

Vietnam in China's Indochina Policies, 1949–1989: An Assessment

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I. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is on China's foreign policies towards the Indochinese region, especially on Beijing's relations with Hanoi since 1949.

Firstly, for various reasons, Hanoi has occupied a central place in China's foreign policy considerations towards the three Indochinese states. To begin with, Vietnam is the only state in Southeast Asia which is considered to be part of the sinicized belt of civilisation. Thus Vietnam is the only country in the region which had been ruled by China for more than one thousand years. Historically, therefore, China had a tendency, even until today, to perceive Sino-Vietnamese relations to have a special kind of patron-client bond, Beijing being the 'patron' and Hanoi being the 'client'. In other words, the 'middle-kingdom' mentality on the part of the Beijing leadership might be a factor in shaping the Sino-Vietnamese relations. However, Vietnam's behaviour since 1975, testified to the fact that Vietnamese nationalism may not necessarily accept this 'patron-client' model of thought as the basis for governing Sino-Vietnamese relations. This behaviour, however, should not be interpreted to mean that the Vietnamese through their revolutionary model are trying to pose a challenge to the Maoist

communist revolutionary model to become a better alternative for initiating communist revolutionary changes in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, one should not assume that Vietnamese communism is competing with Maoist communism in seeking influence and/or domination over Southeast Asia.

Secondly, Vietnam is important to China as she shares certain common borders with China and both states have been involved in territorial disputes both on land and at sea for a long period of time. These territorial disputes between the two states extend over a 797 miles long land border, covering the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan, the Gulf of Tonkin and the islands in the South China Sea.¹

When assessing the extent of the territorial disputes as being a factor in shaping contemporary Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1949, it is the contention of this author that these disputes are not the most important factors in shaping China's foreign policy considerations towards Vietnam. In other words, it was not mainly the territorial disputes between China and Vietnam which led to Deng Xiaoping's decision to invade Vietnam in February 1979. Evidence suggests that China can take a longer view and indeed knows how to exercise considerable patience and restraint in her neighbours are concerned. China, for example, had amicably resolved her territorial disputes with Burma without resorting to violent means, such as armed conflicts and war.

Thirdly, Vietnam is more important to China than Laos and Cambodia because — although she is one of the poorest states in Southeast Asia — she has the strongest and the most experienced and seasoned army in Asia. The fact that Deng Xiao-ping did not go all out to invade Vietnam in February, 1979 suggests that the Vietnamese army could have inflicted serious damages to the Chinese army had the war spread deep into Vietnamese territories. Moreover, the Chinese press, mass media, official

speeches, announcements and policy statements frequently criticized Vietnam since 1978 but especially after the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea which clearly suggests that China took Vietnam as a factor in shaping her Indochinese policy. Furthermore, with Vietnam's domination over Indochina, and if Vietnam can be persuaded to become China's partner, which is likely to be the case in the long run, then Vietnam's cooperation and support, will be a big plus and help to increase China's influence in the region as well as give her an additional leverage vis-a-vis the two superpowers, especially the USSR.

Historical ties, ethnicity, ideology, geopolitical factors and Vietnam's policies towards Kampuchea and the USSR, were relevant factors in shaping China's foreign policies towards the Indochinese region. Therefore the main thesis of this paper is to argue that China's foreign policies since 1949 were mainly shaped by *security-cum-strategic* considerations. This however, does not imply that other factors, such as ideology, ethnicity, culture (Chinese chauvinism, i. e. the middle-king-dom mentality), trade, territorial disputes, etc. are irrelevant in affecting Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Prior to the analysis of the evolving changing patterns and complexities of the Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1949, it is important to spell out the goals or China's foreign policies towards the Indochinese region since 1949.

II. China's Foreign Policy Goals in Indochina

The following few behavioural characteristics of China's foreign policies towards the Indochinese region, especially towards Vietnam can be observed:

Firstly, China professes to be a 'superpower' who has a permanent

seat in the Security Council of the U.N. Although she is the largest power in Asia in terms of the size of her population and has the largest conventional army in the world, China has never been the most dominant power in Southeast Asia since the 19th century. Her influence over the indochinese region since 1949 has also not been commensurate with the image and the behaviour of a superpower in the region. In fact, for most parts during the last four decades, China's foreign policies have been primarily *a reaction* and at times worse still, she was *a victim* of the unfavorable changing environment in the region. On the whole, China was not able to assert nor to achieve and even less to initiate her foreign policy goals in the region at her own will.

In a nutshell, one of China's most important foreign policy goals was, still is and will be to ensure that the southern part of her frontiers are completely free from any security threats emanating from any of her adversaries. China's behaviour in Southeast Asia in the 20th century is different from her conduct during the 15th century when Admiral Cheng Ho of the Ming dynasty could travel freely in Southeast Asia without facing any major resistance and challenges both from the states within and without the region.

Since China perceives her southern borders as part of her *backyard*. Beijing's main consideration has been to ensure that there would be no security threats by any of the superpowers or any regional power. Hence, China had not, could not and will not tolerate any foreign power, especially the US and the USSR to commit any serious acts of intrusion into her backyard. This does not however imply that China wants to seek a sphere of influence in the region or that she has imperialistic aspirations or intends to adopt a consistent long-range policy of colonization of the Indochinese region as the French imperialists did since the mid-19th century until 1954.

From 1949 to 1975, China's foreign policy was mainly a reaction to the US foreign policies towards Indochina in particular, and Asia in general. Hence China became a victim of the cold war confrontation between the US and the USSR. Throughout the 1940's until today, China's policy towards Indochina shows a consistent pattern, i. e. when she perceived that the security threats from the US increased, as they did at the height of the Vietnam war in the mid-1960's, China increased her support to the 'people's wars' in the non-communist ASEAN states as well as to the three Indochinese communist revolutionary movements. But when China perceived the threats were decreasing, as Mao quite correctly did in the late 1960's, in the wake of President Nixon's announcement of the 'Vietnamization' of the Indochinese war and the declaration of the Guam Doctrine in 1969, her support to the three communist revolutionary movements as well as to the communist insurgency movements in the ASEAN states correspondingly decreased. Instead of promoting 'people's liberation wars' in Southeast Asia, as she did in the 1960's, China began in the early 1970's, to reactivate the Five Bandung Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (1955). At times she even went out of her way to promote good state to state relations with the ASEAN states, — even to the extent of sacrificing her economic interests.² — which then eventually resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1974 with Malaysia and in 1975 with the Philippines and Thailand.

In short, when the US threat decreased China's support to the Indochinese communist movements also decreased. In this sense, the two hypotheses which have been expounded by J.D. Armstrong are relevant in explaining China's foreign policy towards the Indochinese region, i.e. hypothesis one: "There is no such thing as a long-term Chinese foreign policy strategy, merely a series of adjustments to external developments with the objective of maximizing security."³ Hypothesis two: "Chinese

policymakers perceive and evaluate international events in terms of their effect upon the security of China. Events will be ranked in importance according to the extent to which they involve an immediate and direct threat to China or offer some means of countering such a threat.”⁴

III. Pattern of Cooperation: 1949–1975

For more than two decades, China's policies towards Indochina especially Vietnam could best be summarized as pattern of cooperation. The US involvement in Indochina from 1955 until the Indochina debacle in mid-1975 was the most important factor which cemented Beijing's bond with Hanoi, the Khmer Rouge and the Pathet Laos. Because of Mao's concern that the US war efforts in Indochina were directly posing a security threat to China's security, Mao decided to go all out to back Vietnam in her war against the US. In this sense, China's policy of cooperation with Vietnam was a function of the US policy. In fact, at the height of the war i.e. from 1965 to 1968, China claimed to have sent about 320,000 men to North Vietnam and given them aid amounting to more than US\$2 billion.⁵ Taking into consideration that China was a poor states which had been devastated by the Japanese occupation from 1937 to 1945 and plagued by the civil war from 1946 to 1949, and that Mao desired to reconstruct China's devastated economy since 1949, this amount of aid rendered to Vietnam was certainly a considerable sacrifice.

The decision on the part of Mao to seek closer cooperation with the 'comrades in arms' in Indochina from 1949 to 1975 was mainly due to the US containment and anti-China policy. Mao was especially infuriated and frustrated by the US's strong support of Taiwan which rendered Mao's desire to 'liberate' the island unachievable. It also made it impossible for Mao to achieve one of his last political ambitions in the early 1950's to

unite China under his tutelage. Furthermore, Mao's support of the Indochinese communist struggle in the late 1950's and the early 1960's was also shaped by Mao's own perception and assessment that the international strategic environment was unfavorable to China. Mao suspected that there was a possible 'collusion' between the US and the USSR at the expense of China's national interests. Mao was particularly disturbed since Khrushchev came into power especially by his famous speech in 1956 expounding the thesis of peaceful coexistence between socialism and imperialism. Mao therefore viewed with suspicion the Camp David Agreement in 1958 which was signed between the US and the USSR and the Tripartite Nuclear Test Ban Treaty signed in 1963 between the US, the USSR and the UK. In short, during this period Mao saw the need to advocate a hardline policy towards the US through the 'international united front' strategy in the wake of Khrushchev's policy of detente with the US.

It was however unclear whether the role of Maoist ideology if so and to what extent, played a part in shaping Mao's decision to support the Indochinese 'people's liberation' war against 'US' imperialism'. But the subsequent escalation of the conflicts in Indochina from 1978 to 1989 among the communist powers, i.e. the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam and China and the USSR render support to the argument that Maoist ideology as an input in China's foreign policy was probably not central in China's overall assessment of her foreign policy objectives. In this sense, one might argue that Maoist ideology as an input of China's foreign policy towards the Indochinese states was at most minimal, if not totally irrelevant. National interests, i.e. security and strategic considerations remained the central factors in governing China's international relations in this region. Furthermore, it can also be argued that there is no strong evidence to suggest that the claim made by Vietnam that China has a desire or long-

term systematic plan to colonize the three Indochinese states is relevant. A US analyst, Steven I. Levine, in analysing China's foreign policy behaviour in Asia argued that "Although much, if not most, of China's foreign policy is focused on Asia, at the conceptual level the Chinese rarely think in regional terms at all."⁶ In Levine's observations, "to a significant degree, China has been a regional power without a regional policy."⁷ In this sense, China's foreign policy towards the Indochinese region from 1949 to 1975 was to minimize the US threat to Beijing. Similarly, China's policies towards the Indochinese region since 1975, as it will be shown subsequently, is aimed primarily at denying (though not successfully) a Soviet presence in Indochina which is perceived as a direct threat to China's southern frontiers. Thus China's policy was not aimed at initiating and at seeking domination and at embarking on an imperialist scheme towards the three Indochinese states. If one accepts the above argument as valid, then it would be difficult to accept the premises that China has been seeking a sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. Thus one can argue that the closer cooperation between China and Socialist Vietnam from 1949 to 1975 was not motivated to carve a niche or seek a sphere of influence in Indochina.

IV. Pattern of Conflict between China and Vietnam: 1978 — 1989

In international relations, no states have permanent friends nor permanent enemies. This political axiom is certainly true in describing the changing pattern of Sino-Vietnamese relations, i.e. from being friends in the 1950's and the 1960's to becoming enemies in the late 1970's and 1980's. By the end of the 1960's, the political environment in the Indochinese region changed fundamentally which eroded the bases of Sino-Vietnamese cooperation. The following highlight some of the developments which

resulted in the changing patterns from cooperation to conflicts between the two states. Firstly, one of the most important changes which affected the pattern of Sino-Vietnamese relations was the victory of the Republican Presidential candidate Richard Nixon who became the new President of the US in January 1969. He initiated a new policy of 'balance of power' and thus abandoned the obsolete cold war policy of ideological confrontation between the East and the West. The US debacle in Indochina in 1975, removed the basis for Sino-Vietnamese cooperation which was previously based on the common perception of the 'US threat'. Since then in Mao's perception, the US was not any longer the number one enemy in his assessment of China's foreign policy objectives towards Indochina in general and Vietnam in particular. Sino-Vietnamese amity was possible because of this common enemy. No sooner was this factor removed, the basis of the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts began to come to the fore.

The 'USSR factor' now replaced the US as the focal point behind the conflicts between the two states, as the goals and priorities of the two countries towards the USSR were different. China's armed conflicts in March 1969 with the USSR over the territorial disputes along the Ussuri River resulted in the stationing of a large number of Soviet troops along the Chinese borders. This new threat prompted Mao to seek some new dialogues with Washington. Hanoi however perceived this move as a betrayal, as the Indochinese war was still in full force. Worse still, Hanoi was particularly disturbed by China's attempts to pressure her to seek a peace settlement with President Nixon on the latter's terms and to cajole her into abandoning her armed struggle which she was strongly committed to.

Despite China's pressure and threats to cut off all support, Hanoi stubbornly resisted and decided to turn to the USSR for more military and economic assistance so as to speed up her armed attacks on South Vietnam.

In the perception of Hanoi, she had learnt as the experience from the 1954 Geneva Conference showed that Mao deep in his heart, was not keen in helping Ho Chih Min to realize his ambition to unify North and South Vietnam which was a very important goal for the Vietnamese leadership since the inception of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. Hence Michael Yahuda's observation is relevant as he said "the Chinese leaders were none too keen to see the unification of Vietnam and at one point they publicly endorsed the idea that the North and the newly liberated South might be admitted to the United Nations as separate entities."⁸ In this sence, H. Ray has argued that China preferred a divided Vietnam, as a united country together with Hanoi's control over Kampuchea and Laos might eventually, challenge Beijing's interests in Indochina.⁹ Secondly, the most important factor which contributed to the intense hostility between the two states was Vietnam's decision to abandon her equaldistant policy towards China and the USSR. China would probably have had no objection and certainly would not in any way have perceived Hanoi as a direct threat to China's security interests with or without the annexation of Kampuchea and Laos had it not abandoned this equal-distant policy. The power relationship between the two countries is too assymetrical, i.e. China is too much of a 'Goliath' dragon to be threatened directly by a small Vietnamese 'David'. The Chinese being pragmatists, took cognizance and accepted the fact that given the assymetrical power relationship between Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos and the radical nature of Vietnam's nationalism and communism, and her firm belief in creating a unified Indochina, it is inevitable that Kampuchea, a fragmented state plagued by factionalism, is destined to be a vassal state if not an outright colony if nature would take its course. The fact that Kampuchea had not become a Vietnamese colony at a much earlier date was mainly due to the advances of French imperialism since the 19th century and the US intervention since

1955.

As soon as Hanoi achieved her goals to unite the North with the South in July 1976, Hanoi began to turn part of her efforts towards the achievement of an Indochinese confederation or 'socialist unity' in Indochina with Hanoi as the center of tutelage. China would have probably accepted the fact that sooner or later, Vietnam would dictate the course of foreign policies of both Kampuchea and Laos had the Russian factor not entered the picture in Indochina.

From Beijing's perspective, the main cause of the conflict in Indochina was Vietnam's policy tilt towards the USSR, China's arch enemy. China's growing anger towards Hanoi since 1975 was motivated by a number of factors. The most important irritants were Hanoi's decision, firstly, to permit the USSR the use of Cam Ram Bay which was perceived by China as a potential threat to her security along her southern frontiers as well as the South China Sea. Secondly, China perceived Hanoi's decision to join COMECON in June 1978, despite Beijing's repeated warnings, as another evidence of Vietnam's intentions to challenge China's national interests. Thirdly, China, especially Deng Xiaoping reached his utmost level of tolerance when Hanoi signed the 25 years of Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow in November,¹⁰ which was perceived by China as posing a direct challenge and threat to her security. As mentioned earlier, China could not tolerate any presence of any one of the superpowers along her southern borders.

Vietnam's decision to invade Kampuchea was a contributing factor to the Sino-Vietnamese conflict but the invasion per se was not a fundamental cause of the conflicts between the two states. The 1978 invasion however, gave China a good excuse to launch some very carefully calculated, limited armed clashes against Vietnam which lasted for only six weeks i.e. between February and March 1979. Thus security and strategic

considerations mainly motivated China to launch this military punitive action against Vietnam. Besides the threats from the Soviet Union to her southern border, Beijing was especially worried about an even worse scenario, i.e. Hanoi and the USSR might collude to use force to reoccupy the Paracel and the Spratley Islands Vietnam lost to China.

Thus the crux of the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts from Beijing's perspective was the so-called Vietnamese-Russian 'collusion' against Beijing since 1978, although Hanoi had no such intentions at all.

Thirdly, since Hanoi's liberation of the South in 1975, the Vietnamese communist leadership had adopted certain foreign policy lines which displeased Beijing. Since China gave staunch support to Vietnam in her fight against the US even to the extent of affecting the funds for the badly needed economic development, China was unwilling to accept Vietnam's behaviour of 'Wang En Fu Yi' (忘恩負義) (ungratefulness).

But Hanoi never supported China's hardline policy towards the Soviet Union, especially when Beijing took the 'anti-hegemonistic' stand in the wake of the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 which was strongly condemned by Mao. However, despite China's pressure, Hanoi refused to follow suit.¹¹

At the ideological level, Mao advocated the end of the Socialist camp whereas Hanoi firmly believed in the unity of international communism. Thus Hanoi's call on the two communist giants to resolve their conflicts amicably for the sake of the international communist unity angered Mao.

The argument of Vietnam's 'ungratefulness' as a factor in explaining the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts is based on the assumption that there was a discrepancy of expectations and values between the two states. In a way, as mentioned previously, China's foreign policy towards Vietnam is unique in one aspect as Vietnam is the only sinicized state in Southeast Asia. Thus China expects that a special kind of relationship between the two countries

should reign, i.e. based on the Confucian ideology. The smaller brother should respect the wishes of the bigger brother. Thus the conflicts between Vietnam and China could also be due to these differences in cultural expectations based on this special patron-client relationship. From Hanoi's perspective, she could not accept this patron-client relationship. Hanoi reckoned that Beijing's support in the 1950's and 1960's was based on selfish rather than altruistic motivations.

Perhaps Beijing underestimated the resilience of the Vietnamese national character and culture and their resolute desire to preserve their hard-earned independence. They are therefore expecting a relationship based on the principle of equality. After all, Hanoi had once boasted that Vietnam and not China was the first country to defeat American 'imperialism' in Asia.

Could the Sino-Vietnam conflict (1979-89) have been avoided if the Chinese had been more sensitive to the Vietnamese feelings or vice-verse? It is not easy to answer this hypothetical question, but the fact remains, as Michael Yahuda observed that by mid-1977, "Sino-Vietnamese relations were set inexorably on a collusion course in which global, regional and local dimensions of their conflict interacted in ways that neither was able to control."¹²

The border disputes both on land and at sea had their roots in the past, the racial outbursts between the Vietnamese and the ethnic Chinese, the ideological differences and discrepancies of expectations between the big brother and the smaller brother, together with a sense of mutual betrayal and disappointments on both sides, all emerged and were linked with the larger security and strategic interests of both states which then finally led to the war in 1979. The border disputes, the ethnic conflicts between Vietnam and China, the ideological and cultural differences were not crucial factors but certainly exacerbated the conflicts.

V. Assessment

What important inferences can be drawn from China's foreign policy towards Indochina since 1949 ? Firstly, the most important observation is China's desire to ensure that her southern borders of her territory both on land and at sea are free from threats by any of the superpowers. Secondly, Beijing's hostilities towards the US and later on towards the USSR and Vietnam underline the weaknesses and limitations of China to project herself as a 'superpower' in the region. By the end of the 1970's, China's outlook for playing the role of a major power, not to mention the role of a superpower in the region looked bleak. Her military strength was falling far behind her Russian counterpart in the region, as she was not powerful enough to change Vietnam's policy in Kampuchea. The limited six week armed conflict with Vietnam clearly brought to the fore the weaknesses and contratints of China's power as she was not able to dictate the course of development in Indochina on her own terms and reverse Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea. By the end of the 1970's, China completely failed to achieve her foreign policy goals in Indochina. The only winner was the Soviet Union, although Beijing did indeed inflict considerable damages upon Vietnam's economy.

In short, in the words of Sheldon W. Simon, "Hanoi's conquest of Indochina demonstrates China's military and political weakness its inability to control political change on its own borders. Not only did this reveal that China is not a global power but it also called into question whether it was much of a regional actor as well."¹³

Thirdly, China's foreign policy behaviour can be a factor of both stability and instability in the region. For example, China's smiling diplomacy in 1955 during the Bandung Conference and her endorsement of the Principles of peaceful coexistence and China's desire to promote normal

state to state relations with the ASEAN states brought stability to the region. When China, however not hesitated to use force in the South China Sea and continued her hardline policy towards Vietnam, as well as stubbornly endorsed the unpopular Khmer Rouge, Beijing brought about instability to Indochina.

For most parts, China's foreign policy towards Indochina has been mainly a reaction to the policies of the superpowers, i.e. the US and the USSR as well as to some extent to Vietnam's policies towards Kampuchea. Security and strategic and territorial claims have shown to be the most important factors in shaping China's foreign policies towards Indochina and the South China Sea. Ideology, ethnicity, exporting Maoist revolution and seeking colonies have not seem to be an important factor on China's foreign policy agenda, not at least until China can overcome her economic, political and military weaknesses.

VI. Prospects

Will the pattern of hostility between China and Vietnam which persisted since the late 1970's continue in the 1990's? Is there any evidence to indicate a possibility of change, i.e. might the pattern of hostility evolve into one of normalization and eventually cooperation in the 1990's?

In the wake of Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea since December 1978 until 1986, China did adopt a hard-line policy aiming at 'bleeding Vietnam white'. It consisted of the following various tough means, i.e. military pressure along the Sino-Vietnamese border by stationing a substantial number of Chinese troops; diplomatic cooperation with the ASEAN grouping as well as those states who were against Vietnam such as the US and Thailand; trying to diplomatically isolate Vietnam in the UN and other international organizations; military and financial assistance

to anti-Vietnamese Democratic Kampuchean factions, especially strong support for the Khmer Rouge and finally political propaganda. All of these measures were aimed at inflicting serious costs to Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea. At the same time, China tried to project Vietnam as a 'bad guy' showing on various occasions Beijing's willingness to resolve the Kampuchean conflict through direct negotiations with Vietnam. These tactics of course, turned out to be part of her strategies in pressuring Vietnam to pull out her occupation forces from Kampuchea. Beijing persistently insisted that the Kampuchean problem cannot be solved and the Sino-Vietnamese relations cannot be improved if Hanoi adamantly refused to pull out her troops from Kampuchea and stopped once and for all what China perceived to be Vietnam's expansionism into Laos and Kampuchea.

Despite various ouvertures on the part of Vietnam to improve relations with China and Hanoi's promise to pull out all her troops from Kampuchea, China's hardline policy remained unchanged up to 1986. Thus the Sino-Vietnamese pattern of hostility continued. Unlike some of the ASEAN states, such as Malaysia and especially Indonesia, who were more sympathetic towards Vietnam, China argued that any compromise or soft option adopted in dealing with Vietnam, would be tantamount to admitting weakness on the part of the ASEAN grouping. Such a stand, Beijing insisted might encourage Hanoi to further her ambitions to look beyond Indochina. Thus as the logic of the argument implied, Thailand might be the next target for revolution as it is the frontline state of the ASEAN grouping. Hence the Kampuchean quagmire remained unresolved and no prospects of peace were within sight up to 1986, as long as Sino-Vietnamese hostilities continued.

However, there was some evidence to suggest that since 1987 China began to soften her policy of 'bleeding Vietnam white' and there were

some signs that she tried to improve her relations with Vietnam. China began to show a more flexible attitude by accepting Prince Shihanouk as Head of State of the Coalition of the Democratic Kampuchean government. This stand was a reversal of China's belief that the Khmer Rouge were the only viable alternative in posing a serious challenge to Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea. Thus China gave up the idea that the Khmer Rouge should be the dominant power to lead the anti-Vietnamese coalition forces.

Why did China change her attitude ? Firstly, perhaps the most important factor which resulted in China's volte-face was Gorbachev's rise to power and the implementation of his historic 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost' policy, but more importantly, Moscow's subsequent decision to pull out her troops from Afghanistan. In short, Gorbachev had set the pace for the profound impact detente had both at the global as well as at the regional level, which resulted in an overall improvement of the political climate in Southeast Asia.

Gorbachev's decision to pull out from Afghanistan had profound impact on Vietnam as it made Hanoi's occupation of Kampuchea untenable. Without Moscow's military aid and her huge financial support, Hanoi's occupation of Kampuchea became unsustainable, as Vietnam being one of the poorest states in the world, does not have the economic means and resources to sustain her military presence in Kampuchea and Laos.

In a way, Gorbachev's policy in the late 1980's, like President Nixon's policy in the late 1960's, convinced Beijing that the Soviet threat to China's southern borders began to decrease. There was therefore no need anymore for China to adopt a hard-line policy towards Indochina, especially towards Vietnam. As mentioned previously, China does not perceive that Vietnam alone can pose any serious security threat to Beijing. In this sense, the 'bleeding Vietnam white' policy did not serve China's national interests

anymore. Secondly, with the disintegration of socialism in the East European states and the uncertainty of the prospects of world communism, China, Vietnam and North Korea remain the last three bastions of Asian socialism who staunchly uphold the path of socialism. Hence ideology may be a factor in helping to improve Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1990's. Thirdly, by November, 1989, Hanoi decided to pull out her troops from Kampuchea and thereby removed one of the conditions insisted upon by China which was the major stumbling block hindering the improvement of Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Finally, both the domestic developments in Vietnam and China may also have partly contributed to the desire of both governments to improve their diplomatic relations so that both states can concentrate on their efforts to reconstruct their economies.¹⁴ Furthermore, with the passing away of Vietnam's hardline first generation old guards, the desire to achieve a confederation of Indochina with Hanoi as the center of power may not necessarily be anymore an important goal of Vietnam's foreign policy in the 1990's.

With the implementation of certain capitalistic policies, such as encouraging tourism, under the new leadership of Nguyen Van Linh, Hanoi is likely to build capitalistic socialism at home first rather than to promote regional socialism in Indochina in the 1990's.

Similarly, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square crisis since June 1989, China is expected to face serious political and economic difficulties at home. As far as the political dimension is concerned, power struggles are expected to take place among the top hierarchical leadership in the post Deng Xiaoping era. The lack of institutionalization of the political leadership succession after Deng creates great uncertainty. And unlike the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, who has groomed systematically through the institutionalization process a team of second-

generation leaders to succeed him since 1976, there is no sign to indicate that China's paramount leader did the same thing. Taking into consideration the internal difficulties of these two states, it therefore makes sense to infer that there is a common interest to improve their external relations.

In short, since 1976, China has been taking positive steps to improve relations with Vietnam. Kampuchea, however, remains the crux of the problem between China and Vietnam. But on January 16, 1990, China for the first time together with the other four members in the Security Council agreed to an UN role in Kampuchea so as to end the conflict in Indochina. China's decision at the UN marked a breakthrough in China's policies towards Indochina, i.e. a reversal of Beijing's long-time backing of the Khmer Rouge in the UN.¹⁵ Hence the evolving of the pattern of conflicts to the pattern of normalization in the Sino-Vietnamese relations is expected to take place in the 1990's.

Notes

- 1 . For a detailed study of the Sino-Vietnamese territorial disputes, see Pao-min Chang, *The Sino-Vietnamese Territorial Dispute* (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1985).
- 2 . China for example sold 150,000 tons of diesel oil to Thailand in 1975 for only US\$0.93 per ton, which was US\$12 cheaper than the world 200,000 tons of rice from Thailand in July, 1975 so as to minimize the trade imbalance in favor of China. See Shee Poon Kim, 'The politics of Thailand's Trade with the People's Republic of China', *Asian Survey*, March 1981, Vol. xxi, No. 3, pp.321-322.
- 3 . J. D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p.61.

- 4 . *Ibid*, p.60.
- 5 . *Beijing Review*, No.48, 30.11.1979, p.14.
- 6 . Steven, I. Levine, *China in Asia: the PRC as a Regional Power*, in Harry Harding, ed., *China's Foreign Relations in the 1980s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) p.107.
- 7 . *Ibid*, p.107.
- 8 . Michael Yahuda, *Towards The End of Isolationism: China's Foreign Policy After Mao* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983) p.226.
- 9 . H. Ray, *China's Vietnam War* (Radiant Publishers, 1983) p.55.
10. For a detailed study, see Lau Teik Soon, 'The Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty: A Giant Step Forward.' in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1980*, pp.66-77, (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1981).
11. Mao interpreted the 1968 invasion as a sign of 'social imperialism'.
12. Michael Yahuda, *op.cit.*, p.227.
13. Sheldon W. Simon, *ASEAN States and Regional Security*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1982), p.71.
14. The implementation of socialist economic policies in both states has not shown to be the best choice for improving the quality of the standard of living of their people. Especially in Vietnam, after suffering from many years of war, the economy has been totally ravaged. There are growing signs that the Vietnamese people are loosing patience to keep tightening their belt and accepting Vietnamese communism. Student demonstrations both in China and Vietnam in 1989 are the best testimony that there is something seriously wrong with these two economies.
15. *The Straits Times* (Singapore) 18.1.1990.