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VIETNAM : AN EMERGING POWER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA ?

The end of the Vietnam war brought about major change and realignment in inter-state relationships within Southeast Asia. The diminishing US influence with correspondingly rising Soviet influence in the region and the establishment of an apparently strong and unified Vietnam during the mid-seventies marked the beginning of a new era in Southeast Asia. By the late 70s two significant developments in the Southeast Asian scenario raised apprehensions regarding the potential power and intentions of Vietnam. The first was Vietnam's invasion of Democratic Kampuchea in December 1978 and January 1979 and the second was Vietnam's joining COMECON in June 1978, followed by a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with USSR in November 1978. A combination of cohesive leadership, strong support from political cadres, strong potentials of mobilization to support military forces outnumbering the total of those of all non-communist states in Southeast Asia appears to provide Vietnam the capacity to pursue hegemonic aspirations in Southeast Asia. The possibility of Vietnam's becoming a "twentieth century Prussia¹" in Southeast Asia is much feared.

The likely emergence of Vietnam as a regional power is bound to be a political issue of vital importance to the future peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The role of Vietnam will also have

1. Guy J. Pauker, Frank H. Golay & Cynthia H. Enloe, *Diversity and Development in Southeast Asia*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York 1977, p. 65.

significant impact on the emerging pattern of power balance in the region. It should be further taken into consideration, that Soviet Union has gained military emplacements in the former American bases in South Vietnam and virtually the whole of Indochina appears to be under Vietnamese control. On the other hand the Soviet presence in and its aid to Vietnam in its domination of Indochina is a challenge to Chinese hegemony in what has been so far believed to be its own sphere of influence. Sino-Vietnam rivalry is essentially a competition for domination over Indochina, and eventually the whole of Southeast Asia. Considering the poor state of her economy, Vietnam can pursue her ambitions only with outside help. As long as the Sino-Soviet dispute continues the Russians, in all likelihood may provide that help. Thus the eventuality of Vietnam's future as the biggest military power in Southeast Asia appears to be a subject of more than academic interest.

The countries of the region are indeed faced with increasing security dilemmas. Will Vietnam, after sufficient period of reconstruction and development, emerge as a regional power in Southeast Asia? If so, will it exhibit peaceful intentions towards its Southeast Asian neighbours? Which country will be the buffer—China against Vietnam in the short-term or Vietnam against China in the long? How likely is it that Vietnam will attempt to spread revolution elsewhere in the region? Will the smaller and vulnerable countries in the region fall as dominos? How cooperative the Vietnamese will be to reach a solution to the stalemate in Kampuchea? Most importantly, what impact these developments will create on the future peace and stability of Southeast Asia? These are some of the questions that will be pondered over in the paper.

Vietnam in Southeast Asia : Potentials for a Regional Power

With increasing diffusion of power in a multi-polar world the medium powers have come to possess a greater capacity for asserting regional preeminence either to the benefit or to the detriment of the

smaller powers. Regional powers, as distinct from global powers, are agreeably not capable of playing a major role on a global scale. However, in their part of the world, they may be expected to assume a dominant position by virtue of their human and natural resources, economic and industrial prowess and self-confidence and sense of destiny. The regional hegemony theorists expect "medium powers to create around themselves a regional order or limited sphere of influence, possible as the result of tacit devolution of responsibilities by global powers interested in lightening their burdens or anxious to avoid confrontations resulting from rivalry with other global powers, but unwilling to yield the field to their principal competitors".² The idea appears to be acceptable to global powers, because they are more likely to concede a dominant regional role to a medium power which cannot challenge its global prominence as against another global power who might threaten to upset the global balance. Moreover, such policy of accommodation by global powers in favour of regional powers is aimed at building proxies in a particular region through which they can exert their influence, but at the same time do not need to be directly involved. Certain countries like Nigeria in Africa, Brazil and Venezuela in Latin America, Saudi Arabia and Iran in Middle East,³ among others are usually named as candidates for regional power status in the coming decades. Strategic location, population, political cohesion, abundance of natural resources, military capabilities, economic and industrial achievements, are among the variables that may contribute to a nation's assuming the status of regional power. By virtue of an edge—perceived or real—resulting from one or a combination of such factors, a particular country may develop regional preponderance over neighbours manifested in various form.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

3. Cited in Baldev Raj Nayar, "Regional Power in a Multipolar World", in John W. Mellor (ed), *India: A Rising Middle Power*; Select book Service Syndicate, New Delhi, 1981, p. 149.

In the Southeast Asian region two countries—Vietnam and Indonesia, have or are likely to have in future, essential capabilities to be a regional power. While Indonesia might have been in possession

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of such capabilities, it appears least likely that in the existing geopolitical situation Indonesia would have the requisite imperatives and urge to be a regional power. On the other hand, Vietnam although not in possession of most of the attributes mentioned earlier, particularly the strength and potential in economic terms appears to have the will and political imperative to assume such a role. It is widely assumed that at some future time, perhaps after a period of Vietnamese reconstruction and development, Vietnam could become ruthless in seeking hegemony in Southeast Asia. The burden of this part of the study is to highlight the potentials for Vietnam's emerging as a regional power in Southeast Asia. For the purpose, three variables will be considered as the determinants—politico-ideological, military and economic, because they appear to constitute the basic requirements for a country to be a regional power.

Politico-Ideological

Democratic political systems established in several Southeast Asian countries, following World War II have not fared well in recent years. The new nations in Southeast Asia that emerged from colonial rule after the war, were faced with severe class divisions and compelling economic and social problems. Moreover, the human values and behavioural patterns that underlay democratic political systems in the West were not only unfamiliar to the native population in Southeast Asia, it ran counter to the political and social traditions inherited from the past. It is little wonder that in many of these new states, the democratic experiment was quickly aborted.

The failure of Western political models to succeed in modern Vietnam can be best understood as the consequence of a process that has taken place in varying forms throughout the region.⁴ In case of Vietnam, this was a product, above all, of deep-seated historical and cultural factors within Vietnamese society. Added to this, the presence of an experienced and determined revolutionary movement with its roots deep in the colonial era. It should be mentioned here that Vietnam is unique in Southeast Asia in the sense that it is the only country in the region in which the national liberation struggle was led to victory by the Communist party. Elsewhere in the region, the failure of democratic institutions usually resulted in the rise of the military. In Vietnam, the Communists not only provided a viable alternative to Western bourgeois democracy or military rule, but they grasped power, after a generation of bitter struggle, by their own efforts.

The success of Communism in Vietnam must be ascribed to Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues, who were able to mobilize a mass movement with the driving force to bring the party to power in Vietnam. With the formation of Ho Chi Minh's Revolutionary Youth League in 1925 and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) five years later, an institutional infrastructure devoted to the realization of Marxist ideology in Vietnam had come into being.⁵ Marxism provided the specific approach to problems of social change and underscored the need for popular mobilization, centralized leadership, and ideological indoctrination—features which appealed to the radical intellectuals and patriots in the country. By the time of the outbreak of World War II, Marxism was becoming an increasing force in Vietnamese politics and a persuasive alternative to the Western democratic model. The Communists in Vietnam worked out a strategy for revolution and nation building that combined the theoretical and practical tenets of Marxism-Leninism with the political and cultural realities of

4. William J. Duiker *Vietnam : Nation in Revolution*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado. 1983, p. 72.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Vietnamese society. In all Marxist Leninist societies, the role of the party in guiding society through various stages to the final stage of communism is a key tenet that can under no circumstances be abandoned⁶. Likewise in Vietnam, the Communist party, since its formation in 1930, has viewed itself as the leading force in the Vietnamese revolution. At times, as in the 1930s, and in 1954, this vanguard role has been openly proclaimed. In other words, the Communist party and its components—the unique group of men who have been carrying out Ho Chi Minh's decrees, remain the central force of the revolution in Vietnam. These men have been able to defeat first France and then the United States politically as well as militarily and managed to obtain assistance both from the Soviet Union and from the People's Republic of China, despite the rivalry between the two communist powers. It can safely be assumed, moreover, that the morale of the Vietnamese leadership, the armed forces under its command and the political cadre are, and perhaps will remain extremely high. The inner strength, cohesion and self-assurance of the Vietnamese leadership are demonstrated by the speed at which the unification of North and South has taken place. Despite more than 20 years of separation and contrary to the predictions of foreign experts that rivalries between the leadership in the two segments of the country and the great disparity of their economic and social systems would delay reunification for at least five years, the unification was completed within one year of the April 1975 victory. It is particularly important that unlike other Southeast Asian countries which do not have well-developed methods of mass mobilization and control, Vietnam appears to be in possession of institutional capabilities to bypass popular discontent out of material deprivation and lack of instant success in favour of pursuing national goals and aspirations. Such capabilities also allow it to pursue a calculative and carefully planned foreign policy, much, more flexible and vigorous than that of its less regimented neighbours.⁷

6. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

7. Guy J. Pauker, Frank H. Golay and Cynthia H. Enloe, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Any Southeast Asian regime seeking revolutionary changes may find a model in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It may even be a more appealing model than China to radical elements in neighbouring countries, which in terms of size, resources and other variables are more similar to Vietnam than China. There are insurgent movements, more or less communist in orientation, in most of the other states of Southeast Asia. Each of these movements is

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likely to look to Hanoi for moral support and material assistance. Given their own experience of 30 years of revolutionary struggle, the Vietnamese leadership might well find it even a moral obligation to support national liberation movements in neighbouring states, especially since Hanoi appears to have the assurance of support from Moscow for any such mission. Moreover, such support would be almost costless for Hanoi. The Indochina war made Vietnam a dumping ground for weapons. Hanoi's stock of light infantry weapons, the sort which insurgents would need, is no doubt, substantial. No state or alliance of regional states in Southeast Asia is likely to exert sufficient pressure on Vietnam to dissuade her from supporting insurgencies if she has the intention. Several Southeast Asian countries which have had their share of bitter experiences with communist insurgencies in their respective countries remain skeptical of this possibility. Their apprehensions seem justified in the light of an authoritative editorial in "Nhan Dan," rebroadcast by Radio Hanoi. As monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, the article titled "Unprecedented Opportunity for Southeast Asian Nations" proclaimed that "the victories of the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Lao peoples have had the effect of setting forth the Southeast Asian People's struggle for

independence and freedom as an example and strongly stimulated this struggle". The statement which was considered particularly ominous proclaimed "the Vietnamese people fully support the struggle of the peoples of the Southeast Asian nations for independence, democracy, peace and social progress. Our people's struggle against US imperialist aggression, for independence and freedom, which involves many sacrifices, is aimed also at supporting the just struggles of the neighbouring nations and contributing to building a Southeast Asia of peace and friendly Cooperation."⁸ Coming from the victorious leaders of Vietnam—leaders who have gathered unparalleled revolutionary experience and possess vast stores of weapons, it is not a message to be overlooked either by the governments or by the "undergrounds" of Southeast Asia.

All statements are however not followed by action. But since the dedication of the Vietnamese leaders to the cause of revolution is not open to doubt and the communist zeal of the Vietnamese people is unquestioned—the concern for the countries of the region remains valid. These ideological inspirations and political advantages of Vietnam may at some future time, be catalytic in pursuing hegemonic aspirations in Southeast Asia.

Military

The military has consistently played a crucial role in Vietnamese politics. In Vietnam, where a cohesive political movement to resist communism never really took shape the armed forces served as virtually the only organised and certainly the dominant force in the country. Throughout the long years of struggle, first against the French and later against the US, the armed forces appeared totally loyal to the party leadership, which exercised its authority over the armed forces. This does not mean that the military lacked influence within the party. The party's civilian leadership was perfectly aware that armed struggle would be a

8. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

9. William J. Duiker, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

key element in revolutionary struggle, and throughout the long years of struggle, military needs were consistently given high priority.

In fact Vietnam has eventually become one of the most militarized societies in Asia. During the Vietnam war, military conscription took most young males of draft age. Women and those males who were not in the armed forces were mobilized to serve in artillery or bomb defusing units, or in the countryside, to form self-defense militia units to defend their villages against saboteurs or possible enemy attack from the South. Military units stationed in the North were assigned duties in economic construction, planting and harvesting, or repairing bomb damage. It was, as the slogans of the day confirmed, a totally mobilized society—"all for the front lines" and "every citizen a soldier".

The end of the war in 1975 probably brought optimism that the North Vietnamese army, one of the largest in the world, would be rapidly demobilized and returned to peacetime activities. By 1978, however, such hopes turned out to be nightmare. Border conflicts with China and Kampuchea, which in both cases led to war the following year, forced the regime to build up its military forces to wartime levels. Once again Vietnamese society was forced to gear up for war. Civilians and soldiers were mobilized to build "Combat villages" along the Kampuchean border and along the northern frontier with China. In the aftermath of the 1979 war with China, the regime called for transforming each district into a self-sufficient military fortress to defend itself against outside attack.¹⁰

Presently, Vietnam's military capabilities makes it unique in Southeast Asia. Its actual military capability decisively exceeds even the potential collective strength of its noncommunist Southeast Asian neighbours. Even more significantly, the present forces of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam outnumber, probably by a substantial margin, those currently deployed by the People's Republic of China

10. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

in its military regions close to Southeast Asia. According to authoritative sources, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has at present total armed forces of 1,027,000. It is important to note that some 160,000 Vietnamese troops occupy Kampuchea and some 40,000 are stationed in Laos.¹¹ The army is the world's fourth largest (after the Soviet Union, China and the US). Ordinarily, every young man, must spend at least three years in the military in Vietnam.

During 30 years of combat, the Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) acquired unusual skills in logistic improvisation, giving it the capacity to make use of captured equipment even in very difficult circumstances. Taking into account the number of combat experienced veterans of PAVN, the mobilization potential of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is formidable. By contrast, the noncommunist countries of Southeast Asia are weak and ill-prepared both individually and collectively. These countries are not military allies and are not prepared to act as a single military entity. The table enumerates the non-communist armed forces in Southeast Asia.

Table : Noncommunist Military Forces in Southeast Asia

Countries	Total Armed Forces
1. Brunei	4,050
2. Burma	186,000
3. Indonesia	278,050
4. Malaysia	110,000
5. Philippines	114,800
6. Singapore	55,500
7. Thailand	235,300
Total	983,700

Source: *The Military Balance* 1985-86, IISS, London

If Vietnam could count on the noninvolvement of the major powers against it, it could certainly take successful military action

11. *The Military Balance*, 1985-86, IISS, London.

against any or all of its neighbour on the Southeast Asian mainland. Thailand and Malaysia, standing alone, would not be likely in the view of some scholars to offer lengthy resistance to Vietnamese attacks through Communist Laos and Cambodia. Singapore would be defenseless across the causeway from a hypothetically communist controlled Malaysia and would have to seek an immediate accommodation. Indonesia and the Philippines are of course, not directly vulnerable to Vietnam's land forces, being protected by the South China Sea. But their vulnerability to externally supported insurgencies would be greatly enhanced if their ASEAN partners are communised first.¹²

Vietnam over the years have become highly skilled in the art of war. Her military capability has been sharply honed in wars fought in varying terrain and against such diverse foes as the world's most technologically advanced power (the United States), determined guerrillas, and the massive Chinese People's Liberation Army. The Vietnamese not only have perfected the techniques of mounting a people's war, in addition, they appear to be even more effective in

Enormous conventional war capability of Vietnam with continued Soviet support has come to differentiate the disproportionate power of the country from the rest of Southeast Asia

suppressing guerrilla outbreaks which may be against their interests. In Kampuchea, the Vietnamese also have demonstrated their mastery of Soviet style mechanized war, including (with Soviet technical and material help and the use of US trained personnel and manufactured equipment, such as the Hercules C 130 transport) the supply of forward columns by air and the rapid multiple crossing of rivers by large columns of troops with heavy equipment.¹³

12. Frank H. Golay, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

13. Lim Joo-Jock, "The Indo-China Situation and the Superpowers in Southeast Asia" in Joyce E. Larson (ed.), *New Foundations for Asian and Pacific Security*; National Strategy Information Center, Inc., New Brunswick, U.S.A. 1980, p. 42-43.

Enormous manpower, training, experience, generalship, heavy equipment, air support and logistics needed for conventional war on the scale at which Vietnam can wage it has come to differentiate the disproportionate power of the country from much of the rest of Southeast Asia. However, one cannot overlook neither the logistical costs of maintaining such a large army nor the fact that in the process of its military preparedness, Vietnam has become wholly dependent on the USSR. All weapons system and spare parts as well as oil and gasoline need to be imported from USSR. Current oil imports into Vietnam are about 10 million barrels per annum.¹⁴ It is also estimated that Soviet aid to Vietnam amounts to US \$ 2 billion a year, an amount equal to more than 20% of Vietnam's Gross National product.

Its tanks, planes and personnel carriers and the relentless anti-guerrilla campaign in Kampuchea continues to strain Hanoi's severely limited energy resources. According to most estimates, Vietnam's military and security apparatus consumed between 30% and 40% of its GNP of about US \$ 12 billion in 1984.¹⁶ Will the Vietnamese economy be able to sustain on a long term basis a high level of military preparedness? The question is difficult to answer as it depends as much on political will as on economic means.

Economic

Even after a decade of the end of Vietnam war, Vietnamese economy is in dire straits and is likely to remain so for years. Considering the trials and tribulations the Vietnamese economy went through it is not surprising that the country's economy is faced with multifaceted problems now.

The division between North and South Vietnam was decreed by the Geneva conference in 1954, which led to the creation of two

14. Justus M. Van der kroef, "Cambodia: Whose Vietnam?", in *Asia Pacific Community*, Spring 1985, No. 28, p. 113.

15. *Time*, April 15, 1985, p. 35.

16. *Asia Pacific Community*, Spring 1985, p. 113.

separate and sovereign states. Leaving North Vietnam relatively untouched, the French transformed the Southern provinces into a colony and subsequently exposed it to Western capitalist influence. While the North embarked on the road to socialism under communist rule, South Vietnam continued to follow a separate path and its economy developed along capitalist lines. After reunification in 1978, determined to end market instability in the Southern economy and to eliminate the cultural influence of the capitalist sector, Hanoi nationalized all industry and commerce above the family level and instituted the collectivization of agriculture. The results were disastrous. Industrial production plummeted and a grain shortage forced the government to introduce food rationing. In 1979, the party reversed its course and launched a series of reforms designed to reduce the rising level of social unrest and to promote economic growth.

The new programme had an immediate impact on the economy, but brought with it the revival of capitalist forces which, in the minds of the hardliners, threatened the stability of party rule in the South. In the early 1980s, the party leadership appeared deeply divided. Pragmatists were convinced that the needs of economic growth must have absolute priority while the ideologues feared that the continued existence of capitalist elements in the South would threaten the very foundation of the regime. During the fifth congress of the party in 1982, a compromise was worked out between the advocates of pragmatic economic policies and hardliners. The congress reaffirmed the reformist policies adopted in 1979, at the same time it called for continuing efforts to complete the socialist transformation of industry and trade and the building of collectives in the South by the mid 1980's.¹⁷

In statistical terms, the current policy appears to be paying dividends. Industrial growth is running at about 10%. Agricul-

17. William J. Duiker, "The Legacy of History in Vietnam", *Current History*, December 1984, p. 410.

tural production is also on the rise.¹⁸ While the 1984 IMF report on Vietnam's economy notes improvements in exports, it is also evident, that payments due on Vietnam's foreign debt alone in the next few years will swallow up virtually all of the country's hard currency earnings. The estimated foreign debt, according to the IMF was US \$ 5.3 billion in 1983, 70% which was owed to the USSR. By 1984, the debt has climbed to at least US \$ 6 billion, with hard currency reserves amounting only to about US \$ 16 million and current annual foreign debt arrears standing at about US \$ 428 million.¹⁹ According to the IMF, "Vietnam's hard currency reserves are barely enough to finance two weeks of imports."²⁰ So it is apparent that without the continuing US \$ 2 billion annual injections of Soviet aid the prospects for Vietnam's economy would be extremely grim.

Because of her Kampuchean venture, Vietnam has found herself virtually shut out of the major international money and credit markets. Washington's refusal to discuss any resumption of aid until a Vietnamese withdrawal has been completed, was reiterated by Secretary of State George Schultz during his visit to Honkong on 9 February 1983. Vietnam joined the IMF and World Bank in 1976, but the suspension of World Bank aid after the 1978 invasion of Kampuchea was also attributed by Hanoi to Washington's decision to freeze US \$ 100 million of Vietnamese assets at the same time. Quite apart from its international repercussions, the occupation of Kampuchea continues to present a major strain upon Hanoi's resources and largely accounts for the severe shortage of technicians and qualified administrators capable of bolstering Vietnam's economic recovery. Moreover, Vietnam's huge army continues to preempt a substantial proportion of the country's scarce resources of trained personnel and transportation equipment.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

19. *Indochina Chronology*, University of California, Berkeley, July-September 1984, p. 28, cited in *Conflict Studies*, Number 183, p. 15.

20. *The Sarawak Tribune* (Kuching) 24 April 1985, cited in *Conflict Studies*, Number 183, p. 15.

An authoritative analysis on Vietnam in 1984, describes the country's economic situation as "catastrophic" and adds, "Inflation averages 50% per year. The black market and bribery are on the increase. Officially there are one million unemployed, but the true figure may well be between 3 and 4 million; all this despite the export of Vietnamese workers to other COMECON countries as payment for high debts and settlement by the Vietnamese in Kampuchea. Much money is siphoned off by enforced state loans. Consumption is low and agricultural output per capita is lower than 10 years ago. Industrial production is stagnating (the last Five Year Plan called for a 17% annual increase). Factories use obsolete machinery as Vietnam cannot afford to buy more modern technology."²¹

With a population of 59 million reported as growing, virtually unchecked, at a rate of 2.5% a year, food production is barely keeping pace, if not lagging. Grain production which in 1976 was 13.5 million tons, rose in 1980 to 14.3 million tons (after having dipped to

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12.2 million) and optimistically was estimated to be about 17 million in 1984.²² Vietnam also continues to face a sharply adverse trade imbalance. Imports in 1983 were valued at US \$ 1.67 billion, exports at US \$ 499 million, with further disproportionate increases in the levels of both since 1975.²³

Many outside observers regard Vietnam's economic difficulties as a serious weakness which will inevitably force Vietnam to concede to

21. Joseph Adamek, "Centrally Planned Economies". *Economic Overview 1984* (The Conference Board, Brussels, 1984) p. 51 cited in *Conflict Studies*, Number 183, p. 15.

22. David Jenkins "Vietnam : A Country Adrift". *Far Eastern Economic Review*; 8 November 1984, p. 25 and Paul Quinn-Judge, "Hanoi's Bitter Victory", *Far Eastern Economic Review*; 2 May 1985 p. 31.

23. Justus M Van der Kroef, "Dynamics of the Cambodian Conflict", *Conflict Studies*, Number 183, p. 15.

the Chinese. But from the Vietnamese perspective, what is decisive is not the country's present economic problems but its fundamental political strength, based on the class nature of the society and political regime. The Vietnamese leaders do not deny the economic hardships which their people will have to endure for years to come. They assert, however, that political strength and stability are not related to poverty or wealth. The key factor governing political stability and strength in a developing country, in Hanoi's view, is how poverty is distributed. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach argues that "Vietnam may be poor, but poverty is well-shared."²⁴ The Vietnamese thus see a Socialist system, even one based on "shared poverty," as a guarantee of social and political stability.

The Sino - Vietnamese Conflict

The conflict over Kampuchea remains a crucial factor in the future peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The emerging shape of this conflict will also determine, to a large extent, the prospect of Vietnam's emergence as a regional power. Although the conflict engages the competing interests of Thailand and Vietnam, it cannot be solely explained with reference to Thai-Vietnamese rivalries. The conflict has an important external dimension. It has been both generated and reinforced by an interlocking structure of relationships which extend beyond Southeast Asia, most importantly that between Vietnam and China, which has its roots in history. It must be emphasized here that Vietnam is being abetted by Soviet Union in the powerplay in Southeast Asia. In this backdrop the Kampuchean impasse can be assessed as the mere extension of the Sino-Soviet dispute in Southeast Asia. The stakes of the extraregional powers must also be considered to understand the regional power balance in Southeast Asia.

24. Interview with Thach by a delegation of the Australian Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam, Hanoi, September 7, 1981, cited in *Pacific Affairs*, Spring, 1984, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 16.

In the Vietnamese view—a view also tacitly supported by some ASEAN countries like Malaysia and Indonesia—Chinese stakes in the Southeast Asian region are very high. It is argued that China's leaders had long sought to control the regional order in Indochina and that they wished to subordinate Vietnam to China's regional and global interests. Following from this it was suggested that if successful in Indochina, China would reach out to the rest of Southeast Asia to impose an order agreeable to itself. In other words, China's long term aim was to establish Southeast Asia as a region of China's special influence.²⁵

Historically, China views the Nanyang (i. e. South China Sea) area as falling within its traditional sphere of hegemony. She practically regarded whole of maritime Southeast Asia as Nanyang. If China's needs for naval defence enlarges—and such possibilities are brought into sharp focus by Soviet moves in the area, then she might emerge as the arbiter of sovereignty in the South China seas. Moreover, China is considered a long term threat to Southeast Asia because of its support to insurgencies in Southeast Asian countries and also to some extent because of the large concentration of overseas ethnic Chinese in several Southeast Asian countries. Considering these, some of the Southeast Asian countries have tended to view a resurgent, modernized China as much more of a long-term strategic threat to their national security than a strong and independent Vietnam. Indeed such a Vietnam is seen as able to play a useful buffer role between China and the rest of Southeast Asia. General L. B. Murdani, Commander of Indonesia's armed forces declared in a Djakarta press interview that Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia should be forging closer ties with each other in order "to face the potential threat from a stronger China in the next century" Murdani added: "Some people are talking about a Vietnamese buffer between Southeast Asia and China, I don't want to put it that bluntly, but may be that's what we are thinking of."²⁶

25. Michael Yahuda, *The China Threat*, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), Malaysia, 1986, p. 28.

Although by virtue of its history, size, culture and international weight, China is perceived in Southeast Asia as a major influence in the region—its potential as a threatening military power appears to be limited. Chinese navy is said to be the world's third largest, but its role is confined mainly to the realm of coastal defense, with the exception of part of the PRC's fleet of diesel-powered submarines and a small but growing flotilla of Luta-class missile-armed destroyers. These submarines and early generation missiles, however, can be countered effectively by current Soviet anti-submarine and electronic anti-missile techniques.²⁷ China can at best be seen as a landbased power with a short reach. It may supply arms to Khmer forces and can pose a constant threat of a Sea-borne-landing on the Vietnamese coast opposite Hainan Island, if only the Soviet Pacific fleet does not intervene.²⁸ So if a Chinese threat in Southeast Asia may be identified, it does not constitute a possibility of straight forward military conquest and dominance—it is rather a long term threat of regional dominance in future. As Melvin Gurtov has pointed and, "the principal sources of China's power in Southeast Asia (are) her psychological and political influence and her capacity to assist indigeneous rebellions."²⁹

China holds that Vietnam is seeking regional dominance and is assisted in this direction by Soviet Union, as that facilitates the expansion of Soviet influence and its military deployments in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It also helps the Soviet Union in the encirclement of China and gaining a means of entry into the Southeast Asian region. The immediate major strategic concern in Southeast Asia is the increase in the Soviet military presence aided by access to Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam. Soviet Union having acquired a more

26. *The Straits Times*, 17 December 1984, cited in *Conflict Studies* Number 183, p. 7.

27. Lim Joo-Jock, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

28. *Ibid*, p. 51.

29. Mevin Gurtov, *China and Southeast Asia : The Politics of Survival*, Heath Lexington Books, 1971, p. 176, cited in Michael Yahuda, *The China Threat*, ISIS Malaysia, 1986, p. 32.

visible and growing military profile in the area, is unlikely to withdraw especially in view of its long term strategic purpose of maintaining access to the Indian ocean for its Pacific Fleet.³⁰ The Soviet navy by its presence in the waters of the Asia-Pacific region is the direct military instrument which constitutes the strongest underpinnings of the Hanoi-Moscow axis in the region. It is this mobile and flexible projection of Soviet military power into the region which partly underlies Vietnamese strategic boldness.³¹ For this particular reason and for the devastating effect of Vietnam's military involvement in Kampuchea Vietnam today is considered by most of the Southeast Asian states to pose the most immediate threat to the peace and security of the region. There is no objective way of assessing whether China or Vietnam constitutes the greater threat to the region in the future. Nor is it currently possible to spell out in an objective

The comparative threat-potentials of Vietnam and China would depend largely on the emerging pattern of Sino-Soviet relations and on the stakes of these powers in the region.

manner the nature of the threat that either may pose. Much will depend on the emerging pattern of Sino-Soviet relations and how important the stakes in Southeast Asian region remain for these external powers. One thing is clear, Vietnam, acting autonomously will be incapable of expanding its sphere of influence in the short run due to the great internal difficulties, which it already faces. Vietnam presently is experiencing dramatic reverses in its economic development and is encountering difficulties in the absorption and integration of the South into one national identity with the North.³² The burden of Vietnam's military involvement in Kampuchea is becoming greater as time passes and without Soviet injection of aid, Vietnam stands

30. Michael Yahuda, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

31. Lim Joo-Jock, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

22. Jusuf Wanandi, "The Internal and External Dimensions of Southeast Asian Security" in Joyce E. Larson (ed.), *New Foundations of Asian and Pacific Security*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

nowhere. So whatever role Vietnam will play in Southeast Asia, short or medium term or even in the long term will depend very much upon Soviet strategy toward the region. But ambitious global powers often use as proxies local states with regional hegemonistic ambitions. And in all likelihood Soviet Union may build-up Vietnam as a proxy regional power in Southeast Asia to fulfil her greater designs. The existing nature of power polarization around the region is such that there is a general convergence of interests of China with those of the US and Japan. The overwhelming diplomatic, political, economic and military assistance of Moscow to Vietnam have also placed the ASEAN on the anti-Soviet plane. Though Indonesia and Malaysia continue to see China as a greater threat than Vietnam, ASEAN in general, perceives Moscow-Hanoi axis as the main source of threat to its security and continues to demand lowering of Soviet assistance to Vietnam. In the ultimate analysis the whole problem is also more than evidently linked to the competitive involvement of superpowers. The growing influence of the Soviet Union in the region since the end of the Indo-China war is a matter of great concern for the US which of course has been in the pursuit of containing this growth through its informal or formal alliance relationships with China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and ASEAN countries. It is most likely in this context therefore that Vietnam would continue to function as a regional proxy power of the USSR for the foreseeable future.

Vietnam : An Emerging Regional Power or a Continuing Proxy Power?

The conflict in Kampuchea which has raged for 6 years now has not only polarised Southeast Asia, it has ended up to be a stalemate which is inextricably linked with the question of peace and stability in the region. The interests of the principal contending parties and their supporters are so diametrically opposed and the adverse security priorities so strongly held, that the prospect for settlement in the immediate future by any means is most unlikely. Even though a military stalemate prevails, both the parties in the conflict believe

that they can secure political gains through the continued application of military means. The desperate Khmer resistance groups have demonstrated a growing ability to harass the Vietnamese occupation forces and the embryonic army of the Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh, but they do not possess the capacity to drive the Vietnamese expeditionary force from the Kampuchean soil. For their part, the Vietnamese and their Kampuchean clients have demonstrated an ability to contain the challenge of the Khmer resistance groups but they do not possess the capability to eradicate that challenge in large part because of the facility of sanctuary along and across the border with Thailand.³³ The entrenched position of China and Soviet Union in the conflict are reinforced and prevent a resolution that might involve either decisive victory or a political compromise.³⁴

The strongest probability in the future scenario of Southeast Asia, it appears, is that the conflict in Kampuchea will stay approximately the same in the next few years. While new diplomatic initiatives towards a political settlement will continue to be made at different levels, Vietnamese gradual consolidation of influence and power will continue and if any settlement works out it is most likely to come on Hanoi's terms. Justus M Van der Kroef in his study on the Kampuchean conflict reiterates that "unless its dynamics are soon reversed, 'the third Indochina war' seems destined to end, like its predecessors, with a victory for Hanoi".³⁵

It is true that the conflict in Kampuchea gives Vietnam an opportunity to show her strength, determination and zeal and exhibit her potentials for a regional power—the question remains how long

33. Michael Leifer, "Obstacles to Peace in Southeast Asia", in Hiroshi Matsumoto and Noordin Sopiee (ed.), *Into the Pacific Era*. ISIS and APIC, Malaysia 1986, p. 13.

34. *Ibid*, p. 13.

35. Justus M Van der Kroef, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Vietnam herself, supported by her Soviet bloc allies is prepared to put her own future development in limbo? For the present Hanoi appears prepared to bear that burden as it rapidly solidifies its conquest. However, there is no doubt that with a population of some 60 million which is rising, and with an agriculture subject to the vagaries of both climate and communist doctrine, providing only a basic subsistence, the socio-economic condition in Vietnam is

Vietnam's role in the region—short, medium and long term depends largely on Moscow which dictated by its high stakes in the region is likely to continue building up Vietnam as its proxy power.

deteriorating. If the country expects to move beyond an agricultural base she needs to diversify her sources of economic assistance. Although Soviet Union is providing essential support, it is conditional upon many things, particularly its strategic interests which in a non-homogeneous axis constituted by a Superpower on the one hand and a weak and underdeveloped state on the other always stays in a critical balance. Moreover, the result of such relationships are more often than not detrimental to the long term national interests of the weaker partner. Essential economic and military assistance by Soviet Union helps to sustain the conflict in Kampuchea, but at the same time it ensures that Vietnam is placed in a heavily dependent relationship. In return for this dependency Soviet Union enjoys continued access to military facilities which serve the twin goals of containing China and challenging the US naval predominance in the Western Pacific. The Soviet stakes in Southeast Asia are very strong, so Moscow is likely to continue to utilize the revolutionary elan of Vietnam to build-up a proxy power in the region.

To most outside observers, Vietnam's economic difficulties seem to be a serious weakness, and its vulnerability to Soviet Union a grave handicap. However from the Vietnamese perspective, what is

decisive in a country's strength, as already mentioned, is not its economic problems but its national political goals as perceived by the regime. Vietnam's determination to assure the security of its client state in Kampuchea has come at the expense of its prospects for economic development. Vietnamese people expresses optimism and fierce determination to soldier on in the face of adversity. Although such optimism may look illusory or may seem impractical, Vietnam's past records suggest that it can overcome more powerful foes than the fragmented Kampuchean resistance movement deployed along the border with Thailand. This underlying optimism derives from the spirit of Dien Bien Phu and also a long standing tradition of struggle against China whose machinations are regarded as being at the roots of Vietnam's difficulties. It is encouraged also by a conviction that the worst years of economic tribulations have passed and that determination and tenacity will bring a due reward in the form of concessions by adversaries who will tire first.³⁶

Vietnam is strong in the game of war—it is undoubtedly the new giant in Southeast Asia along the military dimension. It has unmatched political cohesion that is essential to totally mobilize a nation. Most importantly it has fierce determination that can carry out seemingly impossible odds. These are the rare qualities a nation aspires to possess, qualities that are essential for an emerging power. But it is the country's economic backwardness that holds it back from assuming a dominant position. However, abetted by the Soviet Union she may in all likelihood act as a proxy regional power.

36. Michael Leifer, *op. cit.*, p. 13.