

**UNITED STATES – VIETNAM RELATIONS  
1975–1980**

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DEDICATED

to

My Father

SRI D. LINGAIAH

From whom I inherit my ardent  
interest in and love for History  
and International Relations

and

My Teacher

SRI G. KEMPE GOWDA

Who embedded in me deep  
admiration and devotion for  
teaching and scholarship

# C O N T E N T S

|  | PAGES     |
|--|-----------|
| PREFACE  | i - v     |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENT  | vi - vii  |
| CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION :<br>UNITED STATES AND THE<br>QUAGMIRE OF VIETNAM | 1 - 54    |
| CHAPTER II : NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS,<br>1975-1977                      | 55 - 107  |
| CHAPTER III : NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS,<br>1978-1980                     | 108 - 165 |
| CHAPTER IV : UNITED STATES REACTION<br>TOWARDS THE THIRD<br>INDOCHINA WAR  | 166 - 239 |
| CONCLUSION   | 240 - 247 |
| SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY  | 248 - 262 |

P R E F A C E

## P R E F A C E

Nearly thirty years of war in Indochina ended on 30 April 1975 with the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese Communist forces. American power and its influence in Indochina was completely liquidated. It is doubtful whether in the last phase of the war even a massive American intervention could have averted this catastrophic outcome. By mid-1975 the re-unified "Socialist Republic of Vietnam" was an established fact.

The war brought immense misery and human sufferings. Both the United States and its ally South Vietnam, and North Vietnam and Vietcong suffered heavy losses of both men and material. Far more bitter was the legacy left behind by the years of war. The Vietnamese blamed the United States for the devastation and destruction of their country, and the Americans, though feeling somewhat relieved that their nightmare had finally ended, faced the formidable task of nursing their wounded pride.

Despite this deep rooted bitter hostility towards each other, efforts for normalization of

relations were initiated by Hanoi, because the elderly leadership of Vietnam was realistic in its assessment that the reconstruction of the economy of Vietnam required vast input of resources and technology, which only the United States could provide. Hanoi believed that good economic relations with Washington, would help Vietnam in the reconstruction of its economy. Furthermore, the Vietnamese leadership felt that good relationship with the United States would help them in avoiding excessive dependence on the Soviet Union.

Vietnam's overtures were turned down by the Ford Administration. Though the Carter Administration showed some flexibilities in its attitudes towards Vietnam, it failed to achieve full normalization with Vietnam due to certain internal and external reasons.

The tortured course of this pursuit of "normalcy" constitutes the subject matter of this study. The study covers two distinct phases in the American-Vietnamese relationship; first from 1975 to 1977 and the second from 1978 to 1980. During the first phase Vietnam persistently tried to normalize its relations with the United States. It demanded American economic aid even

before any kind of normalization had taken place. The United States on its part turned down this Vietnamese demand, and demanded the supply of informations on and return of the remains of the missing Americans in action during the war. During the early part of the second phase, in sharp contrast to their earlier positions, both sides renounced their respective pre-conditions and favoured an unconditional normalization of relations. However, before any breakthrough could be achieved, events took a different turn. When Vietnam intervened militarily in Kampuchea the United States asked the latter for the withdrawal of its forces from Kampuchea before normalization of relations. Vietnam on the other hand lost its interest in pursuing the normalization with the United States and refused to comply with the American demand. As the respective positions of both sides are fundamentally opposed to each other, American-Vietnamese rapprochement has remained a dream even to this day.

The present study has analysed the overall attitude of the United States towards Vietnam and vice-versa. Efforts have been made to critically evaluate the rationale behind Hanoi's desires and attempts at a rapprochement, and Washington's negative attitude towards Vietnamese overtures. Issues like

problems of missing persons and prisoners of war, and question of American reconstruction aid have been discussed vividly. Diligent efforts have been made to find out how far these issues were genuine and how far they were responsible for the continuation of hostilities between Hanoi and Washington. The role of Vietnamese-Kampuchean conflict, and Sino-Vietnamese war in Vietnamese-American relations has been examined in great depth.

The study has been divided into four chapters. The first, the introductory chapter, traces the origin and the course of American intervention in Vietnam, and its role in the Vietnam war. Only the landmarks and milestones in the history of American involvement in Vietnam have been discussed in length. Rest is just pantographic. The task of tucking the history of thirty eventful and hectic years into a few pages could be done only with the cost of leaving many things unsaid.

The process of normalization of relations during the first phase, from 1975 to 1977, has been examined in the second chapter. Evaluation of the normalization process forms the third chapter. Perspectives and positions of both Vietnam and the United States on the



issue of rapprochement have been critically analysed in these two chapters. Issues like the question of American reconstruction aid to Vietnam, and the problem of the missing Americans, which were closely linked with the issue of normalization of relations have been discussed in length.

The fourth chapter deals with American reaction to Vietnam's intervention in Kampuchea, and Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Impact of these two events on the process of Vietnamese-American rapprochement has been examined in detail. Conclusion forms the last part of the study.

An useful bibliography has been given at the end of the dissertation. As least work has been done on this subject, only books and articles on American policy towards Asia and Southeast Asia have been included in the bibliography.

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New Delhi

31 December, 1986

  
(L. PREMA SHEKARA)

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION : UNITED STATES AND  
THE QUAGMIRE OF VIETNAM

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION : THE UNITED STATES AND THE QUAGMIRE OF VIETNAM

The French made Vietnam part of their colonial empire. Like in other countries of Asia, a movement seeking freedom from colonial rule grew in Vietnam in the Twentieth Century. That movement reached "a critical phase" when the Second World War broke out in Southeast Asia. The United States did not exhibit much awareness of the anti-colonial movement. During the war it came into contact with communist led resistance movement. But even then it failed to comprehend the force and power of militant nationalism in Vietnam. Its direct involvement in Vietnam encompassed nearly three decades. It paid heavy price for its mistakes and was forced to withdraw in humiliation and defeat, from Vietnam. It was the worst defeat ever in its history. The chapter tries to trace the gradual sinking of the United States into the quagmire of Vietnam.

#### THE FRENCH COLONIAL RULE

The establishment of new colonial empires and consolidation of already established ones by the European Powers was the most remarkable phenomenon in the history

of Nineteenth Century Asia. South and Southeast Asia were systematically brought under the control of Western colonial powers. With the exception of Thailand the entire region of South and Southeast Asia was colonised and dominated by these powers : the British in India, Burma, Malaya, North Borneo, and Singapore; the French in Indochina; the Dutch in Dutch East Indies (present Indonesia); and the United States in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

Having failed in their attempt to establish a French empire in India, the French turned their eyes towards a land lying east of British India (and Burma), which was then unknown to most of the Europeans. The French missionaries and traders came to Vietnam; then known as Cochinchina in the Seventeenth Century. Pigneau Behaine,<sup>2</sup> Bishop of Ardan came to Vietnam in the 1760s and stayed there for nearly two decades. After returning

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1. For understanding the process of colonization of Southeast Asia see Georges Coedes, The Making of Southeast Asia (Berkeley, 1964 : London, 1965); Stanley Karnow, Southeast Asia (New York, N.Y., 1962). For another perceptive analysis see Kavalam M. Panikkar, Asia and Western Dominance (New York, N.Y., n.d.).
  2. His full name was Monsignor Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Behaine.

to France in 1787 he strongly lobbied for the establishment of a Christian empire in Asia under the French auspices. Though his narrations about Vietnam aroused a sensation among the courtiers at Versailles, his dream of a French empire in Vietnam was militarily not feasible as France was then tottering on the brink of bankruptcy. Moreover France was then heading for a bloody revolution. Pigneau's dream, however, was fulfilled a hundred years later.

French Catholic missionary activities in Vietnam increased during late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries. Pigneau de Behaine helped Gia Long, a scion of the Nguyen clan of Vietnam in his campaign to gain control of all Vietnam in the late Eighteenth Century. Gia Long, whose original name was Nguyen Anh proclaimed himself emperor of Vietnam in 1802 at Hue. His son and successor Minh Mang, unlike Gia Long took an anti-Catholic posture. In 1825 he issued edicts banning further entry of missionaries from France into Vietnam. When it was found that a rebellion against him was encouraged by the Catholic missionaries in 1833, Minh Mang launched anti-Catholic campaign in which several missionaries were executed.

After the Opium War of 1841, in which England



defeated China and extracted trade concessions from the Chinese, the pressure for an enhanced and stronger French presence in East and Southeast Asia mounted. As a result the Louis Philippe government of France deployed a permanent French fleet in Vietnam. In 1847 Minh died and was succeeded by his son Thieu Tri who shared his father's anti-missionary tendency. In the same year French and Vietnamese forces clashed for the first time at the city of Tourane, now Danang. Napoleon III who took power in France in 1852 sent series of expeditions to Vietnam to protect missionaries and obtain trade concessions.

In 1861 French forces captured Saigon. It was followed by the signing of a treaty in 1867, in which Tu Duc, successor of Thieu Tri granted the French broad religious, economic, and political concessions. Next year the French extended their control over neighbouring Cochinchina.

The subsequent years witnessed the steady expansion of French military presence and activities in Vietnam. In 1873 French inroads into Tonkin (Northern Vietnam) began. In 1879 a French civilian governor was appointed in Cochinchina (Southern Vietnam), thus the region became a French colony. In 1884 the French

defeated the Vietnamese and established a "Protectorate" over Annam (Central Vietnam), and Tonkin, thus gaining mastery over all of Vietnam. This brought them into conflict with the Chinese, the traditional overlords of Vietnam. However, a treaty was concluded in 1885 and the Chinese recognized French suzerainty over Vietnam. After two years in 1887 the French created the "Indochinese Federation" comprising of the colony of Cochinchina, and the protectorates of Tonkin, Annam, and Cambodia. Laos was added to the Union six years later. Thus the French rule in Indochina began.<sup>3</sup>

The opening of Vietnam to Western ideas in early Twentieth Century and the French maladministration<sup>4</sup>

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3. For details on the establishment of French rule in Vietnam see: Joseph Buttinger, The Smaller Dragon, A Political History of Vietnam (New York N.Y. and London, 1958); Coedes, n.l.
  4. Detailed information on French rule in Vietnam can be had from the following books: John Cody, The Roots of French Imperialism in Asia (Ithaca, 1954); Thomas E. Ennis, French Policy and Development in Indochina (Chicago, 1956); Milton E. Osborne, The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Responses, 1859-1905 (Ithaca, 1969); Traditional Vietnamese society under the impact of French colonial rule is described well in the following two books: Ngo Vinh Long, Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French (Cambridge, 1973); and Alexander Woodside, Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam (Boston, 1976).

accompanied with violence, repression and humiliation kindled Vietnamese nationalism.

The Vietnamese nationalists, by nature absorbed the influence of the West but rejected its dominance. In the past the Vietnamese had borrowed from the Chinese, their culture, institutions and ethics but resisted stubbornly Chinese efforts to subjugate their country. Now in the Twentieth Century they did the same thing with the French.<sup>5</sup> The division of Vietnam into three parts was also a cause of anger of the Vietnamese. The unification of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina was a long time demand of the nationalists.<sup>6</sup>

Emergence of Ho Chi Minh as a driving force behind the nationalist movement brought a new spirit in the movement. Ho was a determined revolutionary. He was completely devoted to the cause of Vietnamese nationalist struggle. Thoroughly inspired by Marxist ideology he gave new shape to the nationalist movement. He was a convinced Communist, but not a "Soviet instrument" or an "agent of international communism" as misperceived by

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5. For details on Vietnamese nationalism see: Joseph Buttlinger, Vietnam, A Dragon Embattled, 2 vols (New York, 1977); David G. Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945 (Berkeley, 1981); John J. McAlister, Jr., Vietnam: The Origin of Revolution (New York, N.Y., 1969); Thomas Hodgkin, Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path (New York, N.Y., 1962).

6. Susheela Kaushik, The Agony of Vietnam (New Delhi, 1972), p.3.

the United States in later 1940s and after. Being essentially a pragmatist, he was pre-occupied with Vietnamese independence, not with serving the interests of Kremlin.

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890 in Central Vietnam. His original name was Nguyen Van Thanh. He left Vietnam in 1911 and travelled many countries. In 1917 he went to Paris. At the Versailles Conference of 1919 he tried to petition the then American President and prominent international figure, Woodrow Wilson for self-determination in Vietnam. In 1920 he joined the French Communist Party. In 1930 he and his associates founded the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in Hong Kong.<sup>7</sup>

The fall of France to German onslaught during the Second World War encouraged Japan, Germany's ally in the War, to penetrate into the French colony of Indochina in the summer of 1940. In a very swift military movement the Japanese forces occupied not only Indochina but also the whole of Southeast Asia from the Pacific Ocean right

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7. For details on Ho Chi Minh's life and ideas see : Jean Lacounture, trans. Peter Wiles, Ho Chi Minh : A Political Biography (New York, N.Y., 1968); Jean Sainteny, Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam (Chicago, 1972); Ho Chi Minh, Selected Works, vols. I-IV (Hanoi, 1960-62); \_\_\_\_\_, Prison Dairy (Hanoi, 1966).

upto the eastern frontiers of India. They expelled all the colonial powers in the region except the French in Indochina and took the administration of these colonies into their own hands. The Japanese left the French colonial administration in Indochina intact as the French authorities there collaborated with them. Although the Japanese allowed the French rule to continue they had full control over the region.

After nearly five years the Japanese took over the administration from the French on 9 March 1945. Two days later on 11 March Prince Bao Dai, the last Emperor of Vietnam declared independence of Vietnam from the French rule under the Japanese auspices.

Unlike in other countries occupied by Japan in South-east Asia, a strong anti-Japanese resistance movement grew in Vietnam. This movement was a combination of nationalists and communists known as "Viet Minh" front. Ho Chi Minh was the key force behind this movement. He returned to Vietnam covertly in 1941 and formed the "Viet Minh" or the "Vietnam Doc Lop Dong Minh" to fight both the colonial French power and the occupant Japanese. In his task of launching the anti-Japanese and anti-French movement Ho was assisted by his close associates

Pham Van Dong,<sup>8</sup> Truong Chinh,<sup>9</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap<sup>10</sup> and Le Duan.<sup>11</sup> This Viet Minh movement was directly controlled by the ICP. It was ICP which was in effective control of the movements. The Viet Minh was sufficiently well organized to harass the Japanese by seizing their arms in the closing days of the War. It even occupied Hanoi and Saigon briefly when the Japanese surrendered to the Allied Powers in August 1948. On 18 August 1945 the Japanese transferred power in Vietnam to the Viet Minh. Bao Dai, who was ruling the country as the Emperor since 11 March 1945 under the Japanese auspices abdicated on 23 August 1945. Having strengthened his control over Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed a provisional government in Hanoi on 29 August 1945. He declared the independence of Vietnam and establishment

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8. Dong was born in central Vietnam in the 1908, when he was a student he became involved in the nationalistic movement. He was one of the founders of the ICP, and had been the Prime Minister of the "Socialist Republic of Vietnam" till 17 December 1986.
  9. Chinh was also one of the founders of the ICP. His original name was Dang Xuan Khu. He is an important Communist theoretician. He succeeded Duan as the General Secretary of the VCP after the latter's death, and remained in that post until his resignation on 17 December 1986.
  10. Giap is the foremost military figure of modern Vietnam. He was the chief strategist of North Vietnam in the war against the US and South Vietnam. After victory in 1975 he retired from public life.
  11. Duan was a professional revolutionary. He had been the Secretary General of the Lao Dong. He remained in that post until his death on 9 July 1986.

of the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" (DRV) in a mammoth gathering on 2 September 1945.

#### UNITED STATES AND THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR

Some of the army officers of the United States were present in the independence celebration. They stood on the reviewing stand with Vo Nguyen Giap and other leaders of the ICP. Giap spoke warmly of the new born republic's "particularly intimate relations"<sup>12</sup> with the United States. The presence of American army officers at this celebration and Giap's warm feelings regarding the Vietnamese-American friendship "appear in retrospect one of history's most bitter ironies."<sup>13</sup> Certain Americans had good opinion of Ho Chi Minh. An OSS (Office of Strategic Studies) officer who had worked closely with Ho for several months before the Japanese surrender described him as an "awfully sweet guy whose outstanding quality was his gentleness."<sup>14</sup> Both the Vietnamese and the Americans hardly expected then that the subsequent years would witness these two countries becoming bitter

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12. George C. Herring, America's Longest War, 1945-1975 (New York, N.Y. 1979), p.1.

13. Ibid. p.1.

14. Bernard B. Fall, The Two Vietnams (New York, N.Y., 1964), p.82.

enemies and fight a bloody war which was to be the longest war of this century.

Meanwhile after the surrender of Japan the French sought to re-establish their colonial rule in Indochina. They got the control of the city of Saigon in mid-September 1945 with the assistance of the British forces under Douglas Gracey, which were there in Southern Vietnam following a decision taken at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.<sup>15</sup>

The path for the returning French, however, was not smooth. On their arrival in Southern Vietnam they found Ho Chi Minh on control of a sizeable area in the North and presiding over a government. They expressed their readiness to recognize Ho's government as an "autonomous state" within the French Union. At the same time they refused to accept Ho's demand for the re-unification of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. In the month of March 1946 an accord was reached upon by the two parties, according to which the French recognized DRV as a "free state" within the French Union; French troops were to return to the North to replace the Chinese Nationalist

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15. At the Potsdam Conference of July 1945 the Allied Powers assigned British to disarm the Japanese troops in Southern Vietnam. The Chinese Nationalists were assigned the same function in Northern Vietnam.



forces; and a referendum was to be held to determine the re-unification of the three zones of Vietnam.

This March Agreement, however, was violated by the French in June when Admiral Thierry D' Argentien, French High Commissioner for Indochina, proclaimed a separate government for Cochinchina. Tension grew in the following months and the French policy stiffened. On 23 November 1945 French war ships bombarded Haiphong and in retaliation the French in Hanoi were attacked by Viet Minh men in December, thus triggering off a war which lasted seven and a half years.

When hostilities erupted between the French and the Vietnam, President Harry S. Truman of the United States was sympathetic to the latter. His predecessor Franklin D. Roosevelt had not favoured the return of France to Indochina after the war. He had proposed that a trusteeship should be established under the auspices of the United Nations<sup>16</sup> to look after the affairs of Indochina; and the people of Indochina should be given independence as

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16. It was quite evident in the last months of President Roosevelt's life that a World body would be established after the War.

soon as they were capable of receiving it.<sup>17</sup> But this plan did not get enough backing from the Allied Powers and died with the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945.

President Truman regarded the Indochina crisis as a French problem. He felt that the colonial ambitions of France was the cause of the crisis. Though he was sympathetic to Ho Chi Minh he was not ready to assist him either materially or diplomatically. He gave no encouragement to Ho Chi Minh when he sought recognition of the US for the independent Vietnamese Government he had established in Hanoi. At the same time he turned down French appeals for material assistance to fight the Viet Minh forces. For instance, he insisted in 1947 that American produced propellers be removed from British Aircraft given by the British to the French for use in Indochina.<sup>18</sup>

It appears that during the period between 1945 to 1950 Indochina had a very low priority for the US. It

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17. President Roosevelt's views on Indochina are in his son Elliot Roosevelt's memoirs. See : Elliot Roosevelt, As He Saw It (New York, N.Y., 1946) p. 115.
  18. Barnard B. Fall, The Two Vietnams (New York, N.Y., 1964), p.82.

was primarily preoccupied with Western Europe. The limited American interest in Indochina was clearly reflected by the fact that in 1950 the United States had only eight diplomatic representatives in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.<sup>19</sup>

The Truman Administration's perception of US interest in Indochina began changing since 1948. But this shift was based not on developments in Indochina, but in other parts of the world especially in Europe and China.

1947 and 1948 were the two years in which the world witnessed a series of crises. Crisis in Berlin, Greece, the Dardanelles and Czechoslovakia; and the establishment of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) completely polarised the world among two power blocs led by the US and the Soviet Union; and the gulf between the two blocs kept on widening. In order to counter Soviet moves which the US regarded as hostile and threatening to its security interests and of its allies, the US adopted a policy of "containment". It entrusted itself the role of the "Saviour of Free World" and President Truman began to see himself as the Leader of the free

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19. Henry Brandon, Anatomy of Error : The Secret History of the Vietnam War (London, 1970), p.11.

world resisting the Communist expansion. The Truman Administration included Asia also in the "free world" and began viewing China, where bloody civil war was going on between the Communists and the Nationalists, as an active theatre of Cold war between the two power blocs. This is evident from a report issued in October 1948 by the House Foreign Affairs Sub-committee on World Communism.<sup>20</sup>

This shift in American perception of international Communism prompted the foreign policy makers in Washington to change their view on the conflict between the French and the Vietnamese in Indochina. Not only the Truman Administration but also the American elite and media too began viewing Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh movement as the evil forces of international Communism. This shift in American perception was reflected in such writings as is exemplified below. One, Andrew Green wrote :

In this country, it is only now beginning to be understood that in any Asiatic nationalist movement connected with Moscow through its leadership, the totalitarian-imperialist trend must inevitably kill native nationalism... His (Ho Chi Minh's) Indochinese independence has become the means to another end: Russian conquest of the Southeast (sic) Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

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20. Cited in U.S. House, 80 Congress, 8 Sess. Sub-committee on World Communism, of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, report on China and U.S. Far East Policy, 1946-1966 (Washington, D.C.), p.45.

21. Andrew W Green, "Are you a Middle of the Roader? Plain Talk, April 1948, p.35, in John G. Stoessinger, Why Nations Go to War (New York, 1982) p.86.

As the anti-French Viet Minh was a communist organisation, the Truman Administration realised that setbacks to French interests would also be a setback to American interests. It viewed Ho Chi Minh as an agent of international communism and therefore felt that a communist victory in Indochina would result in the expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia. The Truman Administration was determined to prevent such an eventuality from materialising.

The shifting American perception of its interest in the Far East generally, and in Southeast Asia specifically, took a definite turn in the year 1950. In October 1949, the Chinese communists under Mao Tse Tung emerged victorious in the civil war and established communist regime in Peking. In February 1950 Mao Tse Tung visited Moscow and concluded a defence treaty with the Soviet Union. Mao's and other Chinese leaders' strong anti-American statements and actions after the Red Army took control prompted the Truman Administration to conclude that the US would, henceforth, have to face a Sino - Soviet bloc whose main objective in Asia was to drive the Americans out of East and Southeast Asia and establish its own hegemony. In January 1950 both Moscow and Peking recognized Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic

of Vietnam (DRV). Then Secretary of State Dean Acheson first "identified" America's "ultimate opponent".<sup>22</sup>

This development marked the clear shift in American perception of the Indochinese crisis and the US put its first step in the Indochina quagmire, only to be caught in it completely and then strive helplessly to come out of it. Within less than a month of the recognition of DRV by Moscow and Peking, Washington accorded its recognition on 1 February 1950 to Bao Dai's Government established by the French in Saigon in 1949. The American recognition of Bao Dai's puppet regime, was, in one view, "in accordance with the U.S. policy of making friends with the people of Asia, who were just emerging from colonialism and checking communism in South-east Asia."<sup>23</sup> But this was not the unanimous opinion on the issue of recognition. There was another opposite view too; that the recognition was an "ill-conceived adventure

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22. Brandon, n. 19, p. 11.

23. Walter W. Waggoner, "US Vietnam Tie is due this week", New York Times, 5 February 1950, p. 12, in Susheela Kaushik, p. 6, p. 65.

doomed to end in another self-inflicted defeat" as in mainland China.<sup>24</sup>

Thirty-six years have elapsed since the two views were expressed. Both of them have been thoroughly tested and among the two the second one has clearly been proved to be correct. The United States suffered the 'self-inflicted defeat' eleven years ago and it is still nursing its wounded pride.

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24. Harold Isaacs "A New Disaster in Asia", Leader (Allahabad), 14 April 1950 in ibid. Harold Isaacs, a veteran journalist and observer of Asian affairs, said three and half decades ago in what appeared to be a prophetic tone: With "this act of policy, the United States embarked upon another ill-conceived adventure doomed to end in another self-inflicted defeat. It will not help the United States in its struggle against Communism. It will help the Communists in their struggle against the United States. It has already driven a new wedge between the United States and the other countries of South (sic) Asia. If the United States now involves itself in the Vietnamese Civil War, that gulf will widen. The real problem is not how to implement this policy but how to extricate ourselves from it." He further said: "One may well ask how the United States could let itself in for this disastrous prospect. The answers are bleak. The policy is the result of simple anti-Communist panic" Quoted in James C. Thomson, Jr., Peter W. Stanley and John Curtis Perry, Sentimental Imperialists: The American Experience in East Asia (New York, N.Y., 1981) pp.253-4. Emphasis added

The credibility of the second view lies in the fact that it clearly foresaw the future on the basis of the happenings in the past and present. On the contrary, the first view failed even to correctly grasp and assess the events of past and present, let alone foreseeing the future. The people of the State of Vietnam were not "emerging from colonialism" instead they were still under the effective grip of colonialism; and their Government headed by Bao Dai was not an independent one instead it was still a puppet in the hands of the French colonialism.

Such a puppet regime was recognised by the US in February 1950 in what seemed to be a counter move to Moscow and Peking's act of recognising Ho Chi Minh's DRV. Usually, states act pragmatically while recognising or derecognising other states; and they recognise states which are independent, sovereign, and free from outside interference. Notwithstanding this tradition, a puppet regime, (that too puppet in the hands of a colonial power) got recognition by a state which had a glorious tradition of strong anti-colonialism, and national independence. Much worse was that by 1951 the Truman Administration and a significant segment of the American public began



perceiving French, who were waging a bitter war against the nationalists to maintain their colonial empire, as "the free world's frontline ally in the fight against communism in Southeast Asia."<sup>25</sup>

The American perception of Ho Chi Minh as an agent of international communism has been a subject of serious dispute. As it has been already pointed out earlier that Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh nationalist movement was seen in the US as a means to Russian conquest of Southeast Asia. On 17 June 1949 the New York Times Herald wrote that "Ho Chi Minh is a Comintern agent whom the French rate as an authentic political genius",<sup>26</sup> When Ho Chi Minh's DRV was recognized by Peking and Moscow in January 1950, the Department of State Bulletin declared that this recognition put an end to speculations about the fate of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh who was then characterised as life long servant of World Communism.<sup>27</sup> Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated on 1 February 1950 that the recognition "should remove any illusion as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals

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25. Stoessinger, n. 21, p.87.

26. Ibid., p. 86.

27. Ibid., p.87.

Ho in his true colours as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina."<sup>28</sup>

But the allegation of Ho Chi Minh's subservience to Moscow were not based on facts. Though Ho Chi Minh had been a communist since the 1920s, he had studied Communism in Paris rather than in Moscow. During the initial years of French-Viet Minh conflict Moscow had been quite indifferent and detached and the relation between them was not "unfailingly friendly and close".<sup>29</sup> It was revealed by a Pentagon study in the fall of 1948 that "There was no hard evidence that Ho Chi Minh actually took his orders from Moscow."<sup>30</sup> Interestingly the US did not list Ho Chi Minh as even a communist in the Congressional Report on "Five Hundred Leading Foreign Communist."<sup>31</sup>

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28. Department of State Bulletin, (Washington), 13 February 1950, p.244, in Susheela Kaushik, n. 6, p.67.
29. Bernard B. Fall, The Two Vietnam's : A Political and Military Analysis (London, 1963), p.195.
30. Susheela Kaushik, n.6, p.68.
31. Andrew Roth, "Birth of New Leadership in Asia", Indian News Chronicle, 28 August 1949, in ibid., pp. 67-68.

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The same could be said about Ho Chi Minh's relations with the Chinese communists. Before 1949 the contract between the two sides was "remote and not very significant", and the Viet Minh did not get any material aid from the Chinese before January 1956.<sup>32</sup> Overlooking these facts the US considered Ho Chi Minh as a tool in the hand of the Chinese; and the American commitment to Vietnam was designed to check the expansion of the Chinese Communist influence into South-east Asia. History underlined the fact that the Vietnamese and the Chinese had been enemies for the last two millenia. The American commitment appeared to be counter productive as it united<sup>33</sup> the Vietnamese and Chinese for a brief period. Despite the massive aid to Vietnam by China, their union could not last long. It broke down when the US started withdrawing its troops from Vietnam. Historical animosity prevailed over the massive material aid and staunch diplomatic support. After American withdrawal, hitherto submerged animosity came to surface with renewed bitterness; and obviously these two nations did fight a bloody war

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32. Ibid., p.72.

33. Stanley Karnow calls this Union a "marriage of convenience" See Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History (New York, N.Y., 1984), p.43.

in February - March 1979. Instead of committing itself to Vietnam in 1950 the United States could have exploited this long standing enmity between the two nations.

The American perception of the Ho Chi Minh as a pawn in the hands of the Soviet Union and China was the first in a series of American misperception with regard to Vietnam. Viewing the colonialist French as "Free World's front-line ally in the fight against communism in South-east Asia" was the second one. These two misperceptions together eclipsed all the nationalist characteristics of Viet Minh's fight against the colonialist French for the liberation of Vietnam.

Anyway, by February 1950, the Truman Administration completely changed its perspective on the Indochinese crisis. Contrary to its earlier policy, it now decided to supply France military and economic aid. France was asked to submit a list of arms and military hardware it required. On 27 February 1950, France submitted the list demanding military equipments worth of thirty million dollars. The Griffin Mission<sup>34</sup> submitted its report in

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34. A mission was appointed in February 1950 under the Chairmanship of R. Allen Griffin, Publisher of the Monterey Peninsula Herald. Its task was to study the needs of Southeast Asia and to prepare the ground for technical assistance in the future. See Susheela Kaushik, n.6, p :74.

May recommending a programme of twenty three million in economic assistance and fifteen million in military aid to the French in Indochina.<sup>35</sup> On 10 June the Defence Department announced the first shipment of military aid to the French. This aid consisted of eight C-47 transport Planes and was to be followed by six 158- foot Naval Landing Craft. In addition a military aid worth of 119 million dollars was made available to France under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program. With the outbreak of Korean War in late June 1950, American Military Aid to the French increased substantially. By the time Truman left the Presidency the aid increased to 300 million dollars and it was almost one-third of the total cost of the French War effort in Indochina. In this way, "before he left the Presidency in 1953, Harry Truman had underwritten the French War effort in Indochina".<sup>36</sup>

This American policy of aiding the French against the Viet Minh was guided more by the US perception of interests in Europe (and in East Asia especially in Korea). The Truman Administration supported France in Vietnam because the US needed a strong French ally in

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35. Miriam S. Farley, United States Relations with South East Asia with Special Reference to Indochina (New York, N.Y., 1955), p.4.

36. Stoessinger, n 21, p.87.

in Europe. President Truman was willing to aid France massively to keep it involved as an ally in Europe and the Far East. But at the same time he did not order American combat troops in Vietnam as he did in Korea.

Despite this massive American Aid French position in Vietnam continued to deteriorate. The Viet Minh forces inflicted a number of serious military defeats on the French forces in Vietnam-China border area. The most significant among them was the French surrender on 8 October 1950 at Cao Bong. This Cao Bong disaster was one of the greatest colonial defeats the French have ever suffered.<sup>37</sup>

The American commitment to Vietnam was further deepened and military aid to France increased substantially during the first tenure of Dwight D. Eisenhower as the President of the US. The American commitment went to such an extent that in early 1954 the Eisenhower Administration was on the verge of intervening in Vietnam on behalf of the French. This was not done only because of certain "external" reasons (non-co-operation by the United Kingdom).

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37. Bernard B. Fall, Street Without Joy : Indo-China at War, 1946-54 (Harrisburg, 1961), p.28.

The Eisenhower Administration attempted to justify this increase in American Commitment with a simple analogy.<sup>38</sup> The so called 'Domino Theory' was first 'invented' by the then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and presented to the Congress, American public and foreign governments by President Eisenhower. It was feared that if Vietnam fell into communist lap, then Laos, and Cambodia would fall, whereupon all other countries of Southeast Asia would fall into the communist lap. The loss of Vietnam to the communists could eventually result in the loss to communism of entire region of Southeast Asia which was strategically very important and abundantly rich in natural resources.

Thus it was conceived that if the Communist take over of Southeast Asia was to be prevented then the United States must be the leader of the 'Free World', prevent Vietnam from succumbing to the Communists.

Meanwhile attempts were also made for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh expressed his readiness

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38. Professor Paul M. Kattenburg calls this analogy a rather simple and superficially logical game analogy". See Paul M. Kattenburg, The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1949-75, (New Brunswick and London, 1982), p.43.

for such a negotiation in late 1953. On 25 January 1954, Foreign Ministers of the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union met in Berlin and agreed that a conference on Korea and Indochina should be held in April.

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In the first two months/1954 the French position further deteriorated. On 13 March 1954 the Viet Minh made its first large scale attack on Dien Bien Phu which was France's last stand in Indochina. This assault reduced the French war power to an alarming level. The reports reaching Washington calculated that the French had only about a fifty-fifty chance of holding out. The Commanders of the French forces in Indochina, General Paul Ely who was on a visit to Washington informed President Eisenhower that Indochina would be lost to the communists, unless the US intervened. This opinion was supported and military intervention was recommended by Vice-President Richard M. Nixon and Admiral Arthur W. Badford Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff.<sup>39</sup>

At this crucial juncture the spectre of a possible Chinese intervention in favour of Viet Minh began haunting Eisenhower and Dulles. On 5 April Dulles

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39. Stossinger, n. 21, p.89.



said that the Chinese troops were actually participating against the French in the battle for Dien Bien Phu.<sup>40</sup>

President Eisenhower writes in his memoirs :

the struggle... began gradually with Chinese intervention, to assume to true complexion of a struggle between Communist and non-Communist forces rather than one between a colonial power and colonists who were intent on attaining independence.<sup>41</sup>

Reviewing the situation in Indochina, the National Security Council decided that the US should prevent the communist takeover of Vietnam at any cost. But military action was to be taken only if Britain and other American allies agreed to participate in it, and the French agreed to grant complete independence to Vietnam so as to eliminate the issue of colonialism.<sup>42</sup> Dulles who was very much obsessed with the fear of Chinese intervention declared on 29 March 1954 in an address before the Overseas Press Club, that the US should not "passively" accept Chinese control over Southeast Asia but meet Chinese aggression with "united

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40. Victor Bator, Vietnam : A Diplomatic Tragedy (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., 1965) p.206.

41. Dweight D. Eisenhower, Mandate for Change (London, 1963), p.167.

42. Chalmers M. Roberts, "The Day We didn't go to War", The Reporter (New York), 14 September 1954, p.32, in Susheela Kaushik, n.6, p.167.

action."<sup>43</sup> The American fear of a Chinese intervention in Vietnam was so strong that the US ignored all evidence to the contrary.<sup>44</sup> The Eisenhower Administration made a tentative decision to intervene in Vietnam by bombing Tonkin to relieve the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Dulles told journalist Henry Brandon on 2 April 1954 : "I can tell you that American aircraft carriers are at this moment steaming into the Gulf of Tonkin ready to strike." However in the course of the dialogue he said that the US had "not yet" decided to intervene in Indochina on behalf of France.<sup>45</sup>

However, in a secret meeting, held on 3 April 1954 in which Eisenhower, Dulles, Admiral Radford and some of the important Congressmen participated, it emerged that the Congress would not support American intervention in Indochina without Allied<sup>46</sup> participation. President Eisenhower wrote a letter on the very next day to the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill requesting

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43. Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), 12 April 1954, p.530, in *ibid.*.

44. Stoessinger, n.21, pp.89.

45. Brandon, n.19, p.10.

46. Allies included other non-Communist nations of Southeast Asia, and the British Commonwealth.

him to join in an united action in Vietnam,<sup>47</sup> Churchill, however, did not show any enthusiasm for the Eisenhower proposal.<sup>48</sup> The British Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden also did not favour an united action in Vietnam. He writes in his memoirs that such an action before the scheduled Geneva Conference would not have helped the Allies militarily instead it would have harmed them politically as it would frighten off "important political allies."<sup>49</sup> The Eisenhower proposal did not receive adequate backing by France also.<sup>50</sup> Dulles tried in vain to convince both the United Kingdom and France about the necessity of such an united action. But when their position in Dien Bien Phu further deteriorated and the defeat appeared imminent, the French in a sudden shift in their stand expressed their readiness for American intervention. But now it was the US turn to remain cool. The Eisenhower Administration

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47. For the full text of the letter see, Eisenhower, n. 41, p.347 Journalist Henry Brandon writes that President Lyndon B. Johnson always regarded this Eisenhower letter as the beginning of American commitment to Vietnam; the Republicans trace the commitment to President Truman's pledge of aid to the French. See, Brandon, n. 19, pp 12-13.
48. Eisenhower, n. 41, p. 348.
49. Sir Anthony Eden, Full Circle (London, 1960, p.87.
50. Melvin Gurtov, The First Vietnam Crisis (New York, N.Y., 1967), p.104.

decided against intervention due to UK's unwillingness to join in such an action, and fear of Congressional disapproval.<sup>51</sup>

This "united action" did not materialise and nobody saved the French from the disaster. On the afternoon of 7 May 1954 Dien Bien Phu fell and Viet Minh's red flag fluttered in the air over the French command bunkers at the Fort ending the First Indochina War.<sup>52</sup> The very next morning delegates from nine countries assembled at the old League of Nations building in Geneva to open their discussion on the Indochina problem.

Apart from the US the other important participants of the Geneva Conference were the Soviet Union, the UK, France, the People's Republic of China and the Viet Minh. During the course of the conference the US disassociated itself from the agreement when its attempts to bring the Indochina issue to the floors of the United Nations failed. The other parties agreed on many things than the United States did and finally a cease-fire agreement

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51. Eisenhower, n. 41, p. 251.

52. For details of the battle of Dien Bien Phu see Bernard B. Fall, Hell in a Small Place: The Seize of Dien Bien Phu (Philadelphia, 1966); Jules Roy, The Battle of Dien Bien Phu, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, N.Y., 1963); Vo Nguyen Giap, Dien Bien Phu (Hanoi, 1962).

on Indochina was signed on 21 July 1954.<sup>53</sup> Some of the main features of the agreements were as follows :

1. Vietnam was to be divided temporarily and the Seventeenth Parallel was to be the provisional line of demarcation.
2. The elections by secret ballot, under the supervision of an International Control Commission, were to be held in July 1956 for re-unification of Vietnam.
3. Introduction into Vietnam of foreign troops, arms and ammunitions as well as establishment of foreign bases was prohibited. An International armistice commission consisting of India (Chairman), Poland and Canada was to be responsible to see whether this condition is respected in both zones of Vietnam.

The US did not sign the agreement. Its delegate Bidell Smith, however, stated at the end of the conference that his country would refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb the agreement. He also said that it would view any violation of the agreement with grave concern.

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53. For details on the Geneva Conference see the following : Eden, n. 49. Susheela Kaushik, n.6, Chapter Seven; Bator, n.40; Philip Devillor and Jeane Lacouture, End of a War, Indochina, 1954, trans. Alexander Lieven and Adam Roberts (New York, N.Y., 1969).

With the signing of the Geneva Agreement the French colonial rule in Indochina came to an end. Vietnam was divided into two with a promise of elections for re-unification two years later. This proposed elections were never held and the Vietnamese had to wait for twenty two long years for the re-unification of their motherland.

#### UNITED STATES AND THE DIVIDED VIETNAM

Under the Geneva agreement, adherence of any Indochinese country to military blocs was not permitted. Just a month after the agreement, however, the US set up the South East Asia treaty Organisation (SEATO).<sup>54</sup> Though Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam were not members of the SEATO they were brought under its protection. This can be considered as the American violation of the

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54. The eight countries signed The SEATO were the US, the UK, France, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. This organisation had peculiar features. The US was an external power, the UK and France were two former colonial powers in Southeast Asia, whose influence in the region was fast dwindling. Pakistan was in no way concerned or engaged in the affairs of South East Asia. Philippines was an offshore and had no historical background and involvement in the affairs of the mainland Southeast Asia. Australia and New Zealand were members of the ANZUS and were less concerned with the happenings in Southeast Asia. The only bonafide Southeast Asia state was Thailand.

Geneva agreement.

After the Geneva agreement the Eisenhower Administration decided to work politically with the South Vietnamese Government headed by Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic Christian, who had been appointed as a Prime Minister of South Vietnam by Emperor Bao Dai on 17 June 1954. In another act of the violation of the Geneva agreement it strengthened Diem's military establishment between 1954 to 1956. It started providing economic and military aid directly to Diem's Government without sending it through France. By the end of the year 1954 it had decided to train the South Vietnamese army by the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG).

The US supported Diem when he organised referendum in October 1955 to choose between himself and emperor Bao Dai. After receiving 98.2 percent of the votes he declared himself president on 26 October 1955. Just three days before that he had declared the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam) a Republic.

According to the Geneva agreement elections were to be held in Vietnam. It was widely believed that if they were held Viet Minh would win the election. President Eisenhower himself so believed. He writes: "Had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 percent

of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai."<sup>55</sup> The Eisenhower Administration therefore advised Diem not to hold the elections. By that time Diem had become a client of the US, heavily depended upon the later for political, military and economic support. Diem declared in July 1955 that his government was not prepared to hold the election, since South Vietnam was not a signatory to the Geneva agreement. As a result, July 1956, the time scheduled for the elections, passed without any elections being held. Thus the Geneva agreement was violated for the third time.

By mid 1955 Diem had brought all power and authority in the hands of his Ngo family. This led to increase of dissatisfaction among various elements of South Vietnam.<sup>56</sup> The rejection of the elections by Diem provoked the anti-Diem and pro-Viet-Minh elements to indulge in sporadic agitation against Diem after July 1956. Despite the increasing unpopularity of Diem

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55. Eisenhower, n.41, p.372.

56. For detailed information on South Vietnam under Diem, see Bernard B. Fall, The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis (New York, N.Y., 1963), David Halberstam, The Making of a Quagmire (New York, N.Y., 1964).



the US continued to support him both politically and militarily. By the time Eisenhower left the Presidential office in 1960 almost 1,000 Americans were serving as military advisers in South Vietnam.

When South Vietnam was reeling under political turmoil North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) was looking inward and restructuring its war torn society and economy. The Communist government embarked on bringing socialist revolution. It mobilised people both for this purpose and fighting for the peaceful re-unification of Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

#### Rise of Insurgency in South Vietnam

The sporadic guerilla activities which began in 1956 turned into full scale war by 1959. There are two reasons for the communist insurgency not gaining momentum until 1959. First, due to a light year long war DRV was exhausted and it did not have adequate sources to support such a revolution in the south; regrouping and reorganisation of the communist cadres who were repatriated to the North under the provision of the Geneva agreement, also required enough time. Second, due to heavy American economic and military aid, Diem succeeded in stabilising

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57. For detailed information on North Vietnam (DRV) See : Fall, n.57; P.J.Honey, Communism in North Vietnam (Cambridge, 1977).

his government and suppressing the communists.<sup>58</sup>

On 20 December 1960, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF)<sup>59</sup> was formally constituted to carry out the Communist revolution effectively within South Vietnam. With the formation of the NLF of Vietcong, DRV (North Vietnam) took control of directing the insurgency in the South. It started training the Vietcong guerillas. Trained guerillas in large number began to infiltrate from the North to South. As a result vietcong insurgency in the South increased substantially.<sup>60</sup>

Kennedy Administration and Increasing American Involvement in Vietnam

By the time John F. Kennedy took over the Presidency in January 1961, the situation in Vietnam had become extremely depressing for both Diem and the US as the Vietcong guerillas aided by North Vietnam engaged in a bid to overthrow the pro-American regime of Saigon were gradually succeeding in attaining their target.

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58. Kattenburg, n.38, pp.59-60.

59. Diem gave NLF a Prejorative name, Viet Cong.

60. Detailed information on the Viet Cong, and insurgency see the following : Douglas Pike, Viet Cong : The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Cambridge, 1966); Nguyen Thi Din, Trans, Mai Vi Elliott, No other Road to Take, (Ithaco, N.Y., 1976).

President Kennedy's response to the increasing Vietcong guerilla activities was the creation of the Special Forces, keeping in mind the need for training in antiguerrilla warfare. This special force enjoyed President Kennedy's favour. Sometimes in October 1961 the entire staff of the White House press corps was taken to Fort Bragg to watch demonstration conducted by this special force. David Halberstam, describing this demonstration, also hinted at its weakness. He wrote :

It turned into a real whiz-bang day. There were ambushes, counter ambushes and demonstrations in snakemeat eating, all topped off by a Buck Roger's show: a soldier with a rocket on his back who flew over water to land on the other side. It was quite a show, and it was only as they were leaving fort Bragg that Francis Lara, the Agence France-Presse correspondent who had covered the Indochina war, sidled over to his friend Tom Wicker of the New York Times. "All this looks very impressive, doesn't it?" he said. Wicker allowed that it did. "Funny", Lara said, "none of it worked for us when we tried it in 1951.<sup>61</sup>

Soon President Kennedy authorized the dispatch of 400 men from the special force to Vietnam. By the end of the next year about 15,000 American military men were in Vietnam. Kennedy's decision in 1961-62 to send these military personnel to Vietnam "mark a real and

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61. David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York, N.Y., 1972) p.124.

crucial watershed<sup>62</sup> in the history of American involvement in the Vietnam crisis. Until 1961 an honourable disengagement for the US was possible. But with the commitment of these military personnel, it became increasingly difficult for it to withdraw from Vietnam.<sup>63</sup>

At the end of the year 1962 Americans and the Saigon government launched the Strategic Hamlet Program, a counter-insurgency guerilla strategy in rural Vietnam to counter Viet Minh insurgency. But this program failed to check the growing insurgency. On 2 January 1963 its units defeated the South Vietnamese army at the battle of Ap Bac.

President Kennedy himself was very much sceptical about the possibility of a "decisive American victory" in Vietnam. Once he said : "In the last analysis, it is their war, it is they who must win it or lose it."<sup>64</sup> Top personalities in the White House pressed him relentlessly to commit American combat troops in Vietnam, but he refused. He spelled out clearly his reservations against committing American combat forces. He told Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

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62. Kattenburg, n.38, p.113.

63. Ibid.

64. Stoessinger, n.21, p.94.

They want a force of American troops. They say it is necessary in order to restore confidence and maintain morale. But it will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in, the bands will play, the crowds will cheer, and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It is like taking a drink. The effect wears off and you have to take another.<sup>65</sup>

Kennedy turned down to the end the proposals to commit combat forces in Vietnam. His successor, however, did it.<sup>66</sup>

Changes of Governments in South Vietnam :

Due to severe repression, dissatisfaction and anger against Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu mounted rapidly in South Vietnam in 1963. It was followed by large scale demonstrations and violence. Diem resorted to repressive and ruthless measures to bring the situation under his control. President Kennedy increasingly felt that the US should disassociate itself from Diem. It was decided

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65. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., A Thousand Days (Boston, 1965), p.371.
66. Important secondary sources on the Kennedy Administrations Policy towards Vietnam are as follows : George Ball, The Past Has Another Pattern (New York, N.Y., 1983); Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation (Garden City; New York, N.Y., 1967); Leslie H Gelb and Richard K. Betts, The Irony of Vietnam, The System Worked (Washington D.C., 1979).

to support anti-Diem elements against Diem. On 1 November 1963 in a coup d'etat planned by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Diem and his brother Nhu were ousted from power and murdered after their surrender. The next day the Coup leader General Duang Van Minh assumed power as the head of the state. General Minh, however, was overthrown in another coup within three months and General Nguyen Khanh seized power for himself, but allowed General Minh to remain as figurehead Chief of State. The US vowed its support to General Khanh.

#### THE WAR : FIRST PHASE, 1965 - 1968

Lyndon B. Johnson who succeeded the assassinated President Kennedy in November 1963 was more committed to Vietnam than his predecessor. In 1961, he had visited Vietnam as Vice President and declared in his official report that :

The battle against Communism must be joined in Southeast Asia with strength and determination to achieve success there. Vietnam can be saved if we move quickly and wisely... The most important thing is imaginative, effective American management of our military aid program.<sup>67</sup>

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67. Halberstam, n.61, p.135.

At the same time he had made ambiguous statements on the then South Vietnamese President, Diem Johnson called Diem publicly, "Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia". But when questioned by the Saturday Evening Post reporters about his 'real' ideas about Diem, Johnson replied : "Shit, man, he's the only boy we got out there."<sup>68</sup> Whatever his ambiguities about Diem, he had a firm idea about one thing - saving Vietnam from communism. He was ready even to commit American combat troops for that purpose. And that is what he did in 1965.

#### Gulf of Tonkin Incident and Resolutions

The specific incident that brought the US to fight a war for eight long years was the famous Tonkin Gulf incident. Many scholars and analysts have tried to find out what really happened in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August 1965, but there is no unanimity among them. With the help of available sources the incident can be described as follows :

On 2 August 1965, at 11 a.m. the USS Maddox, an American warship was sailing in the gulf of Tonkin. When it was eleven miles away from the North Vietnamese island of Hon Me, it was reportedly chased by three North Vietnamese patrol boats and were fired upon by it. It

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68. Ibid.

appears that the North Vietnamese mistook the American warship for the South Vietnamese ones, which were engaged in covert maritime operation against North Vietnam during those days. A doubtful second incident involving North Vietnamese patrol boats, and the Maddox and another American destroyer USS Turner Joy, took place on 4 August. It was immediately followed by American air strikes at four North Vietnamese patrol boat bases and an oil storage depot. The Johnson Administration maintained that the American ships were the victims of enemy aggression and it should be retaliated in a befitting manner. But as has been stated earlier, there is no unanimity among the scholars that what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin. One scholar, after a thorough research came to the conclusion that the whole incident was a hoax and it never happened at all.<sup>69</sup> Now it is not a secret that President Johnson misled the public and Congress by weaving the story of Tonkin Gulf incident and obtained congressional approval for war (against North Vietnam) which he had decided upon a few months before.

On 5 August President Johnson sent a message to the Congress, requesting the passage of a Congressional

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69. Anthony Austin, The President's War : The Story of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and How the Nation was Trapped in Vietnam. (Philadelphia, 1971).



resolution expressing support of the Congress for taking necessary action against North Vietnam. The famous Tonkin Gulf Resolution was overwhelmingly passed by the Congress on 7 August. The House of Representatives approved the Resolution by a margin of 416 to 0 and the Senate by a margin of 88 to 2. The two dissenting votes were of Senator Gruening of Alaska and Senator Morse of Oregon.

The draft of this resolution had been prepared by Assistant Secretary of State William R. Bundy several months earlier anticipating an appropriate time to get it passed by the Congress.<sup>70</sup> The Congressional resolution was interpreted by the Johnson Administration as a declaration of war on North Vietnam. This resolution "became the standard document by which the Johnson Administration claimed congressional support for its undeclared war and justified the constitutionality of its subsequent moves and policies towards Vietnam."<sup>71</sup>

### The War

"Operation Rolling Thunder", sustained American bombing of North Vietnam, had begun on 24 February, five

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70. Kattenburg, n.38, pp.128-29.

71. Ibid., p.129.

months before the passage<sup>of</sup> the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. On 8 March two American marine battalions landed in Danang airfield in South Vietnam with a declared purpose of defending it against North Vietnamese air strikes. They were the first American combat troops in Vietnam. From then started the direct American involvement in the Vietnam conflict. In July forty-four additional combat troops were sent to South Vietnam. War between American and North Vietnamese troops began and in a first major clash, fought in the La Drang valley in October the American forces defeated North Vietnamese units.

By 1966, the American commitment in Vietnam had been literally open ended. American troops in South Vietnam kept on increasing day by day. By the end of 1965 the strength of American troops in Vietnam had reached 193,000 and it further rose to 5,79,000 by early 1967.

The bombing of North Vietnam and Vietcong hideouts which began in early 1965 continued till early 1968. Initially bombings were directed against the lines of communication, and later, against its industrial centres, provincial capitals, hospitals and schools. Finally it spread to the capital Hanoi and the Chief Harbour Haiphong.<sup>72</sup> The American military machine brought into

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72. William L. Standard, Aggression : Our Asian Disaster (New York, N.Y., 1977).

action the most powerful and deadly weapons it possessed, except the nuclear ones. Chemical warfare became common.

These savage acts of war resulted in massive death of innocent men, women, and children; destruction of vast arable land and standing crops. The use of chemical weapons caused ecological imbalance. For every North Vietnamese soldier killed, the US was killing four civilians. It was a war against humanity, an ugly scar on human civilisation. But men at the helm of power in Washington miserably failed to understand this naked truth. On the contrary they were delighted at having committed these savage deeds. When, following the so called Tonkin Gulf incident in early August 1965, American bombers destroyed more than a score of North Vietnamese petrol boats and blew up oil depot at Vinh, President Johnson remarked : "It didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh; I cut his pecker off".<sup>73</sup> In a press conference on 22 March 1966, he said : "If I get depressed when I read how everything has gone bad here, I just ask for the letters from Vietnam. So I can cheer up".<sup>74</sup> President

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73. Halberstam, n.61, p.414.

74. Quoted in R.P.Kaushik and Susheela Kaushik, Back to the Front : The Unfinished Story in Vietnam (New Delhi, 1979), p.38.

Johnson made this remark at the time of ruthless killings in Vietnam. Only a savage mind can 'cheer up' at these crimes against humanity and President Johnson, a barbarian in the White House, failed to understand the truth that he would be put on trial by history.<sup>75</sup>

These American bombings, however, failed to break the morale of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcongs. It resulted only in giving them a psychological stimulus for increasing their resistance power. The escalation of the bombing and of the war itself was countered by the North Vietnamese through dispersing the resources and personnels. Factories and other industrial units were broken down into small units and taken to the countryside from big cities and major industrial centres which were the main targets of the bombing. Thus by constant readjustments the North Vietnamese managed to resist effectively the American onslaught.<sup>76</sup>

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75. It is not my attempt to give my own "verdict"! It may appear here irrelevant too. But I feel that talking or writing on crimes against humanity in a calm and quite tone is also a crime against humanity.

76. For details, See Jon M. Van Dyke, North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival (Palo Alto, 1972).  
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During the "Tet", Vietnamese new year in February 1968, fifty to sixty thousand Vietcong guerillas launched a major offensive across the whole of South Vietnam. In this task they were assisted by North Vietnamese troops and airforce. In this famous "Tet Offensive" the Vietcongs took control of the entire rural area and most of the urban areas. By April they had established control over seventy five percent of the total territory of South Vietnam.<sup>77</sup>

#### SECOND PHASE :

#### WAR AND PEACE : SIMULTANEOUS PROCESS OF WAR AND NEGOTIATION, 1968--1973

President Johnson, eventually realized that the spirit of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong could not be curbed through the escalation of the war. This war had damaged his popularity within the US and was drawing wide-spread criticism from both home and abroad. Domestic protests were voiced by people from all walks of life. Moreover, this war proved to be a huge drain on American military resources. Taking into consideration all these developments President Johnson

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77. For details see Don Oberdorfer, Tet (Garden City : New York, 1971).

announced on 31 March 1968 that the US would stop the bombing partially with a view to bring peace in Indochina. Thus this "abdication speech" marked the beginning of the end of American involvement in Indochina. At the same time he also announced that he would not run for reelection as the war had damaged his popularity considerably. Thus the war in Vietnam caused the end of political life of Johnson, who had been elected to the Presidency with thus far the biggest majority in American history.

The North Vietnamese had earlier stated several times that they were ready for talks. When President Johnson also decided to halt bombing and begin talks, they responded positively. President Johnson and his closest advisers had expected this kind of response from Hanoi since it had earlier demanded a complete bombing halt.<sup>78</sup> On 10 May 1968 preliminary talks began in Paris. On 1 January 1969 the Paris talks were started formally. In these talks besides the US and North Vietnam, South Vietnam and NLF also participated. As the position taken by the US and North Vietnam were opposed to each other the talks continued for full four years. North Vietnam

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78. Lyndon Baines Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspective on the Presidency, 1963-1969 (New York, 1971), p.421.

insisted on preconditions like total stoppage of bombing by the Americans; and participation of NLF in any full scale negotiations regarding South Vietnam. On the other hand the US insisted that the American sponsored puppet regime in South Vietnam must dominate the future of South Vietnam.

Richard Nixon, who succeeded Lyndon Johnson to the Presidency in January 1969 favoured simultaneous withdrawal from South Vietnam of both Americans and North Vietnamese forces, thus implying that the North Vietnamese were also aggressors like the Americans. North Vietnam, obviously was not ready to accept this stand.

President Nixon favoured gradual withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and "Vietnamization" of the war. In July 1969 he announced at the Western Pacific island of Guam the Nixon Doctrine (also called Guam Doctrine) saying that in the future, the US would avoid involvements like the one in Vietnam by limiting its role only to military aid rather than commissioning her own combat troops.

While talking about withdrawing American troops from Vietnam, President Nixon ordered for the secret bombing of Vietcong supply routs and sanctuaries in

Cambodia in 1969. It was followed by invasion of that country itself by ground forces in 1970. In a dramatic development in June <sup>1970</sup> year the US Senate repealed the famous Tonkin Gulf Resolution. It also barred military operation in Cambodia without Congressional approval.

The secret talks between President Nixon's National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho, which began in February 1970 continued for three years. In each and every meeting attempt was made by both sides to break the deadlock. By the end of October 1972 the final agreement appeared to be very near.

While peace negotiations were going on in Paris, bombing and war continued unabated in Vietnam. Before a peace agreement was signed, the war was once again intensified. President Nixon on 18 December 1972 ordered the bombing of Hanoi and Hai-phong. In this infamous "Christmas Bombing" of twelve days American planes dropped 95,490 tonnes of bombs. The North Vietnamese held out against this bombing stubbornly. Emphasising the American failure, the North Vietnamese called the bombing as "Dien Bien Phu in the air."



## THE PARIS AGREEMENT AND AFTERMATH

The Paris talks were resumed on 8 January 1973 and on 23 January a ceasefire was finally reached on 27 January. The agreement was signed by both North and South Vietnam, the US and the Provisional Revolutionary government of South Vietnam (PRG).

The very first article, the solitary one in the Chapter I declared that the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam was recognised by all including the US Article 2 in Chapter II dealt with the cease-fire and the subsequent article declared that this ceasefire "shall be durable and without limit of time."

This agreement allowed the North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam to stay in their place. On the other hand it demanded the total withdrawal of American troops. The agreement also stressed a mutual co-operation in exchanging the Prisoners of war (POW) and information on the persons missing in action (MIA). According to Article 21 the US pledged reconstruction aid to North Vietnam<sup>79</sup>

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79. For more information on the Paris Peace Negotiations and Agreement see Gareth Porter, A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam and the Paris Agreement (Bloomington, 1975).

With the signing of the Paris Agreement American military involvement in Vietnam came to an end and on 29 March 1973, the last American troops left Vietnam. But the war in Vietnam did not end. The Nixon Administration used every available means to strengthen the Thieu government of South Vietnam. In late 1973 Thieu stepped up ground and air attacks on NLF bases. The North Vietnamese quickly infiltrated troops and equipments into the South. In January 1974 war began again. The North Vietnamese and NLF forces scored success after success in their counter attacks in the next few months. By the end of 1974 military balance within South Vietnam had shifted in favour of North Vietnam. In January 1975 the NLF and North Vietnam forces occupied the entire Central Vietnam with little risk. On 2 April they besieged Saigon and called for negotiations and demanded Thieu resignation. President Ford who succeeded Nixon requested the Congress to sanction economic and military aid to the Saigon regime. But the Congress opposed this move.<sup>80</sup> When the fall of Saigon seemed imminent, he ordered for the evacuation of terror-stricken Americans and South Vietnamese from South Vietnam. This was the only decision President Ford took regarding Vietnam.

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80. For detailed information on the President-Congress rift over the issue of aid to South Vietnam see P. Edward Haley, Congress and the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia (Rutherford, 1982).

On 21 April Thieu resigned and General Duang Von Minh popularly known as "Big Minh" was appointed President of South Vietnam. On 29 April he asked the South Vietnamese Army to lay down their arms and surrender to the North Vietnamese forces. The latter entered Saigon on 30 April and nearly thirty years war in Vietnam finally came to an end.<sup>81</sup>

With the fall of Saigon, American influence in Vietnam was completely liquidated. That is what the US got after twenty five years of involvement and eight years of active engagement in Vietnam. It dropped more than seven million tonnes of bombs in Indochina. These bombs left twenty million craters and nothing will grow there for generations. In Vietnam the US spent \$ 150 billion and lost 55,000 lives. Even with this massive human toll it could not achieve its goal. What it got ultimately was quite opposite to what it had hoped for. Both Cambodia and the whole of Vietnam came under the communist rule in April 1975, and Laos followed suit within a few months.

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81. For details on the last phase of the war see Wilfred Burchett, Grasshoppers and Elephants: The Vietcong Account of the Last 55 Days of the War (New York, N.Y., 1977); Alan Dawson, 55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1977); Terzani Teziani, Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon (New York, N.Y., 1976).

CHAPTER II

NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS,  
1975-1977

## CHAPTER II

### NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS, 1975-1977

#### The United States and Post-Vietnam-War Southeast Asia

Since it ended direct military intervention in the Vietnam War in January 1973, the United States has "declined" to play a "major" role in the affairs of the three Indo-chinese Communist states of Vietnam, Kampuchea (erstwhile Cambodia) and Laos.<sup>1</sup> With the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973, the American influence in Vietnam considerably declined and was completely liquidated with the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

This led some scholars to hastily conclude that the failure of American policy in Indochina might force the United States to keep itself away from the affairs of Southeast Asia. Some argued that it might leave the region altogether.<sup>2</sup> On 4 June 1974, the then US Assistant Secretary

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1. Paul M. Kottenburg, "Living with Hanoi", Foreign Policy (Washington D.C.), Winter 1983-84, p.131.

2. Bernard K. Gordan, "Asian Angst and American Policy", Ibid., summer 1982, p.48.

of State for Southeast Asia Philip C. Habib met with the then Prime Minister of Thailand, Kukrit Pramoj in Bangkok and told him that the withdrawal of the remaining 23,000 American troops from Thai soil would be completed by March 1976.<sup>3</sup> The reality, however, was quite different. Both the United States as well as the five members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>4</sup> desired American presence in the region. They believed that it was much more necessary than before in the changed situation.

After the fall of Saigon, the United States expected and the ASEAN countries feared that the victorious Vietnamese would sustain and support fellow communists in other countries of Southeast Asia and thereby pose a serious threat to non-Communist, anti-Vietnamese and pro-American regimes. It was believed in 1975 that the "new balance in Southeast Asia would consist of an ASEAN bloc confronting an Indochina bloc."<sup>5</sup> ASEAN countries were also afraid of the expansion of Soviet influence in the region following the unification of Vietnam. They believed that the power vacuum created in Vietnam by the American withdrawal could

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3. New York Times, 5 June 1975.

4. Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines.

5. Franklin B. Weinstein, "US-Vietnam Relations and the Security of Southeast Asia", Foreign Affairs (New York N.Y.), vol. 56, July 1978, p.847.

be filled by the Soviet Union which had been the closest ally and supporter of North Vietnam throughout the war.

During the first week of December 1975 President Gerald R. Ford paid an official visit to the People's Republic of China Indonesia and the Philippines. There he "learnt" that the "friends" of the United States wanted the Americans to remain "actively engaged" in the affairs of Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup> Pronouncing the "Pacific Doctrine" in the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu on 7 December after his return from the tour, the President affirmed American determination to remain actively engaged in the Asia-Pacific region.

He said :

I subscribe to a Pacific Doctrine of Peace with all and hostility towards none.... Our military assistance to allies and friends is a modest responsibility, but its political significance far surpasses the small cost involved. We serve our highest national interest by strengthening their self-reliance, their relations with us, their solidarity with each other and the regional security.

I emphasized to every leaders I met that the United States is a Pacific nation. I pledged as President, I will continue American active concern for Asia and our presence in the Asian-Pacific region."<sup>7</sup>

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6. A "Pacific Doctrine" of Peace with All and Hostility Toward None. Address by President Ford, Department of State Bulletin, (Washington, D.C.) vol. 73, 25 December 1975, p. 915.
  7. For complete text of the Pacific Doctrine See *ibid.*, pp. 913-916.

The implication of the statement was that the United States was not going to take itself away from Southeast Asia. The Los Angeles Times wrote that it showed the world that "the United States did not abandon Asia when it abandoned Vietnam." It marked, as the Providence Journal wrote, "a renewed recognition of the rights and wishes of the smaller nations" of Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> The New York Times commenting on the speech stated :

The principle and laudable aim of President Ford's so called "Pacific Doctrine" seems to be to forestall a swing in the United States towards isolationism and withdrawal from Asia following the defeat in Indochina.<sup>9</sup>

"The Pacific Doctrine" reaffirmed American commitment to the cause of security and cooperation in Southeast Asia. It also put an end to all speculations as to whether the United States would leave or stay in the region.

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8. See the Editorials in Los Angeles Times, 12 December 1975; Providence Journal, 11 December 1975, in Editorials on file, (Washington D.C.), vol. 6, 1-15, December 1975, pp. 1486-87.

9. New York Times, 9 December, 1975.



## NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS : VIEWS FROM BOTH SIDES

Writing in Foreign Policy in 1983, Professor Paul M. Kathenburg, a well known scholar on Southeast Asia, pointed out that the "...U.S. policy toward Vietnam is still driven by a profound animus on the part of American policy makers toward a country they believe has embarrassed and humiliated the United States."<sup>10</sup> It was rather difficult for the United States to digest its bitter experience in Vietnam, "a small impoverished Asian Communist Country."<sup>11</sup> For the first time in its history of two centuries it saw one of its client regimes destroyed.

Because of the fear of Vietnam's support for communists in the region, the Ford Administration's policy towards Hanoi was apparently not based on goodwill, friendship and cooperation. On the other hand the Vietnamese showed keen interest in rapprochement with the United States.

### Normalization of Relations : View from Hanoi

The Vietnamese evolved their post-War foreign

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10. Kathenburg, n. 1, p.131.

11. Kathenburg writes: "...for many Americans, including leading policy makers, some of the humiliation induced by defeat at the hands of an impoverished Asian Communist Country lingers on..." Ibid., pp.140-1, Emphasis added.

policy towards the United States pragmatically. Despite the memory of the bitter past, the Vietnamese leadership thought that a working relationship with the United States would help Vietnam in many ways, primarily in economic field. Usually policies are framed keeping in view past experience. However nations have to deal with existing reality and cannot retire to a quiet corner to ponder over the past and mourn their losses. Realizing that although the United States was primarily responsible for the devastation of their country's economy, the Vietnamese leadership also understood that their country's rehabilitation and reconstruction would be speeded up if the United States agreed to cooperate. The United States could, if it so desired, provide them with aid, investment and trade. The Vietnamese were not only willing but eager to lay aside burden of the past and begin afresh. They were willing to open a new chapter in their relation with the United States.

A careful analysis of the policy, Hanoi and the shortlived Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam, pursued with regard to the normalization of relations with the United States during 1975 to 1978 clearly shows that the motive behind Hanoi's persistent efforts to have diplomatic ties with Washington was to

gain economic aid. Hanoi was aware of the fact that Soviet Union or any other member of the Socialist bloc had no capacity to offer economic and technological assistance on a scale required by Vietnam and those needs could only be met by the advanced capitalist states of the west.<sup>12</sup> It could get only limited assistance from the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> From 1976 to mid 1978 the Vietnamese leadership made significant efforts to lessen its dependence on Moscow.<sup>14</sup>

It is easily understandable that Hanoi had realized that it would not get any political benefit of any kind whatsoever by establishing diplomatic ties with the United States. The elderly leadership of Vietnam had watched the attitude of the United States towards the Soviet Union and other members of the Socialist bloc, and understood that politically the United States opposed the Socialist nations. It can be said that the Vietnamese leadership was realistic enough to understand that the United States' policy towards Vietnam would in no way be

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12. For details see Donald S. Zagoria, "The Soviet Quandary in Asia", Foreign Affairs, (New York, N.Y.), vol. 56, January 1978, p. 307.

13. Robert C. Horn, "Soviet-Vietnamese Relations and the Future of Southeast Asia", Pacific Affairs (Vancouver), vol. 51, winter 1978-79, p. 588.

14. For details see Winstein, n. 5, pp. 542-56 and Horn, n. 13, pp. 585-605.

different. Therefore it concentrated its attention only on getting economic aid from the United States.

For nearly three years between 1975 to 1978, Hanoi kept on insisting that any kind of normalization should be preceded by American economic aid. It gave up this "precondition" only when it fully realized by mid-1978 that Washington was not at all ready to accept it. After that it gave up its serious efforts at normalizing relations with Washington.<sup>15</sup>

#### Views from Washington

When Hanoi signalled Washington its interests in normalization of relations, Washington knew that Hanoi's movements were motivated by its desire to obtain economic aid. It, however, was not in favour of giving such aid to Vietnam. Though after the end of the Second World War the United States provided massive reconstruction aid to Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany (F.R.G. or West Germany), it was not ready to provide similar assistance to Vietnam because there were significant differences between Vietnam and Post-War Japan and West Germany. Not

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15. The United States-Vietnam relations during 1978-80 is analysed in detail in Chapter Three.

only North Vietnam had been an enemy of the United State, but unlike Japan and West Germany, it was also a Communist country. It belonged to the Socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union, the adversary of the United States. The latter did not show any interest in providing economic aid. On the contrary it demanded that Vietnam first provide full account of the Americans missing in action during the war in Vietnam. The latter made considerable effort to meet this pre-condition but the United States did not show its willingness to improve ties.

FIRST STEPS TOWARDS NORMALIZATION :  
DEMANDS, REFUSALS AND COUNTER DEMANDS

The Vietnamese desire to establish diplomatic ties with the United States and to get economic aid from it was conveyed soon after the fall of Saigon. On 30 April 1975, the day Saigon fell, Din Ba Thi, head of the PRG. Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam delegation stated in Paris that the new government would accept "economic and technical aid from any country with no political condition attached".<sup>16</sup> Though the statement did not identify "any country" specifically it was evident the new regime in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) had the United

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16. New York Times, 1 May 1975.

States in mind. The statement added that the new regime would establish diplomatic relations with all nations "irrespective of their social system."<sup>17</sup> This was aimed not only at the United States but at the members of the ASEAN as well. It is possible that the desire of the PRG to have diplomatic relations with the United States had germinated even before the fall of Saigon. Though neither the PRG nor the North Vietnamese government had talked about the United States' aid to Vietnam, it seems that Hanoi recognized the value and importance of possible American aid even before the war ended.<sup>18</sup>

The Ford Administration, however, was not in favour of giving any aid for the economic reconstruction of Vietnam. If Vietnamese leadership wanted American funds for reconstruction of their economy, the Ford Administration saw no need to oblige it. Secretary of States Henry Kissinger in a press conference on 29 April 1975 said that he did not "favour" American aid for rebuilding North Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> With respect to South Vietnam he said that the

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17. Ibid.

18. See the Editorial in Statesman, (New Delhi), 21 January 1976.

19. New York Times, 30 April 1975.

Administration would see what kind of government emerged there and whether it was going to remain or not.<sup>20</sup> Then he ironically added, "The primary responsibility (of rebuilding Vietnam) should fall on those who supplied the weapons to North Vietnam which brought the political change in Indochina."<sup>21</sup>

PRG's eagerness to establish relations with the United States was clearly evident from the statement given by Chairman Nguyen Hue Tho of the PRG Advisory Council in a victory celebration held in Saigon from 15 to 17 May. He declared that the new government in Ho Chin Minh City (Saigon) would open "diplomatic, economic, cultural and friendly relations with all the countries including the United States provided South Vietnam's sovereignty was respected."<sup>22</sup> This statement is significant because for the first time after the fall of Saigon, the PRG explicitly declared that it was ready to establish all kinds of relations with the United States. The condition, it put for establishing such relations was simple - the United States was to respect the sovereignty of South Vietnam. This condition appears easy when compared to the

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20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 16 May 1975.

conditions Hanoi put later for establishing diplomatic ties with the United States.

The formal offer of normalization of relations was made by Hanoi for the first time by Premier Pham Van Dong while addressing the National Assembly in Hanoi on 3 June 1975. But this offer was conditional. Premier Dong demanded that the United States seriously implement its pledge of economic aid made in 1973. He said :

We demand the United States government truly respect Article 1 and 4 of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam on the basic national rights, independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Vietnam and seriously implement the spirit of Article 21 concerning the United States obligation to contribute to healing the wounds caused by the criminal United States war of aggression in both regions of Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

The Paris Agreement or "An Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam" as it was formally titled, was signed on 27 January 1973 by the foreign ministers of the United States, the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG).<sup>24</sup> Through one of the clauses of this Agreement

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23. Ibid., 4 June 1975.

24. For details on the Paris Agreement see Chapter 1.



the United States pledged to contribute to the reconstruction of Vietnam, which was referred to by Premier Dong in his National Assembly speech. Article 21 of the Agreement which embodies American pledge of reconstruction aid reads :

...In pursuance of its traditional policy, the United States will contribute to healing the wounds of war and to post-war reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and throughout Indochina.<sup>25</sup>

A letter written on 1 February 1973 by former President Richard M. Nixon to Premier Pham Van Dong also pledged that the United States would contribute to the post-War reconstruction of North Vietnam "without any political condition."<sup>26</sup> According to the letter the American aid was to amount \$ 3.25 billion.

A State Department official, apparently replying to Premier Dong's offer, was reported to have said on 4 June 1975 that the United States had little to gain by seeking to establish diplomatic ties with Vietnam

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25. Text of the Agreement Signed by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the United States of America, mimeograph, copy is available in the Jawaharlal Nehru University Library, p.17, (hereinafter referred to as Paris Agreement).

26. For the full text of the letter see : Former President Nixon's Message to Prime Minister Pham Von Dong, Department Announcement, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C), vol.76, 27 June 1977, p.674.

at that time.<sup>27</sup> He said that though the question had received some study in the governmental circles, it had so far been rejected. The official contended that quick establishment of ties with North Vietnam soon after its victory over South Vietnam, an American ally, would be a mockery of American policy of aiding the former Saigon Regime.<sup>28</sup> The United States made it clear that it was not at all ready to establish ties with Vietnam under the condition Premier Dong set. The State Department official added that the question of normalization of relations could not be considered seriously until North Vietnam sharply curtailed its anti-American propaganda and offered to normalize relations without setting any conditions.<sup>29</sup>

Premier Dong's offer of normalization of relations did not get favourable attention in Washington. Instead, his description of the United States as guilty of criminal war of aggression in Vietnam evoked strong criticism from the Department of State. Reacting angrily, a spokesman of the Department said on 3 June 1975 :

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27. New York Times, 5 June 1975.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

Violation by North Vietnam of the Paris Accords were massive and resulted in the complete subjugation of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese military forces. The result of these violations leave no doubt as to the identity of violator.<sup>30</sup>

Premier Dong's offer of normalization and demand for economic aid was rejected outright by the Ford administration on 4 June 1975, one day after Premier Dong made his offer. Robert Anderson, a State Department spokesman, speaking for the Administration said, it was "ironic" for North Vietnam to press the United States to observe Paris Agreement when Hanoi was responsible for the "wholesale violation" of the same agreement by vanquishing South Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> He went on to add that it was because of North Vietnam's violations of the Agreement that the Ford Administration was not ready to seek from the Congress any aid for North Vietnam. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger also reiterated the Ford Administration's determination not to give aid to North Vietnam.<sup>32</sup>

North Vietnam did not abandon its efforts even after it was rebuffed. On 11 June 1975 North Vietnam reiterated its earlier offer. The offer, however, was

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30. Ibid., 4 June 1975.

31. Ibid., 5 June 1975.

32. Ibid.

conditional as the previous one. North Vietnam reiterated its demand for reconstruction aid. In a commentary in the North Vietnamese Communist Party news paper Nhan Dhan broadcast by Radio Hanoi on 11 June 1975 said,

At present, the war has completely ended and real peace has been reached throughout Vietnam. This situation has created conditions for resolving problems of the consequences of war between Vietnam and the United States, such as the United State's contribution to healing the wounds of war in both parts of Vietnam, the search for United States M.I.A.s (missing in action) and the exhumation and repatriation of the remains of Americans who died in Vietnam.<sup>33</sup>

The statement further added :

We demand that the United States seriously implement the spirit of Article 21 of the agreement concerning the United States Obligation to contribute to healing the wounds of war caused by the criminal United States war of aggression.<sup>34</sup>

North Vietnam thus again invited the United States to resolve the existing problems between the two countries. It also demanded again that the United States should abide by Article 21 of the Paris Agreement. The statement made in Nhan Dhan said one more important thing that North

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33. Ibid., 12 June 1975.

34. Ibid.

Vietnam would not permit the United States to search for the remains of MIAs unless it provided reconstruction aid.<sup>35</sup> Thus North Vietnam directly linked the question of reconstruction to that of MIAs. Hanoi's stand seemed to be unexpected. American officials in Bangkok said that for the first time they came to know that North Vietnam was linking the reconstruction aid and MIA issue.<sup>36</sup> It appeared to most Americans, including Kissinger that North Vietnam was "blackmailing" the United States with the remains of MIAs to get reconstruction aid.<sup>37</sup>

This second conditional offer of North Vietnam for normalization of relations was also rejected by the United States. A State Department spokesman Robert Funseth said on the same day that it was difficult to take Hanoi's proposals seriously and the State Department had already declared that it was "ironic Hanoi would make such demands in view of its own violation of the Paris accords"<sup>38</sup>

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35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. See the Editorials in The Blade (Toledo, Ohio), 21 November 1976, and Forthworth Star Telegraph, 24 November 1976. Editorials on file (Washington D.C.), vol. 7, 16-30 November, pp. 1476-77, and

Secretary Kissinger Interviewed for NBC "Today" Show, Department of State Bulletin, (Washington D.C.), vol. 74, 14 June 1976, p. 750.

38. New York Times, 12 June 1975.

Thus the United States reiterated its stand that North Vietnam had violated the Paris accords and therefore was not entitled for any aid.

While refusing to implement one of the clauses of the Paris Agreement the Ford Administration demanded the implementation of another clause by North Vietnam. President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger both stated more than once that the attitude of the United States towards North Vietnam and South Vietnam would be influenced by their conduct towards their neighbours and their attitude towards the United States.<sup>39</sup>

What Ford and Kissinger meant by the Phrase the favourable attitude of two Vietnams towards the United States was the supply of information about the MIA by the Vietnamese. On 19 June 1975 Kissinger said in an interview : "... With respect to Vietnam... we would look for particularly the implementation of the Paris Agreement especially with respect to the missing in action."<sup>40</sup>

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39. Secretary Kissinger Interviewed for NBC, 'Today' Show, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), vol. 72, 26 May 1975, p.67.

40. Secretary Kissinger interviewed for CBS TV Evening News, Department of State Bulletin, Vol. 72, 14 June 1975, p.64.

When referring to the Paris Agreement Kissinger had in his mind Article 8-b of the agreement which deals with the question of the MIA. The Article 8-b reads :

The parties shall help each other to get information about those military personnel and foreign civilians of the parties missing in action, to determine the location and take care of the graves of the dead so as to facilitate the exhumation and repatriation of the remains, and to take any such other measures as may be required to get information about those still considered missing in action.<sup>41</sup>

The United States authorities listed about 965 American servicemen and civilians as missing in action in Indochina and approximately 1,100 others declared legally dead but whose remains had not been recovered.<sup>42</sup> The Ford Administration demanded that North Vietnam should provide complete list of all these 2065 missing and dead Americans, and allow the United States officials to search for the remains in Vietnam. But Hanoi had already rejected this demand on 11 June 1975 before Kissinger made it on 19 June 1975. This rejection further blocked the possibility of the United States recognizing the two Vietnams. Answering a question at a press conference on this subject President Ford said on

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41. Paris Agreement, n.26, p.5.

42. New York Times, 12 June 1975.

7 August 1975 : "Their current actions certainly don't convince me that we should recognize South Vietnam or North Vietnam."<sup>43</sup>

Though President Ford did not specify the actions, it is apparent that he was referring to the refusal of North Vietnam to permit the U.S. officials to search for the remains of the MIAs.

Here one thing is very significant. North Vietnam had not said that it would never allow American officials to search for the remains. It had only stated that until the United States provided reconstruction aid as agreed upon in Paris, the latter would not be permitted to search for the remains. It was clear that once the United States agreed to provide aid, then North Vietnam would have allowed American officials to search for the remains. But the United States refused to give any aid on the ground that North Vietnam violated the Paris agreement. At the same time it insisted on North Vietnam's implementation of the clause on MIA forgetting that it had also violated the Paris Agreement. This paradox in

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43. President Ford Interviewed for Public Television, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), Vol. 73, 8 September 1975, p.379.



American stand blocked the way of normalization of relations. It nullified Vietnamese overtures for early normalization.

US OPPOSITION TO VIETNAM'S MEMBERSHIP  
OF THE UN

Though the PRG held office in Ho Chi Minh City it was reported that it was Hanoi that was making all the important decisions in South Vietnam. Efforts were being made by Hanoi since the fall of Saigon to unite the two zones into one single country. It was certain in July 1975 that the expected unification would be completed by mid 1976.

Both South and North Vietnam however applied for the membership of the United Nations separately on 15 and 16 July 1975 respectively and these applications were approved by the General Assembly. Then it seemed that the United States might not block their way to the membership.<sup>44</sup> But signs of possible American opposition to the membership started appearing soon. The United States proposed a package deal by which the two Vietnams and South Korea, an American ally, would be admitted. As some countries, including the Soviet Union were

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44. New York Times, 18 July 1975.

opposed to the entry of South Korea into the United Nations, it appeared that they were opposed to the package deal proposed by the United States. In that case it was certain that the United States would oppose Vietnamese entry into the world organization. Both North and South Vietnam opposed this American stand. In a news conference held on 5 August 1975 at the United Nations, Nguyen Van Luu and Dinh Ba Thi, permanent observers in the United Nations of North and South Vietnam respectively, said that the United States was "manoeuvring" against an early consideration of Vietnamese applications by the Security Council by linking the admission of the two Vietnams to that of South Korea.<sup>45</sup> They cited the example of the simultaneous admission into the United Nations in 1973 of the two German states and said that it was the practice of the United Nations to admit both parts of a divided country when both requested for it. They also said it was not the practice of the United Nations to refuse to admit any one part of the divided country when the other did not want it. To support their contention they gave the example of the two Vietnams during the war and of the two Koreas at that time (August 1975).<sup>46</sup> They implied that the case

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45. Ibid., 6 August 1975.

46. Ibid.

of Vietnamese admission should not be linked to that of South Korea. In the case of Vietnam, both parts were seeking admission but in the other case, only South Korea was seeking admission not North Korea. The United States, however, stuck to its earlier decision and paid no heed to the attacks of the Vietnamese observers.

All the three applications of both Vietnams and South Korea were placed for consideration before the Security Council on 6 August 1975. When the voting took place, the applications of both Vietnams were approved for consideration by 12-1. Out of fifteen members (five permanent and ten non-permanent), twelve members voted in favour and the United States voted against. The United Kingdom and Costa Rica abstained.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand the South Korean application was rejected. Minimum nine members had to vote in favour of an application, if it was to be considered. But only seven members - two short of the required nine votes - favoured South Korean application.

When South Korean application was rejected in the Security Council, the United States decided to carry out its earlier decision of opposing Vietnamese applications.

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47. Ibid., 8 August 1976; Year Book of the United Nations, 1975. (New York, 1978) vol.29, p.310.

Robert Anderson, State Department spokesman announced in a news conference on the same day that the United States would veto the applications of North and South Vietnam if they were brought to the Security Council for voting.

He declared :

We are supporting a package deal. We are not going to participate in a selective program of universality. If South Korea is not approved, we will not support the applications of North and South Vietnam.<sup>49</sup>

The United States' stand was reiterated by President Ford on 7 August 1975. Answering a question on this subject in a news conference he gave his opinion in the following words :

We have taken a very strong stand that we would not agree to the admission of South or North Vietnam unless and until South Korea is admitted. We believe in universality across the board.<sup>50</sup>

The American decision of vetoing the applications of North and South Vietnam was promptly carried out by Daniel P. Moynihan, American envoy to the UN on 11 August

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49. New York Times, 7 August 1975.

50. President Ford Interviewed for Public Television, Department of State Bulletin, n. 43, pp. 379-80.

1975, when the applications of the two Vietnams were placed before the Security Council. When the voting took place thirteen out of the fifteen members supported it. United Kingdom which had abstained when the voting for consideration of the applications took place on 6 August, now voted in favour of the applications, thereby showing its support for the Vietnams' entry into the United Nations. Costa Rica which abstained on 6 August did the same thing now also. The United States which vetoed the applications was the sole opponent. Even its West European allies did not support its stand.

These two vetoes were the eight and ninth the United States cast in the entire history of the United Nations and first and second with regard to the question of membership.

After the voting Daniel P. Moynihan affirmed that the United States stand by saying that the United States stood for universal membership of the UN.<sup>51</sup> He also said that by excluding South Korea the Security Council had in effect proclaimed "selective universality, a principle which in fact admits only new members acceptable

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51. New York Times, 12 August 1975.

to the totalitarian states."<sup>52</sup> In his usual style he made it clear that by "totalitarian states" he meant the Soviet Union which supported Vietnamese membership and opposed that of South Korea. About American acts he said :

We must not apply partisan political terms to U.N. membership. The U.N. cannot work if we do. It is because the United States has a desire that it should work that we have made today the hard decision to break with our practice of thirty years and block the membership of two nations whose sponsors have refused to act equitably toward the application of another nation.<sup>53</sup>

Moynihan also said that if the Security Council had not refused to consider South Korea's application for membership, the United States would have voted for admission of the two Vietnams.

Commenting on the American veto, Soviet representative Yakov A. Malik said it was "illogical" to link admission of North and South Vietnams to "side issues". This comment was made on package deal proposed by the United States. Malik said that 99.9 percent of the members of the United Nations would fail to understand why the two Vietnams were kept out of this world organization.<sup>54</sup>

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52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

Expressing his country's support for Vietnamese admission into the United Nations the Chinese representative Huang Hua said that the Chinese and Vietnamese were "comrades in arms" and praised the struggle of the Vietnamese people "as a brilliant example for the anti-imperialist revolutionary cause" throughout the world.<sup>55</sup>

Both the Vietnamese act of applying for the United Nations membership and the American act of opposing it could be criticized, if one looks into the issue with an impartial perspective.

First, the crucial question is whether there actually were two Vietnams. As the whole world knew that the main goal of the North Vietnamese was to unite the divided country and as it is mentioned earlier they were trying to reach this goal. It was evident that by mid 1976 the two halves would be united into one single country. It is true that the PRG held office in Ho Chi Minh City. But it is doubtful that this government was independent. Reports indicated that Hanoi was making all the important decisions in the South.<sup>56</sup> North Vietnamese army was in occupation of the South. School

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55. Ibid.

56. See the Editorial in Toronto Star; 16 August 1975 in Editorials on File, vol.6, 16-31 August 1975, p. 986.

children in both zones were using same text books. Efforts were being made to introduce a single monetary and economic policy in both zones. All these facts show that South Vietnam was not a separate sovereign and independent country. Despite this "Hanoi regime and its South country branch office in Saigon"<sup>57</sup> sought to enter the United Nations separately. The rationale behind this act remains a mystery. It is even difficult to guess what would have happened to South Vietnam's membership when it formally united with the North and ceased to exist. If the membership was to terminate along with its ultimate union with the North, why did South Vietnam apply for the membership? These questions can be answered satisfactorily only when authentic documents would be available.

The United States, however, did not choose this ground for its opposition. Its linking of the admission of the two Vietnams to that of South Korea was not justified. South Korea is one half of a divided country not recognized by the other half. Moreover, neither North Korea nor South Korea has accepted the division of the Korean peninsula as permanent. There have been continuous

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57. See the Editorial in Miami Herald, 13 August 1975 in ibid., 1-15 August 1975, p.987.



efforts for the reunification of the two halves. Granting of United Nations membership to any one or both parts would have perpetuated the division. For this reason North Korea did not apply for the membership of the United Nations, whereas South Korea did. United States by pressing for the entry of South Korea into the United Nations, indirectly favoured the perpetuation of the division of the Korean peninsula, and ignored the cause of reunification. If the United States did not want the entry of the two Vietnams into the United Nations, it should have used a more credible ground. Had the United States approved the application of North Vietnam and rejected that of the South Vietnam, it would have demonstrated to the world that the United States, had no animus against North Vietnam. At the same time it would have exposed the Vietnamese manouvre to get two votes in the United Nations, while maintaining Vietnam as an united country.

The American veto drew both appreciation and criticism from the American press. The New York Times supported the stand taken by the United States by saying :

The United States was absolutely right in insisting that universal membership ought to be the rule in the United Nations, not a kind of "selective universality" under which only governments politically accepted to the bloc with the most vetoes are admitted.<sup>58</sup>

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58. New York Times, 13 August 1975.

The paper wrote that the American veto "was not merely a reflection of Ford Administration's new resolve to show its toughness in countering the double standard of the Communist Countries and their Third World allies apply to the United Nations." It supported the "package deal" by saying that the American contention that South Korea "with its quarter century record of stability" was as much entitled to get the United Nations membership as the two Vietnams.<sup>59</sup>

After supporting American position, the Times pondered over the disadvantages of such a policy. It felt that the American veto might be counter productive from the point of view of both United States' own interests and of a "sound power balance" in the Far East region.<sup>60</sup> It opined that the time for reconciliation with Hanoi has come and the United States had nothing to gain, instead suffer damages to its Pacific posture by continuing adverse relationship with North Vietnam. The paper maintained that the United Nation's membership to South Vietnam would have underlined its separate identity and a similar membership to North Vietnam could

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59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

have helped North Vietnam to play a role independent of the Soviet Union and China.<sup>61</sup>

The Des Monis Register and the Evening Bulletin backed the American package deal. The former said that if the Communist countries and their Third World allies wanted to seat the two Vietnams in the United Nations, they had to make a "deal" with the United States on the membership of Korea. The Evening Bulletin criticized the "Communists" who wanted to get two votes in the United Nations for the Vietnams and rejected the longstanding efforts of South Korea.

The maiden vetoes of the United States with regard to a membership question was termed by the Salt Lake Tribune as "Crucial turning point" in American policy towards the United Nations.<sup>62</sup>

In September 1975 the non-aligned countries led by Algeria campaigned to reopen the issue of Vietnamese membership. It was supported by the Soviet Union and China. On 19 September the General Assembly decided by a 123-0 vote to ask the Security Council to consider the

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61. Ibid.

62. See the Editorial in Des Monis Register (Des Moines, Iowa), Evening Star Bulletin (Philadelphia), 14 August 1975; Salt Lake Tribune (Salt Lake City), 13 August 1975 in Editorial on File, n. 57, pp. 985-989.

applications of the two Vietnams "immediately and favourably."<sup>63</sup>

The United States had not changed its policy towards Vietnamese membership. It stuck to its previous position of opposing what it called "selective universality". It abstained from voting in the General Assembly. Explaining the United States' stand, Daniel P. Moynihan stated in the General Assembly that American position remained unchanged. He said :

The United States is not opposed to the admission of two Vietnamese states, but we are not prepared to agree to their admission as part of a practice of selective admission by which the Republic of Korea is excluded. For this reason the United States abstained.<sup>64</sup>

Moynihan further contended that the United Nations would die if it did not remain representative. In order to free the United States from allegations that it was abusing the veto power, Moynihan said that it was not the United States, but the Soviet Union which had abused the veto power. He said that the Soviet Union had cast its veto four times to block South Korean application.<sup>65</sup>

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63. New York Times, 20 September 1975;  
Year Book of the United Nations, 1975, n. 47, pp. 312-13.

64. New York Times, n. 63.

65. Ibid.

On 30 September 1975 the applications of the two Vietnams were placed again before the Security Council for voting. As expected the United States vetoed both the applications separately for the second time. Out of fifteen members United States was the lone opponent. All other fourteen members voted in favour of the admission. Even Costa Rica which had abstained previously now voted in favour.<sup>66</sup>

#### MUTUAL RELATIONS UPTO THE RE-UNIFICATION OF VIETNAM

The Ford Administration's anti-Vietnamese attitude was not limited to blocking the entry of the two Vietnamese states into the United Nations. It continued to allege that the Americans in South Vietnam were held as hostages. It accused the Vietnamese of not providing information regarding the MIA.

It was reported on 11 September 1975 that the United States Department had charged that the Americans in South Vietnam were held as hostages with the intention to force the United States to recognize the new regime in Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>67</sup> South Vietnam denied this allegation on 13 September. The Foreign Ministry in

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66. Ibid., 1 October 1975.

67. New York Times, 14 September 1975.

Hanoi said that the change was an "evil trick" aimed at distorting the new regime's (PRG's) policy towards aliens in South Vietnam and "sowing dissention" between the Vietnamese and the people of the United States.<sup>68</sup>

Remaining Americans in South Vietnam were repatriated to the United States time and again. Three Americans, Thomas Hinkins, Julie Forsythe and Rev. Al. Kowles departed from South Vietnam on 7 October 1975.<sup>69</sup> The first two were quakers who had gone to South Vietnam to work with the war wounded. The third one was a protestant clergyman.

Through the mediation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, fourteen foreigners including nine Americans<sup>70</sup> were repatriated from South Vietnam on 30 October 1975. They had been taken into custody by the PRG authorities during March-April 1975 and kept in various detention centres and prisoners of war camps. Three American crewmen held in Saigon since October 1975 were released by the South Vietnamese authorities in early

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68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 8 October 1975.

70. The other nationals were two Canadians, two Filipinos and an Australian.

January 1976. They were set free aboard their yacht, Brillig, at the port city of Vung Tho.<sup>71</sup> These repatriations however did not earn the goodwill of the United States. This is evident from the statement read to news correspondents by Robert Anderson, Special Assistant to the Secretary of States for Press Relations on 30 October 1975 when fourteen foreign nationals including nine Americans were repatriated from South Vietnam. The statement welcomed the return of these persons. It "appreciated" the "Assistance" given by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>72</sup> But there was not even a single word in the whole statement which appreciated or thanked Vietnamese.

The Ford Administration's attitude towards the question of MIA was rather rigid. Both President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger said more than once that Hanoi's Policy towards Washington was not conducive for improving relations. The United States' disagreement with Vietnam centered around the question of MIAs. The United States was primarily interested in obtaining information about the MIA. It was determined that unless

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71. New York Times, 31 October 1975.

72. For the full text of the Statement see U.S. Welcomes Release by Viet-Nam of Nine Americans, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), Vol. 73, 8 December 1975, p.810.

Vietnamese were forthcoming in this regard, there would be no improvement in relations. Vietnam said many times that it was interested in improvement of relations and it did try to accommodate American concern. On 21 December 1975 it handed over remains of three American airmen to a five member delegation of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia.<sup>73</sup> North Vietnam, however, was not willing to allow American officers to search for the remains in its territory.

More than once the United States declared that its policy towards the two Vietnams would be based on the latter's attitude towards their neighbours. The Vietnamese were not doing anything to give the impression that they did not want to have good relations with their neighbours. Ever since the fall of Saigon both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City expressed time and again their willingness to have friendly relations not only with their neighbours but the United States as well.

The Ford Administration ignored suggestions by various persons to improve relations with the two Vietnams. Senior Democratic leader Mike Mansfield on

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73. These remains were of Lt. Col. Crosky Jame Filtur Jr. reported missing on 28 February 1968; Capt. Ronald Dwight Barry, declared missing on 21 December 1972; and Comdr. Jesse Taylor Jr., killed in action on 17 November 1965.



5 December 1975 called for the recognition of the two Vietnamese governments. He believed that the recognition would help to stabilize Southeast Asia and provide final answer to the question of MIA.<sup>74</sup> Senator Mansfield was talking in the final session of the three day "Pacem in terris" conference sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

Another senator, George McGovern (D, SD) visited Vietnam in January 1976. He was the first Congressman to visit both North and South Vietnam since the end of the war. He said in a telephone interview from Bombay on his way back from Hanoi that the leaders of both North and South Vietnam wanted to forget the past and were deeply interested in establishing normal relations with the United States. He went on to say "Every person and leader I talked with both in the North and South, said they were eager to establish normal relations with the United States."<sup>75</sup> Senator McGovern went on to add that he was assured by North Vietnamese leaders that the latter would make all efforts to secure all possible information about the MIA, and Americans and their dependents stranded in Saigon.

The Ford Administration, however, did not respond

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74. Straits Times (Singapore), 6 December 1975.

75. New York Times, 18 January 1976.

positively to Vietnamese overtures. It took no notice of Senator Mansfield's suggestion and the Vietnamese initiative in conveying their desire for normalization through Senator McGovern. It kept on insisting that an accounting of MIA was an "absolute precondition" for the normalization of relations. It felt that the Vietnamese were not providing the list though they were capable of doing so. But it was not an easy job for Hanoi to provide the list and return the remains of as many MIAs as would have satisfied the United States.

By the end of March 1976 the Vietnamese went one more step to woo the United States. On 29 March the Vietnamese embassy in Paris issued a statement which expressed their readiness to implement Article 8-b of the Paris agreement, which dealt with the MIA. In return, the Vietnam demanded the implementation of Article 21 by the United States.<sup>76</sup> It was the most possible flexibility the Vietnamese could show at that time. But the United States kept mum. Under the circumstances, things continued without any change for the better.

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76. New York Times, 30 March 1976.

V. PROCESS OF NORMALIZATION AFTER THE  
RE-UNIFICATION OF VIETNAM

Following the re-unification of North and South Vietnam on 2 July 1976, there was no significant positive shift in the policy of the Ford Administration towards the "Socialist Republic of Vietnam". On the contrary, its policy considerably hardened. It regarded a unified and resurgent Vietnam as a threat to the security of Southeast Asia. Speaking at a luncheon sponsored by Downtown Rotary Club and Seattle Chamber of Commerce on 22 July 1976 Secretary Kissinger said :

...Vietnam has been united by force, producing a new and strong power in the region, and Communist regimes have taken over in Laos and Cambodia. The relations of the Indo-Chinese states with one another are unsettled and unclear as are Hanoi's long term ambitions.<sup>77</sup>

Outlining American policy towards Southeast Asia in the changing condition, the Secretary said : "...Our policy is designed to bolster the independence of our friends, encourage the restraint of former foes and help chart a more constructive pattern of relations within the region."<sup>78</sup>

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77. America and Asia, Address by Secretary Kissinger, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), vol. 74, 16 August 1976, p.224.

78. Ibid.

US Third Veto of Vietnam's Admission  
into the UN

It would appear that the Ford Administration was determined not to allow Vietnam to get a seat in the United Nations. It had vetoed Vietnam's applications twice in 1975. The question of Vietnam's membership came up again in September 1976. This time the Ford Administration found another reason to block Vietnam's entry into the United Nations, because South Korea had not renewed its application. It linked the question of Vietnam's membership with that of MIA.

On 1 September 1976 Secretary Kissinger, after his meeting with Kurt Waldheim, General-Secretary of the United Nations, was asked a question on Vietnam's membership of the United Nations. Both the questions and answer went as follows :

Question : Mr. Secretary, the question of admission of Vietnam is coming to the United Nations again next week. Could you tell us whether the United States intends to use the veto again?

Answer : Well, I would not want to deprive you of the surprise that is inherent in this question prematurely. For us, the issue of the missing in action is of course a key issue, and we want to see whether any progress can be made there.79

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79. Secretary Kissinger Meets with U.N. Secretary General Waldheim, Department of State Bulletin (Washington, D.C.), Vol. 74, 27 September 1976, p. 400.

This was the first clear indication that the United States was going to link the question of MIA with the issue of Vietnam's membership. A month later President Ford confirmed Kissinger's statement. Participating in the second nationally televised debate on 6 October with Jimmy Carter, his Democratic challenger for the Presidency, Ford said :

As long as Vietnam, North Vietnam, does not give us a full and complete accounting on our missing in action, I will never go along with admission of Vietnam to the United Nations.<sup>80</sup>

1976 was an election year. President Ford faced a stiff challenge from the Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter, former Governor of the State of Georgia. In order to win popular support President Ford had to do something. He, as the Vietnamese alleged, chose the issue of MIA, which was an emotional issue in the United States, to influence the Americans.<sup>81</sup> He must have concluded that he could win the elections by showing a strong commitment to obtaining information about the MIA.

United States representative in the United Nations William Scranton carried out the Ford Administration's decision to block Vietnam's membership by vetoing the

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80. New York Times, 7 October 1976.

81. Ibid., 16 November 1976.

admission of Vietnam on 15 November 1976 in the Security Council. The United States stood alone and it was the eighteenth veto the United States cast in the Council.

Speaking for the United States, Scranton stated that this country would reconsider its veto if Vietnam changed its policy on MIA.<sup>82</sup> Criticizing Vietnamese stand on MIA he said :

"We cannot help but conclude from the Vietnamese refusal to provide a fuller accounting that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam persists in its attempt to play up to the deep anguish and the uncertainty of the families of these men in order to obtain economic and political advantage."<sup>83</sup>

In reply, Dinh Ba Thi, Vietnam's chief observer in the United Nations said that Vietnam was doing its best to cooperate and asked the United States to live up to its commitment regarding the economic aid. He warned that the American veto "will only serve to continue the days of waiting of American families whose children have been listed as missing in action."<sup>84</sup> This warning suggested that there was some truth in the Ford Administration's charge that the Vietnamese were not providing the accounting of the MIA though they were capable of, and

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82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

were withholding it in order to obtain economic aid and other advantages. Commenting on this, the Blade said :

...the Vietnamese representative admitted, in effect, what both President Ford and U.S. Ambassador William Scranton have charged- that the Vietnamese are exploiting the fears and sufferings of the families of the missing servicemen in order to obtain economic aid and diplomatic recognition.<sup>85</sup>

It would not be unfair if this opinion of the Blade is accepted as a general reaction in the United States to this warning of Thi.

Though Vietnam could be criticized for its policy, it would not be proper to ignore its efforts at meeting American demand of information on MIA. Vietnam was trying to partially fulfil American demand by returning the remains and informing about the MIA now and then with a view to keep the issue alive as well as spur the United States towards the idea of economic aid. On the contrary, the United States was not doing anything to meet the Vietnamese demand of economic aid : It not only refused firmly to provide any such aid but also blocked Vietnam from obtaining aid from such International

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85. The Blade (Toledo, Ohio), 21 November 1976, in Editorials on File, Vol.6, 16-30 November 1976, p. 1488.

financial organizations of which the United States was a donor. Moreover, it used the MIA issue as a weapon to block Vietnam from entering into the United Nations, it being the sole member opposing Vietnam's entry into the United Nations.

Though Ambassador Scranton said in the Security Council that his country would reconsider its veto if Vietnam changed its policy on MIA, it is doubtful whether the United States would have reconsidered its veto even if Vietnam had provided the list. The Ford Administration would have, it would appear, found another reason to block Vietnam's path to the United Nations.

Calling the American action as "wrong veto" the New York Times wrote :

...the MIA issue still cannot justify the American veto, which violates the principle of universal membership by all legitimate governments - a basic rule of the United Nations which the United States should honour.<sup>86</sup>

The newspaper felt that the fact the Ford Administration had "shifted its ground in explaining its successive vetoes suggests an action more concerned with diplomatic maneuvering than with international principles." It was unlikely that the fate of all MIAs would be disclosed by threat or pressure, wrote the Times.

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86. New York Times, 17 November 1976.



The New York Post felt that American abstention might have had equally positive effects like "greater responsiveness" by Hanoi on the MIA issue.<sup>87</sup> It said that the veto appeared to have produced nothing substantial. Saying that the lack of information about the missing servicemen was a continuing agony for many families in the United States, the Sentinnel reminded the promise of reconstruction aid by the United States to Vietnam, thus revealing the other side of the issue.<sup>88</sup>

#### Beginning of Paris Talks

Though both the United States and Vietnam were unhappy and dissatisfied with each other's policies, efforts were made to break the deadlock by discussing the issues. American and Vietnamese delegations held preliminary discussions at Nevilly, a suburb of Paris on 12 November 1976. This meeting was a landmark in the history of United States-Vietnam relations of the post war period. On 20 Nov. 1976, delegation of the two countries formally met. The American delegation was led by Samuel Bher Gamman, deputy chief of mission at the American embassy in Paris. Ten Hoan, the second ranking diplomat in the Vietnamese embassy led the Vietnamese delegation.

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87. Ibid., 28 November 1976.

88. The Sentinnel (Winsten-Salem),  
20 November 1976, n:85.

Although the meeting aroused hopes on both sides for improved relations, nothing came out of it. The meeting adjourned without even fixing another date for further talks. The only positive aspect of the meeting was that the respective positions of both sides were discussed.

Though the Paris talks of 12 November 1976 failed to achieve anything substantial, they can be hailed for laying the foundation for further talks which were held in 1977.

#### THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION'S FIRST YEAR AND NORMALIZATION PROCESS

The assumption of the Presidential office by Jimmy Carter in January 1977 marked the beginning of a new era in the United States-Vietnam relations. The Carter administration indicated its belief and showed practically that the United States had a firm commitment to normalization of relations with Vietnam. But like its predecessor it failed to solve any major issues. Nor did it succeed in establishing diplomatic ties with Vietnam. However the entire blame for the failure should not be placed on the Carter Administration alone. One must understand that there were many forces - both domestic and external -

working against normalization of relations. These forces kept Vietnam and the United States apart.

There is a striking contrast between what Carter said before the Presidential elections of 1976 and what he did after the assumption of office. During his campaign Carter indicated that if he was elected his Vietnam policy would not be much different from that of his Republican rival. He had created an impression that he was not in favour of normalization of relations or allowing Vietnam to enter the United Nations unless and until it accounted for the MIAs. In the second nationally televised debate between him and President Ford, Carter said:

I...would never formalize relationship with Vietnam nor permit them to join the United Nations until they have taken this action" (providing the list of MIA).<sup>89</sup>

It also appeared that regarding the issue of MIA Carter would take a tough stand and would make all out efforts at obtaining an accounting. Criticizing Ford's policy and suggesting what had to be done in this regard he declared on 6 October 1976 :

...we need to have an active and aggressive action on the part of the President, the leader of his country, to seek out every possible way to get that information which has kept the MIA families in despair and doubt.<sup>90</sup>

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89. New York Times, 7 October 1976.

90. Ibid.

But after the assumption of office in January 1977 he changed his Vietnam policy drastically. The rationale behind this shift cannot be comprehended as neither Carter nor his National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski say anything on this subject in their memoirs. It can be assumed that like President Ford, Carter also thought that a tough policy towards Vietnam, particularly in case of the MIA, would influence voters in his favour. Having been elected to Presidential office he decided to follow a more rational policy towards Vietnam.

In order to fulfil his election promise of obtaining full account of MIA, President Carter decided to send a Presidential Commission to Vietnam to discuss the issue with the Vietnamese authorities. Accordingly a Commission led by Leonard Woodcock, a Labour union leader, visited Vietnam in the third week of March 1976. The response of the Vietnamese leaders to this move was remarkably favourable. They gave the Commission remains of eleven American servicemen. They also promised to set up a Vietnamese organization to receive information, American authorities had about the date and place, the servicemen were lost in. The Woodcock Commission suggested that the best way to get an accounting of the MIA was the normalization

of relations.<sup>91</sup>

President Carter was rather realistic about the MIA issue. He seemed to have understood how far it was possible to get the "full accounting" of the MIA. He knew that at the conclusion of the Korean war and the Second World War, the United States did not get accounting for twenty two percent of the total missing servicemen. Whereas here in Vietnam it had accounting for all except four percent. He disclosed this in a news conference on 24 March 1977.<sup>92</sup> In the same news conference he said :

I cannot certify that we have all the information available, and we are never going to rest until we pursue information about those who are missing in action to the final conclusion.<sup>93</sup>

By March 1977 both Washington and Hanoi had realized the necessity of direct negotiations between the two parties to remove differences and normalize relations. Both the Carter Administration and Vietnamese leadership understood that any precondition for the beginning of the talks would jeopardize the possibility of holding the talks. Hence they dropped their preconditions and decided to discuss the major issues.

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91. President Carter's News Conference of March 24, Department of State Bulletin (Washington, D.C.), vol. 76, 18 April 1975, p. 359. For the full text of the Woodcock Commission's report see ibid., pp. 363-70

92. Ibid., p. 360

93. Ibid.

The formal talks between the two parties were held in Paris on 3 and 4 March 1977. The Vietnamese delegation was led by Phan Hien, deputy foreign minister and the American delegation was led by Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. The main issues were the same old ones which were discussed in November last. But this time a minor advance was made on the issue of normalization. The United States pledged that it would not veto Vietnam's admission to the United Nations and would lift the trade embargo once the diplomatic relations were established.<sup>94</sup> In turn the Vietnamese promised to intensify efforts to provide information about the MIA.<sup>95</sup>

The second round of Paris talks were held on 2 and 3 June 1977. Both sides presented their views in a "friendly" and "cordial" atmosphere.<sup>96</sup> The Vietnamese delegation on 3 June gave American delegation data about twenty MIAs. But in the final analysis the talks achieved nothing. As the United States was not ready to fulfil Vietnamese demand of economic aid the talks moved into a deadlock and were adjourned without fixing a date for the further round of talks.

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94. New York Times, 5 May 1977.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid., 3 June 1977.

Neither the Carter Administration nor the Congress was ready to provide any aid to Vietnam. President Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance made it clear more than once that the United States was not ready to give any reconstruction aid. The Congress voted thrice against giving any aid to Vietnam.

But the Carter Administration was able to take one positive step. It decided not to oppose Vietnam's entry into the United Nations. Unlike Ford, Carter did not find any justification for using veto. Instead he wanted to give Vietnam "an option to come to a more democratic free society", forgetting all other issues. On 21 July 1977 he said in a news conference :

We have a basic decision to make in our country in our foreign policy about how to deal with nations who in the past have not been our friends... Should we write them off - permanently as enemies... or should we start the process of giving them an option... hoping that they will come to a more democratic free society and join with us in making a better world?<sup>97</sup>

When the Vietnamese application was placed before the Security Council for voting on 20 July 1977 the

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97. President Carter's Remarks at Yazoo City Mississippi, Department of State Bulletin, (Washington D.C.), vol.77, 15 August 1977, p. 199.

United States did not veto. As a result the Security Council unanimously recommended Vietnam for membership.<sup>98</sup>

This was the only positive move made in the year 1977 in US-Vietnamese relations. After the second round of Paris talks in June 1977 both sides did not show much interest in improving relations. The Paris talks were resumed in December 1977, but no progress was made. No major issue was solved even slightly. The talks were adjourned, never to resume again.

Though working relations between the United States and Vietnam were not established even two and a half years after the end of the war and considerable efforts, it would be unreasonable to conclude that nothing was achieved. Despite the continuing differences on various issues, mutual animosity was much lesser in early 1978 than what it was in April 1975 and both countries were moving towards greater flexibility.

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98. New York Times, 21 July 1977.



An analysis of the affairs during this period shows that some of the fears expressed immediately after the fall of Saigon were unfounded. There was no bloodbath in South Vietnam following the communist victory as it was feared earlier. Vietnam was not supporting communist rebels in the neighboring ASEAN countries and it was not supplying them with large quantities of military hardware left behind by the Americans.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, Vietnam's policy towards these countries was not hostile. Instead, it was "remarkably conciliatory."<sup>100</sup> It extended its friendly hand to them and by the end of 1977 it had established diplomatic relations with all of them.

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99. Bernard K. Gordan wrote in mid-1977 : "...there is no firm evidence that Vietnam in making external use of the \$ 5 billion arsenal of military equipment that the US left behind in the South. In the first months after the war's end, it was widely feared that the vast storehouse, in the hands of a leadership historically committed to revolutionary causes, would be used to encourage the numerous anti-government groups in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. This has not materialized. Bernard K. Gordan, "Vietnam and Indochina in U.S. Policy", Pacific Community (Tokyo), vol. 8, July 1977, p. 584. Emphasis added. Same opinion is expressed also by Ralph N. Clough, "East Asia and the Carter Administration", *ibid.*, March 1977, p. 200.

100. Weinstein, n. 5, p. 847.

CHAPTER III

NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS,  
1978-1980

## CHAPTER III

### NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS 1978-1980

The year 1978 saw some sharp ups and downs in the relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In a way it was a year of paradoxes. Until the penultimate month, this year appeared to be the most promising year in the post-Vietnam War period, with regard to the issue of normalization of mutual relations. Despite some serious unfavourable developments in the initial month, both sides showed considerable interest in normalization. They dropped their pre-conditions which had earlier blocked the smooth process of normalization and by October appeared to be on the threshold of exchanging embassies. However, events took a different turn by the end of the year. By early 1979 the process of normalization reverted to a point similar to the pre-1977 situation and it never moved forward.

#### Espionage Case

An unprecedented, but of very limited consequences, crisis in the bilateral relations of the United States and Vietnam cropped up on the last day of the month

of January. On 31 January 1978, the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested two persons, Ronald L. Humphrey, an American, and Truong Dinh Hung, a Vietnamese on charges of spying for the Hanoi government. Humphrey was an official of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and had worked in South Vietnam. Hung was the son of Truong Dinh Dzu, running-mate of President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam in the 1967 Presidential elections. Hung, known as David Truong in the United States, was admitted to that country in 1964 as a student. At the time of arrest he had applied for the citizenship of the United States.

An indictment by a Federal grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia charged these two of conspiring with several Vietnamese officials in the United Nations and Paris, in delivering "classified" State Department communications, to the Vietnamese government. According to the indictment these communications related "to the national defence of the United States."<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese officials mentioned

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1. New York Times, 1 February 1978. The list of these classified communications consisted of numerous analyses of events in Asia by American diplomats in Asia, and their conversation with other diplomats. It included two cables from American consulate in Hongkong to the State Department. One was on Sino-Vietnamese relations and the other on new Indian Ambassador's comments on Vietnam. The first one was marked as "Secret" and the second one "confidential."

above were listed in the indictment as "unindicated co-conspirators, all of whom were representatives, officials, agents and subjects of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam"<sup>2</sup> The indictment alleged Din Ba Thi, Chief of the Vietnamese mission in the United Nations, as one such Vietnamese official. The crisis germinated at this point.

The fifteen page indictment mentioned Thi's name only once. It said that Hung, one of the arrested spies, visited the Vietnamese mission in the United Nations in December 1977.<sup>3</sup> It was in relation with this alleged visit that Thi's name was mentioned. This alleged meeting between Thi and Hung was admitted by the former. Thi was reported to have "readily admitted" this charge saying that he talked with Hung not in December 1977 but on several other occasions.<sup>4</sup> He said in an interview on 5 February that Hung was active in the anti-Vietnamese war movement in the United States, which proved to be correct.

Though the charge of meeting with Hung was admitted by Thi on 5 February, the charge of espionage was outrightly

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 6 February 1978.

4. Ibid.

rejected by the Vietnamese mission in the United Nations on the very day of arrests and issue of indictment by the court. Refuting the charge, a spokesman for mission termed it in a statement as a "blatant fabrication, gross slander and offence" and another example of Carter Administration's policy of "continued hostility" towards Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

The United States government, however, took the incident seriously. It's attitude towards this espionage case appeared to be stiff and it was not ready to show any kind of flexibility. Infact, the documents and cables, the Hanoi government allegedly got from the arrested persons were not top secret. Most of them were listed as "confidential", the lowest security classification in the government. Moreover, the arrested persons had not committed any grave harm to the national security of the United States by transmitting these documents to the Vietnamese authorities. A top Pentagon official himself said that he had "seen better leaks in the New York Times and Aviation Week."<sup>6</sup>

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5. New York Times, n.l.

6. News Week (New York, N.Y.) 13 February 1978, p.7.

But what concerned the United States government most was the discovery of a Vietnamese spy ring operating within the country.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the Carter Administration resolved to nip the spy ring in the bud. In a dramatic move the United States government on 3 February 1978 requested Din Ba Thi to leave the country. In order to allow him to finalize his personal and professional dealings at the United Nations, no date was set for his departure.

The decision to ask Thi to leave the country was taken by the Secretary of State, Cyrus R. Vance, and the request was transmitted by a diplomatic note to the Vietnamese mission by the American mission in the United Nations. United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim and his staff were also informed of American action. Announcing this request a State Department spokesman, John C. Turner said :

The action is taken in pursuant of Section 13 B of the headquarter agreement under which the United States retains the right to request the departure of members of foreign missions of the United Nations who have abused their privilege of resident.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Ibid.

8. New York Times, 4 February 1978.

The section 13 B of the headquarter agreement of 1947, which the spokesman referred to, gives the United States the right to request the departure of any United Nations delegate who abuses his privilege of resident by indulging in activities outside his official capacity. Several lower ranking delegates of the United Nations had been expelled earlier from the United States on this ground. But Thi was the first United Nations ambassador of any nation who was asked to leave in an espionage case.

At the time the request for Thi's departure was made, it had not been firmly established that Thi had really been a medium between the two arrested persons and the Hanoi government in the supply of classified State Department documents and cables by the former to the latter. As it is mentioned earlier Thi's name was mentioned only once in the indictment in connection with a meeting between himself and one of the accused spies. The American action invoking the headquarter agreement could have been fully justified if allegations made against Thi had been proved true and supported by hard evidence.

The Vietnamese mission in the United Nations apparently, rejected the American request as "totally



unacceptable". It insisted that Thi would continue to work normally, and termed the American action as "detrimental to the normalization of relations" between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> Thi also said that he would not leave.

The American action evoked strong protests and criticisms in Hanoi. The Vietnamese government on 4 February outrightly rejected it by saying that its delegate had been "in no way involved in any such activities as the one fabricated" by the United States. It termed the request "as unprecedented event in the history" of the United Nations, and criticized it as an "offence" against Vietnamese mission in the United Nations.<sup>10</sup>

Din Ba Thi's insistence that he would not leave angered the American government. It indicated that it would take drastic actions against Thi if he refused to leave. American officials said that if Thi persisted in his refusal, his visa could be annuled and he could be deported.<sup>11</sup> This warning gave Thi the option either to leave the United States voluntarily with dignity or

9. New York Times, 4 February, 1979.

10. Facts on File (Washington D.C.) vol.6, 1979, p.78.

11. New York Times, n.8.

face humiliation of cancellation of visa and deportation. Thus now the ball was put in the Vietnamese court.

Din Ba Thi, however, continued to insist that he would not leave. But his home government appeared to be more prudent. On 5 February 1978 it summoned Thi home. The message recalling him reached Thi's hand at a time when he was saying in an interview that he "would continue to defy the expulsion order from the United States."<sup>12</sup> When he got the message which ordered him to do exactly the opposite of what he was saying at that moment, Thi, reportedly did ~~not~~ reveal any kind of feelings. He took it calmly and declared that he had been called home because the American actions had made it impossible for him to work as the head of his country's delegation. On the same day the Vietnamese government gave the same reason for Thi's recall. The official Vietnamese News Agency reported that Vice Foreign Minister Nguyn Co Thach said in Hanoi that Thi was being recalled because the American government was "hindering" his activities.<sup>13</sup> This Vietnamese action was welcomed by the United States. Commenting on the decision a State Department spokesman said: "We welcome

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12. New York Times, 6 February 1978.

13. International Herald Tribune (Paris), 6 February 1978.

it. We have been assuming all along that he would be leaving.<sup>14</sup> While expressing its satisfaction at the recall of Thi by his home government, the administration also expressed its concern with its adverse implications. The State Department Spokesman said his country hoped that this recall would not affect the negotiations on normalization of relation between the two countries.<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to find out the exact rationale behind Hanoi's surprising move of recalling Thi. However, the analysis of the developments regarding the espionage case, American stand on that, and the trend in the Vietnamese foreign policy in those days helps one to draw certain conclusions.

The American request of Thi's departure was turned down by both Vietnamese government and its mission in the United Nations. But the tough stand taken by the American government, and its warning of cancelling Thi's visa and deportation, appears to have caused much worry to Hanoi. They might have realized that if Thi refused to respect American request, the American government might not resile from its rigid stand and it implement

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14. Ibid.

15. New York Times, n. 12.

its earlier warning. The Vietnamese government obviously did <sup>not</sup> want the events to take that turn, to see the Chief of its first ever delegation to the United Nation suffer humiliation. If the American government had deported Thi, the Vietnamese government itself would also have been humiliated. Probably, the Vietnamese government wanted to avoid giving another ground for discord between itself and the United States as it was keen to normalize its relations with the United States.

As far as the implications of the espionage case was concerned, it was quite insignificant. It did not have any kind of impact on the process of normalization between the two countries. If the normalization was stalled at the end of the year it was not at all due to this episode. This simply showed Vietnam that the United States would not permit even slightest espionage activities. The episode was soon forgotten.<sup>16</sup>

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16. The judicial trial of Humphrey and Hung lasted upto July 1978. They were found guilty and sentenced for fifteen years imprisonment. Din Ba Thi was killed on 17 June 1978 in an automobile mishap in Central Vietnam. The News Week magazine however, reported that Thi was murdered by Vietnam's anti-communist guerillas. See: Newsweek, (New York, N.Y.), 3 July 1978, p.6.

President Carter's Secret Message to Hanoi

It was feared in February 1978 that the espionage case might hamper the process of normalization and further widen the gulf between the two countries. But this did not happen. Even after the return of Din Ba Thi to Vietnam both Washington and Hanoi continued their efforts at establishing diplomatic and trade relations. Vietnam's demand of economic aid was, however, still a major hurdle. Even in early 1978 such a precondition was totally unacceptable to the United States. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard Holbrooke reiterated his government's stand on 14 March 1978. While speaking before the House Subcommittee on International Relations, He said : "We are prepared to move forward with Vietnam, but the United States cannot accept Hanoi's aid demands. The United States has no obligation to provide aid."<sup>17</sup>

In April 1978 President Carter, apparently expressing personal interest in normalization sent to the Vietnamese leaders a secret letter through Midway

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17. New York Times, 15 March 1978.

Brewster Knight, the Chase Manhattan Bank's director of international relations in Europe, Knight was a former diplomat. He had been the United States ambassador in Belgium. This secret mission was reported more than a month later on 30 May 1978 by a "well informed" Western source, which did not give much details about the contents of Carter's message. It reported that the secret letter contained several suggestions for intermediate steps leading to normalization of relations. The suggestions made by Carter centered on finding some means to gradually relax American trade embargo against Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> No details about the contents of the letter were disclosed later and the press did not investigate. Nor did President Carter and his National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski say anything about the letter in their memoirs. They do not even mention that such a message had been sent, let alone disclosing its contents. On the basis of available information it can be concluded that Carter was personally interested in normalizing relations with Vietnam. While at the same time exploring the possibilities of a speedy rapprochement with the People's

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18. This paragraph is based on two newspaper reports. See: Indian Express, 1 June 1978 and New York Times 2 June 1978.

Republic of China, whose relations with Vietnam was rapidly deteriorating. President Carter's interest in normalizing relations with Vietnam, however, did not last long. Nor did it bear any fruit. It evaporated within only a few weeks.

#### PERIOD OF NO PRE-CONDITIONS

By the summer of 1978 both the Americans and the Vietnamese were moving towards greater flexibility thereby opening a new phase in their relations. They virtually renounced their respective preconditions thus initiating a period of no pre-conditions which unfortunately, lasted only for a few months without achieving any breakthrough. By early next year the United States stiffened its stand and imposed two pre-conditions. This period of no pre-conditions, (or the interim period between the renunciation of pre-condition and American imposition of two pre-conditions) was a crucial period not only in the bilateral relations of the two countries but also in their relations with other countries.

#### Shift in American Stand

Vice-President Walter Mondale paid an official visit to the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand from 29 April to 10 May 1978. On his way

back home from the trip he spoke at the East-West Center, Honolulu. There is a striking similarity between what Mondale said there and what the then President Gerald Ford said at the same place after returning from a similar tour of Southeast Asian countries in the first week of December 1975. Vice President Mondale said that all the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia wanted active American security and economic role in the region and he assured them that the United States was a Pacific power.<sup>19</sup> This is precisely what President Ford said at the East-West Center, Honolulu on 7 December 1975.<sup>20</sup> Thus the American commitment to the security and economic development of Southeast Asia was once again affirmed by the United States.

Vice President Mondale's speech contained one timely significant goodwill gesture towards Vietnam. He remarked at the end of the speech :

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19. The Vice President : American Role in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), vol.78, July 1978, p.7.
  20. For details on President Ford's speech see Chapter two, or A Pacific Doctrine of Peace with all and Hostility towards None : Address by President Ford, Ibid., vol. 70, 29 December 1975, pp. 913-16.





To those who are concerned with putting the Vietnam war behind us, I pointed out that we have made a fair offer to the Vietnamese - that we are ready to establish diplomatic relations without pre-conditions. But Hanoi is still demanding a prior commitment of American aid, something which the American people cannot accept.<sup>21</sup>

For the first time a top leader of the government was affirming that the US had dropped its pre-condition for normalization -- prior supply by Vietnam of information and remains of missing Americans in the Vietnam war (MIA). It can not be said with certainty when exactly did the United States drop its pre-condition, as no official announced it earlier. Probably, President Carter might have conveyed this to the Vietnamese in his secret message sent in April.

Thus by the spring of 1978 the United States was on record to have agreed for an unconditional normalization <sup>was</sup> of relations with Vietnam. This in pursuant to President Carter's own policies and outlook. Soon after assuming the Presidential office he observed that his hope was that the United States might eventually have normal diplomatic ties with all countries.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes he thought

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21. Department of State Bulletin, n. 19, p.22.

22. "East Asia : Vietnam and Indochina", Statement by Assistant Secretary of State of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard C. Holbrooke, before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on June 13, 1979, Department of State Bulletin, vol.79, October 1979, p.34.

of recognizing any government which is fully established.

His own words give an insight into his mind :

...I was tempted on a few occasions to change the policy of the United States to one of giving automatic diplomatic recognition to any fully established government and exchanging ambassadors as soon as satisfactory arrangements could be worked out. If there were an unresolved dispute within the country between two contending governments, we would of course, have to make a diplomatic judgement. Automatic recognition of an undisputed regime would give us a toehold in the unfriendly country and an opportunity to ease tensions, increase American influence, and promote peace...23

From this it might be inferred that President Carter thought of normalizing relations with the communist regimes in both Peking and Hanoi, which had been firmly and fully established in their respective countries, but had not till then been recognized by the United States. This was openly announced by the administration as far back as in June 1977. On 11 June 1977, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher said that the "Carter Administration wants to establish normal relations with a score of nations, including China, Vietnam, Cuba, Iraq and Mongolia."<sup>24</sup>

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23. Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, Memoirs of a President (New York, 1982), p.195.

24. New York Times, 12 June 1977.

As for as Vietnam question was concerned, ever since the assumed the Presidential office he made several goodwill gestures towards the Vietnamese - sending a Presidential Commission, holding of three rounds of normalization negotiations in Paris, promising of withdrawing American trade embargo against Vietnam, and dropping of American opposition towards Vietnam's entry into the United Nations.

President Carter's moves towards Vietnam got strong backing from the State Department. Secretary of State Cyrus, had realized even before he became the Secretary, the importance of having diplomatic ties with Vietnam. Before the 1976 Presidential elections, he had written to Carter a lengthy memorandum in which he insisted that the road to normalization of relation with Vietnam should be explored. He was of the opinion that such a normalization "would give the United States an opportunity to have more influence with a nation which obviously will play an important part in future development of South East Asia."<sup>25</sup> He argued that Vietnam would welcome such a normalization

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25. Anthony Lake, "Third World Radical Regimes, US Policy Under Carter and Reagan". Headline Series (New York), Jan-Feb. 1985, pp.16-17.

with the United States because it would reduce its dependence on the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Richard C. Holbrooke was extraordinarily interested in establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski writes in his memoirs that Holbrooke, "kept urging the Vietnamese to demonstrate their flexibility and readiness to move forward in relations with us, so that we would then have to reciprocate."<sup>27</sup>

The National Security Council (NSC) however, was not in favour of normalization of relations with Vietnam. It virtually opposed such a move on the ground that it would pose hurdles in the path of American rapproachment with China, which was underway then. It contended that the Chinese would view American moves towards Vietnam with disfavour. Eventually the opinion of NSC prevailed. This will be discussed later.

Contrary to the NSC's stand, the Chinese were initially in favour of the United States normalizing its relations with Vietnam. President Carter's writes in

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26. Ibid., p.17.

27. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle :  
Memoirs of the National Security Adviser,  
1977-1981 (New York, N.Y., 1983), p.228.

his memoirs that in early 1978, the Chinese sent him word that they "welcome" American moves towards Vietnam "in order to moderate that country's policies and keep it out of the Soviet camp."<sup>28</sup> Both the American and Chinese stands on relations with Vietnam were identical, based on similar rationale - maintaining their own interests in Southeast Asia. It was in the interest of these two countries to have good relations with Vietnam preventing it from sliding into the Soviet Camp and from embarking upon any adventures in Indochina and Southeast Asia.

But the nature of inter-state politics suggested the possibility of a clash of interests between the United States and Vietnam, and Vietnam and China. Vietnam emerged from the war in Southeast Asia as the strongest regional power both in manpower and equipments.<sup>29</sup> It being the second most populous state, next to Indonesia,

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28. Carter, n.23, p.184.

29. The strength of the armed forces of all South-east Asian countries in 1977 were as follows : Vietnam, 615,000; Kampuchea, 90,000; Laos, 49,000; Thailand, 211,000; Burma, 170,000; Malaysia, 64000 ; Singapore, 36000; Indonesia, 247,000; and Philippines, 99000. Data collected from The International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 1977-78, (London, 1977).

marked it for a leading role in the region. The United States and China wanting to prevent the dominance of the region by a single power were thus likely to come into conflict with the ambitions of Vietnam. The United States maintained close relations with the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries and its relations with Vietnam was going to be affected by latter's actions towards the members of the ASEAN.<sup>30</sup> China similarly competed with Vietnam for power and influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>31</sup> It tried to allge the fear of the ASEAN and win their friendship, supported the genocidal Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea. It gave its "blessings" to these countries and also favoured Japan's economic assistance to them.<sup>32</sup> Eventually these American and Chinese interests gained ascendancy.

The American and Chinese aims ran parallel as both were interested in preventing Vietnam from joining the Soviet Camp. The Soviet goals on the one hand and American and Chinese goals on the other hand, in Asia in

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30. Statement by Holbrooke, n.22, p.34.

31. Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, "Summary Analysis" Lloyd R. Vasey ed., Pacific Asia and U.S. Policies: A Political-Economic-Strategic Assessment (Honolulu, Hawaii, 1978), p-XXVIII.

32. Gaston Sigur, "The Strategic Triangle: The U.S., the U.S.S.R., and the R.R.C.," in Ibid, p.33.

general and in Southeast Asia in particular, were fundamentally opposed to each other. In Asia, the major Soviet goal was containment of China,<sup>33</sup> and winning the two small Asian communist nations of North Korea and Vietnam to its side.<sup>34</sup> It was maintaining close ties with Vietnam by providing to it economic and military assistance and diplomatic support. Moreover, the shared aim to oppose China in the region resulted in significant co-operation between the two countries.<sup>35</sup> Soviet Union's special relationship with Vietnam, the strongest military power in Southeast Asia, naturally gave it a position of influence in that region.<sup>36</sup> That is what exactly the Soviet Union wanted since its "most fundamental goal" in Southeast Asia was "to be recognized as a power which must be included in any decision affecting that region."<sup>37</sup> At the same time

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33. Robert U. Pfattzgraff Jr. and Jacquelyn, Davis, "The Asian/Pacific region - Implications for U.S. Global Strategy, in *Ibid.* p.17.
34. Donald S. Zagoria, "The Soviet Quandary in Asia", Foreign Affairs (New York, N.Y.), vol. 56, January 1978, p. 307.
35. Robert C.C. Horn, "Soviet-Vietnamese Relations and Future of Southeast, Asia, " Pacific Affairs (Vancouver), vol. 57, winter, 1978-79, p. 597.
36. Sigur, n. 32, p. 31.
37. Horn, n. 35, p. 592.

the interest of both the United States and China was lying in checking the expansion of Soviet Power into East and Southeast Asia.<sup>38</sup> So it was in the interest of both the United States and China to maintain good relationship with Vietnam. The twin benefits of such a good relationship would be, on the one hand, softening of Vietnam's attitude towards other countries of Southeast Asia, and on the other hand, prevention of Vietnam from slipping into the Soviet camp, thereby limiting the Soviet influence in the region. Hence it was natural, that both Peking and Washington were agreed in their view regarding the issue of normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam.

#### Shift in Vietnam's Stand

Vice President Mondale, in his speech at the East-west Center, Honolulu, not only openly declared readiness of the United States for unconditional normalization, but he also stressed that Vietnam was still clinging to its precondition. It was now for Vietnam to favourably respond to this maximum concession from the United States, and it did not do so immediately by renouncing its demand for American reconstruction aid. This shift in Vietnam's stand first appeared subtly

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38. Pfattzgraff, Jr. and Davis, n.33.



and later openly.

Even in the last week of May 1978 Vietnam appeared to be stuck to its demand of economic aid before normalization of relations. Talking to Tatsuzo Mizukami, President of the Japan Foreign Trade Council who headed a private economic goodwill mission to Vietnam in the last week of May, Prime Minister, Phan Van Dong said that he would "welcome the United States as his country's prospective friend if only it would extend a helping hand in Vietnam's economic reconstruction."<sup>39</sup> But at the same time Hanoi sent a secret message to Washington through a third country expressing its willingness to shelve the issue of economic aid and proceed with the normalization of relations.<sup>40</sup>

Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien paid an official visit to Japan during early July 1978. He reportedly told the Japanese leaders in Tokyo that Vietnam was prepared to discuss with the United States the issue of normalization of relations without any

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39. "Japanese Businessmen on SRV Leaders' Attitude Toward U.S.," KYDO Tokyo, 29 May 1978; JPRS, no. 731345; Vietnam, no. 2039, 23 June 1978, p. 20, in Nguyen Van Canh, Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982 (Stanford, Calif, 1983) p. 233. (Text refers to Canh).

40. Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 19 May 1978, p. 5.

pre-conditions.<sup>41</sup> At a press conference at the end of his visit on 10 July, he expressed his country's 'utmost eagerness' to have rapprochement with the United States. He, however, made no reference to dropping of the demand for aid. Rather he said that Vietnam would "welcome" American aid. Stressing that the relations between the two countries must be established, he said: "... it is better for the United States to bring something to Vietnam rather come bare-handed. Vietnam will welcome United States aid before normalization but expects aid even after normalization."<sup>42</sup> He said :

We believe a new development is expectable in relation with Washington following a new phase of the situation at home and abroad three years after end of the war. The United States brought bombs to Vietnam in the past, but we are now ready to accept a friendly and co-operative United States.<sup>43</sup>

The sudden momentum in Vietnam's overtures at normalizing relations with the United States, and its hint that the demand for aid would be dropped appeared

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41. New York Times, 11 July 1978.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

to be a surprising development. Inventive minds attempted to trace the reason for this developments in Vietnam's worsening relations with neighbouring Kampuchea and China. However, it may be noted that Phan Hien had declared in Tokyo that the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations "cannot decide our policy towards the United States."<sup>44</sup> The timing of the proposal, however, gave a different impression.

Analysing this change in Vietnam's policy American experts opined that this change was due to two reasons, first, the Vietnamese were "deeply stricken by the breach with Peking which has become much more serious than they had anticipated," and second, they were determined to "avoid being suffocated by the mounting pressure from Moscow."<sup>45</sup>

Vietnam's relations with neighbouring Kampuchea had worsened since mid 1975 and by early 1978 both were at each other's throat. Vietnamese leadership had decided to take some stern actions against the Pol Pol regime. They had well realized that such an action against Kampuchean regime would certainly invite the Chinese intervention in dispute between Vietnam and Kampuchea.

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44. Ibid.

45. Henry Brendon, "Suddenly Hanoi Likes America" Sunday Times (London), 27 August 1978.

Since February 1978 China had openly taken up a pro-Pol Pot stand and its relations with Vietnam was rapidly worsening over issues of Kampuchea and the mass exodus of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> In order to strengthen its position in the conflict with Kampuchea and a possible Chinese threat the Vietnamese leadership began mobilizing diplomatic support from other countries especially members of the ASEAN, and the United States.

In order to win friendship and co-operation of these countries, Vietnam began showing utmost flexibility in its attitude towards them. Vietnam had viewing ASEAN as the successor of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). But now in a mid-1978 it changed its view. Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien said on 6 July 1978 that his country had recognized ASEAN as an economic organization.<sup>47</sup>

In the same way, with an intention to win the United States friendship and a early normalization of relations with that country, Vietnam expressed its

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46. For details on Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict and Vietnamese-Chinese tussle see Chapter Four.

47. Bangkok Post. 7 July 1978.

readiness to accept an unconditioned normalization.

Commenting on Hien's remarks at Tokyo a state Department spokesman remarked on the same day that the Vietnam's readiness for an unconditioned normalization had not been conveyed to his government in any official ways.<sup>48</sup> Still the Department of officials expressed their happiness over the reported remarks of Hien.<sup>49</sup>

The Vietnamese authorities became increasingly more emphatic in expressing their country's willingness to accept unconditional normalization. They expressed it both publicly and privately. A group of Vietnamese officials visited Hawaii during the second week of July 1978 and went to visit the Defence Department's Central Identification Laboratory, Honolulu, to study the method of identification of the remains. There, two senior Foreign Ministry officials met with State Department's Area Director for Indo-China, Fredrick Brown, and conveyed to him that Vietnam was eager to establish various types of relations with the United States. They also told that it virtually accepted American

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48. New York Times, n. 41.

49. Ibid., 16 July 1978.

stand on normalization.<sup>50</sup> On 18 July 1978 Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien said in Wellington, New Zealand that Vietnam was ready to meet Americans "at any place, any time" to discuss the issue of normalization.<sup>51</sup> Premier Pham Van Dong and Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien said something to two American delegation which visited Vietnam in July and August.

#### Visit of the American Delegations to Vietnam

During the last days of July and August 1978 two delegations from the United States visited Vietnam. The first one was sent by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D,Mass) and led by his aide Jerry Tinker. It reached Vietnam on 27 July. It had gone there to secure the departure from Vietnam of such wives and children who had been separated from their American husbands and fathers since the fall of Saigon. Earlier Hanoi had not allowed their departure on the ground that such a gesture could not be made by it before the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam.<sup>52</sup> Vietnam, however, changed this position as a goodwill gesture towards the United States. The

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50. International Herald Tribune (Paris), 30 July 1978.

51. New Strait Times (Kuala Lumpur), 19 July 1978.

52. International Herald Tribune (Paris) n. 50 and New York Times, 8 August 1978.

delegation members reported in Bangkok on 7 August 1978 that the Vietnamese Premier Phan Van Dong expressed his government's readiness to "speed family reunification without imposing any conditions on the United States."<sup>53</sup> Delegation leader Jerry Tinker said that Premier Dong "asserted" that his country "considered its duty" to act positively on cases concerning legitimate family re-union.<sup>54</sup> The Premier also told the delegation that his country wanted reconciliation, normalization of relations, and friendship with the United States. Expressing similar views Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien declared once again that his government was not attaching any pre-condition for normalization. Thus Vietnam expressed its eagerness to have normalized relations with the United States openly once again by top leaders of that country. The delegation members also noted "strong desire" of the government to improve mutual relations with the United States.<sup>55</sup>

The Vietnamese leaders again expressed their readiness for unconditional normalization when American

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53. New York Times, 8 August 1978.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

Congressional delegation visited Vietnam in the last week of August 1978. One of the members of the delegation, George E. Danielson (Dem.Co.), wrote that the purpose of the visit to Vietnam was to "explore the possibilities of a new U.S. relationship with Vietnam and Laos."<sup>56</sup> The delegation held a series of meetings with Vietnamese officials in Hanoi. The main subject on the agenda was on the MIAs. After extensive talks, Danielson wrote that the delegation concluded unanimously that there had been no living MIAs or POWs (Prisoners of war) in Southeast Asia.<sup>57</sup> The delegation failed to get any credible evidence against their opinion. It noticed a "fundamental and dramatic change" in Vietnam's attitude towards diplomatic ties with the United States.<sup>58</sup> The Vietnamese reiterated their position on normalization to the delegation. The Vietnamese officials talked to the delegation members quite intimately and frankly. They stated that their country would follow a middle path between the Soviet Union and China and that its foreign policy was

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56. George E. Danielson, "A U.S. Congressman Returns to Vietnam," International Herald Tribune (Paris), 10 September 1978.

57. Ibid.

58. New York Times, 29 August 1978.



based on "independence and sovereignty" and that no external power would be allowed to dominate their country.<sup>59</sup>

American Dilemma : Vietnam or China?

Thus by August it was clear that Vietnam had virtually accepted American stand on normalization. Thus there appeared to be no serious obstacle in the path of establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam. At this very time China was also showing great interest in a rapprochement with the United States.

Thus in mid-1978 the United States position in East Asia was strong as never before. In contrast, the relations between communist states of Asia was getting worse everyday. Kampuchea and Vietnam had many border skirmishes during the last three years and a final showdown was expected in near future. China had openly taken up anti-Vietnamese stand. On the other hand United States' East Asian ally Japan had just concluded a friendship treaty with China. This treaty laid a strong foundation for friendship and economic co-operation

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59. Danielson, n. 56.

between the two former enemies. This was very much in the interest of the United States as it could now stage a strong Washington - Tokyo - Peking front against the Soviet Union in East Asia. Moreover, both China and Vietnam were showing utmost interest in establishing diplomatic relations with the United States. If Washington was to establish diplomatic ties with both Peking and Hanoi, it would have considerably decreased the Soviet influence and leverage in East and Southeast Asia, and put the United States in a dominant position.

President Carter considered the possibilities of American recognition of both China and Vietnam simultaneously. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski writes in his memoirs that in early September President Carter told him that "We should evaluate the pros and cons of diplomatic relations with Vietnam, perhaps aiming at simultaneous recognition of China and Vietnam."<sup>60</sup> The National Security Council headed by Zbigniew Brzezinski was however, totally opposed to American friendly overtures to Vietnam. Brzezinski strongly favoured American-Chinese rapprochement and was diligently working towards it. He was afraid that American moves

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60. Brzezinski, n.27, p.228.

towards Vietnam would be viewed by the Chinese with suspicion and disfavour. He repeatedly warned President Carter that friendly overtures to Hanoi would be interpreted by the Chinese as "pro-Soviet, anti-Chinese move."<sup>61</sup> The President was prevailed upon by the NSC and other China lobbyists. He considered China move to be of "paramount importance" and in mid-October he decided to postpone the moves towards Vietnam until agreement with China was concluded.<sup>62</sup> In this situation no breakthrough was expected from the normalization talks which started on 29 September in New York.

Negotiations between the United States and Vietnam were started in New York on 23 September. The American side was led by Assistant Secretary of State for Pacific and East Asian Affairs Richard Holbrooke and the Vietnamese side by Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach. The talks continued for a month. There were some confusions regarding the outcome of talks. The Western press reported in the end of October that the negotiations "have reached the point where the principle subjects being

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61. Ibid.

62. Carter, n.23, pp.194-95 and Brzezinski n.27, p.228.

discussed on are a time-table and ways and means of proceeding toward a normal relationship."<sup>63</sup> This was highly inconceivable because at that time the Carter Administration and the Chinese were finalizing their programmes for establishing diplomatic ties and President Carter had decided in mid-October to postpone the Vietnam move. The reports continued to say that President Carter had not yet taken final decision on exchange of embassies with Vietnam.<sup>64</sup> The Thailand Foreign Ministry sources, however, said in Bangkok on 1 November that Holbrooke told them that the United States intends to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam within two months.<sup>65</sup> The State Department, however, "categorically" denied this report. Department spokesman Hodding Carter III announced that "No decision has been reached by the U.S. government on normalisation."<sup>66</sup> He also said that the Department was convinced that Holbrooke had been misquoted because "No knowledgeable official of the U.S. government would say such a thing and we doubt that is indeed what was said"<sup>67</sup> The American

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63. New York Times, 26 October 1978 and International Herald Tribune (Paris), 27 October 1978.

64. Ibid.

65. International Herald Tribune (Paris), 2 November 1978

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

embassy in Bangkok could neither confirm nor deny Holbrooke's reported statement. A spokesman for the embassy termed the report as "speculative."<sup>68</sup> As Vietnamese version of the outcome of the talks is not available, it is difficult to accept or deny the reported statement of Holbrooke. But, no matter the reports were true or not, one thing was certain that the Carter Administration was not in favour of normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam at that juncture.

It was reported that the five ASEAN countries as well as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand favoured the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam.<sup>69</sup> At the same time these countries were said to be not in favour of large scale economic assistance to Vietnam from the United States. China favoured continuation of American trade embargo against Vietnam. Another report said that Thailand, a member of ASEAN, requested Holbrooke that the United States recognition of Vietnam be held off until next spring after a meeting of the foreign ministers of the ASEAN countries.<sup>70</sup>

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68. Ibid.

69. International Herald Tribune, n.63.

70. International Herald Tribune, n.63.

Soviet-Vietnamese Friendship Treaty and American Reaction

On 1 November 1978 the Soviet Union and Vietnam signed in Moscow a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation after a brief negotiation. The treaty contained a clause stating the obligations of the signatories in case of external aggression. Article VI of the treaty says :

...In case either party is attacked or threatened with an attack, the two parties signatory to the treaty shall immediately consult each other with a view to eliminating that threat and taking appropriate and effective measures to safeguard peace and security of the two countries.<sup>71</sup>

This was the first such treaty Vietnam concluded. Even during its war of independence and war of survival it had not thought such a treaty was necessary. But in 1978 unprecedented circumstances forced it to sign a treaty with Moscow. The latter, on its part, had its own reasons to have an ally in Southeast Asia bound by a treaty.

Though Vietnam was striving hard to normalize its relations with the United States since mid-1975, the latter's response was not so favourable. In mid-1978

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71. "The Full Text of the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation Between the SRV and the USSR", Vietnam, (New Delhi) vol. 19, December 1978, p. 5. For the full text of the treaty see ibid, pp. 3-5.

Vietnam virtually accepted United States stand on normalization. Then the Vietnamese leaders valued normalization highly because of their escalating confrontation with the Chinese and the Kampuchians. American friendship and economic co-operation was very much needed in Vietnam to make its position economically, militarily and diplomatically strong enough to take a decisive action against Kampuchea and to deter a possible Chinese military move. The Carter Administration, however, gave paramount significance to its rapprochement with China, leaving the impression on Vietnam that the United States was not interested in normalizing its relations with Vietnam. Prof. Paul M. Kattenburg's assessment supports this view. He wrote, that "the signing of the treaty in turn must have stemmed from the Vietnamese conviction that Washington would not normalize its relations with Hanoi, despite the latter's entreaties for such normalization after 1975 and especially during 1977 and 1978..."<sup>72</sup> Even if Vietnamese leadership knew that the Carter Administration had just "postponed" the

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72. Paul M. Kattenburg, "Living with Hanoi". Foreign Policy (Washington D.C.), winter 1983-84, p. 134.

issue until its rapprochement with China was finalized, it was not ready to wait due to the increasing pressure of worsening relations with Kampuchea and China. It was prudent as well as necessary for Vietnam to strengthen its existing relations with one who was willing rather than establishing new relations with one who was unwilling.

The Soviet Union also needed a friendship and co-operation treaty with Vietnam. The Soviet leaders were very much concerned about the growing co-operation between China, Japan and the United States as all these three countries shared common interests in countering the expansion of Soviet influence into East and Southeast Asia. In <sup>the</sup> words of a high ranking official of the United States : "The Russians are haunted by the nightmare of a hostile China, the world's most populous nation, allied with world's most powerful industrial nations, the United States and Japan."<sup>73</sup> In a way the Carter Administration's policy towards Vietnam and China was responsible for the signing of the treaty by the Soviet Union and Vietnam. The Carter administration's efforts at establishing diplomatic relations with China, naturally

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73. Joseph Fromm, "Battle of Red Giants in Asia", US News and World Report (New York, N.Y.), 27 November 1978, p.31.



made the Soviet Union feel that its interests in East and Southeast Asia were likely to be threatened. As a result Moscow endeavoured to obtain a strong ally in the region so that it could safeguard its interests against a Washington-Tokyo-Peking axis. On the other hand, instead of responding favourably to entreaties of Vietnam, the Carter Administration began courting the Chinese. As a result the Vietnamese leadership was forced to find an ally elsewhere when it badly needed one. It can be assumed that the Vietnamese leadership was convinced that even after the normalization of relations between the two countries, Vietnam would not get much diplomatic support from the United States in its conflict with China. Because then the Carter Administration had speeded up the process of rapprochement with China and establishment of diplomatic relations with that country was expected in near future. Since Vietnam needed an ally who could decisively support its activities within and without Indochina, it was natural for Vietnam to sign a treaty with Soviet Union, an adversary of China. In fact, the adverse consequence of the Carter Administration's Vietnam policy, had been foreseen in as early as September 1978. Western Indochina analysts in Hanoi then said that Vietnam "could one day

step solidly into the Soviet Camp if Washington decides on an indefinite cold shoulder policy."<sup>74</sup> Criticizing the Carter Administration's negative attitude towards Vietnam, Peter Weins, former Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, asks a crucial question :

Would Vietnam, whose fierce dedication to independence is the hallmark of its 4,000 years history, have been driven into the arms of the Soviet Union... if the United States had not stubbornly refused to normalize relations and lift its trade embargo for three and a half years following the end of the war, in the face of concessions after concession by a ravaged country desparately in need of peace and reconstruction?<sup>75</sup>

The United States reaction to this Soviet-Vietnamese treaty came rather late. When it came it obviously expressed United States displeasure over the treaty. The Carter Administration suspected Vietnam's adherence to non-alignment. A spokesman for the Department of State on 5 December said in a statement that if "the Vietnamese truly want to be a non-aligned, independent member of the Southeast Asian community" the treaty with the Soviet

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74. Denis D.Gray, "US Divided on Relations with Hanoi", Bangkok Post, 4 September 1978.

75. Peter Weins, "Contributory Negligence in Foreign Policy," New York Times, 2 March 1979.

Union was a step in the wrong direction."<sup>76</sup> He also said that his government was "studying aspects" of the treaty.

The United States concern regarding the treaty centered around the future of Cam Ranh Bay, a large anchorage on the coast of Southern Vietnam built by the United States during the Vietnam war. Both the United States and China believed that the use of the naval base by the Soviet navy would weaken their own naval position in the region.<sup>77</sup> Their apprehension appeared to be genuine since the Soviet naval forces operating from the Cam Ranh Bay could be a counterweight to American naval forces based at Subie Bay naval base and air forces based at Clark air-force base in the Philippines; and the Chinese South Sea Fleet based at Whampoa, Chankiang and Yulin.<sup>78</sup> The Carter Administration conveyed to the Vietnamese government its apprehensions of the treaty and asked for the clarification of the implications of the treaty in the light of the repeated assurances in the past by the Vietnamese that they would follow an independent

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76. New York Times, 6 December 1978.

77. Drew Middleton, "Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty May Alter Sea Strategies" in Ibid, 8 November 1978.

78. Ibid.

foreign policy and never allow foreign military bases on their soil. The Vietnamese assured the Carter Administration that the treaty was not directed against any third nation and the Vietnamese people's attachment to their nation's independence and sovereignty did not allow any Soviet base on their territory. Regarding the signing of the treaty it said that it was a natural consequence of the long friendship between the people of Vietnam and the Soviet Union.<sup>79</sup>

Even after signing the treaty the Vietnamese leadership did not appear to lose its hope for normalizing American-Vietnamese relations. Talking to the editor-in-chief of Mainstream, Nikhil Chakravarthy, during the second week of November Premier Pham Van Dong said that the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the United States was "progressing". He expressed the hope that the normalization would be "dealt with favourably" if "both sides show good-will."<sup>80</sup> On the contrary the Carter Administration was thinking on the opposite lines. The signing of a treaty of friendship and co-operation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam created suspicion in

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79. Statement by Holbrooke, n.22, p.35.

80. "Interview between Phom Van Dong and Nikhil Chakravarthy", Vietnam (New Delhi), n.69, p.18.

the administration in Washington about the future intentions of the two signatories. The treaty must have convinced the Carter Administration that Vietnam was going to be a puppet of the Soviet Union. Intelligence sources had reported in October that Vietnam might begin a massive offensive against Kampuchea later that year.<sup>81</sup> Both the Vietnamese plan to intervene militarily in Kampuchea, and American suspicion about the Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty had an adverse effect on the dormant process of normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam. The Carter Administration lost its interest in normalization. To quote President Carter : ...When the government in Hanoi decided to invade Kampuchea... and also began to take on the trappings of a Soviet puppet, we did not want to pursue the idea (of normalization of relations).<sup>82</sup>

Like the United States, China also viewed Vietnam either as a puppet or client of the Soviet Union. This was an inaccurate understanding of the reality. Vietnam was neither a puppet nor a client. Even while it had received massive aid from the Soviet Union and China

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81. New York Times, 26 October 1978 and International Herald Tribune, 27 October 1978.

82. Carter, n.23, pp.194-5.

during the war in Southeast Asia, it did not become one. Circumstances forced it to conclude a treaty with the Soviet Union in 1978. It is highly unlikely that a treaty of that nature or one of the clauses of that, would make the Soviet Union, patron and master of Vietnam, a nation which highly values its national freedom and cherishes the great values of its founder who declared that "nothing is more precious than independence."

A correct assessment of the treaty was made by the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Mokhtar Kusumatmadja when he stated :

I prefer not to use any term denotes subservience of Vietnam to any country or intimates that Vietnam is the proxy of any country. I have had many conversations with their leaders, and I am aware of their pride and their fears since independence. So the fact that they have signed a treaty and have been obliged to receive aid, is, I think a result of circumstances. They have tried to obtain assistance from other sources, they have encouraged investment and trade but not much was forthcoming.<sup>83</sup>

The United States speeded up the process of rapprochement with China following the signing the Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty. China also showed keen interest in normalizing its relations with the United States at the earliest. Earlier the main constraint in

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83. Quoted in Ashoka Mehta, Changing Alignments in Asia, (New Delhi, 1984), pp.61-62.

the path of such a normalization had been the issue of continuation of American arms sale to Taiwan after the rapprochement. The Chinese were disolutely opposed to such arms sale to Taiwan.<sup>84</sup> But now China changed its stand assessing the strategic significance of the Sino-American relationship and "its value in the context of the imminent military confrontation with Moscow's new Asian treaty partner, Vietnam."<sup>85</sup> Moreover the Chinese feared of being sandwiched between two hostile countries on both their northern and southern border.<sup>86</sup> Once the causes of embarrassment were removed, both the United States and China finally decided to exchange embassies. On 15 December President Carter announced that the United States would recognize the "People's Republic of China" and diplomatic relations would be established on the forthcoming New Year day. Though this normalization of relations surprised many, it was "in no way revolutionary, but rather a natural process already in train."<sup>87</sup>

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84. Richard H. Soloman, "East Asia and the Great Power Coalition", Foreign Affairs (New York, N.Y.), vol. 60, p. 694.

85. Ibid.

86. Stanley Karnow, "East Asia in 1978: The Great Transformation", Foreign Affairs (New York, N.Y.), vol. 57, no. 3, p. 596

87. Hedley Ball "A View from Abroad: Consistency Under Pressure", *ibid.*, p. 449. Ball further says that normalization had been expected since President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 and President Carter had promised it in his election campaign.

Both the Soviet Union and Vietnam felt concerned with the normalization of relations between the United States and China. Two Soviet officials Leonid M. Zamiatin, head of the Central Committee's International Department and also a key aide to Leonid I. Breznev, and Nikolai Shishlin, head of the Central Committee, Group of Consultants expressed concern that the new Sino-American economic and military co-operation was aimed at bringing pressure on the Soviet Union. Participating in a television discussion on 16 December they said that henceforth the Chinese might try to expand their influence in Southeast Asia especially over Vietnam.<sup>88</sup> Commenting on the announcement made by Carter Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh said in Tokyo on 18 December that the Chinese policy would end in a failure if China aimed at strengthening its diplomatic position against Vietnam and the Soviet Union by this rapprochement with the United States. Talking to Japanese Foreign Minister Sunao Sonoda, Trinh remarked that the Sino-American rapprochement was a "logical outcome" of the Shanghai Communique issued by the United States and

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88. New York Times, 17 December 1978. In their discussion the two officials made no mention of President Carter's announcement. It seems the programme had been videotaped before and tele-cast after the Carter announcement.



China following a state visit by the then President Richard Nixon to China in 1972.<sup>89</sup>

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The next day Foreign Minister said in a press conference that Vietnam wanted to have diplomatic relations with the United States, but the latter was not showing similar goodwill. He said that it previously insisted on an unconditional normalization but it has now changed its stand by "using the refugee situation and our border problem with Cambodia as excuses."<sup>90</sup> Though he did not specify the new conditions the United States was attaching for normalization, his remarks were very significant because at that time the United States had not officially announced that the Kampuchean crisis and the refugee question were blocking normalization. This implies that something was going on behind the curtain, between the two countries. But as no reliable source material is available it is not possible to say with certainty what was going on.

#### VIETNAMESE INTERVENTION IN KAMPUCHEA AND ITS AFTERMATH

On 25 December 1978 the Vietnamese armed and air-forces, and the army of the Kampuchean National United

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89. Ibid., 19 December, 1978.

90. Ibid., 20 December, 1978.

Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS), created by the dissident Kampuchean in Vietnam, launched a major offensive on Kampuchea. It took less than two weeks for the United army to occupy the whole of Kampuchea. On 7 January these forces entered the capital Phnom Penh and established a new government headed by Heng Samrin. The United States, China and the ASEAN countries denounced this Vietnamese role in Kampuchea as an "invasion" and strongly demanded for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea.<sup>91</sup>

The Vietnamese action in Kampuchea evoked strong reaction in Washington about the intention of Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The Carter Administration now found the two month old Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty providing "an important measure of security to Hanoi" for its "invasion" of Kampuchea.<sup>92</sup> This Vietnam's action put an end to the dormant process of normalization between the United States and Vietnam. The Carter Administration suspended all negotiations with Vietnam. It was announced by a Department of State spokesman, John Cannon, who said on 10 January 1978 that there was

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91. For details on Vietnamese military intervention in Kampuchea and American reaction see Chapter Four.

92. Statement by Holbrooke, n.22, p.36.

no question of movements towards normalization of relations, under the present conditions.<sup>93</sup>

Since then the United States has been maintaining that the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam is impossible until and unless the latter withdraws its forces from Kampuchea, and stops exodus of refugee into other countries. On the contrary Vietnam has been insisting that withdrawal of its troops from Kampuchea is not possible until and unless the security of the Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Panh is assured from the threats of Khmer Rouge forces operating from the Thai territory and assisted by China, and the United States. Regarding the question of refugees, the Vietnamese authorities argue that they were powerless to control the flight from Vietnam, of the "malcontents" who were not willing to build a new Vietnam on the basis of Socialism.<sup>94</sup> As the respective stands of both

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93. See Chapter Four or New Strait Times, (Kwala Lumpur) 11 January 1978.

94. Statement by Holbrooke, n.22, p.35.

sides are fundamentally opposed to each other, normalization of relations has remained a dream to this day.

During 1979 and 1980 (and even after) no constructive step was taken by any side to cease hostilities and hold negotiations for normalization of relations. The Carter Administration was totally opposed to any talks unless its demands were met. As a result no talks was held. In mid-1979 Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was reported to have stated that talks for normalization were underway. This statement was denied by the United States. A State Department statement on 9 August 1978 declared that "there have been no talks, secret or otherwise ... since last fall." It indicated that the United States stand on the talks remained unchanged.<sup>95</sup> The

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95. This statement was read on 9 August 1979 to news correspondents by acting Department Spokesman Tom Reston in the name of and on behalf of Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard C. Holbrooke, following is the full text of the statement:

We have read press reports quoting Vietnamese Vice Minister Nguyen Co Thach as stating that talks toward normalization of relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (S.R.V.) are now underway.

I want to state that there have been no talks, secret or otherwise, on normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam since last fall. As we indicated at that time, Vietnam's action toward its neighbour and its policies toward its own people resulting in a flood of refugees have made it impossible for us to continue with normalization.

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Carter Administration maintained its stand even in early 1980. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reiterated it in Chicago on 3 March 1980.<sup>96</sup> In July 1980 the Vietnamese expressed, through the Indonesian ambassador in Hanoi, Sudarsono, their readiness to establish diplomatic relations with the United States and get American economic aid. Briefing Indonesian President Suharto in Jakarta on 23 July 1980, ambassador Sudarsono said that Vietnam presently "receives big aid from the Soviet Union, but would also welcome American aid and

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We have made this position clear to the Vietnamese both publicly and we have made it plain to them privately. We have had and continue to have contacts with Vietnamese officials on matters which are related to the question of normalization of relation.

It is not true, however, that renewed movements toward normalization of relations is underway. Our ultimate objective remains unchanged. But in the circumstances which prevail in the region at the moment and which circumstances prevail because of Vietnam's policies and actions, this is not an appropriate time to move forward on this particular matter. Issue of U.S. - S.R.V. Relations, Department of State Bulletin (Washington, D.C.) vol. 79, October, 1979, p. 37.

96. Question And Answer Session following Vance's Chicago Address, *ibid*, vol. 80, p. 36.

was willing to open diplomatic relations with Washington.<sup>97</sup> The United States, however, took no note of this new proposal from Vietnam. Hence there appeared no possibility of talks on normalization. The second phase which initially appeared to be more promising regarding the normalization of relations, thus ended in disappointment.

#### US CONCERN AT INCREASING SOVIET - VIETNAMESE MILITARY COLLABORATION

Since mid-1978 both American and Chinese governments had been expressing their concern at the increasing Soviet military presence in Vietnam. They were very much obsessed with the increasing military co-operation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam which was seen as a potential threat to the interests of the United States, China and the ASEAN countries. They were deeply apprehended by the reported use by the Soviet navy of Cam Ranh a large naval base built by the United States during the Vietnam war.

The issue of alleged Soviet use of Cam Ranh was first raised by the Pro-Chinese newspapers of Hong Kong in April-June 1979. These newspapers charged that Cam Ranh had become a Soviet naval base and the Russians

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97. Bangkok Post, 24 July 1980.

were assisting the Vietnamese to build missiles around Haiphong, the main port city of northern Vietnam.<sup>98</sup> These charges, however, were not supported by hard evidences. The American intelligence failed to find any evidence to prove the charges true.<sup>99</sup> These charges were made at a time when the Sino-Vietnamese hostilities were mounting rapidly. The timing of the charges suggested that they were merely a part of Chinese propaganda war against Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

However, the Soviet-Vietnamese military co-operation became increasingly explicit following the signing of the Friendship Treaty in early November 1978. During the period of Vietnamese military intervention in Kampuchea in December 1978/January 1979, the Soviet navy actively co-operated with the Vietnamese. Soviet Ships carried Vietnamese troops and war materials from Haiphong to Saigon, situated close to the battlefield.<sup>100</sup> Still the alleged Soviet use of Cam Ranh remained unconfirmed. It appeared that the Vietnamese were resisting pressure from the Soviet Union to provide it with base facilities in Cam Ranh naval base and Danang airbase.

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98. Nguyen Manh Hung, "The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict : Power Play among Communist Neighbours", Asian Survey (Berkeley), vol.19, November 1979, p.1047.

99. Sunday Times (London), 16 August 1978.

100. Canh, n., 39, p.229.

But, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in February/March 1979 "ironically proved to be precisely the kind of pressure the Soviets required to convince" Vietnam to open the naval and air bases to their navy and air force.<sup>101</sup> Following this Sino-Vietnamese war, Soviet military activities in Vietnam increased considerably. The Soviet Union re-inforced its Far Eastern fleet with a Suerdlov class cruiser.<sup>102</sup> At the height of the war a Soviet naval task force of fourteen ships entered Vietnamese waters for the first time. Later several ships dropped anchor at Cam Ranh and Danang. The purpose of this Soviet move was, as speculated by a military analyst, to "take fresh water, fix a few things and generally give a signal to China that 'we are here.'"<sup>103</sup>

This visit of Soviet ships to Vietnam evoked strong protests from Washington. The Carter Administration sent a strongly worded message to the Soviet leaders warning them that "...any organized Soviet

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101. Sheldon W. Simon, "U.S. Security Interests in Southeast Asia," in William T. Tow and William R. Feeney, eds., U.S. Foreign Policy and Asian-Pacific Security, (Boulder, Col., 1982), pp. 118-19.

102. Les Buszynski, "Vietnam Confronts China", Asian Survey (Berkeley), Vol. 20, August 1980, p. 841.

103. Nayan Chanda, "A Prophecy Self-fulfilled", Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 1 June 1979, p. 19.



military presence, particularly naval presence in Vietnam... would force us to reevaluate our security position in the Far East..."<sup>104</sup>

On 22 February 1979, Richard Holbrooke said that the introduction of Soviet troops into Vietnam "would be very unfortunate for the strategic balance in Southeast Asia". He further said that the United States would view this Soviet move with "considerable disfavour" and "concern."<sup>105</sup> At that time it was not clearly known to the world that the Soviet Union was assisting Vietnam militarily against the Chinese assault. But sometimes in May 1979 a "Soviet source admitted" to Nayan Chanda, correspondent of the Hong Kong based Far Eastern Economic Review that the Soviet Union was providing logistical help to Vietnam "in the face of the Chinese threat."<sup>106</sup> It seems that the United States had clear knowledge about this Soviet-Vietnamese military collaboration and Holbrooke's statements were in response to that collaboration. The statement warned Soviet leaders that U.S. neutrality over the border conflict would be terminated if the Soviet Union became deeply involved."<sup>107</sup>

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104. Text refers to Brzezinski, n. , p.414.

105. The Guardian (London), 23 February 1979.

106. Chanda, n.103, p.20.

107. Buszynski, n.102, p.842.

On 27 March 1979 three Soviet ships, a guided missile cruiser, a frigate, and a minesweeper visited the Cam Ranh Bay. The United States took serious note of this visit and warned both Vietnam and the Soviet Union against turning the Cam Ranh Bay into a Soviet base.<sup>108</sup> In early May, American spy satellites reportedly spotted a diesel-powered Foxtrot class Soviet submarine entering Cam Ranh Bay. It was the first Soviet submarine to visit Cam Ranh.<sup>109</sup> This caused serious concern in American military circles. Reacting to this Soviet submarine's visit, Thomas Hayward, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, speculated the possibility of "military co-operation" between the United States and China to face Soviet threat in Asia.<sup>110</sup> What made the United States to be concerned with the use of Cam Ranh Bay by the Russians was its strategic location and its close proximity with American naval and air force bases in the Philippines. Cam Ranh Bay is said to be one of the finest harbours in East Asia.

In Cam Ranh Bay the Soviet Pacific fleet could be

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108. New York Times, 29 March 1979.

109. Chanda, n. 103, p. 19.

110. Washington Post, 1 June 1979.

serviced and crews rested without having to go to Vladivostok. Moreover, from this base Soviet bombers were within two hours of the Malacca Straits, a sea route of tremendous significance which connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean; and they could easily monitor military movements in Subic Bay, where the United States maintains the largest naval base outside its own territory.

In response to American and Japanese concern at the visit of the Soviet ships to Cam Ranh Bay, the Vietnamese authorities maintained that these visits were "normal practice". In an interview on 24 April 1979 with James Laurie, Correspondent of the ABC (American Broadcasting Companies), Premier Pham Van Dong said :

I do not believe the US and Japan have legitimate reasons to be concerned about a Soviet military presence in Vietnam. They know the realities here. There is no reason to be afraid of Phantoms or ghosts. We regard the visits to our ports and airfields of Soviet ships and planes as a normal practice. That will continue. We are, however, a sovereign and independent nation and Soviet military bases are an entirely different matter. There are no bases here now and none are planned for the future. 111

Thus Vietnam categorically denied the charges that it had provided base facilities to the Soviet

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111. "Seeking the West's goodwill", Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 18 May 1979, p.13.

Union. But during the rest of the year of 1979 and the subsequent year Soviet military activities in Vietnam increased steadily. In May 1979 American intelligence sources released information that the Russians were setting up an electronic listening post in Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>112</sup> Reports said that these large intelligence gathering facility was being constructed for surveying American air force and naval operations in Southeast Asia, and for serving as the main regional communication center for Soviet naval and air forces stationed in Vietnam.<sup>113</sup> The number of Soviet experts and advisers in Vietnam reportedly rose from 2,700 in mid-1977 to anywhere between 5,000 to 8,000 by August 1979.<sup>114</sup> But this increasing Soviet presence in Vietnam was in no way alarming and its implications and consequences did not appear to be far reaching. As a result the United States lost its interest in the issue. At the same time it appeared to have failed to justify its criticisms of Soviet presence in Vietnam while it was maintaining a large and most modern naval base at Subic Bay and airforce base at Clark island in the Philippines.

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112. Chanda, n. 103, p.19.

113. Daily Telegraph (London), 13 July 1979.

114. Justus M. Van der Kroef, "The Indochina Triangle: The Elements of Conflict and Compromise," Asian Survey (Berkeley), vol.20, May 1980, p.478.

CHAPTER IV

UNITED STATES REACTION TOWARDS  
THE THIRD INDOCHINA WAR

## CHAPTER IV

### UNITED STATES REACTION TOWARDS THE THIRD INDOCHINA WAR

It was hoped in 1975 that the prolonged upheaval in Indochina had come to an end and peace and stability would return to the region in the following years. At that time the world hardly expected that Indochina was heading for another round of bloody conflict involving an "Asian Super Power." It appears that peace and Indochina cannot coexist or that events in Indochina are being "regulated" by an "iron law" that "nothing is ever simple, and things can always get worse."<sup>1</sup>

The "Third Indochina War" first started as border clashes between Vietnam and Kampuchea (erstwhile Cambodia), developed into a major military intervention by Vietnam in the internal affairs of Kampuchea in favour of anti-Pol Pot regime elements in December 1978--January 1979. Eventually it culminated in a massive Chinese invasion of the northern frontiers of Vietnam in February-March 1979. Internecine conflicts within the Socialist Bloc were not new and had taken place earlier

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1. David W.P. Elliott, "Third Indochina Conflict : Introduction", in self edited, The Third Indochina War (Boulder, Colorado, 1981), p.1.

as in the cases of Soviet-Yugoslav controversy during the Stalin era or Sino-Soviet clashes (both ideological and military). But the Kampuchea-Vietnam-China conflict was the first instance of three socialist countries engaging in major military operations against each other. The Third Indochina War was the result of historical rivalry and deep rooted racial animosity between the Vietnamese and the Khmers (Kampuchians) and Vietnamese and the Chinese. It is true that the Vietnamese and the Kampuchians had fought together against the American intervention in Indochina and they were supported and assisted by the Chinese. But soon after the end of American intervention in 1975 and victory of Communist forces in both Vietnam and Kampuchea, hitherto submerged antagonism between the allies came to the surface,<sup>2</sup> and resulted in military intervention and invasion.

#### BACKGROUND OF VIETNAMESE-KAMPUCHEAN CONFLICT

##### The Border Dispute

The animosity between Vietnam and Kampuchea is deep and lasting. They have fought a series of wars since the Thirteenth Century to achieve supremacy over

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2. Ibid.

the southern part of the geographical area which has been named as "Indochina" by the Western colonialists in the later part of the previous century. But this was an unequal conflict between a strong Vietnam and a weak Kampuchea. Whenever the Khmer (Kampuchean) kingdom was weak, Vietnamese and Thai kingdoms made repeated incursion into Kampuchea and reduced its boundaries considerably. The Kampucheans viewed Thais as a "manageable menace", whereas they viewed the Vietnamese as "alien, domineering and determined to absorb their nation."<sup>3</sup> The reason for Kampuchea's strong hostility towards Vietnam lies in the respective cultures of the two nations. Culturally Kampuchea is closer to India and Vietnam to China and the border between these two nations "serves as the frontier between Indian and Sinic cultures - one of the world's sharpest cultural divisions."<sup>4</sup>

In the later part of Nineteenth Century both Vietnam and Kampuchea alongwith Laos came under the French rule which prevented Kampuchea from being completely annihilated by Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> But the French colonial policies

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3. William S. Turley and Jeffrey Race, "The Third Indo-china War", Foreign Policy (Washington D.C.), spring 1980, p.96.

4. Ibid.

5. Stanley Karnow, "East Asia in 1978." The Great Transformation". Foreign Affairs (New York, N.Y.), Vol. 57, p.604.



gave the Vietnamese a dominant position in the Kampuchean economy and administration. When the French delineated the border between Vietnam and Kampuchea they did not take into account either the population or culture or history. Cochinchina or southern Vietnam was historically a part of Kampuchea and it was inhabited mostly by Kampucheans. The Kampucheans refer to this region as Kampuchea Krom (Lower Kampuchea) and the inhabitants as Khmer Krom (Kampucheans of Lower Kampuchea). Neglecting these points, the French unilaterally gave this region to Vietnam. In doing so the French were guided only by administrative convenience.<sup>6</sup> Thus the process of loss of Kampuchean territory to Vietnam was not halted by the French.

When Kampuchea won its independence from the French in 1954, the Norodom Sihanouk regime officially protested to the merger of Lower Kampuchea with South Vietnam and maintained that Kampuchea continued to have sovereignty over these territories.<sup>7</sup> However, this stand was gradually

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6. For details on French rule in Kampuchea and Vietnam, see John Cody, The Roots of French Imperialism in Asia (Ithaca, 1954); Thomas E. Ennis, French Policy and Developments in Indochina (Chicago, 1956) and Milton E. Osborne, The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response, 1859-1905 (Ithaca, N.Y. 1969).

7. Roger Smith, Cambodian Foreign Policy (Ithaca, N.Y., 1965), pp. 154-55.

given up in favour of a new one according to which the Sihanouk regime expressed its readiness to accept the existing frontiers. But this new position of Kampuchea required Vietnam to agree to two principles that the existing frontiers are non-negotiable and Kampuchea alone had the right to ask for any minor readjustments in the frontiers.<sup>8</sup> This policy meant negotiations with Vietnam on border issue could not deal with any exchange of territories, instead, they could only involve Vietnamese "acceptance and rejection" of Kampuchean stand on the frontiers even when Kampucheans demanded readjustments in their favour.<sup>9</sup> Naturally the chances of Vietnamese rejecting this Kampuchean position on the frontiers was high.<sup>10</sup> The Kampucheans felt that their historical losses of territories to Vietnam was greater than these "minor Vietnamese concessions of territories."<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the 1950s the Sihanouk regime began moving closer to the Left, its relationship with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam) and

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8. Stephen E. Heder, "The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict" in Elliot, ed., n.l, p.23.

9. Ibid., pp.23-24.

10. Ibid., p.23.

11. Ibid., p.24.

National Liberation Front (NLF, Viet Cong) of South Vietnam becoming increasingly cordial. Kampuchea was alienated from South Vietnam and Thailand when those two countries revived their territorial claims on it in early 1960s. This created tension on the borders and as a result Kampuchea broke off diplomatic relations with Thailand,<sup>12</sup> and South Vietnam<sup>13</sup> in 1961 and 1963 respectively. The United States was also following anti-Sihanouk policy by organizing and aiding a private army from the Rightist group called Khmer Serai to oppose Sihanouk. Kampuchea expressed its displeasure at this American policy and retaliated by declining further American economic assistance and breaking off diplomatic ties with Washington in 1965.<sup>14</sup>

Though the Sihanouk regime was on good terms with NLF and DRV, the latter were not ready to accept the former's position on the frontier problem. However, after 1965 Sihanouk made it increasingly clear that the presence of Vietnamese Communist troops in Kampuchea and the latter's diplomatic support for Vietnam against

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12. For details on Thai-Kampuchean tussle see P.G.Pradhan, Foreign Policy of Kampuchea (New Delhi, 1985), pp.70-74.
  13. For details on Kampuchean-South Vietnamese conflict see *ibid.*, pp. 70-71 and 74-78.
  14. For US-Kampuchean Relations see *ibid.*, pp.79-83 and 119-20.

the United States was dependent on a Vietnamese acceptance of "some kind of border settlement."<sup>15</sup> In 1967 he prevailed on DRV and NLF to issue statements unilaterally declaring their respect for Kampuchea's existing borders. Sihanouk interpreted these statements as complete acceptance by Vietnam of his stand on the borders. Publicly both NLF and DRV supported Sihanouk's stand, but privately they did not.<sup>16</sup>

During the Rightist Lon Nol regime in Kampuchea the gulf between Vietnamese and Kampuchean Communists went on increasing resulting in even small scale armed clashes between the two sides. The Kampuchean Communists were opposed to the existence of Vietnamese base camps and military supply lines on their territory. By the time both Vietnamese and Kampuchean emerged victorious in April 1975, the gulf between them was so wide that it could not be easily bridged. This unsettled border question and mutual hostility between the two sides led to a number of armed clashes in the immediate aftermath of April 1975.

#### The Ideological and Political Dispute

The Vietnamese and the Kampuchean Communists had formed a united front against the American intervention

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15. Heder, n.8, p.25.

16. Ibid., pp.26-27.

in Indochina and had fought shoulder to shoulder throughout the war right up to the fall of Lon Nol regime in Kampuchea. The world was surprised when the hostilities between the war-time allies erupted after April 1975. However, some of the information which has come to light after 1977 shows that mutual suspicions and hostilities between the Kampucheans and the Vietnamese Communists have existed since early 1950s.

The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was founded in 1930 on the basis of a common struggle against the French throughout Indochina. This Party had a few Kampuchean members but was dominated mainly by the Vietnamese. This Vietnamese dominated ICP stood for an "Indochinese revolution" and did not contemplate independent and separate revolutionary movements in Laos and Kampuchea.

In 1941, the Khmer Issarak movement was formed in Kampuchea to carry out armed struggle for independence from the French. It was the Kampuchean counterpart of Vietnamese Viet Minh and Laotian Itsala. By 1953 the Issarak had considerable influence over a greater part of Kampuchea.

By 1951 it was recognised that all the three nations of Indochina-Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea - had grown into three separate states. In that very year it was decided that the

creation of separate parties in the three countries was feasible and necessary to carry out anti-French struggle effectively. Accordingly Pracheachon or the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party was established in Kampuchea. In Vietnam Lao Dong, or Vietnam Workers Party and in Laos Pathet Lao came into being.

Most of the members of the Khmer (Kampuchean) People's Revolutionary Party were former members of the ICP. Through these people the Vietnamese continued to dominate the activities of the KPRP even after 1954. Prince Sihanouk's anti-American policies in 1960s won him the friendship of DRV and NLF. The Vietnamese insisted that Kampuchean Communists support Sihanouk. This aroused resentment among the Kampuchean Communists when Sihanouk launched a campaign to repress them. In this anti-Communist campaign about ninety per cent of the Kampuchean Communists were eliminated.<sup>17</sup>

Since mid-fifties, a small group led by Saloth Sar (who later came to know under the pseudonym Pol Pot) and Ieng Sary was getting more and more powerful. They were young and had studied Marxism in France rather than in ICP. They returned to Kampuchea and joined the Party,

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17. Disclosed in an interview with a high Vietnamese official by Gora Weis in Hanoi on 25 May 1978, in Gareth Porter, "The Sino-Vietnamese Conflict in Southeast Asia", Current History (Philadelphia), vol. 75, December 1978, p.194.

when the country became independent. Their background and no-connection with ICP made them oppose or reject some of the policies of ICP. They rejected the thesis of Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev on the "peaceful transition to Socialism."<sup>18</sup> They even opposed the Vietnamese policy of supporting Sihanouk as "revisionist."<sup>19</sup>

During Sihanouk's anti-Communist campaign most of the Vietnamese trained Kampuchean Communists were eliminated. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and Son Sen and a few of their compatriots survived and got control over the Party and supplied new blood to it. In 1963 Pol Pot became the first Secretary of the KPRP. This marked a change in the old pattern of relations between Kampuchean and Vietnamese Communist Parties. Pol Pot visited Hanoi in 1965, where he rejected Vietnamese insistence on supporting Sihanouk's external policy. He also advocated armed struggle against Sihanouk's regime. This policy was not accepted by the Vietnamese. This was a clear indication of the widening gulf between Kampuchean and Vietnamese Communist Parties. Disappointed with his Hanoi visit, Pol Pot later went to Peking where he met the Chinese leaders for the first time.

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18. Interview with Ieng Sary, The Call (Chicago), 28 August 1978, in Porter, n.17, p.194.

19. Ibid.

Though the Chinese and Kampuchians did not agree on many issues, including opposition to Sihanouk's regime, they agreed upon one point - importance of the elimination of "revisionists". For the Kampuchians "revisionists" meant Vietnamese Communists and the remaining Kampuchian Communists who had ICP background.

In 1968 Pol Pot launched an armed struggle against the regime of Sihanouk. Both DRV and the Soviet Union opposed this action.<sup>20</sup> China also expressed its disapproval. Throughout the 1960s the Kampuchian Party did not receive any significant material or propaganda support from the DRV, the Soviet Union or China. On the contrary, the Sihanouk regime received such support.<sup>21</sup>

An uneasy collaboration between the Kampuchian and the Vietnamese Communists started in 1970 when Sihanouk was deposed and replaced by a pro-American rightist regime led by Lon Nol. In view of the continuing popularity of Sihanouk, Pol Pot accepted the latter's leadership of an anti-imperialist and anti-Lon Nol regime united front. The Vietnamese concluded from this Pol Pot's acceptance of Sihanouk's leadership that Pol Pot conceded that his earlier policy in the 1950s and 1960s regarding Sihanouk was wrong.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Heder, n.8, p.39.

21. Ibid.

22. R.P.Kaushik and Susheela Kaushik, Back to the Front: The Unfinished Story in Vietnam (New Delhi, 1979), p.71.



With great reluctance Pol Pot accepted military collaboration with the Vietnamese against the Lon Nol regime. Pol Pot and his supporters were afraid that the anti-Pol Pot elements in the party would be strengthened if Vietnamese troops operated in Kampuchea. But Pol Pot ultimately agreed to co-operate with the Vietnamese, as he later succeeded in convincing the Chinese to support their military participation in Kampuchea.

Some serious tensions developed in 1972 within the Vietnamese-Kampuchean alliance. They differed over ceasefire in Indochina.<sup>23</sup> In 1973 DRV concluded a ceasefire agreement with the United States. Then the Kampuchean found themselves fighting against American imperialism alone.<sup>24</sup>

Another source of tension was the return to Kampuchea of some 4,000 "Khmer Viet Minh". This Kampuchean Communists who had joined Viet Minh, had fought the French in Kampuchea before 1954. They fled to North Vietnam following the Geneva settlements of 1954. After the ouster of Sihanouk they started returning to Kampuchea. Though Kampuchean Communists needed their assistance to organize an effective military force, they feared that they would alter the balance within the resistance

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23. Heder, n. 8, p.40.

24. Ibid.

movement in favour of anti-Pol Pot faction. Hence in 1973 Pol Pot group started removing these Khmer Viet Minhs from the party.

Despite these differences, both Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge (Kampuchean Communists) forces fought together against the Lon Nol regime. Military aid and assistance from the Vietnamese was responsible for most of the victories of the Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese fought along with the Khmer Rouge forces till the liberation of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975.

The Pol Pot Regime and Escalation of  
Hostilities, 1975-1977

During the liberation struggle North Vietnam was providing assistance and support to the Khmer Communists. The Vietnamese forces were entrenched to Kampuchean territory and they were still there when Phnom Penh was liberated in April 1975. Though the Vietnamese were withdrawing from most of the Kampuchean territories, this withdrawal was neither immediate nor complete especially in the so-called "Parrot's Beak" in the province of Svoy Rieng,<sup>25</sup> considered to be w...

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25. A piece of Kampuchean territory surrounded by Vietnamese territory on three sides on the Southeastern border of Kampuchea.

strategically very significant even by the Americans during their involvement in Vietnam,<sup>26</sup> and in the northeastern provinces of Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri.<sup>27</sup> This slow and incomplete withdrawal by Vietnam made the new Khmer Rouge Government of Phnom Penh suspicious of Vietnamese.<sup>28</sup>

Both DRV and NLF of South Vietnam had issued statements in 1967 questioning Kampuchean borders and Kampuchea's stand on the border issue. On the basis of these statements Kampuchea regarded certain zones as its own. But the Vietnamese forces did not evacuate these zones after April 1975 which resulted in minor skirmishes between the two armies.<sup>29</sup> In some cases the Kampuchean troops crossed into recognized Vietnamese territories. Though some of these crossings were probably inadvertent, some of them were probably deliberate, done with the intention of testing the Vietnamese defences.<sup>30</sup>

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26. Marian Kirsch Leighton, "Prospects on the Vietnam-Cambodia Border Conflict," Asian Survey (Berkeley), Vol. 18, May 1978, p.448.
27. Nayar Chanda, "Guessing Game on a Border War", For Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 20 January 1978, p.13.
28. Pradhan, n. 12, p.188.
29. Milton Osborne, "Kampuchea and Vietnam: A Historical Perspective", Pacific Community (Tokyo), vol.9, April 1978, pp.260-61.
30. Facts About Vietnam-Kampuchea Border Question, Document issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 7 April 1978, p.7. Cited in Heder, n.8, p.28.

Flaring up of border skirmishes between Kampuchea and Vietnam involving local border security forces of the two sides after April 1975 should be seen in this context. Along with these clashes on land, there were clashes in the sea and offshore islands as well. These marine clashes were more significant as they were larger and more immediate.

In the later half of 1974 the Lon Nol regime had asserted the Kampuchean sovereignty by questioning South Vietnam's location of an oil rig near the island of Poulo Wei. Moved by the feeling of nationalism the Kampuchean communists supported this assertion. But the DRV and the NLF maintained a discreet silence. They did not challenge Lon Nol's contention or Vietnam's claim over the disputed area. Kampuchean government under Pol Pot feared that the Vietnamese might advance their claims on territory north of the Brevier line drawn by the French colonialists in 1939, to determine sovereignty over the offshore islands.

In early May 1975 patrol vessels of both countries exchanged fire off the coast of the island of Phu Quac. The latter is the largest off-shore island lying north of Brevier line. Brevier had placed it under Vietnamese administration.

This Phu Quac incident was followed by a vain attempt by Kampuchean forces to land on the island of Tho Chou situated south of the Brevio Line and claimed by the Kampuchians. Although Pol Pot admitted this act as an error when he met with a Vietnamese leader, Nguyen Van Linh, in early June, the conflict between the two sides did not end.<sup>31</sup> The Vietnamese naval units attacked the Kampuchean naval bases on the island of Poulo Wei and occupied the island by early June 1975. On 11 June 1975 Pol Pot and two other top CPK leaders (Nuon Chea and Leng Sary) arrived in Hanoi for discussions on bilateral issues. By that time the Vietnamese had completely occupied Poulo Wei. The Kampuchean leaders, however, did not allow this Poulo Wei occupation to disturb the talks. They downplayed this issue and instead suggested a treaty of friendship that would deal with settlement of boundary disputes, trade and free movement across the border. The Vietnamese on their part, asked the Kampuchean leaders for a "special relationship" between the two countries based on their history of common struggle. This was rejected by the Kampuchean leaders. The long standing political difference between the Vietnamese and Kampuchean Communist Parties made such a special relationship very difficult.

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31. Heder, n.8, p. 29 and Pradhan, n.12, p.188.

After this meeting the military clashes between the forces of Kampuchea and Vietnam came to an end. Poulou Wei was returned to Kampuchea when the Vietnamese Communist Party leader Le Duan visited Phnom Penh in August 1975.

In the same month Kampuchea signed an agreement with People's Republic of China. Vietnam watched this development carefully as Sino-Vietnamese relations were getting worse day by day. After the signing of this agreement Kampuchea showed no interest in a friendship treaty with Vietnam. Instead it undertook a massive build-up of its armed forces with the Chinese assistance in equipment and training.

During 1976 Kampuchean leaders faced strong opposition against their domestic and foreign policy. The Pol Pot regime had limited relationship with the outside world. Close and friendly relationship was maintained only with China. Domestically the Pol Pot regime ruthlessly implemented its policies, causing widespread dissensions which <sup>was</sup> particularly strong in the army. The Vietnamese trained cadre was still occupying a prominent position in the Kampuchean army.

In the first half of 1976 elements hostile to the

Pol Pot regime planned a coup which was discovered by the regime in September 1976.<sup>32</sup> Later the Kampuchean authorities charged the Vietnamese with conspiring to overthrow the government through "agents they recruited long ago." By "agents" they meant former ICP members and cadre trained by the Vietnamese.<sup>33</sup> The discovery of the plot was followed by the systematic effort by Pol Pot regime to eliminate all those suspected of being pro-Vietnamese from both Party and army.

During the year 1977, border skirmishes, "mostly provoked" by "Kampuchea occurred along the Kampuchean Vietnamese frontier "on an ever increasing scale."<sup>34</sup> In January 1977 Kampuchea launched strong attacks on Vietnamese border settlements and ended all contacts between liaison committees in the border provinces of both sides. It turned down a Vietnamese proposal for immediate high level negotiation and declared that Vietnam had to end its aggression first. Kampuchea also suggested a pull-back by both sides to a distance of half to one kilometer. This proposal was rejected by the Vietnamese. In July

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32. For details on this coup plan see Anthony Paul, "Plot Details Filter Through", Far Eastern Economic Review, (Hong Kong), 19 May 1978.
33. Phnom Penh Radio, 15 January 1978 and 24 January 1978 in Porter, n.17, p.196.
34. Leighton, n.26, p.448.

and August 1977 Vietnamese forces entered Kampuchean territory. Kampuchea retaliated with a major attack in late September on the Tay Minh province of Vietnam. Its armed forces penetrated six miles into Vietnamese territory. Then Vietnam sent an envoy to Peking to try to reach an understanding with Kampuchea. This mission however failed. Vietnam launched a multi-divisional offensive on Kampuchea in October 1977 to convince the Kampuchean leadership that it had to put an end to the attacks on Vietnamese borders.<sup>35</sup> Vietnamese offensive was intensified in December and Kampuchea, in retaliation, broke off diplomatic relations with Vietnam on the last day of that month<sup>36</sup> and in the first week of January 1978 the ambassadors of respective countries were withdrawn. At the same time it accused Vietnam of having a design to create an Indo-chinese Federation including Kampuchea and Laos. This allegation was, however, categorically denied by Vietnamese officials and leaders. Answering a question in an interview by Nikhil Chakraverty who visited Hanoi in mid-November 1978, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong stated :

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35. Porter, n. 17, p.196.

36. Sunday Times (London), 1 January 1978.



...it should be pointed out that the alleged "Vietnam's desire to set up an Indochinese federation" is a sheer fabrication and slander by Peking and its agents. The French colonialists (sic) total defeat in this region ended once and for all the existence of the "Indochinese federation."<sup>37</sup>

VIETNAM'S MILITARY INTERVENTION IN  
KAMPUCHEA : AMERICAN REACTION

Developments in Indochina in  
1978 and American Reaction

The happenings in Indochina, intensification of conflict and escalation of hostilities in December 1977 between Kampuchea and Vietnam attracted considerable attention from important capitals of the world including Washington. The first reaction to the Vietnamese-Kampuchean conflict by a prominent American came in January 1978. Answering a question in an interview on 8 January 1978 National Security Adviser in the Carter Administration Zbigniew Brezezinski referred to the conflict between Kampuchea and Vietnam as the first case of a "proxy war" between China and the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup> When questioned

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37. "Premier Pham Van Dong Interviewed by Indian Press," Vietnam, vol. 19, December 1978, p. 10.

38. New York Times, 9 January 1978. James N. Wallace, "Hanoi's Uneasy Conquest", US News and World Report, 23 January 1978, p. 39.

how did he mean that, his reply was in the following words: "The Vietnamese are clearly, supported by the Soviets, politically and militarily, and the Cambodians are supported politically and, perhaps militarily, by the Chinese."<sup>39</sup> When inquired whether he was in possession of any intelligence report regarding the presence of Russian and Chinese advisers in Vietnam and Kampuchea his answer was negative.<sup>40</sup> Thus he labelled Vietnam as a "Soviet proxy."<sup>41</sup>

It was a fact that Vietnam was backed by the Soviet Union and Kampuchea was supported by China in their respective claims. The facts described in the last few pages however, do not suggest that Vietnam and Kampuchea were fighting somebody else's war. The Vietnamese and Kampuchians were not killing each other to help two external rival powers to maintain their interests in that region. Though the Soviet Union and China had some part in these conflicts it was limited. The reasons for

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39. American Foreign Policy Basic Documents, 1977-1980 (Washington D.C., 1983) p.1104.

40. Ibid.

41. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981 (New York, N.Y., 1983), p.228.

the conflict were many and these powers had nothing to do with some of them. The Vietnamese-Kampuchean conflict was the result of historical rivalry and racial animosity. In the words of Stanley Karnow, a noted scholar on Southeast Asia, "the roots were home grown: Vietnamese the Cambodians had been fighting since the day of Angkor."<sup>42</sup> Even after the strong collaboration for nearly thirty years against American intervention, nationalism and national interest in Indochina were still stronger than the common ideology shared by Kampuchea and Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> It was an established fact that "a communist regime with a strongly nationalist character will resist attempts by another communist state to encroach on its interests."<sup>44</sup> When both Vietnam and Kampuchea suspected each other of encroaching upon their respective interests their mutual relations deteriorated. Their historical rivalry and racial animosity further made them suspect each other and struggle hard to maintain their respective interests.

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42. Karnow, n. 5, p.604.

43. Tai Sung An, "Turmoil in Indochina: The Vietnam-Cambodia Conflict", Asian Affairs (New York), vol. 5, March-April 1978, p.245.

44. John Patan Davis, "America and East Asia", Foreign Affairs (New York), vol.55, January 1977, p.393.

Hence Kampuchea and Vietnam were fighting their own war, not of China and the Soviet Union. Moreover in January 1978 Vietnam had not yet leaned completely towards the Soviet Union. It was in fact making its "last" attempt to lessen its dependence on the Soviet Union and strengthen its relations with the West, especially with the United States and Japan. It was only in July/August 1978 after failing in its "last" attempt to normalize relations with the United States, Vietnam turned towards the Soviet Union completely and concluded a friendship treaty with it in early November. On the other hand though the gulf between China and Vietnam was widening, China had not yet come out openly in support of Kampuchea. The Chinese were demonstrating extraordinary self-restraint. They were appealing to both Vietnam and Kampuchea to settle their differences peacefully.<sup>45</sup>

Thus it is difficult to accept Brzezinski's characterization of the Kampuchea-Vietnam war as "proxy war". They were fighting their own war which was deeply rooted in mutual suspicion and when the war had progressed then the

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45. At the sametime the ASEAN countries were also maintaining a neutralist stance. They were appealing both Kampuchea and Vietnam to settle the issue amicably. See Bangkok Post, 1 January, 1978.

two sides were supported by the Soviet Union and China respectively.<sup>46</sup>

China began to support Kampuchea increasingly from early 1978. In January 1978 it increased its supply of military equipments. The Chinese support encouraged Kampuchea to oppose the Vietnamese forces stubbornly. As a result they recovered most of the territory occupied by the Vietnamese army and intensified its counterattacks in late January. On 5 February Vietnam proposed the establishment of an internationally supervised demilitarized zone between Kampuchea and Vietnam. Kampuchea, however, turned down this proposal and war continued.

The Vietnamese faced with intensified military counterattacks and Chinese support for Kampuchea turned more to political struggle. Even before Kampuchean counter-offensive Vietnam started propaganda war against Kampuchea. The Vietnamese leaders began referring to Kampuchean leaders as "reactionaries."<sup>47</sup> In later

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46. In the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 India was supported both materially and diplomatically by the Soviet Union and Pakistan by the United States. Nobody described it as a "proxy war" between the United States and the Soviet Union.

47. Heder, n.8, p.46.

January Hanoi Radio began broadcasting statements of Kampuchean refugees and prisoners of war calling for replacing the Pol Pot regime by one friendly to Vietnam.<sup>48</sup> In February Vietnamese leadership reportedly decided to replace Pol Pot's regime with dissident Kampuchean elements by deploying Vietnamese military forces, if necessary. This decision was first taken by the Political Bureau of the Vietnamese Communist Party at its Fourth Plenum.<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Becker of Washington Post reported that high Vietnamese officials "informed" her that at a politbureau meeting in July 1978, Vietnamese leaders took a decision to "conquer" Kampuchea.<sup>50</sup>

In March the Sino-Vietnamese relations were severely damaged when Vietnam nationalized all "industry and commerce directly related to production", on 23 March.

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48. Ibid.

49. Nayan Chanda, "The Timetable for a Takeover", Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 23 February 1978; Turley and Race, n.3, p.98.

50. Text refers to Lucian W. Pye, "The China Factor in Southeast Asia" in The American Assembly, The China Factor: Sino-American Relations and the Global Scene (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1981), p.242.

The effect of this move fell mainly on the Chinese business community. The ethnic Chinese began to flee to China. China protested vigorously and criticized Vietnam. At the same time Chinese support and assistance to Kampuchea was increased.

Meanwhile inside Kampuchea the Pol Pot regime had embarked on an appalling course of genocide killing hundreds of thousands of Kampuchean.<sup>51</sup> Thousands of terrified Kampuchean started fleeing to Vietnam and Thailand. This ruthless regime of Pol Pot was condemned by many quarters. The United States expressed its concern at this "most flagrant and massive abuses of human rights" through its Deputy Secretary of State, Warren Christopher on 18 January 1978. Talking before the National Foreign Policy Conference for Editors and Broadcasters at the Department of State, Christopher stated :

...we condemn what has taken place there (in Kampuchea) and will take every suitable opportunity to speak out, lest by our silence we seem to acquiesce in the unspeakable human

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51. For a better understanding of the Khmer Rouge's road to power and its rule in Kampuchea see Ben Kiernan, How Pol Pot came to Power, A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930-1975 (London, 1985); Craig Etcheson, The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea, (Boulder, Col., and London, 1984); Michael Vickery, Cambodia, 1975-1982 (North Sydney, 1984).

rights abuses that are occurring there. Moreover, we will be supporting international efforts to call attention to this egregious situation.<sup>52</sup>

On 21 April 1978 President Jimmy Carter of the United States condemned the Pol Pot regime as "the worst violator of human rights in the world today."<sup>53</sup>

Some people, including former Kampuchean head of state Prince Sihanouk, held the United States responsible for the emergence of this genocidal Pol Pot regime. According to William Showcross in Sideshow Prince Sihanouk describes the roots of Pol Pot regime thus :

There are only two men responsible for the tragedy in Cambodia today - Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger... By expanding the war into Cambodia (in 1969 and 1970), Nixon and Kissinger killed a lot of Americans and many other people, they spent enormous sums of money...and the result was the opposite of what they wanted. They demoralized America, they lost all of Indochina to the communists, and they created a Khmer Rouge.<sup>54</sup>

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52. Warren Christopher, "Human Rights: Cambodia," Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), Vol. 78, February 1978, p.32.
53. New York Times, 22 April 1978.
54. Refers to Showcross, Quoted in James Finn, "Vietnam in America", World View (New York, N.Y.), June 1978, p.236.



The regime headed by Prince Sihanouk was more or less neutral and civilized. But the United States supported a right wing coup which replaced Sihanouk.<sup>55</sup> The new American backed Lon Nol regime turned out to be weaker and more vulnerable than Sihanouk would have been to the Khmer Rouge.<sup>55</sup> So in a real sense, as the Wisconsin State Journal wrote in its editorial, the United States brought Pol Pot to power.<sup>56</sup>

The Vietnamese leaders took the decision to remove the genocidal, anti-Vietnamese Pol Pot regime in February 1978. They were, however, aware of the risks they were taking.<sup>57</sup> They expected a retaliatory move, possibly military action, from China as by that time China had become an ardent supporter of Pol Pot regime and Sino-Vietnamese relations were strained due to the issue of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. So the Vietnamese leaders began to mobilize diplomatic support from various quarters. Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien said that Vietnam was ready to normalize relations with the United States without the precondition of American reconstruction aid.<sup>58</sup> This move was aimed at winning the

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55. See editorial, Wisconsin State Journal (Madison), 12 January 1979 in Editorials on File (New York, N.Y.) vol. 10, 1-15 January 1979, p. 3.

56. Ibid.

57. Turley, and Race, n. 3, p. 100.

58. For details see Chapter Three.

United States to Vietnam's side. At the same time Vietnam's attitude towards its ASEAN neighbours underwent sharp changes. On 6 July Phan Hien recognized ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) as an organization for economic co-operation.<sup>59</sup> Thus Vietnam dropped the earlier charge that ASEAN was a militaristic tool of American imperialism created with an objective of containing the Communist movement in Southeast Asia. When Hien was questioned in an interview on 4 July 1978 about previous Vietnamese accusations that there was no genuine independence in some of the members of the ASEAN, he answered that, "these are misunderstandings, we have never had such a view."<sup>60</sup> In late July Phan Hien also indicated Vietnam's intention to negotiate with ASEAN a common formula for a peace zone in Southeast Asia.

In July Hanoi sent emissaries to Japan and Australia. In September and October Premier Pham Van Dong visited Bangkok, Manila, Jakarta and Kualalumpur, and proposed non-aggression treaties with the member countries of ASEAN.

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59. Bangkok Post, 7 July 1978.

60. Asian Almanac,  
4 November 1978, p.9121.

But all these diplomatic moves by Vietnam aimed at the United States and ASEAN did not succeed. Hanoi's proposal for an unconditional normalization of relations with the United States went unheeded as the latter was busy with its efforts for a rapprochement with China. ASEAN countries turned down Premier Dong's proposal.

In contrast, Vietnam achieved a major diplomatic victory in Moscow. On 3 November Vietnam signed the 25 year Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with the Soviet Union. This move by Vietnam was in response to the increased danger of a Chinese attack on Vietnam. By this friendship treaty with the Soviet Union Vietnam "sought a security commitment from the Soviet Union both to deter a Chinese attack and to increase Vietnamese capabilities for repelling it should it occur."<sup>61</sup>

During all these months the border conflict between Vietnam and Kampuchea continued unabated. The developments in Indochina were being closely watched in Washington. The Carter Administration did not support the claims of either Kampuchea or Vietnam. Assistant Secretary of States for East Asian Affairs Richard Holbrooke announced

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61. Gareth Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis" in Elliot, ed., n.1, pp.106-7.

American neutrality on 25 October in Bangkok when he went there to meet with American ambassadors to the five ASEAN nations. Speaking at a news conference Holbrooke said that his country was "not going to take sides in the disputes that are...growing in intensity among all the Asian communist states..."<sup>62</sup> This statement by Holbrooke indicated that the United States was maintaining neutrality toward not only Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict but the growing Sino-Vietnamese hostility as well.

On 1 November 1978, two days before the announcement of the Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty, the United States sent a letter to members of the United Nations Security Council stating that the American intelligence had reported that Vietnam had planned to launch a major offensive against Kampuchea in December.<sup>63</sup> The letter asked each member to take "appropriate" measures to prevent such a conflict.<sup>64</sup> The letter, however, did not ask for a public debate on the possible Vietnamese attack on Kampuchea. This American letter indicates that the United States knew nearly two months earlier, about the Vietnamese move against Kampuchea which started on 25 December 1978.

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62. New York Times, 26 October 1978.

63. Ibid., 6 November 1978.

64. Ibid.

During mid and later 1978 there was no consensus among the foreign policy makers in Washington regarding American reaction and policy towards the developments in the various parts of the world. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was more interested in a rapprochement with China. On the other hand, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was giving primary to improving relations with Moscow and completing the SALT II negotiations with it. He feared that the Soviets might be annoyed by Washington's dealings with Peking. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke was negotiating with the Vietnamese authorities for normalizing relations. His intention and efforts were directed at achieving an early normalization. President Carter was not playing the role of the co-ordinator among these divergent positions. Instead, he was busy with the Middle-East problem working for an understanding between Egypt and Israel. As a result until mid-December Washington could not formulate a clear-cut policy towards the Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict and increasing Sino-Vietnamese hostilities.<sup>65</sup>

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65. The contents of this paragraph are analysed in detail in chapter three.

Vietnam's Intervention in  
Kampuchea

By the end of November Vietnam had strengthened its position by a friendship treaty, with the Soviet Union. China had to think twice before taking a military action against Vietnam in support of the Pol Pot regime. The US did not have a clear-cut policy regarding the conflicts in Indo-China. In this setting Vietnam got ready for the final showdown.

The Kampuchean dissidents, who had fled from Kampuchea into Vietnam in the wake of repressive rule of Pol Pot regime formed the Kampuchea National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS) on 2 December in an area consisting of 600 square miles of Krek, Memot and Snoul districts held by the Vietnamese troops.<sup>66</sup> This KNUFNS was created with Vietnamese assistance. It has been suggested that Vietnam created the KNUFNS under its supervision as a "figleaf" to cover its initial invasion with a Khmer identity and provide it with a formal invitation.<sup>67</sup> Vietnam made this move in order to "minimize" the possibility of a major Chinese attack on Vietnam in response to the Vietnamese "invasion" of Kampuchea.<sup>68</sup>

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66. Bangkok Post, 4 December 1978.

67. Turley and Race, n.3, p.100.

68. Porter, n.61, pp.108-9.

The KNUFNS echoed Vietnamese stand on the conflict. It declared that the border conflict with Vietnam was provoked by the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime to serve Chinese strategic aim.<sup>69</sup> It also declared that it would unite the Kampuchians to topple the genocidal Pol Pot regime.<sup>70</sup>

On 25 December the armed forces of KNUFNS supported by fourteen divisions of Vietnamese People's Army consisting of 100,000 troops, and Vietnamese airforce, launched a major offensive on Kampuchea. It took less than fifteen days for these combined armies to pulverize Kampuchean armed forces and to enter Phnom Penh. By 12 January 1979 they occupied the whole of Kampuchea and reached Thai border.<sup>71</sup>

On 7 January 1979 these forces entered Phnom Penh and on 8 January they set up a People's Revolutionary Council with Heng Samrin as Chairman and Hun Sen as Foreign Minister.<sup>72</sup> On 11 January 1979 the new government

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69. Pradhan, n.12, p.190.

70. Ibid., pp.190-1.

71. For details on the war see Nayan Chanda, "Fifteen Days that Shook Asia", Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 19 January 1979, pp.10-13 and Richard Nations, "A Frantic Drive for Victory", *ibid.*, 26 January 1979, pp.11-13.

72. Pradhan, n.12, p.191.

proclaimed the People's Republic of Kampuchea.<sup>73</sup>

More than 700 foreign officials and advisers in Kampuchea fled the country and crossed into Thailand in order to escape from the United Front troops. Among those about 650 were Chinese including the Chinese ambassador in Phnom Penh.

Vietnam did not hide or deny the presence of its troops in Kampuchea. It attributed the military victories in Kampuchea to the United Front consisting of the KNUFNS troops and Vietnamese army and airforce. In diplomatic terminology Vietnam's military action in Kampuchea can be termed "intervention". However, the quantity of Vietnamese troops engaged in this "intervention" made most of the outside world to term it as an "invasion."

#### United States' Reaction

Kampuchean Deputy Premier Ieng Sary twice asked the United Nations Security Council on 31 December and 2 January 1979 to condemn the "aggression" against Kampuchea by Vietnam and the Soviet Union.<sup>74</sup> Sary

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73. Ibid.

74. New York Times, 3 January 1979; Yearbook of the United Nations 1979 (New York, N.Y., 1982), p.272.



called for an emergency meeting of the Security Council.

The Kampuchean bid for an emergency meeting of the Security Council was backed by the United States. John Cannon, a State Department spokesman announced this on 3 January, a day after Ieng Sary called for the meeting. The spokesman said that while the Carter Administration "takes great exception to the human rights record" of Kampuchea, as "a matter of principle," it did not feel that "unilateral intervention" by Vietnam against Pol Pot regime was justified.<sup>75</sup> The spokesman termed the Vietnam's military action in Kampuchea as "intervention by armed forces in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation."<sup>76</sup> It is an historical irony that the United States which did not favour a Security Council debate over its invasion of Kampuchea in 1970, now strongly backed such a debate when another country (Vietnam) "invaded" Kampuchea.

A spokesman for Vietnam mission to the United Nations criticized Kampuchea's request for a meeting of the Security Council.<sup>77</sup> He said that the Kampuchean government was trying to cover up its serious military

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75. New York Times, 4 January, 1979.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid., 5 January 1979.

debacles at the hands of the rebel forces. He alleged that the Pol Pot regime was serving the expansionist policies of China.<sup>78</sup>

With a view to remove the suspicion that might have arisen in Vietnam regarding American backing for Ieng Sary's call for the Security Council meeting, the State Department issued a follow up statement on 4 January which said that the American stand on the meeting "does not prejudge the position" that the United States might take in the Security Council meeting.<sup>79</sup>

The Carter Administration conveyed its serious concern even to the Soviet Union. On 5 January, two days before the United Front troops entered Phnom Penh, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance met with Anatoly F. Dobrynin, Soviet ambassador in the United States and expressed his government's concern at the developments in Indochina.<sup>80</sup> Dobrynin reportedly told Vance that his country urged the Vietnamese to be cautious in their actions in Kampuchea but they (Vietnamese) replied that they were their own masters.<sup>81</sup>

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78. Ibid.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid., 6 January 1979.

81. Ibid.

The Vance-Dobrynin meeting and the things they discussed shows that the Carter Administration was taking a serious view of the Vietnamese drive in Kampuchea. If what ambassador Dobrynin said in the meeting is true then one will have to conclude that the Vietnamese were intervening in Kampuchea on their own without Moscow's endorsement of their action. But it was an established fact that Moscow was supporting each and every move of Vietnam regarding Kampuchea and China, and was even supplying arms and equipments to Vietnam. It also hailed the success of the United Front troops. Dobrynin probably wanted to refute the Chinese and Pol Pot regime's accusation that the Soviet Union was supporting Vietnamese "aggression" against Kampuchea.

One day after the fall of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, a State Department spokesman accused Vietnam of being "guilty of aggression against Kampuchea". He declared that "it is not our fight" implying that the United States would not get involved in the conflict but called for the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea.<sup>82</sup>

This American condemnation of Vietnamese "invasion" of Kampuchea was welcomed and appreciated by Prince Sihanouk, former head of State of Kampuchea. He was released

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82. Ibid., 9 January 1979.

by the Pol Pot regime from house arrest on 5 January 1979 and sent to New York to represent it (the Pol Pot regime) in the proposed Security Council meeting. On 4 January 1979 a day before his release Prince Sihanouk had expressed his total support for the Pol Pot regime's stand on the Kampuchean - Vietnamese conflict.<sup>83</sup> Before arriving in New York he went to Peking, where he participated in a six hour news conference on 8 January. At this news conference he thanked the United States for its stand on Vietnamese 'invasion' of Kampuchea.<sup>84</sup> Speaking on behalf of the ousted Pol Pot regime, Prince Sihanouk sought help from both the United Nations and the United States to drive out the Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea.<sup>85</sup> In a major policy change he said that Kampuchea was ready to forget American military role in Kampuchea during the Vietnam War,<sup>86</sup> and now wanted to have friendly relations with it.

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83. Bangkok Post, January 1979.

84. New York Times, n.82.

85. Ibid.

86. The Nixon Administration secretly bombed Viet Minh hideouts in Kampuchea in 1969 and invaded that country in 1970. In the same year in an American planned and backed coup, Sihanouk, then head of state was ousted and replaced by a rightist pro-American regime headed by Lon Nol. Prince Sihanouk claimed that the coup was "masterminded" by the CIA. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, however, maintained that the US did not have any hand in the coup. He stated that it "took us completely by surprise." It is however, clearly established now that the US really played a role in the coup. For Sihanouk's and Kissinger's statements see Norodom Sihanouk, My War with the CIA, (London, 1973), p.56; and Seymour Hersh, The Price of Power: Henry Kissinger in the White House (New York, N.Y., 1983), p. 180.

The Security Council discussed the Indochina crisis on 11 and 12 January 1979. The Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia attempted to prevent Prince Sihanouk from presenting the case of the Pol Pot regime. They based their arguments on their consideration that the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea to be the "genuine and sole representative" of the people of Kampuchea and "situation in that country was an internal matter."<sup>87</sup> But their motion was defeated by a 13 to 2 vote as the United States and all other members oppose it. Supporting the participation of the delegation led by Prince Sihanouk in the Security Council, the American representative asserted that the Security Council, should not be prevented "from considering a request from a recognized Member of the United Nations to hear a grievance."<sup>88</sup>

The Security Council meeting did not turn out to be significant as nothing came out of it. Sihanouk had earlier condemned Vietnam but now did not ask the Council to formally condemn it. He also urged the Council not to recognize the new regime at Phnom Penh headed by Heng Samrin. The Chinese representatives by and large,

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87. Yearbook of the United Nations, 1979, n.74, p.273.

88. Ibid.

repeated what Sihanouk said. The Vietnamese refuted all charges and said that the "border war" between Vietnam and Pol Pot regime, and "civil war" inside Kampuchea are two different things.<sup>89</sup> Condemning the Vietnamese action the US representative declared that border disputes and violations of human rights did not give one nation the right to impose government on another by force. He called on all the member states to press for withdrawal of the Vietnamese forces from Kampuchean territory, and find ways to avert any possibility of the expansion of the conflict.<sup>90</sup>

The military intervention of Vietnam led the United States to break all contacts with it which had been established with a view to explore the possibility of normalization of relations and establishing diplomatic relations. In mid-1978 both the US and Vietnam appeared to be very near to that. Vietnam was no longer insisting on economic aid and the United States appeared willing to come to the negotiating table without any precondition. There were reports in some sections of the Western press that the United States would establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam by the end of the year.<sup>91</sup>

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89. New York Times, 12 January 1979.

90. Yearbook of the United Nations, 1979, n.74, p.274.

91. International Herald Tribune (Paris), 2 November 1978.

President Carter, however, decided to postpone the normalization of relations with Vietnam till rapprochement with China was over. He considered the Chinese move to be of "paramount importance."<sup>92</sup> But the Vietnamese 'invasion' completely changed Carter's perspective. He writes in his memoirs that "when the government in Hanoi decided to invade Kampuchea (Cambodia) and also began to take on the trappings of a Soviet puppet, we did not want to pursue the idea (of normalization with Vietnam)".<sup>93</sup> The suspension of talks on normalization of relations was announced by John Cannon, a State Department spokesman on 10 January 1979. He said that "there is no question of a move towards normalization of relations under the present circumstances."<sup>94</sup>

Since then withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea has become the precondition of the United States for normalization of relations. Vietnam has not withdrawn its troops from Kampuchea, and the United States has not dropped this precondition.

The United States did not intervene in the Vietnam-Kampuchea conflict either directly or indirectly. Though the Carter Administration diplomatically backed the

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92. Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President (New York, N.Y., 1982), pp.194-5 and Brzozinski, n.37, p.278.

93. Ibid., p.195.

94. Text refers to New Strait Times (Kuala Lumpur), 11 January 1979.

Pol Pot regime it did not provide any material assistance to it to fight the Vietnamese army. The reason behind American neutrality is simple. As the Vietnamese experience was still fresh in the minds of both foreign policy makers and the general public, the President had to be very cautious before deciding upon a military intervention in a Third World crisis.<sup>95</sup> Until he was certain of the support from a majority of American public and the Congress, the President would not have been able to "undertake a sustained major military assistance efforts in a 'hot war' situation."<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the President was prohibited by the War Power Resolution of 1973 and the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Act of 1976, from undertaking any military assistance programme without obtaining the consent of the Congress.

#### Public Reaction in the United States

Almost the entire press in the United States called the Pol. Pot regime cruel and barbaric and condemned it with one voice. There was no sympathy in the press for the "demise" of his regime. The Detroit News thus described

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95. Thomas J. Bellows, "Proxy War in Indochina", Asian Affairs (New York, N.Y.), vol.7, September-October 1979, p.13.

96. Ibid.



the cruelty of Pol Pot regime :

The Pol Pot regime...was cruel beyond imagination. After taking power in 1975, this government depopulated the cities, split families apart, destroyed education and health care systems, and drove the people into the country to serve as beasts of burden. Those who resisted were shot or beaten to death.

Many other newspapers criticized the Pol Pot regime in equally harsh words. Some compared it to the Hitler's. Richmond Times Dispatch wrote that the Pol Pot regime "turned the countryside into one vast Hitlerite death camp", thus gave an idea of Kampuchea under Pol Pot. The Louisville Times wrote that in Pol Pot's Kampuchea about two million people might have been barbarically persecuted and killed "in a Frankenstein-like experience in social transformation". Some newspapers opined that the Pol Pot regime was as cruel as or more cruel than the Idi Amin regime of Uganda. Newsday of Garden City wrote that the Pol Pot and his colleagues made Idi Amin "look almost benevolent". The Pittsburg Press deided the Pol Pot regime by saying that "no regime in the world, with the possible exception of Idi Amin's ... has earned the condemnation of civilized people more than the 'government' of...Pol Pot." Worcester Telegraph debased Pol Pot by equating him with

Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun<sup>97</sup> who struck terror in the people of both Asia and Europe, by their savage acts and said to have built mountains of human skulls. Many newspapers declared that nobody would shed tears for the extinction of the Pol Pot regime from the earth. The press also attacked Vietnam's military intervention in Kampuchea in equally strong words. The entire press termed Vietnam's action as "invasion." No newspaper accepted Vietnamese explanation and severely criticized it. The Chattanooga Times called Phnom Penh's collapse and establishment of Heng Samrin's government as an "ominous development". Chicago Tribune ridiculed the Vietnamese by saying that "those peace-loving, anti-imperialist Vietnamese Communists, those champions of the oppressed and enemies of the powerful, have just run roughshod over neighboring Cambodia." The paper also taunted the Soviets by saying that "those who self-righteously denounced U.S. imperialism in Indochina might well take note of what is happening there now." The Christian Science Monitor recognized the "seizure" of Kampuchea as a "fait accompli" and it

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97. Detroit News, 10 January 1979; Richmond Times Dispatch, 9 January 1979; Louisville Times, 8 January 1979; Newsday (Garden City, N.Y.), 8 January 1979; Pittsburg Press, 10 January 1979; and Worcester Telegraph, 10 January 1979 in Editorials on File, (New York, N.Y.) Vol.10, 1-15 January 1979, pp.2-15.

said that the United Nations debate on the issue would bring nothing. But at the same time the paper condemned Vietnam's act as a "naked breach of a nation's territorial integrity."

Some newspapers expressed the fear that the "Domino Theory", held in great esteem in the fifties and sixties, according to which the fall of one country in Southeast Asia to the communists would be followed by the fall of other countries of the region, has become true. The Detroit News opined that the domino theory proved to be all true. The paper branded Laos as a "puppet" of Vietnam and the latter as the "willing surrogate" of the Soviet Union. It saw Kampuchea as the latest victim of Soviet expansionism. Referring to these developments in Southeast Asia the paper concluded that domino theory has proved to be true and communism gradually succeeded in Southeast Asia. The Charleston Evening Post saw the threat posed to the security of Thailand "by the fall of the domino on its south-eastern frontier." The Dispatch shared the fear by saying that Vietnam might use Kampuchea as a base for destabilizing the governments in Thailand and Malaysia. The Worcester Telegraph voiced its concern that the steady expansion of Vietnam into Laos and Kampuchea would mean "many sleepless nights" in Thailand, Singapore and Burma. San Jose News wrote

that the events in Indochina showed that a part of the domino theory might have been valid.<sup>98</sup>

Most of the newspapers alleged that both Soviet Union and China were playing significant role in the Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict. Some even declared that it was a proxy war between those two nations. Some papers wrote that Vietnam and Kampuchea were in effect clients of the Soviet Union and China, and some said the same thing in a mild manner: Vietnam and Kampuchea were backed and supported by the two communist giants.

The Chattanooga Times suspected that there was "much more at stake" in the Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict, than the revival of ancient rivalry between these two nations. It said that both the Soviet Union and China were involved in a struggle for exercising influence in Asia. Chicago News citing Brzozinski's description of a "proxy war" between the communist giants, said that both

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98. Chattanooga Times, 11 January 1979; Chicago Tribune, 9 January 1979; Christian Science Monitor (Boston), 11 January 1979; Detroit News, n.80; Charleston Evening Post, 9 January 1979; The Dispatch, (Columbia, Ohio), 10 January 1979; Worcester Telegraph, n.80; San Jose News, 9 January 1979 and Houston Chronicle, 11 January 1979, in *ibid.*

the Soviet and the Chinese imperialism were equally involved in the Kampuchean-Vietnamese crisis. The paper warned that it would be a "serious error" to dismiss their conflict as a "local falling-out among thieves, interesting only for ironies." According to San Jose News the Kampuchean-Vietnamese conflict was "in the loosest sense a proxy war" between China and the Soviet Union. The San Diego Union said that this conflict was "an internecine communist conflict casting the Soviet Union against China in a dangerous proxy clash that is far from resolved."

The fear of the so-called 'proxy war' turning into a "hot war" between China and the Soviet Union was expressed by many newspapers. Their fear was based on the reported concentration of Chinese troops along the Sino-Vietnamese border and Soviet armies along the Sino-Soviet border.

Richmond Times Dispatch warned that though it was unlikely in the first week of January 1979, the "proxy war" could even explode into a direct conflict between the communist Super Powers. The Charlotte Observer expressed its concern that if China and the Soviet Union were drawn in, then it "would vastly raise the stakes and could make Southeast Asia as dangerous - in world terms - as the Mideast". Such fears were also expressed by The Pittsburg Press, and The Boston Globe.

Contrary to these fears, Los Angeles Times did not see any possibility of a Sino-Soviet clash. It wrote that there were no sign that China and the Soviet Union would do "anything more than exchange rhetoric. The Miami Herald, however, said that the "ingredients of a conflagration are in place" and they needed "only a spark to set them off."<sup>9</sup>

The entire press declared with one voice that the United States should keep itself away from the conflict. There was no approval for even Carter Administration's support for Ieng Sary's request for a Security Council meeting. The Burlington Free Press, mentioning the savage and inhuman acts of the Pol Pot regime, said that if the leaders of the United States are wise "sincere about their defense of human rights, they should repudiate the Pol Pot government and refuse to support its effort to bring the issue to the United Nations". The Philadelphia Inquirer recalled President Carter calling the Pol Pot regime "the worst violator of human rights in the world today" and expressed its surprise at Carter Administration "concern" at the "demise" of the Pol Pot regime.

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99. Chattanooga Times, n.81; Chicago Tribune, n.81; San Jose News, n.81; San Diego Union, 9 January 1979; Richmond Times Dispatch, n.80; Charlotte Observer, 9 January 1979; Pittsburg Press, 10 January 1979; Boston Globe, 9 January 1979; Los Angeles Times, 9 January 1979; and Miami Herald, 9 January 1979 in *ibid.*

San Jose News agreed with the State Department statement declaring that "it is not our fight". The paper advised the Carter Administration to do nothing in the Security Council meeting. The Chattanooga Press also advised that, the United States should be "content" to let Kampuchea, Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union "resolve their quarrel in a way they see fit." The Arizona Republic declared that there was "absolutely no reason" why the United States take sides in a quarrel between "communist tyrants."<sup>100</sup> The same opinion was expressed by many other newspapers.

#### CHINESE INVASION OF VIETNAM AND AMERICAN REACTION

The Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorated during 1978 over the issue of ethnic Chinese, Vietnam's tilt towards the Soviet Union, and its troubled relations with neighbouring Kampuchea. The military intervention of Vietnam in Kampuchea on behalf of the rebel Kampuchians (KNUFNS) in December 1978 further aggravated the already soured relations. The fall of the Pol Pot regime which

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100. Burlington Free Press, 8 January 1979; Philadelphia Inquirer, 9 January 1979; San Jose News, n.81; Chattanooga Times, n.81 and Arizona Republic (Phoenix, Ariz.), 10 January 1979 in *ibid.*

was strongly supported by China, its replacement by the Heng Samrin government meant "a loss of prestige, influence and 'face'" for China.<sup>101</sup> Vietnam feared that there might be some possible Chinese retaliatory moves into Vietnam. But the Vietnamese calculated in early January 1979 that China would not do so, because of its economic plans and Vietnam's friendship treaty with the Soviet Union.<sup>102</sup> Contrary to this calculation there were several instances of border violations between Vietnamese and Chinese troops in January 1979.

On 21 January, the Carter Administration specialists on Southeast Asia, expressed their concern about increasing tension on the Sino-Vietnamese border in the previous ten days. In an interview one unnamed specialist reported the mutual incursion by troops along the border. Another specialist said that "a major invasion" by the Chinese troops was "not at all an impossibility".<sup>103</sup> However, at the same time these specialists doubted such a Chinese move because of the possibility of a Soviet counter-move.<sup>104</sup>

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101. See the Editorial in the Albuquerque Journal, 10 January 1979, in ibid, p.3.

102. Porter, n.17, p.109.

103. New York Times, 22 January 1979.

104. Ibid.



The available evidence then did not lead to a clear conclusion that a Chinese attack was imminent. However, the remarks of Teng Hsiao-Ping, the Chinese vice-premier, in Washington in the end of January left no doubt about a Chinese military action against Vietnam.

#### Teng's Visit to Washington

Vice-Premier Teng paid an official visit to the United States beginning on 26 January 1979. Speaking at a luncheon at the Capital Hill on 30 January, and attended by eighty-five Senators, Teng said that he could not dismiss the possibility of using China's forces against Vietnam.<sup>105</sup> He went on to criticize Vietnam's role in Kampuchea and said that China needed to act "appropriately" to safeguard its security and borders. He further said: "In the interest of world peace and stability and the interest of our own country, we may be forced to do what we do not like to do."<sup>106</sup>

He again sharply denounced Vietnam on the same evening at a gathering in the new East Wing of the National Gallery of Arts. He also criticized the Soviet Union for backing Vietnam. In a sharp warning to Vietnam, Teng declared that his country would "not hesitate even to

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105. Ibid., 31 January 1979.

106. Ibid.

shoulder the necessary sacrifice, to uphold international justice and the long-term interest of world peace and stability."<sup>107</sup>

In these public speeches Teng indirectly hinted at the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Vietnam. But in his private meeting on the same day with President Carter he clearly divulged China's plans and firm determinations to take such a move.

This private meeting was held on the request of Vice-Premier Teng at 5 p.m. on Tuesday, 30 January in the Oval office. On the American side along with President Carter, Vice-President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski attended and the Chinese side included Teng, Chinese Foreign Minister and Deputy Foreign Minister.

Teng told the American leaders his country's tentative plan to make a punitive strike against Vietnam. He said that the Chinese leaders "consider it necessary to put a restraint on the wild ambition of the Vietnamese and to give them an appropriate limited lesson."<sup>108</sup> He

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107. Ibid.

108. Brzezinski, n.41, p.409.

added that the lesson would be a limited one in scope and duration. He also talked about the Soviet response and China's plans to counter that. He said that his country would hold out against any Soviet counter-move.<sup>109</sup> It is difficult to find out what really Teng expected from the Carter Administration. President Carter writes in his memoirs that Teng asked for his "advice."<sup>110</sup> But Brzezinski writes in his memoirs that "all he (Teng) asked for was 'moral support' in the international field" and at the close of the meeting Teng said that he did not expect an endorsement by the United States.<sup>111</sup>

According to Carter, when Teng asked for his "advice" he tried to discourage the Chinese leader. He writes :

"...I tried to discourage him, pointing out that the Vietnamese were increasingly isolated in the world community and were being condemned because they were aggressors, having crossed the border into Kampuchea. It might arouse sympathy for them and cause some nations to brand China as a culprit if Chinese forces moved towards Hanoi. Furthermore...his potential military move would help to refute one of our best arguments for the new Sino-American relationship that it would contribute toward more peace and stability in Asia."<sup>112</sup>

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109. Ibid.

110. Carter, n. 92, p.206.

111. Brzezinski, n.41, p.409.

112. Carter, n.92, p.206.

Though President Carter's advice was genuine and best Teng was not ready to take it seriously. He said that if Vietnam was not punished, then it would expand its activities. He assured the American leaders that China's action would be a limited/ one. He insisted that Vietnam must be punished as the Indians were punished in 1962.<sup>113</sup> It was decided to continue the discussion next morning.

The next day, before meeting with Teng, President Carter discussed with his colleagues about American response to Teng's plans. After the discussion Carter himself drafted a letter to Teng, stressing the importance of restraint and likely adverse international consequence. At the same time the letter did not "lock the United States into a position which could generate later pressure to condemn China<sup>o</sup> in the United Nations in case China did invade Vietnam."<sup>114</sup> The participants in the meeting agreed that Carter should meet with Teng alone and tell him American concern over the adverse impact of the Chinese action on normalization of relations between the United States and China.

President Carter met Teng alone on the morning of Wednesday, 31 January 1979 and gave him the draft, he had

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113. Brzezinski, n.41, pp. 409-10.

114. Ibid., p.410.

already prepared. Teng appreciated Carter's comments. But he was not ready to give up his plans. He tried to convince Carter that if Vietnam was not punished then the Soviets might use that country in the same way as they had used Cuba.<sup>115</sup> Carter felt that Vietnam would be punished.<sup>116</sup>

It was certain from Vice-Premier Teng's public and private statements that China would invade Vietnam. The Vietnamese, who had believed a few days earlier that China would not invade them now changed their opinion. It appears that they started expecting a Chinese drive into their territory. American intelligence officials reported on 30 January 1979 that China assembled 100,000 or more troops, several hundred tanks and about 100 warplanes on its border with Vietnam. On the other hand, the officials said, Vietnam was moving its troops along the border.<sup>117</sup>

The Carter Administration, now was anxious that the world should not link the Chinese invasion with the normalization of relations between the United States and China and perceive that the United States was now taking China's side in the conflict. In order to avoid such an

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115. Ibid.

116. Carter, n.92, p.209.

117. New York Times, 31 January 1979.



impression it announced on 9 February that the United States was not taking sides in the conflict. A policy statement read out by Thomas Ruston, a State Department spokesman emphasized the policy of the Carter Administration that it sought peace and stability in Southeast Asia.<sup>118</sup> The statement also warned China that the Administration would be "seriously concerned" over a Chinese attack on Vietnam.

#### Chinese Invasion and American Reaction

On Thursday, 15 February the Chinese informed the Carter Administration that they were undertaking military action against Vietnam.<sup>119</sup> President Carter, Vance and Brzezinski who were in Mexico City then got the message on the next day. After returning to Washington President Carter convened a National Security Council meeting. It was decided in the meeting that United States should call for the withdrawal of not only the Chinese forces from Vietnam but also the Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea as well. A decision was also taken to send a message to the Soviet Union urging the Soviets to maintain restraint. This addition was approved.<sup>120</sup> The decisions taken at this

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118. Ibid., 10 February 1979.

119. Brzezinski, n.41, pp.411-12.

120. Ibid., p.412. (Brzezinski privately felt that the additional phrase "implied also a willingness to respond militarily if the Soviets acted)."

meeting later served as the basis of American policy towards the Chinese invasion of Vietnam which began on Saturday, 17 February 1979.

When the news of Chinese troops crossing over the boundary and entering Vietnam reached Washington, President Carter was at Camp David busy with Middle-east problem. In his absence Mondale, Vance, Brzezinski and Charles W. Duncon Jr., Deputy Secretary of Defense meet in the White House and framed six principles to guide American policy towards the invasion. They were :

The United States will not become directly involved in a conflict among communist nations in Asia.

Immediate American interests are not threatened by the fighting between China and Vietnam, but a widening conflict could be dangerous.

The United States will use whatever means it can, including diplomatic, political and moral, to encourage restraint and discourage a wider war involving the Soviet Union. American influence is regarded as limited in this matter.

The security of America's allies in Asia is not seen as being threatened by the conflict now, but the United States would view with concern any threat to the region's stability and in a close consultation with allies in the area.

The normalization of relations with China is regarded as an accomplished fact, and will not be reversed because of the latest conflict. What was involved in normalization was recognition of the fact that the Peking government exists.

The United States will work with other nations to seek the immediate withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and Chinese forces from Vietnam and will assist the principle of opposing interference of forces in the internal affairs of other nations.<sup>121</sup>

The framers of these principles had clearly grasped the gravity of the situation created out of the war, and the position of the United States in international field with regard to the conflict. In the words of a senior official of the Administration: "By staying out of the conflict we have a few chips to play. But we are a major power with important interests in Asia, and we can't be indifferent to what happens."<sup>122</sup> Accordingly these principles were evolved with a view to keep the United States away from the conflict, and at the same time enable it to endeavour for bringing an end to the war. These six principles were based on the earlier decision taken at the National Security meeting which tried to <sup>evolve</sup> the United States response toward the conflict between China and Vietnam. All the policy statements made by any State Department spokesmen or top American leader including President Carter were similarly based on these principles. They did not say anything which was not include in these.

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121. New York Times, 18 February 1979

122. Ibid., 19 February 1979.



This American policy was welcomed and appreciated by prominent Americans. Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. (Rep. Jenn.) said that the United States was playing "the right role in watching, in cautioning both countries and trying to avoid being the partisan of either China or Russia in this situation."<sup>123</sup> Senator John H. Glenn (Dem. Ohio), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee agreed with the American policy. He said "...we are on the right course right now."<sup>124</sup>

The State Department on 17 February called for the withdrawal of Chinese troops from Vietnam and Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. A Department spokesman, Hodding Carter III said that the United States was "critical of any use of military force outside one's own territory."<sup>125</sup>

On 20 February 1979 President Carter said in Atlanta :

We will not get involved in conflict between Asian communist nation. Our national interest are not directly threatened, although we are concerned of course, at the wider implication of what might happen in the future and what has been happening in the past.<sup>126</sup>

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123. Ibid.

124. Ibid.

125. Ibid.

126. President Carter, America's Role in a Turbulent World, Department of State Bulletin (Washington, D.C.), Vol. 79, March 1979, p. 7.

Spelling out what the United States would do to bring an end to the conflict, he said :

...we will continue our efforts both directly with the countries involved and through the United Nations, to secure an end to the fighting in the region, to bring about a withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and of Chinese forces from Vietnam, and to gain a restoration of the independence and integrity of all nations involved. 127

Eight days later, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard C. Holbrooke repeated the same. Giving a statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 1 March 1979 he said :

The interest of the United States are not immediately threatened, and we will not get directly involved in a conflict between Asian Communist nations...we shall use whatever means are at our disposal to encourage restraint, bring an end to the fighting, and prevent a wider war. 128

The United States strongly favoured a Security Council Meeting. On 18 February Secretary Vance agreed to support a request for a debate in the Security Council which would cover both the issues of Chinese attack on

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127. Ibid.

128. Richard C. Holbrooke, Statement Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in *ibid.*, April 1979, p. 17.

Vietnam and Vietnamese 'invasion' of Kampuchea.<sup>129</sup> On 22 February the United States and three of its allies asked for an "urgent" meeting of the Security Council.<sup>130</sup> and such a debate was held from 24 to 27 February. On the first day, Andrew Young, American representative to the United Nations, expressing his country's disapproval of both Vietnam's action in Kampuchea and China's action in Vietnam's borders stated :

We are aware that there have been incidents along the frontier between Vietnam and China and that the two countries have been in serious disagreement for sometime. But this is in no way gives China the right to attack Vietnam, any more than Vietnam's dispute with Kampuchea gives Vietnam the right to overrun that country.<sup>131</sup>

Ambassador Young asked, the Council to take appropriate actions to secure the protection of both Kampuchea's and Vietnam's security according to the Charter of the United Nations. He urged the warring countries and others to exercise restraint.

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129. New York Times, 19 February 1979.

130. Ibid., 23 February 1979.

131. Southeast Asia : Statement made in the Security Council by Andrew Young, US Ambassador to the United Nations, Department of State Bulletin, vol. 79, June 1979, p.63.

American Responsibility for  
the Invasion

The United States normalized relations with China on 1 January 1979. The Chinese Vice-Premier Teng Hsiao-Ping paid an official visit to Washington at the end of January 1979, and China launched a 'punitive attack' on Vietnam on 17 February. These three major events happened in a short period following one another closely. This gave the impression to some, that the United States was indirectly responsible for China's attack on Vietnam.

Taiwan charged that China's invasion was a consequence of American decision to normalize relations with it. James Soong, spokesman of Taiwan government said that the conflict in Vietnam was "part of a chain reaction touched off by the United States recognition of China."<sup>132</sup> He contended that the American policy towards China had heightened tension in the region and sharpened hostility between China and the Soviet Union.

This view was echoed in Moscow. The Soviet Union went to the extent of charging the United States with being directly responsible for the Chinese invasion. An article in Pravda, the Soviet Communist Party newspaper, advanced this opinion. The article said that Teng's

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132. New York Times, 19 February 1979.

"American friends" might have encouraged him to punish Vietnam, for the defeat the United States had suffered at the hands of the Vietnamese.<sup>133</sup> These allegations by Taipei and Moscow needs to be looked into carefully. The Carter Administration, as it is well-known, established diplomatic ties with China on 1 January 1979. This act was the culmination of the long process which started with the so-called "Ping Pong Diplomacy" during the Nixon era. When President Carter decided to set up diplomatic relations with China at ambassadorial level, he also decided to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The Taiwanese were very unhappy with this turn around in American policy. Their allegation of American responsibility in the Chinese invasion stemmed from their feeling of frustration.

However, the Soviet allegation was much stronger than of Taiwan. It charged that when he visited Washington, Vice Premier Teng had told the American officials about China's plans to invade Vietnam and he was led to believe that the United States would do nothing to prevent the invasion. The Soviets even alleged that the invasion was practically prepared by Peking with tacit approval of Washington.

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133. Ibid., 21 February 1979.

Refuting the charge that the visit of Chinese Vice Premier Jung to Washington served to provide American "consent if not encouragement" for the Chinese attack against Vietnam, the American ambassador to the United Nations, Andrew Young said in the Security Council on 27 February 1979:

This is wholly false. And we strongly resent such an assertion. President Carter made clear directly to the Chinese Vice Premier our opposition to any Chinese military action. When our efforts to prevent the attack failed we immediately spoke out against it, and we began to ask for this meeting of the Security Council. Secretary of Treasury Blumenthal has reiterated our opposition to Chinese action publicly in Beijing. 134

The available sources do not give any evidence to prove this Soviet allegation. It was true that Teng told President Carter and his colleagues that China had decided to attack Vietnam. If one accepts the veracity of what Brzezinski and Carter have written in their memoirs, the obvious conclusion will be that Carter did not have any idea about the Chinese action until he was told about that by Teng. Further, President Carter even attempted to discourage Teng, but the latter's mind was already made up.

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134. Statement by Andrew Young, n., 131, p. 63.

Even before China implemented its plans, the United States made it clear that it was not going to side with any party and would even oppose the invasion. The Carter Administration did not deviate from this path when China invaded Vietnam. It called for the withdrawal of Chinese troops from Vietnam more than once and strongly supported a Security Council debate on the issue and a United Nations resolution condemning the invasion.

Almost the entire press in the United States expressed its displeasure, though rather mildly, at the Chinese invasion. It said almost in unison that it was not America's war and America should keep itself away from the conflict.

Though the press approved the Carter Administration's overall policy towards the invasion there were disapprovals on certain policies also. The Harford Courant did not agree with the Administration's statement that rapproachment with China would not be affected by the invasion. It wrote :

We do not agree with the State Department statement that normalization of U.S. relations with China "is an accomplished fact", no matter what Peking does in Vietnam. Normalization is in a tender, incipient stage and may not withstand the pressure resulting from the onslaught of Chinese troops.

Detroit Free Press opined that Washington might have made a "serious mistake" in sending Treasury Secretary to China for a tour.

Except these in few dissenting voices of disapprovals there was total unanimity in the press in hailing Carter Administration's policy of neutrality in the war. Tulsa World said that "perhaps correct" in protesting both Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea and Chinese invasion of Vietnam. The paper advised that there were no reasons for the United States to get "too excited". Akron Beacon Journal termed the Administration's policies as "logical moves". Arkansas Gazette felt that the Administration was "pursuing its correct course". "We think President Carter is absolutely right"; this was the opinion of San Jose News.<sup>135</sup> Similar views were expressed by a number of other newspapers.

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135. Hartford Courant, 20 February 1979; Detroit Free Press, 24 February 1979; Tulsa World, 20 February 1979; Akron Beacon Journal, 20 February 1979; Arkansas Gazette (Little Rock), 20 February 1979 and San Jose News, 20 February 1979 in Editorials on File, Vol. 10, 4, p. 188-213.  
16-28 February 1979,



Impact of the Sino-Vietnamese Conflict on Sino-American Rapprochement

The Carter Administration's policy of normalizing relations with China came under severe attack when China invaded Vietnam. Apart from the Soviet Union and Taiwan, some prominent American analysts of international affairs held Carter Administration's policy responsible for the Chinese action. Former Senior editor of the New York Times, John B. Oakes wrote :

All of which raises again the question of the wisdom and judgement of President Carter in being in such a hurry to rush through the normalization agreement with China. The Chinese after all needed that agreement far more than we did and, as it now appears needed it quickly in order to clear the way for their punitive action against Vietnam. 136

Peter Weins, former Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington D.C., asks one crucial question :

Would China have unleashed a quarter of a million men to "teach Vietnam a lesson" if President Carter had not made it clear to Jeng that although we might publicly disapprove an attack on Vietnam, this would not stop us from proceeding full speed with the further development of relations. 137

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136. John B. Oakes, "Victories for 'Them'?", New York Times, 1 March 1979.
137. Peter Weins, "Contributory Negligence in Foreign Policy", in *ibid*, 2 March 1979.

It is implicit in the above statements that China would have not invaded Vietnam if the Carter Administration had not established diplomatic relations with Peking, and China on the other hand used this rapprochement with the United States to invade Vietnam and deter a possible Soviet military move in favour of the Vietnamese. In fact Hans J. Margenthau had warned several months earlier that "China intends to play the American Card against the Soviet Union."<sup>138</sup>

The Carter Administration, however, did not pay any heed to these criticisms. It saw no reason to go back with its programme of normalizing relations with China. President Carter declared more than once that the normalization was a "fait accompli". He said on 20 February 1979 :

The normalization of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China is already an accomplished fact and will not be reversed. This was the simple, long, overdue recognition of the reality of the government in Peking.<sup>139</sup>

Two days later, on 22 February he reiterated the same thing in stronger terms :

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138. New York Times, 25 July 1978.

139. President Carter, n. 126, p.7.

The normalization of relations between our country and the People's Republic of China is an accomplished fact. It will not be affected one way or the other by combat among Asian Communist countries... recognising the Peking government as government of China... will not be atrogated nor will there be any interference with it. 140

These repeated statements made it clear that the Chinese invasion of Vietnam would not impede the process of Sino-American rapproachment. The Carter Administration sent Secretary of Treasury Michael Blumenthal to China when the latter's attacking armies were still in Vietnam. Despite some opposition from a certain section of the State Department, President Carter decided not to cancel Blumenthal's trip. National Security Adviser Brzezinski strongly supported this visit arguing that "...the crisis between China and Vietnam should not be permitted to affect our... bilateral relations with... China."<sup>141</sup> Blumenthal left for Peking on 22 February.<sup>142</sup>

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140. President Carter, Remarks and Questions-and-Answer Session Before a Foreign Policy Conference, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), vol. 79, April 1979, p. 5.

141. Brzezinski, n. 41, p. 413.

142. In Peking, Blumenthal publicly condemned the Chinese action against Vietnam more strongly. This was not in the liking of President Carter and Brzezinski. With Carter's Consent Bzezinski sent Blumenthal "a strongly worded" cable telling him to concentrate his public comments entirely a matters related to trade. Brzezinski, n. 41, pp. 413-14.

Thus the Chinese punitive raid against Vietnam did not make any adverse effect on the improving Sino-American relations. It did not cause any friction whatsoever between the two countries. In Brzezinski's terms, "the new American-Chinese relationship... successfully weathered its baptism of fire."<sup>143</sup> On the other hand the Vietnamese intervention in Kampuchea put a serious impediment on the process of American-Vietnamese normalization of relations. The United States suspended the normalization negotiations in protest against the Vietnamese action. Though the United States did not support the Chinese against the Vietnamese, the differences in its policies towards Vietnam and China clearly show a slight tilt in its attitude, in favour of China.

### Soviet Stand

If the Chinese leaders had assured themselves that by a rapprochement with the United States they could deter a Soviet action in favour of Vietnam in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, they were, probably, right in their logic. When the Soviet Union increased its military activities in Vietnam at the height of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, the United States warned the former against any military intervention in the conflict.

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143. Ibid. p.414.

The very first reaction of the Soviet Union towards the conflict was ambiguous and paradoxical. A statement issued on 18 February said that the Soviet Union would "honour its obligation" in its treaty with Vietnam, but it also stated that Vietnam would "stand up for itself."<sup>144</sup> The Soviet leaders repeatedly warned the Chinese to "hands off" from Vietnam. They talked of their "obligation" more than once. In a speech before Supreme Soviet on 1 March, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid I. Breznev assured Vietnam that his country would be loyal to the Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty.<sup>145</sup> Prime Minister Alexeyi Kosygin declared : "Vietnam would not be abandoned in its time of crisis."<sup>146</sup>

Except supplying necessary ammunitions and spare parts; and even providing a limited logistical support, the Soviet Union did not do anything to relieve Vietnam from the Chinese onslaught. They did not take any decisive action in favour of Vietnam. The main reason behind this Soviet inactivity or limited role, was a strong opposition from the United States against any

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144. Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong), 2 March 1979.

145. New York Times, 2 March 1979.

146. Ibid.

Soviet intervention in the conflict. The Carter Administration sent a message to Moscow warning it that any "organized Soviet military presence" in Vietnam would force the United States to reevaluate its security position in the FAR East. The implication of this message, was, in Brzezinski's words: "...a U.S.Chinese relationship of some sort would develop as a consequence of such Soviet involvement."<sup>147</sup>

This Sino-Vietnamese conflict, thus underscored the significance of Sino-American rapprochement. It also revealed the limits to Soviet power. In Brzezinski's terms it demonstrated "that an ally of the Soviet Union could be molested with relative impunity."<sup>148</sup>

While viewing with disfavour Soviet military assistance to Vietnam against the Chinese assault, the United States "promised" Thailand of its assistance in case the latter was attacked by the Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea. China also promised to come to Thailand's aid.<sup>149</sup>

American commitment to the territorial integrity of Thailand was expressed by President Carter on 17 January 1979 at a time when fears of a Vietnamese assault on Thai

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147. Brzezinski, n.41, p.414.

148. Ibid.

149. Turley and Race, n.3, p.92.

borders were mounting. Answering a question that what was the United States prepared to offer Thailand to ease its concern about the Vietnamese, he declared :

We are very interested in seeing the integrity of Thailand protected...the borders not endangered or even threatened by the insurgent troops from Vietnam in Cambodia... And in our effort, along with others in the United Nations we have warned both the Vietnamese and also the Soviets who supply and who support them against any danger that they might exhibit towards Thailand. 150

Again on 20 February, he declared that the United States would stand by its allies in any part of the world, and honour its commitments.<sup>151</sup> Accordingly, the United States increased its arms supply to Thailand when the latter's forces were engaged in clashes with the Vietnamese troops on the Thai-Kampuchean border.

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150. President Carter's News Conference of January 17, Department of State Bulletin (Washington D.C.), vol. 79, February 1979, p. 4.

151. President Carter, n. 126, p. 5.

## CONCLUSION



## CONCLUSION

The War in Vietnam which divided and tormented American society and foreign policy makers for over a decade ended with the fall of Saigon to the Communist forces on 30 April 1975. The "Vietnam War", which was described by former National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger as "a great national tragedy for the United States,"<sup>1</sup> and characterized by former President Richard Nixon as "a traumatizing experience for Americans, a brutalizing experience for the Vietnamese, an exploitable opportunity for the Soviets"<sup>2</sup> was finally over on that day. With this Communist Victory American influence in Indochina was completely liquidated, and the artificial political and military division of Vietnam became a part of history. By mid-1976 the re-unified "Socialist Republic of Vietnam" was an established fact.

After the war the elderly and wise leadership of Vietnam evolved their future foreign policy pragmatically. Even after fighting a bitter war with the Americans for a

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1. Henry Kissinger, America's Foreign Policy: A Global View (Singapore, 1982), p.17.
  2. Richard Nixon, The Real War (New York, N.Y., 1980), p.96.

long time the Vietnamese showed keen interest in establishing working relations with the United States. This interest was motivated primarily by their desire to get reconstruction aid from the United States. They knew very well that reconstruction of the war devastated country required a vast input of resources which only the United States could provide.

Immediately after the war the Vietnamese leadership signalled their country's readiness to normalise relations with the United States and demanded American reconstruction aid before any such normalisation. They even attempted to legitimise their demand by pointing out to a clause in the Paris Agreement which guaranteed American aid after the war.

The United States, however, firmly refused to give any such aid to Vietnam. The Ford Administration justified its refusal on the ground that North Vietnam had violated the Paris Agreement. While dismissing Vietnam's demand, it urged the Vietnamese to supply information<sup>on</sup> and return the remains of the persons missing during the war, thereby invoking another clause of the same Paris Agreement. The Ford Administration's policy towards Vietnam during that period could be challenged on this ground.

The Vietnamese first refused to fulfil American demand but as time passed on they made efforts at exhume the remains of the Americans and sending them to the United States. The latter, however, did not do anything on its part to fulfil the Vietnamese demand. Moreover it even blocked Vietnamese attempts for the membership of the United Nations thrice. It ignored advises from some prominent Americans to improve bilateral relations with Vietnam.

Even in this realm of hostility, rays of hope flashed sometimes. In November 1976 officials of both countries met together for the first time since the end of the war in Paris to discuss issues concerning mutual relations. As both countries had not moved away from their earlier stands and were not ready to offer any concessions the Paris talks failed to achieve any breakthrough

The United States' policy towards Vietnam underwent some positive changes during the early months of the Carter Administration. Before entering the White House President Jimmy Carter had created an impression that his Administration's policy towards Vietnam would be in no way different from that of his predecessor. But after assuming the office he changed his policy drastically

and raised hopes of an early normalisation between the two countries.

The Carter Administration dropped American opposition to Vietnam's membership of the United Nations. Three rounds of normalisation talks were also held in Paris. However not much headway was made due to the "not enough flexible" stand of both sides. The policy did not change because of congressional opposition. The Congress firmly opposed any kind of American economic aid to Vietnam.

The year 1978 began with an unhappy event. The United States accused the Vietnamese envoy to United Nations of his involvement in a spy scandal and asked to him to leave the country. It was feared that this would create a diplomatic impasse as the Vietnamese envoy refused to obey American request. The Vietnamese government, however, acted prudently by recalling him, thereby averting any deadlock. Fortunately this incident did not impair the existing relations between the two countries. Nor did it create any impediment on the process of normalization.

Meanwhile in early 1978 some serious developments started taking place in and around Indochina. Vietnam's

relations with neighbouring Kampuchea were worsening day by day. Both the Vietnamese and Kampuchean Communists had fought together against the Americans and their client regimes in Saigon and Phnom Penh. But after the war the racial animosity and historical hostility between the Kampucheans and the Vietnamese raised their heads and soon covered all aspects of the mutual relations between the two countries. This resulted first in minor border skirmishes and later in serious military engagements. At the same time certain anti-Pol Pot elements of Kampuchea had sought refuge in Vietnam and the Vietnamese government was considering the possibility of ousting the hostile Pol Pot regime and replace it by a friendly one.

At the same time, relations between Vietnam and its northern neighbor, the People's Republic of China was also fast worsening due to many issues. As China was the closest ally and friend of the Khmer Rouge regime of Kampuchea, it viewed with disfavour Vietnamese policy towards Kampuchea. Another cause of friction was the mass exodus of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam.

At this crucial juncture Vietnam made strong efforts at normalising its relations with the United

States with a view to strengthen its position against Kampuchea and China. In a policy reverse it dropped its demand for American economic aid and expressed its readiness for an unconditional normalisation. By the same time the United States had also dropped its precondition.

The State Department, especially, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard C. Holbrooke, showed a great deal of interest in normalising relations with Vietnam. However, the National Security Council headed by Zbigniew Brzezinski opposed such a move. It was interested in the process of rapprochement with China, which had got momentum by that time. It feared that the Chinese might view American moves at Vietnam with disfavour and suspicion, and improvement of relations with Vietnam might hamper American efforts at establishing diplomatic ties with China. Brzezinski successfully persuaded President Carter not to normalize relations with Vietnam at that time. President Carter decided to postpone efforts to improve relations with Vietnam until a rapprochement with China was reached.

The Vietnamese, however, were not ready to wait.

They were in need of a reliable friend in the wake of their rapidly increasing hostilities with Kampuchea and China. They suspended their overtures towards the United States and concluded a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, thus gaining a diplomatic victory. The United States criticised Vietnam of being a proxy of the Soviet Union. But it was the policy of the United States which pushed Vietnam into the Soviet fold.

When Kampuchean rebels assisted by the Vietnamese army and airforce invaded Kampuchea during last days of the year 1978 the United States condemned it strongly. It suspended its efforts at improving relations with Vietnam and demanded the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea before any kind of normalisation of relations. Since then this has become the key pre-condition for the improvement of relations between the two countries.

When China invaded Vietnam in February 1979 to "teach" it "a lesson" the United States was accused by certain quarters of indirectly responsible for this. But available sources do not support this allegation. The United States demanded the withdrawal of the

Vietnamese force from Kampuchea as well as the Chinese forces from Vietnam. Though the United States did not support the Chinese against the Vietnamese, a pro-Chinese tilt was clearly visible in its policy towards the conflict.

Ever since the Vietnamese intervention in Kampuchea no progress has been made regarding the issue of normalisation of relations between Vietnam and the United States. No talks have been held. The United States is firmly stuck to its stand. But Vietnam has not withdrawn its forces from Kampuchea. It has been arguing that it cannot withdraw from Kampuchea until and unless the Pro-Vietnamese, Heng Samrin government is firmly established in that country. As the stands of both the United States and Vietnam are fundamentally opposed to each other, normalization of relations has remained a dream even to this day.

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