

# The New Phase in Sino-Vietnamese Relations since 1989

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## 1. Process of Normalization

The Summit between Do Muoi, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party (hereafter VCP) and Jiang Zemin, Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) held in Beijing from the 5th to the 8th November, 1991, marked the end of more than a decade of Sino-Vietnamese hostilities and ushered in a new phase in relations between the two countries.

Contemporary Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1945 have evolved through three distinct patterns, i.e. first, the 'lip and teeth' Alliance (1945–1975) to secondly, a period of hostility (1977–1988), culminating in a limited war in February/March, 1979 and a short skirmish over the Spratly Islands in March, 1988 and finally to the present pattern of entente.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the process of and analyse the motivations for normalization between the two states. Prior to 1989, negotiations between the two governments bore no fruitful results, mainly because of Hanoi's adamant refusal to accept the stringent pre-conditions of resumption of relations set by China which included inter alia that, firstly, Vietnam must withdraw her troops completely and unconditionally from Kampuchea and Laos. Secondly, she had to accept the Khmer Rouge's legitimate role in any peace negotiations. Thirdly, to end Vietnam's anti-Chinese policies and to issue an apology; fourthly, to terminate Moscow's use of the military bases and facilities in Cam Ran Bay though China did not demand that the Sino-Vietnamese alliance be terminated.

From 1979 to 1988, Vietnam steadfastly upheld her uncompromising hard-line policies towards China. By 1989, however, there were signs that Hanoi began to take some initiatives to ease tensions between the two states. The first signs of a thaw in their frosty relations came in January, 1989 with a Deputy Ministerial Meeting between the two governments held in Beijing. Though the meeting bore no concrete results, it did however provide a psychological breakthrough for both sides, since both parties attempted bona fide to minimize their differences, so as to lessen the gap in their respective intransigent positions.

Despite harsh criticism from the West, Vietnam's response to the Tiananmen crisis in July, 1989 was one of caution and in fact, she adopted a very low profile attitude. Vietnam's moderate posture was due to the following reasons: firstly, she did not want to destroy the momentum generated from the process of the Sino-Vietnamese detente five months after the first important meeting; secondly, she faced the same problems at home as Vietnamese students also demanded political freedom and wanted the government to undertake reforms. Thirdly, Beijing would have options available, if necessary, such as agitating the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, to use in her anti-Vietnamese campaigns and propaganda if Vietnam continued to be critical of China.

In September, 1989, Vietnam again took the initiative to improve relations with China when the VCP Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh during a ceremony on the eve of the 44th Anniversary of the founding of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam promised to pull out all the troops from Kampuchea by the end of 1989. China responded favorably which subsequently resulted in a flurry of high-level visits between the two capitals. Since then, both sides have moved further to take positive steps to normalize their relations. For the first time since 1977, i.e., in September, 1990, Hanoi's top three leaders Nguyen Van Linh, Do Muoi and Pham Van Dong met their Chinese

counterparts in Chengdu, China's Sichuan Province in an unpublized secret mission during which both sides signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding' <sup>1</sup>. In the same month, when Vo Nguyen Giap was invited to Beijing in connection with the 11th Asian Games (21st–24th September, 1990), he seized this golden opportunity to sound out the Chinese leaders' attitude towards normalization. In January, 1991, Vietnam again took the initiative to invite Beijing to send a delegation to visit Hanoi. Contacts then continued unabated. Six months later, in July, 1991, General Le Duc Anh, the then Defence Minister and the number two man in the Party's top hierarchy, visited Beijing. However, the diplomatic breakthrough came during the August 8th to 10th 1991 meeting with Vietnam's Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Dien and China's Vice-Foreign Minister Xu Dunxin whereby they agreed in principle to restore full diplomatic relations. After this meeting, Vietnam's attitude towards China changed drastically, especially as far as her policies towards Kampuchea were concerned. Since then, Hanoi agreed to cooperate not only with China but also with the international community in a common effort to find a just solution to end the Kampuchean quagmire based on a comprehensive framework of peace initiated and agreed upon by the five permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations (hereafter P-5 plan). This volte face marked a reversal of Vietnam's rejection of the P-5 plan during previous occasions, when Vietnam argued that the Kampuchean conflict had nothing to do with her since she had already withdrawn her troops from Kampuchea. In any case, Vietnam took the position that the Kampuchean conflict had to be resolved by the Kampucheans themselves.

From China's perspective, Hanoi's volte face was a welcome move, signalling Vietnam's sincerity to end the Kampuchean conflict. During the 7th Party Congress held in July, 1991, the Party not only reaffirmed but also wanted to accelerate the process of normalization with China. <sup>2</sup> To show Vietnam's commitment, Vo Van Kiet, a southerner, a moderate reformist was

appointed as the Head of the Council of Ministers (Prime Minister). This appointment sent a signal to Beijing that Hanoi was ready for full restoration of Sino-Vietnamese ties. Accordingly, China's Premier Li Peng reacted favorably by sending a telegram to Vo Van Kiet which indicated China's desire to have an early date for restoring relations between the two states.<sup>3</sup>

Two months later, namely on 9th September, 1991, Vietnam's new Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam officially visited Beijing which was the first foreign ministerial encounter since 1979.<sup>4</sup> Cam's six day sojourn was of political significance as it marked another positive step in the process towards complete normalization of Sino-Vietnamese ties. Not surprisingly, Xinhua News Agency carried a favourable report on Cam's visit. The meeting did pave the way for the Sino-Viet nameese November, 1991 Summit. Besides state-to-state relations, party-to-party and economic ties were also strengthened. In October, 1991, for example, a delegation of the CCP visited its counterpart in Hanoi. This meeting was the first encounter between top party-to-party officials since 1979.

Economic ties also strengthened since 1983. In October, 1990, for example, both governments signed an agreement on tourism which aimed at strengthening economic ties.

## II. Reasons for Normalization

Why was normalization possible after a decade of fruitless negotiations? To answer this question, it is pertinent to hypothesize that internal factors such as 1. Ideology; 2. Leadership; 3. Economy; 4. New foreign policy thinking, as well as external factors, such as 5. the Kampuchean conflict; 6. Gorbachev's factor, and finally, the changing international environment, are all relevant to this inquiry. The following sections attempt to look at these factors.

## 1. Ideology

Was the rapprochement in Sino-Vietnamese relations due to changes in the ideological orientation of both sides? From the Vietnamese ideological parlance, since the inception of the VCP in 1930, Hanoi until the mid-1980's, followed faithfully the Leninist notion of class struggle in international relations as the central notion of her ideological orientation. The gerontocratic Vietnamese revolutionaries steadfastly upheld this orthodox ideological purity to the extent that they regarded themselves as the only genuine champions of revolutionary ideology in Southeast Asia. Naturally, they perceived China's decision to seek detente with the US in the early 1970's as betrayal of the Marxian-Leninist ideology and thereby from Hanoi's world view, China committed the ideological sin of 'revisionism', i.e., appeasement with 'imperialism'. However, by the middle of 1984, Hanoi began to reconceptualise her world view and ideological outlook. By 1988, the ageing 'old guards' formally accepted the 'new thinking' in their ideological horizon and acknowledged the changing new international economic order. This volte face had profound ramifications for Vietnam's domestic policy priorities as well as her foreign policy formulations. Why did such a change occur? With the victory over 'imperialism' as a result of the US 'debacle' in Indochina in 1975, the Vietnamese communist leaders were supremely confident in the superiority of socialism over capitalism/feudalism in the post 'liberation' era for economic reconstruction of their country. In the mid 1970's the Vietnamese communist vanguards made their ambitions so blatantly known that they wanted to show to the world that Vietnamese socialism was the best revolutionary model for the economic development in Southeast Asia and indeed for the whole world. Even up to the 5th Congress in 1982, Hanoi still upheld the notion of the superiority of socialism over capitalism. However, by 1987, with the appointment of Nguyen Van Linh as Secretary General of the

VCP the Party adopted the policy of 'Doi Moi' (Renovation) and 'Cong Khai', (Openness) indicating not only that profound changes of policy but also shifts in the ideological orientation of the leadership were in the offing. After eleven years of implementing the socialist autarkic model of economic development, the 'old guards' had to reluctantly accept the fact that the SRV's economy was in deep trouble. They already had already doubts about the validity of their thesis of the superiority of socialism over capitalism. One of the reasons why the economy had failed miserably was because the ageing Vietnamese revolutionaries were champions of war but unexperienced in peace. For their whole adult lives they had been fully committed to and engaged in wars, fighting one imperialist power after another since 1930. Thus, peace to them was a luxury and worse still, development was an unfamiliar concept. In other words, the Vietnamese communists are good in destruction but poor in economic development. Thus, instead of opting for peace with Kampuchea, Hanoi embraced war. Hanoi's changing ideological orientation was also to some extent affected by Gorbachev's 'new thinking' of Perestroika and Glasnost. After sixty-eight years of practising Soviet socialism, Gorbachev started to seriously question the suitability of the Soviet model of socialism in bringing about economic affluence for the Soviet people. Moreover, the Vietnamese communist leaders could see very clearly that their Asian neighbours' choice for the path of the free-market economy and export-oriented developmental priority generated much more and faster impressive economic growth. Indeed, capitalism did not show any signs of decline as predicted by the orthodox Vietnamese communists. On the contrary, it proved to be a very successful superior model of economic growth. The cases of Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, etc., are living testimonies to this success.

From the Chinese perspective, although Maoist ideology has been strongly de-emphasized since the post-Mao era, it does not signify that Deng has

totally rejected ideology in China's foreign policy calculations. Indeed, ideology is the basic foundation of China's foreign policy formulation. At the ideological level, it would be difficult for China in the foreseeable future to forego the ideology of socialism. On the contrary, the preservation of socialism has become all the more an important task for China with the fall of communism since 1989. As such, there is a need to be friendly with Vietnam so as to entice Hanoi in a common endeavour to preserve the fading away of the socialist ideology. Lately, during the last few months, a flurry of visits by other socialist leaders to Beijing testified that the latter has now become the de facto ideological 'Mecca' of socialism.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Leadership

It could be hypothesized that Sino-Vietnamese hostilities might not have reached a point of no return or might even have been totally eliminated if Ho Chih Min (who passed away in 1969) had lived for another decade. Ho, a very seasoned international communist, had a long-standing personal friendship with the top Chinese communist leaders, including Deng Xiaoping. He would have probably been able to clear the storm during this difficult decade of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970's.

However, the post-Ho era saw the emergence of hardliners who were not only staunch Leninist communists but were at the same time, highly ardent nationalists under the tutelage of Le Duan (1969–1986) and his aides-de camp Le Duc Tho, Nguyen Co Thach, Mai Chi Tho, etc. (strongly anti-ethnic Chinese), who ushered in a new phase of hardline policies towards China. It can be argued that the tough personality of ex-Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach (dropped after the 7th party Congress as a political price payable to China because of her pressure), was partially instrumental in explaining the difficulty to improve as quickly as possible the Sino-Vietnamese relations.

From the Chinese perspective, Nguyen Co Thach's uncompromising attitude and at times critical comments 'humiliated' the Chinese who expected 'the smaller brother' to tally to 'the big brother's' wishes. But with the emergence of a moderate, reformist-minded and certainly personality-wise less anti-China disposed leadership in the person of Nguyen Van Linh as Secretary-General in the 6th party Congress in 1986, there were signs that Sino-Vietnamese relations would become less tense. Furthermore, with the rise of the pragmatist, reformist-minded Premier Vo Van Kiet and Secretary General of the VCP, Do Muoi in the 7th Party Congress, Sino-Vietnamese relations continued to improve. Thus, one can conclude that Vietnam's changing top leadership corresponded to a thawing in Sino-Vietnamese relations. However, it needs to be emphasized that the leadership, though an important factor, was not the only determinant which shaped the complex and dynamic Sino-Vietnamese relations.

One of the main reasons for the current Vietnamese leadership to abandon Le Duan and his associates' pro-Moscow policy and to seek detente and even 'kowtow' to China was because the current leadership calculated that the advantages derived from detente and accommodation with China would by far outweigh any closer alliance with Moscow. Since 1985, due to insurmountable internal economic problems and political difficulties, Gorbachev was not in a position any longer nor did he possess the capability to deliver substantial economic aid to keep Vietnam's economy afloat. Thus, with the declining succour from Moscow and the Eastern bloc countries, and worse still, faced with a trade embargo from the West, coupled with Tokyo's reluctance to deliver her 'cheques' as well as the ASEAN states' hard-line policy, Vietnam had no option but to patch up her impediments with China, a country, geographically near and strategically and economically important to Vietnam which does not have the luxury to ignore, let alone be hostile to her more powerful neighbour. Therefore, especially during the Sino-Vietnamese

war in February, 1979, the Vietnamese leaders came to the conclusion that the constraints and limitations posed by the Moscow-Hanoi alliance did not validate any longer the continuation of her pro-Moscow policy. After all, she was a distant collapsing 'superpower' who could not and was not any longer capable of salvaging Hanoi from potential storms. At any rate, their alliance proved to trigger off more irritants than offering cooperation and mutual admiration. In fact, the alliance was nothing more than a marriage of convenience which now only existed in name but not in substance.

### 3. Moribund Socialist Economy

From the Vietnamese perspective, first and foremost was the collapse of the autarkic socialist economic model of development and ideology of communism. The Vietnamese communist leadership proved to be unable to meet if not satisfy the rising aspirations and expectations of their people. After more than fifteen years of economic development, Vietnam, with a population of 66 millions and a per capita GNP of about US\$175 (1990), remains one of the poorest countries in Asia.'

Despite the euphoria over the communist victory in Indochina in 1975, and thereafter over the unification of the South with the North in July, 1976, the country has been persistently plagued with serious economic problems, such as unemployment (10% of the workforce) underemployment (12 millions), runaway inflation, declining value of currency, bureaucratic inertia and rampant corruption among the cadres. In the words of a Vietnamese economist, since the 1976 unification, the living standards of the majority of the people, especially the workers, soldiers, civil servants and intellectuals, etc., have deteriorated continuously due inter-alia to mainly sky-rocketing runaway inflation (at times 700 to 1000%).<sup>8</sup> In fact, one can argue that the Vietnamese economy is clearly on the brink of collapse, unless specific reforms work fast

enough to produce tangible results'.<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing the limitations and weaknesses of the socialist model of economic development, Vietnam has, since the 6th Party Congress in December, 1986, initiated some new thinkings and policies, such as 'Doi Moi' and 'Cong Khai' (initiated in 1979) with the hope to overcome the economic malaise. Hanoi's economic 'health' is so totally undermined that unless massive inputs of cash and technical knowhow from external sources (capitalist world) are pumped in, there is no way Hanoi can achieve the basic objectives of her new policy. Thus, rapprochement with China so as to receive economic aid was one of the paramount considerations in Hanoi's decision to abandon her hardline policy towards China.

In the last few years, the Vietnamese communist government felt the pinch from the pressure emanating from the bottom. With the increasingly worsening economic hardship, how long can the communist government ask their people to continue tightening their belt in the name of abstract ideology?

In this sense, Hanoi's decision to seek normalization with China can be interpreted as a function to serve her new policy of 'Doi Moi' and 'Cong Khai'. In essence, domestic considerations motivated Hanoi's deference of and overtures to Beijing.

From Beijing's perspective, the decision to normalize relations with Hanoi was motivated by a combination of external as well as internal considerations. Detente with Hanoi is part of China's overall important consistent objective to ensure a stable external environment with the neighbouring states which share borders with China. A stable external environment is sine qua (necessary) to ensure the success of China's four modernization programs.

Since Deng Xiaoping embarked on his modernization and economic reforms in 1978, China's economy is definitely in a much better shape than her Vietnamese counterpart's. For the past thirteen years, China's economy has

been able to generate moderate growth. China's main challenges come from the political scene, i.e., internally as well as externally. The June 1989 Tiananmen Crisis and its aftermath tarnished China's international image. The suppression of freedom and democracy testified to the central political dilemma of China seeking a right balance between economic growth and political democracy. Can the Chinese authorities eat bread and drink milk simultaneously?

In short, as far as foreign policy considerations are concerned, China was motivated by the following four political reasons, i.e., firstly, to promote good neighbourly policies with all the Southeast Asian states, including Vietnam; secondly, to improve her tarnished image in the post-Tiananmen Crisis; thirdly, to secure a stable external environment on her southern flank so that China can concentrate on internal economic reforms and modernization; fourthly, to resolve bilateral outstanding disputes with Vietnam in an amicable manner.

Furthermore, China's decision to seek a rapprochement was also partly motivated by the perception that Vietnam, together with the other mainland states in Southeast Asia, including Burma and Thailand can be integrated as part of China's economic strategy to link these states economically with the southern states of China, especially Yunnan Province. Vietnam is important for Yunnan 'to open the southern gate facing Asia and the Pacific.'<sup>10</sup> From the Chinese perspective, both land and sea links between Yunnan and Guangxi province with Vietnam's coastal cities, like Haiphong 'could provide a valuable outlet for landlocked south-central China.'<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, economic issues were the central focus in the negotiations between Do Muoi and Jiang Zemin during their November, 1991 Summit. This could be seen from the signing of the trade agreement between the two sides and China's willingness to provide US\$1 billion of goods to Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. New Foreign Policy Thinking

Vietnam's decision to seek normalization of relations with China could be partially interpreted as an adjustment<sup>13</sup> of her foreign policy due to the changes in her Party line which spilled over to the Sino-Vietnamese relations. Unlike the 5th Party Congress in March, 1982, when Le Duan blamed China for being Vietnam's number one enemy, the 6th Party Congress (1986) witnessed a new thinking in Vietnam when improving relations with not only the ASEAN states but also with China became an important goal of Hanoi's new foreign policy line. During the 7th Party Congress (1991) Hanoi reaffirmed the importance of promoting a good neighbourly foreign policy of peace and cooperation as an important principle of Vietnam's foreign policy. This new thinking was in great contrast to the 4th Party Congress (1976) when Hanoi had emphasized the importance of the solidarity of an Indochinese Confederation, i.e., the thinking of Vietnam's domination over the Indochinese states. Implicitly, Hanoi recognized that the policy of seeking domination over Indochina since 1976, proved to be a disastrous foreign policy goal. Thus, Hanoi's new foreign policy thinking emphasized more on economic pragmatism and less on ideological considerations. This argument could be supported by Vo Van Kie's trip in October, 1991 to Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore, during which the Vietnamese leader even went so far as to proclaim that he wanted to integrate Vietnam economically to become part of the ASEAN grouping, as an alternative to overcome his country's economic quagmire.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Do Muoi's visit to Beijing in November, 1991, also had a purpose to show to the world that Hanoi indeed was set on pursuing an independent foreign policy line and had no intention to form a new Sino-Vietnamese alignment to replace the old Soviet alliance.

From the Chinese perspective, China's desire to normalize relations with

Vietnam can be interpreted as China's persistent goal of promoting the Bandung Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to all Southeast Asian states. This new policy line came to the fore since July, 1974 from China's decision to normalize relations with the ASEAN states, i.e., first with Malaysia and thereafter with Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore and finally with Brunei.

Insofar as China's policy towards Vietnam was concerned, Li Peng, during a speech to the People's Congress in March, 1991, observed that the year 1991 would be the best time to resume full normalization of relations with Vietnam.

## 5. The Kampuchean Conflict

Kampuchea was the most important bone of contention in the Sino-Vietnamese relations since 1987. Basically, it was a major clash over the perception of their roles and aspirations in Indochina.<sup>15</sup> Beijing blamed Vietnam for occupying Kampuchea and accused Hanoi of seeking 'regional hegemonism' by virtue of her domination over Phnom Penh and Vientiane as well as her alliance with Moscow as being the fundamental causes which triggered off the deterioration in the relations between the two states.<sup>16</sup>

Since 1949, China's policy towards Kampuchea has always been mainly motivated strategic-cum security considerations. The paramount goal of China's foreign policy towards Kampuchea in particular and Indochina in general, was to ensure the maintenance of an independent neutral and non-aligned Kampuchea which would preferably cooperate with China to ensure that China's southern flank would be free from the domination of any major or superpowers and therefore eliminate threats to China's security. It was precisely because of this main concern that Beijing decided to actively participate in the Geneva Conference in 1954 so as to ensure that the

following objectives could be achieved, i.e., firstly, to deny Hanoi's ambition over Laos and Kampuchea; secondly, and more importantly, to prevent any western power from again establishing its presence in Indochina, thereby, posing a threat to China's southern border which has always been one of the top priorities of China's foreign policy goals.

China responded favourably to Prince Shihanouk's policy of an independent, neutral and non-aligned Kampuchea (1955 to 1969). Hence Beijing decided to establish diplomatic relations with Shihanouk's government in 1958. Recognizing the vulnerability of Kampuchea's survival as an independent state, China has consistently endorsed Prince Shihanouk's policy of calling for an international guarantee for the preservation of an independent and neutral Kampuchea during the period of 1961 to 1963. In order to project a neutral image, Prince Shihanouk rejected US aid in the 1960's and distanced himself from Washington. China viewed the Prince's policy with satisfaction as Beijing perceived Shihanouk as a useful ally in China's international 'united front' against the US.

However, China reverted her friendly attitude towards Kampuchea and adopted a hardline policy towards General Lon Nol, the then Defence Minister who staged a successful coup and ousted Prince Shihanouk who was then on an overseas trip in 1970. In order to show China's displeasure towards Lon Nol, Beijing decided to sever diplomatic relations with General Lon Nol on 5th May, 1970 because of his pro-US policy. Instead, China endorsed and supported Shihanouk's anti-Lon Nol coalition, i.e., Front Unifiée National de Kampuchea.

China's anti-Lon Nol policy lasted for five years until 1975 when the Khmer Rouge 'liberated' Phnom Penh. From 1975 to 1978, prior to Hanoi's joining the COMECON, China, in fact, adopted a cautious policy towards Kampuchea. Initially, China wanted the Khmer Rouge (under the tutelage of Pol Pot who was strongly anti-Vietnamese) to resolve amicably the growing conflicts with

Hanoi. In fact, China consistently upheld the five Bandung Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and therefore wanted to maintain a normal, good relationship with the three Indochinese states. China however tried, unsuccessfully though, not to embroil herself in the Indochina conflicts because Deng Xiaoping preferred to concentrate his energy on his internal four modernization programs.

China also did not want to adopt a high profile policy in Indochina for fear of being mistakenly accused of having an ambition of regional hegemony. When Hanoi however decided to tilt towards Moscow since June, 1978, and worse still, *de jure* legitimized herself as being part of a Soviet alliance in November, 1978, China then decided, forced due to these circumstances, rather than on her own initiative, to revert back to her cautious policy (1975–1978). China was slowly drawn in, at first, although reluctantly, but finally all out, to support the Khmer Rouge and later the anti-Vietnam Kampuchean coalition. Thus from Beijing's perspective, China's changing policy was a reaction to Hanoi's attempts to dominate Indochina. Worse still, Hanoi willingly became, in China's perception, a 'proxy' to serve the grand design of Moscow to circumvent China from Kabul to Phnom Penh and Hanoi. In this sense, China's involvement in the Kampuchean quagmire, can be interpreted as being a larger issue in the Sino-Soviet rivalries and conflicts.

From Vietnam's perspective, Kampuchea is very important to her survival because in the past, the western powers used Kampuchea as a corridor for invading Vietnam. If Vietnam can ensure control over Kampuchea and Laos as well, then it can be used as an important bulwark against China's domination over Indochina.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, due to population pressures and the topographical constraints and weaknesses Vietnam, if left unchecked by external intervention on the part of larger powers, will as in the past expand westwards to Laos and

Kampuchea which has large plains for basic food cultivation.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, security has been the main motivation of Vietnam's desire in attempting to colonialize Laos and Kampuchea. Hence, 'a Kampuchea closely allied with, if not also subservient to Vietnam, constitutes one of the essential conditions of regional order and Vietnam's own security'.<sup>19</sup> Given Vietnam's sensitivity to the larger 'northern dragon', and at times psychological paranoia (due to China's colonialization of Vietnam for more than a thousand years) Hanoi perceives that a larger security net consisting of Laos and Kampuchea would definitely then strengthen her security needs and certainly lessen her anxiety vis-a-vis China. Hence, one of the main causes of conflicts between China and Vietnam was the issue of what constitutes the proper parametres of their security needs. China's support to the Khmer Rouge was misperceived by Hanoi as the 'dark scheme' of Beijing trying to dominate Indochina, and in the long term, to colonialize Vietnam. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, from Beijing's perspective, Hanoi's occupation of Kampuchea constituted a larger design in China's misperception of Moscow's conspiracy to encircle China. For this reason, China had always insisted that since 1979, one of the major conditions for the improvements in Sino-Vietnamese relations was the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. Furthermore, China insisted that a solution to the bilateral Sino-Vietnamese conflicts must also be tied up with the larger issues of the Kampuchean conflicts as well as the Vietnamese relations with Moscow. From Vietnam's perspective, overtures for peace must come from China. Hence, when China shifted from strong support for the Khmer Rouge from 1979 to 1988, to less backing in the late 1980's, leading to completely abandoning the Khmer Rouge in the 1990's, Hanoi was convinced that China for at least the foreseeable future, had no ill intentions to threaten Hanoi's security. Thus, Beijing actively supported the peace proposal initiated by the Five Permanent Members of the UN. This new stand made it possible for Hanoi to reverse

her previous hardline policies towards China. The process of normalization also improved because Beijing responded favourably to Hanoi's changing positive attitude towards the 'big brother'. Thus, it can be argued that, Beijing's hard-line or soft-line foreign policy towards Hanoi can be a function of Hanoi's foreign policy towards Beijing. Therefore, when Hanoi adopted a hard-line policy under Le Duan and Nguyen Co Thach's leadership, Beijing reacted with her 'bleed Vietnam white' policy. However, when the moderate leadership of Vo Van Kiet and the new Foreign Minister Nguyen Man Cam advocated a moderate policy, Beijing responded by offering an 'olive branch'. In this sense, Sino-Vietnamese relations take the dimension of the psychological ambivalence between a 'small brother (Hanoi) and a 'big brother' (Beijing). At the same time, Beijing also began to question the wisdom of seeking an alliance with the increasingly more and more unpopular Khmer Rouge. The US decision to withdraw her support for the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in the UN further weakened China's anti-Vietnamese policy. In addition, the Tiananmen Crisis also to some extent tarnished China's international image, further weakening China's ability to mobilize international support against the Vietnamese. Thus China was forced by the changing circumstances to abandon her hardline policy towards Vietnam and instead to negotiate with Vietnam, to resolve their differences. This line of thinking came to the fore from China's behaviour towards Vietnam. For example, three months after the anmen Tiananmen Crisis, China sent a message on Vitenam's National Day in September, 1989, expressing China's wish to restore ties with Vietnam, even promising to progressively scale down her support of the Khmer Rouge if Vietnam would withdraw from Kampuchea as promised by the latter.

China reacted favorably when in November, 1989, Hanoi announced that the withdrawal of her troops from Kampuchea had been completed, though initially, China was sceptical. Nevertheless, for the first time on 16th January,

1990, China reversed her long-standing support for the Khmer Rouge in tandem with the other four Permanent UN Security Council Members, accepting the UN's role in solving the Kampuchean conflict. It marked the end of a decade of China's uncompromising, hardline 'bleed Vietnam white' policy. In short, as perceived by China, the Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea removed the most fundamental stumbling block in the process of Sino-Vietnamese normalization. Since then, China has had no reason anymore to harbour any hostility against Vietnam.

Since the Kampuchean conflict has been resolved by the signing of a peace treaty by nineteen countries, including China and Vietnam, the process of normalization between the two countries could go ahead at full speed, as China had always insisted that once the Kampuchean conflict would be resolved, China would restore Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic relations.

## 6. Gorbachev Factor

Since Gorbachev came to power in 1985, his historic policy of Perestroika and Glasnost not only had profound impact on the internal development of Moscow and the Eastern European states but also on the relations between the superpowers as well as the whole world order.

Gorbachev Vladivostok initiative in 1986, was aimed at improving peace and stability in the Asian region, especially Sino-Soviet relations. The Sino-Soviet Summit in Beijing in June, 1989, was watched by the Vietnamese leaders with deep concern, as they were worried about any impending Sino-Soviet detente which could lead to a possible 'collusion' between the two giants at the expense of Vietnam's interests in Kampuchea. Gorbachev's decision to tilt towards China made it impossible for Hanoi to continue with her anti-China policy which was primarily based on taking advantage of Sino-Soviet rivalries in the 1970's. Detente with China therefore can be viewed as a way to

prevent any secret understanding between Moscow and Beijing over Kampuchea without Hanoi's prior knowledge.

Furthermore, Gorbachev's decision to pull the Soviet troops out from Afghanistan in 1989 made Hanoi's occupation of Kampuchea militarily untenable and economically unviable. In fact, no sooner did Gorbachev come to power, he served notice to Hanoi that in view of her domestic troubles, Moscow could not continue to provide substantial economic and military aid to Hanoi's troops in Kampuchea. Without massive economic and military assistance from Moscow, there was no way for the Vietnamese economy to sustain a costly war machinery in Kampuchea.

Furthermore, Gorbachev wanted to foster good relations with the Seven Industrialized States which had become more critical of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, especially Hanoi's uncompromising attitude towards Kampuchea. In fact, Gorbachev had pressurized Hanoi to negotiate with Beijing in order to reach a political modus vivendi in Kampuchea. Hence, one can argue that Gorbachev's pressure was partially instrumental in triggering off Vietnam's willingness to accommodate to Beijing's terms she had until 1988 so arduously refused.

The disintegration of Moscow's socialist system and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe had profound psychological impact on the left-over 'gang of four', i.e., China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba. China was forced due to the new changing circumstances to accept willingly or unwillingly to become the last bastion of communism. Vietnam thus came to view China as the only 'guru' of communism whereas Beijing would look at Hanoi as one of the few remaining potential partners left in the fast disintegrating socialist movement. In other words, the changing circumstances in Moscow and in Eastern Europe forced the two governments to seek accommodation with each other out of sheer necessity.

Finally, with the declining aid flowing from Moscow and the East European

countries, the opposition from the West, especially the US trade embargo and non-recognition policies, Japan's reluctance to give aid and ASEAN's hard-line policy towards Vietnam, Hanoi was left no option but to sail to Beijing and to 'kowtow'.

### III. Assessment

What is the significance and the ramifications of the process of normalization between China and Vietnam which culminated in the November, 1991 Summit in Beijing?

It marks the total failure of Hanoi's policy of seeking a 'special relationship' (connotes colonialism) with Kampuchea and Laos. For the moment and at least for the foreseeable future, Hanoi has no choice but to drop the idea of creating a confederation of Indochinese states which since 1930, has been an important vision for the old Vietnamese revolutionary guards.

Hanoi's decision to initiate accommodation with China since the 6th Party Congress in 1986, can be viewed as an adjustment of Vietnam's China policy from a hardline to a softline approach. Hanoi's hardline policy which lasted for one decade (1978-1988) was primarily shaped by three factors, i.e., firstly, security; secondly, ideology; thirdly, the Sino-Soviet conflicts. From Hanoi's perspective, Kampuchea and Laos are very important to Vietnam's security. Hanoi's decision to opt for war rather than for the ironically hard-earned peace, was motivated by the desire to achieve her long-time dream of creating a socialist solidarity bloc with Hanoi as the center of 'revolution'. Finally, the persistent and bitter conflicts between Beijing and Moscow made it possible for Hanoi to take a hardline policy. However, this hardline policy became untenable after the Beijing-Moscow Summit in June, 1989 which officially ended three decades of Sino-Soviet hostilities. At any rate, Hanoi has learnt an expensive lesson, namely that ultimately as a smaller state than

China, any policy of aggression against Kampuchea and Laos without China's blessings cannot be viable and cannot be sustained in the long-run, especially when China's basic security is at stake. Hanoi learned from the fiasco of her Kampuchean policy that to seek peace as instrument to achieve her foreign policy objectives in Indochina is a better alternative than war.

The process of Sino-Vietnamese normalization and the end of the armed conflicts in Kampuchea for the moment signifies a sweet victory for Beijing's diplomacy. But more importantly, China has emerged as the most important regional power in Indochina, affecting the direction of peace and stability or instability in the region. China can be a factor of either stability or instability in Indochina depending on China's desire to achieve her objectives in Indochina.

Does it then mean that the Sino-Vietnamese detente signifies the emergence of a golden era of peace and stability in Southeast Asia in general and in Indochina in particular?

Firstly, the fact that it takes almost a decade of talks and negotiations between Beijing and Hanoi to reach an understanding to normalize their relations ipso facto, implies that there are underlying difficulties or 'contradictions' between the two states in terms of their priorities of policies and conflicts of national interests.

Secondly, the most thorny issue is the territorial conflicts over the Spratly and the Paracel Islands, the land border and the territorial disputes over the Gulf of Tonkin. The issue of sovereignty is sensitive as it touches on the feelings of national pride, nationalism, larger strategic and economic interests as well as the complex psychological relationship between the 'big brother', i.e., China and the 'smaller brother', Vietnam, the latter which had been colonized by the former for more than one thousand years.

During the last conference on the South China Sea held at Bandung, Indonesia on 15th to 18th July, 1991, though both Beijing and Hanoi did not

openly criticize each other—their strong positions (especially Beijing insisting on the notion of non-negotiable sovereignty) testified to the deep 'contradictions' which still exist between the two states over their territorial disputes. In all probability, they are unlikely to be resolved as long as nationalism remains an important force in guiding their respective foreign policy goals.

The third problematic issue is the role of Vietnam and China in Indochina, especially in Kampuchea whose viability as a stable political system remains doubtful. The question, what should be the proper future role of the Khmer Rouge in Kampuchean politics can be a potential source of conflict between Vietnam and China. At any rate, Hanoi's long term desire to seek 'tutelage' over Indochina which remains one of her important foreign policy goals may not be compatible with China's national interests in Indochina.

Fourthly, the uncertainty over the relations between Russia and Vietnam, the rise of nationalism in the Soviet republics as well as in Asia can be a potential source of conflicts. So far, Hanoi still wants to maintain some relations with Russia.

Finally, an element of uncertainty is which brand of communist ideology, i.e., Vietnamese or Maoist communism should be the right path of communism in Southeast Asia? The irony in the SinoVietnamese relationship is that culturally and ideologically, they are so close to each other that they may not feel comfortable with each other, especially the Vietnamese. Herein lies the ambivalence of Vietnam's attitude and her foreign policy towards China. For China, she portrays an equally ambivalent attitude towards Vietnam. Perceiving herself as being the 'big brother', —Oyabun— (the patron), the Chinese regard Vietnamese as the 'small brother', i.e., 'Kobun' (client), as too stubborn and too difficult to control. The paternalistic and benevolent and to some extent culturally arrogant Chinese fail to understand the sensitivity of the Vietnamese nationalists who are trying to be independent and master of their own destiny without necessarily having to rely on the guidance from the

'big brother' in the North. Psychologically, the Chinese have still not yet accepted the fact that the 'small brother' is already grown up and wants to be the master of his own destiny.

In view of the above serious fundamental differences, one can therefore argue that it is inconceivable that normalization will pose a serious threat to the security of the non-communist states, least of all that they would export their revolutionary cause to the region.

To sum up, what inferences or hypothesis can be derived from the above study? Economic considerations appear to be an important factor in shaping the process of normalization. Both sides gain economically, especially in the case of Vietnam, from complete restoration of relations. Hence Vietnam's policy can be assessed in the context of serving the domestic policy of 'Doi Moi and 'Cong Khai'. Thus economic considerations are more important to Vietnam than to China although China's southern provinces, especially Yunnan benefit from the improvement of diplomatic relations.

From China's perspective, the main reasons were due to political rather than economic considerations. The paramount concern was to ensure a stable southern region free from external interventions involving the superpowers. Furthermore, since 1989, China also wanted to strengthen her diplomatic relations with the third world countries and to improve her tarnished image in the post-Tiananmen Crisis. Insofar as the leadership factor was concerned, the changing leadership in Hanoi's political hierarchy from hardliners to moderate reformists contributed to the emergence of the new phase in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Ideology appears to be a factor of convergence of interests but nevertheless not an important determinant.

The Kampuchean factor seemed to be an important element in the process of normalization between the two countries. Hanoi's decision to pull out her troops from Kampuchea and at least in the foreseeable future to forego her

desire to create a confederation of Indochinese states was the fundamental cause which triggered off the ending of hostilities. Thus, China's policy was a reaction to Vietnam's policy towards Kampuchea.

Finally, the Gorbachev factor had a more profound impact on Vietnam rather than on China.

In short, the process of normalization between the two states since 1989 was brought about by a combination of both internal as well as the external changing environment. The circumstances and the bases of the foreign policy of both states in the 1990's were different from the decades of the late 1970's and 80's when hostility reigned.

On balance, the main impetus of China's policy towards Vietnam originated mainly from external factors whereas Vietnam was basically motivated by internal determinants.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *The Straits Times* (thereafter *ST*), 21.9.1990, p.5.
2. *Foreign Broadcasting Information Services* (thereafter *FBIS*) EAS-91-178, 13.9.1991, p.78.
3. *FBIS*, EAS-91-159, 16.8.1991, p.52.
4. *Business Times*, (thereafter *BT*), 9.9.1991.
5. *Asian Wall Street Journal* (thereafter *AWSJ*), 5.11.1991, p.5.
6. For example, according to a Chinese source, Xu Dunxin, China's Vice Foreign Minister, was 'humiliated' by Thach's harsh comments on China's policy towards Vietnam. *FBIS*, EAS-91-129, 5.7.1991, p.46.
7. The population is expected to reach the 100 million mark by the year 2030.
8. Vo Van Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy since 1975* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990,) p.250.
9. *ST*, 18.7.1991, Tan Lian Choo, 'Vietnam: Reforms Planned but Basic Issues not resolved.'
10. This remark was made by the Vice-Governor of Yunnan Province, Jin Renqing, in *AWSJ*, 5.11.1991, p.5.
11. *Ibid* , *AWSJ*, 5.11.1991, p.5. The two-way trade between Guangxi Province and Vietnam reached US\$145million in 1990 and is expected to attain US \$283 million in 1991. *AWSJ*, *ibid*, p.5.
12. *Lian He Zao Bao*, 7.10.1991.
13. Zhu Zhenming, 'Vietnam's New Course in Foreign Affairs, A Long Process of Readjustment', in *Indochina Report*, Number 28, July-September, 1991, p.1-15.
14. Vo Van Kiet also asked Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's ex-Prime Minister to be Vietnam's econmic adviser. See *ST*, 22.11.1991.

15. Charles McGregor, 'China and Vietnam and the Cambodian Conflict', *Asian Survey*, March, 1990, p.267 and Chang Pao-Min, *Kampuchea Between China and Vietnam*, (Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore,) 1985, pp.91-112.
16. *British Broadcasting Corporation*, Far East, 6/3/1980, 6405/A3/1.
17. Kim Ninh, 'In the Era of Renovation: Leadership and Security in Vietnam', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, September, 1989, pp.216-217.
18. By 1830, most of the fertile land in Kampuchea had been annexed by Vietnam which undertook to drastically Vietnamize the Kampucheans both politically and culturally. Chang, *op.cit.* p.6.
19. *Ibid.*, p.13.