S. and ASEAN governments will have to start the work of establishing sound and durable relations with Vietnam all over again, but, this time, with a new leadership and with an emancipated Vietnamese people.

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