

# THE THIRD INDOCHINA WAR

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*by William S. Turley and Jeffrey Race*

**M**ainland Southeast Asia has once again become a quagmire of conflict. Since December 1978 between 150,000 and 220,000 Vietnamese troops have occupied Cambodia. Elements of this force have been involved in small cross-border operations in Thailand and have on several occasions seemed on the verge of launching a punitive attack on that country. The Thai are expanding their armed forces by a third and are shopping for more weapons in Washington. Malaysia, Indonesia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the United States have promised to come to Thailand's aid if it is attacked.

In February 1979 Beijing invaded northern Vietnam to punish Hanoi for its invasion of Cambodia. Although it withdrew its troops, China has left several hundred thousand men on Vietnam's border. Hundreds of thousands of people who have fled their homes by boat from Vietnam and by land from Laos and Cambodia are cooped up in squalid refugee camps in poor and hostile neighboring countries, waiting for someone to take them in.

The current turmoil is a resumption of historic patterns of conflict that colonial rule forced into abeyance. American withdrawal from Indochina represented the exit of the last non-Asian power from the region. Southeast Asian states are more free now than at any other time in the last century to deal with one another without outside interference. The current conflicts are a complex brew of ancient ethnic antagonisms, limited conflict for local

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advantage, modern ideological struggle, and competition between the superpowers.

The United States must be concerned with these conflicts. For American interests in Southeast Asia include a respectable volume of trade and investment, security pacts with Thailand and the Philippines, friendly relations with governments that exercise a moderating influence within the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations, and a large flow of emigration for which America will be the main recipient. The United States also faces a rising Soviet threat in the Pacific and Indian oceans and the South China Sea. With Vietnamese cooperation, the Soviets will be able to challenge American naval dominance in the Pacific and the security of important U.S. allies. Tokyo is particularly sensitive to the naval issue because of its important economic stake in Southeast Asia and the vulnerability of its energy life line from the Middle East.

Policy toward Asia should take account of long-term basic trends in the economic and international politics of the region. This simple truth must be emphasized because it has so often been ignored. America's support for Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang in China until the late 1940s, its refusal to recognize the PRC when it was established in 1949, and its costly efforts—first on behalf of the French and then of a rump government in Saigon—to turn back revolution in Vietnam stand out as examples of poor judgment in opposing ineluctable long-range trends. In each case the United States stood against political forces deeply rooted in indigenous social traditions over which no external actor could have decisive control.

### *Submerged Struggles*

Sino-Vietnamese conflict started at the dawn of the Christian era, when ethnic Vietnamese (then a tribe in what is now southern China), moved south into the Red River Delta under pressure from the expanding ethnic Han Chinese. Repeated Han attempts to subjugate the fleeing Vietnamese and their ultimately successful effort to resist Han domina-

tion left a deep anti-Chinese imprint on the character of the Vietnamese.

The ethnic Thai, likewise residents some 2,000 years ago of what is now southern China, similarly moved southward under the same impetus and with the same result. The history of peninsular Southeast Asia in the last thousand years has thus been one of marches and countermarches among the contending empires, kingdoms, and petty principalities, all in the shadow of the Celestial Empire to the north.

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Until the nineteenth century, the conflicts in Southeast Asia were struggles for local advantage. But with the onset of colonial penetration, these local struggles became blended with and finally submerged in the larger struggle for world power centered in Europe. This process left but two contestants, Thailand and Vietnam. Long before colonial rule suspended their competition, they showed a propensity to seek security by competing for buffer states, supporting each other's internal dissidents, and enlisting outside powers in their respective causes.

Following World War II, as European power receded, the Thai-Vietnamese rivalry reasserted itself. In the last 30 years, Thailand has thrived while Vietnam has been wracked by internal conflict.

Thai strategy during this period was remarkably successful. Vietnam remained fragmented, and Thailand was able, with the aid of the United States, to perpetuate a similarly fragmented regime in Laos and, in cooperation with South Vietnam, to harass Cambodia. It also assisted U.S. bombardment of North Vietnam and sent ground combat forces to support South Vietnam. North Vietnam was unable to respond on an equal

scale, because it was tied down in a war for survival on its own territory. But it did assist an ongoing insurgent movement in Thailand. North Vietnam also intervened in Laos and Cambodia to deny their hostile use by the United States and Thailand and to secure access to South Vietnam for its troops.

After a century of partial submergence, the old pattern of local conflict has re-emerged. Also reappearing is the very distinct Vietnamese sense that its destiny is to struggle against the Thai (and to a lesser extent the Malays of Malaysia and Indonesia) for dominance over the Southeast Asian peninsula. The struggle over Laos and Cambodia, which in recent centuries (except when under the protection of the French) have had the choice only of Thai or Vietnamese suzerainty, is one aspect of this age old conflict.

Although both Vietnam and China are Marxist states and, at least nominally, were wartime allies against the United States from 1965 through 1975, their leaderships have long been deeply antagonistic over several issues of Marxist theory and practice. These antagonisms go far back. Early in their own revolution, when they seemed closest to China and had most reason to follow its example, the Vietnamese came to view Mao Zedong's doctrine of peasant revolution as a heretical departure from the genuine Marxist-Leninist doctrine of uprising based on the working class. Later, Hanoi refused to be reconciled to the Sino-Soviet dispute and blamed it on whichever side it perceived to be jeopardizing solidarity behind its aim of reunification.

From 1958 to 1965, China was more supportive of Hanoi than was the Soviet Union. Then Moscow increased its aid to North Vietnam, while Beijing rejected the Soviet call for united action in supplying war materiel to North Vietnam and signaled Washington that it would not intervene if the United States carried the air war to the north. Vietnamese communist leaders viewed this as proof of Chinese perfidy and hostile intentions. They viewed China's rapprochement with the United States in 1972—the year

American air forces mined North Vietnam's harbors and bombed Hanoi—as the ultimate betrayal. By 1973 North Vietnamese and Chinese border guards were exchanging small-arms fire, and in 1974 China seized the Paracel Islands, which, although occupied by Saigon's troops, were claimed by Hanoi.

The cleavage between Vietnam and Cambodia is also deep and lasting. The border between the two countries serves as the frontier between the Indian and Sinic cultures, one of the world's sharpest cultural divisions. Although France prevented Vietnam from completely dismembering Cambodia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial policies nonetheless allowed the Vietnamese to attain a dominant position in the country's economy and administration. Whereas the Cambodians had a strong cultural affinity with Thailand and viewed it as a manageable menace, they viewed the Vietnamese as alien, domineering, and determined to absorb their nation. The Vietnamese traditionally viewed Cambodia as a land of barbarians on the edge of their miniature "middle kingdom." These ancient perceptions acquired a modern ideological veneer in the Khmer Rouge view of Hanoi as regional representative of hegemonic, bureaucratic communism and in Hanoi's view of the Khmer Rouge as Maoist primitives.

### *Strategic Shifts*

The parallels between the current Sino-Vietnamese relationship, on the one hand, and the Vietnamese-Cambodian relationship, on the other, are striking. Just as the Chinese take a patronizing attitude toward the Vietnamese, so do the Vietnamese toward the Cambodians. In each relationship, the larger nation considers the smaller one a pawn and an agent of encirclement. The smaller state resents the apparent insistence of the larger one that it revert to the role of vassal, which it believed had been abolished by modern ideology and lengthy wars of national independence. These perceptions lead the larger powers to exaggerate the threat emanating

from the smaller ones, and they lead all parties to adopt inflexible positions on the fundamental issues that divide them.

The growing power of the PRC is the independent variable driving the changes—and producing part of the turmoil—in Asian interstate relations. Starting from a position of subordination to the Soviet Union in 1949, the PRC began to break away in 1956. Chinese moves were further inhibited, partly by domestic Chinese political considerations but mainly by the continuing powerful U.S. military presence on the peninsula of Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. With the collapse of the U.S. war effort in Southeast Asia in 1975, this constraint was relaxed.

By mid-1978 the American military factor in peninsular Southeast Asia had virtually disappeared. The situation in the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations)<sup>1</sup> countries had been resolved favorably or at least clarified: Thailand had removed U.S. forces, Malaysia was pushing for neutralization, the Philippines had begun to distance itself from the United States, and it was clear that Indonesia would not have a communist government. The Soviet threat was larger than it had been a decade before, both in relation to the U.S. threat and in absolute terms. China's internal economic and defense needs were incompatible with continued PRC-generated tension and uncertainty vis-à-vis Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia.

From the increasingly acute PRC recognition of these facts have grown the peace treaty with Japan; termination of the friendship treaty with the Soviet Union; normalization with the United States; an implied resolution of the future of Hong Kong; a decision to follow a policy of supporting established governments rather than insurgent movements in Southeast Asia; the invasion of Vietnam; and security and diplomatic cooperation with the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Japan.

These strategic shifts form the basis of the

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<sup>1</sup> *The members of ASEAN are Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.*

new framework within which the Southeast Asian states must seek their own security. The United States has not adequately recognized the full scope and implications of these changes and has been slow to respond to them. But these changes are likely to prove durable and offer a rare opportunity for new relationships with positive implications for stability.

Vietnam, like the PRC, is striving to consolidate a more favorable position in the region. Aside from the Chinese threat, its paramount concern is to prevent Laos and Cambodia from becoming springboards for attacks on its territory or havens for organizing insurgencies among the minorities that straddle its borders. Current Vietnamese leaders believe that this guarantee can be obtained only by implanting subordinate regimes in these states.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) wants to maintain good relations with the ASEAN countries to broaden its economic ties and to enhance its legitimacy in the Non-Aligned Movement, as long as they remain weak and fragmented. For the Vietnamese do not want to rely exclusively on the Soviets for their economic health and security.

Yet the ASEAN countries are generally suspicious of the SRV. They now realize that the Vietnamese diplomatic offensive of August and September 1978 was a maneuver to soften them as part of Vietnam's preparations to invade Cambodia. At the same time, they want the United States to open lines of communication with Hanoi to inhibit the SRV from moving closer to the Soviet Union. However, they do not want American or Japanese aid to help Hanoi increase its military power or become an economic competitor.

### *Diplomatic Offensive*

The Vietnamese decision to remove the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia reportedly was made at a special meeting of the central committee in February 1978. This decision led to a remarkable series of policy moves, suggesting Hanoi's resignation to confrontation

with China and its sensitivity to the need for diplomatic preparation.

On March 23 Hanoi issued a decree nationalizing all "industry and commerce directly related to production," an order whose consequences fell most heavily on the Chinese business community. This decree and the revoking of Chinese privileges in northern Vietnam stimulated a mass exodus to China that Beijing protested vigorously. On June 29, apparently as the price of Soviet support for its forthcoming adventure, the SRV moved from observer status to full membership in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. As a result, Beijing suspended its \$300 million aid program to Vietnam.

Having set a clear course in its relations with Beijing and Moscow, Hanoi unleashed a diplomatic offensive aimed at noncommunist states. In July emissaries were sent to Japan and Australia. In a remarkable reversal, Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien recognized ASEAN as a "genuine regional organization for economic cooperation," dropping the charge that ASEAN was a militaristic tool of American imperialism. This shift was made simultaneously in Soviet propaganda. At the same time, Vietnamese spokesmen publicly stated that Hanoi no longer would demand bilateral economic assistance as a precondition for normalization of relations with the United States.

In September and October, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong toured all of the ASEAN capitals. His most important stop was in Bangkok, where he dropped Hanoi's demand for the return of all planes and vessels used by refugees fleeing South Vietnam in 1975, pledged that Vietnam would not support the Thai insurgency, signed agreements on repatriation of refugees who had fled Vietnam in the 1940s and on commercial and economic cooperation, and tried unsuccessfully to obtain a friendship treaty.

Meanwhile, on November 1 Hanoi signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, thus obtaining strategic reinsurance in case the consequences of

the invasion turned out to be more grave than anticipated. Cambodian dissidents under Vietnamese supervision created the Kampuchea National United Front for National Salvation on December 2 as a fig leaf to cover Vietnamese forces that invaded Cambodia, initially with a Khmer identity and then with a formal invitation.

The Vietnamese were obviously aware of the risks they were taking. Their diplomatic offensive was carefully orchestrated to avoid alienating noncommunist benefactors such as Japan and Australia and, at a greater distance, France, Sweden, and other European donors. Furthermore, it showed a desire to head off opposition from other Southeast Asian states. Vietnam's overtures to the United States were based on the assumption that the invasion would jeopardize progress toward normalization, which should therefore be accomplished beforehand.

Vietnamese leaders were also aware of the risks to the reconstruction and development of their country that might result from damage to trade and investment and from reassigning the army to a purely military mission. Moreover, they could not have been unaware of the potential for becoming bogged down in a costly war of pacification on foreign soil. The resulting dependence on the USSR could endanger their hardwon independence and incur greater Chinese hostility.

Precisely because there were such great risks, consensus was uncharacteristically difficult for the party to achieve and maintain. Debate over relations with the Soviet Union and China had come close to breaking out into the open at the fourth party congress in 1976, at which Hoang Van Hoan, a political bureau member, and a few central committee members who wanted to appease China were demoted. The party apparently has been less than unanimous ever since, as Hoan's defection to China in July 1979 indicated.

### *The Cat's-Paw*

What, then, did the Vietnamese see in Cambodia to justify taking these risks? First,

Pol Pot's Cambodia posed a very real threat to the security of Vietnam's southwestern border and the upper Mekong Delta. According to Vietnamese claims corroborated by foreign witnesses, Cambodian commando raids and fighting along the border had caused widespread destruction. The Vietnamese had to cancel plans for economic development projects and new economic zones in these agriculturally promising border areas. Furthermore, Vietnam found itself host to 150,000 Cambodian refugees, and it feared Phnom Penh's political influence among the approximately 500,000 ethnic Cambodians on Vietnam's side of the border.

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Second, the Vietnamese, as they have made clear in every public and private utterance, considered Cambodia the cat's-paw of China, the instrument of Beijing's strategy to weaken the SRV and extend Chinese influence throughout Southeast Asia. Third, as Cambodia improved relations with Thailand, Hanoi feared it might become the spearhead of a gigantic anti-Vietnamese coalition backed not only by China but also by Thailand, ASEAN, and the United States. And fourth, Vietnam traditionally considered Cambodia, like Laos, a tributary state.

After a succession of raids, incursions, and diplomatic maneuvers by both sides and Vietnamese efforts to instigate a coup in Phnom Penh, the Vietnamese proposed on February 5, 1978, the establishment of an internationally supervised demilitarized zone between Vietnam and Cambodia. Rebuffed, they began to assist dissident Cambodians to organize an insurgency against Pol Pot.

In late June, following almost two months of attacks by Cambodian forces, up to 80,000 Vietnamese troops supported by armor and air strikes moved deep into Cambodia. Hanoi placed the blame for Pol Pot's intransigence

squarely on China and began organizing local governments from Khmer sympathizers in occupied territory. The central committee then decided to proceed with a full-scale invasion to resolve the Cambodian problem once and for all.

SRV leaders believed they had reduced the risks of invasion with their diplomatic blitz, which they hoped would allay fears of broader Vietnamese ambitions and pre-empt sympathy for Cambodia. Moreover, international response to Tanzania's invasion of Uganda convinced them that the world would accept if not acclaim the removal of Pol Pot. They anticipated an intensification of Chinese harassment on their border but discounted large-scale military retaliation. According to a January 1979 report in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Beijing told Cambodian Defense Minister Son Sen in August 1978 that China would not come to Pol Pot's rescue if Vietnam invaded. Moreover, Beijing's earlier military assistance to Cambodia had seemed purposely designed to enable the Khmer Rouge to wage a defensive guerrilla war on its own. Evidence that China was embarrassed by Pol Pot's excesses carried out in the name of Mao further suggested that Beijing's commitment was limited. Most important, the SRV may have exaggerated the degree to which China would be deterred by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that Hanoi had just signed with Moscow.

The invasion left the lasting impression, particularly in ASEAN capitals and Japan, that Hanoi's preinvasion diplomacy had been a duplicitous stratagem. To the Vietnamese, however, any contradiction between the expulsion of Pol Pot and of Chinese influence from Cambodia and the maintenance of good relations with ASEAN was the result of mis-conceived self-interest on the part of the latter.

### *Power and Security*

China's decision to invade Vietnam was not simply a gesture of support for Pol Pot. It was the culmination of a long-term effort to extract some measure of flexibility from

Hanoi on crucial strategic issues. The Chinese, preoccupied with the Soviet threat, were mainly concerned about the balance of power in Asia and the Pacific and the security of their southern flank. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia provided China with a pretext for showing to Vietnam the gravity with which Beijing viewed Hanoi's obstinacy and China's potential for doing something about it.

China moved quickly to blunt criticism of the invasion and to settle some issues that the invasion otherwise would have postponed. Movement toward a decision to invade began in August 1978, when, according to a senior PRC official, the Beijing leadership learned that Hanoi intended to invade Cambodia. Building on the momentum provided by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed with Japan on August 12, 1978, Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping said during a visit to Tokyo in late October that the PRC would seek peaceful reunification with Taiwan. Deng was playing up to the keen U.S. interest in normalization that American National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had expressed in Beijing in late May and that President Carter had repeated to the PRC liaison officer, Chai Tsemin, on September 19.

On November 4 Washington sent Beijing a draft communiqué, and on the 25th Deng expressed publicly his desire to visit the United States, a statement that signaled China's tentative acceptance of Carter's terms. The establishment of full diplomatic relations between the United States and China was announced on December 15, barely three weeks after Beijing had indicated it wished to proceed.

In retrospect, it is hard to judge which gained more from the other's haste to normalize: Beijing by achieving a diplomatic coup that was beyond Hanoi's reach, while implying Sino-American collusion against Vietnam; or Washington by winning Chinese consent to all of its terms. It remains unclear whether Washington was fully aware of the linkages behind Chinese and Vietnamese diplomatic strategies or whether it pondered

how these linkages might be used constructively in connection with the looming conflict in Indochina.

When the Chinese invasion began on February 17, it appeared at first that Beijing's main objective was to demonstrate that its friends, however odious, could not be attacked with impunity because of the damage to Chinese prestige and credibility that would result. But China soon made clear that the Sino-Soviet dispute and Vietnam's role in it were the key issues in its decision to invade. Specifically, Hanoi's heavy reliance on the Soviet Union and the resulting opportunities for the extension of Soviet power into Southeast Asia were unacceptable to Beijing. The Chinese wanted to demonstrate that their military forces could wreak heavy damage on Vietnam at little relative cost to China, that the Vietnamese could not guarantee their own security, and that the Soviets would not come to Vietnam's defense. As a result, Chinese strategists hoped to force Hanoi to reappraise its interests, loosen its ties to the Soviet Union, return to its traditional independence from both Moscow and Beijing, on Sino-Soviet issues.

To drive these points home, the Chinese have maintained a high degree of tension along their border with Vietnam since the invasion. Chinese troops have staged mini-incursions into Vietnamese territory. Using personnel recruited from the ethnic minorities that straddle the border, China has encouraged dissidence in Vietnam's northern mountain regions. In Laos, the Chinese have organized the Lao Socialist party as an alternative to the Vientiane government and have supplied weapons to a division of several thousand men and to Meo tribesmen who formerly enjoyed the support of the American Central Intelligence Agency. Since mid-1979 China has recruited troops for a Lao guerrilla movement from among Lao refugees in Thailand. Moreover, Chinese support for the Cambodian resistance could indefinitely prolong Vietnam's—and the Soviet Union's—burdens there.

*Implacably Hostile*

Will Hanoi draw the intended conclusions from the invasion? One view is that it will eventually have to admit that it is virtually defenseless against China. The Chinese moved deep into Vietnamese territory with relative impunity and decimated several major towns without ever utilizing the reserves and air power they had assembled. What was a major attack for Vietnam was a minor operation for China. Moreover, the Vietnamese could not fail to notice that the Soviet response was carefully measured. Finally, China's attack demonstrated that Vietnam cannot pursue aggressive policies as in Cambodia and guarantee its own security at the same time. Vietnam will therefore be forced, this argument concludes, to forswear further integration with the Soviet bloc and to moderate its goals where they conflict with those of China.

However, the Vietnamese maintain that the Chinese attack did not really test their capabilities. Vietnamese military leaders concede only that their forces were shown to be inexperienced in static defense. They believe that even without Soviet intervention they can make further Chinese attacks too costly for China to contemplate. As for the reliability of Soviet guarantees, the Vietnamese seem satisfied that Soviet materiel and diplomatic support is sufficient and that they can strengthen the Soviet commitment to their defense by broadening the base rights and other forms of military cooperation that the Soviets have requested.

A final factor that makes continuing confrontation with China likely is Hanoi's internal politics. The current top leaders are secure in their power, have achieved a stable consensus committing them to the present course, and enjoy the support of an emerging younger generation accustomed to conflict and more provincial in outlook. The most poignant evidence of Hanoi's commitment has been the public use of the late President Ho Chi Minh's final testament, which ex-

horted the party to press for national independence, reunification, and unity within the world communist movement in the campaign against China.

The Vietnamese have subscribed wholeheartedly to the Soviet position on the most sensitive issues of doctrine and strategy. Barring an extraordinary change of heart by those leaders now in power in Hanoi, the kind of policy shift Beijing demands would require a change of leadership on a scale the party has never before experienced. Since the logical candidates to lead such a change constitute an increasingly isolated element within the party, it is very unlikely to occur. Under these circumstances, Vietnam must become more dependent on the Soviet Union, and Sino-Vietnamese relations will remain strained.

This does not, however, imply that the Vietnamese like the current state of affairs. On the contrary, they are desperate to cut their losses in Cambodia, they would like Chinese pressure to cease, they want to take advantage of the capitalist economy for resources and technology, and they are wary of the Soviet Union's long-range intentions and question its reliability. But given their perception of China as an implacably hostile member of a global conspiracy against them, it is difficult for them to imagine a way out.

For a time after 1972, two trends appeared to be in motion in Southeast Asia: superpower withdrawal from the region, culminating in the neutralization of Southeast Asia; and accommodation between the communist and noncommunist blocs there, leading to complementary economic development.

Both of these trends have now been arrested, dramatically changing the regional security. Of overriding importance are the forces working to bring the superpowers back into an active role, a development bearing decidedly mixed blessings. While certain states may improve their security and certain regimes their short-term stability through increased superpower support, other effects are negative. A strong superpower presence in Southeast Asia would tend to widen

cleavages among competing regional powers and to encourage narrowly based elites to rely on coercion rather than reform to keep themselves in power.

ASEAN leaders have sought to reactivate or to strengthen their military ties with the United States in response to what they perceive as Soviet hegemony, the loss of an important buffer (Cambodia), and the presence of a Soviet proxy (Vietnam) in their midst. The enthusiasm for this trend declines in proportion to the particular country's distance from the Cambodian border, and each has a deep-rooted fear that by relying on a superpower for its security it runs the risk of being drawn into proxy rivalries at Southeast Asia's expense.

The effect of the conflicts on ASEAN as a whole has in certain respects been favorable. Historically, economic integration has provided only a weak impulse to cooperation among ASEAN states. Instead, external threats have provided the main stimulus. The sudden reappearance of a challenge from Vietnam has tightened ASEAN's cohesion, helping it to make progress toward becoming a true political and economic community.

Paradoxically, in view of the trends toward militarization and heightened tensions in the area, the Sino-Vietnamese-Khmer conflicts have helped reduce the threat of both internal insurgency and external aggression for the noncommunist states of Southeast Asia. This is most evident in the case of Thailand, which, due to its geographic position, is the most seriously threatened.

#### *Dangerous Consequences*

Internally, the Bangkok government enjoys improved solidarity as a result of the crisis. Moreover, as the price for using Thai territory to resupply the Khmer Rouge, Beijing has terminated its support for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), and the CPT, thought too pro-Chinese by Vietnam, has been summarily ejected from its base camps in Laos and Cambodia. The Vietnamese are helping elements of the CPT

whom they trust to organize a new party, but for the moment Bangkok's communist opposition is in disarray. Internationally, Thailand is unassailable because China, the United States, Malaysia, and Indonesia have promised to assist it in case of attack. Even the Soviet Union, motivated by its competition with China and seeking to allay fears caused by the actions of its friends in Hanoi, is courting the Thai. Finally, the Vietnamese, tied down in Laos and Cambodia and beset by economic problems at home, can hardly afford to pursue an aggressive policy against Bangkok.

However, if Laos and Cambodia are successfully incorporated into the Vietnamese orbit, Vietnam would be in a favorable position to apply renewed pressure on Thailand. As a result of the fighting and in return for limiting its cooperation with the PRC to avoid provoking Vietnam, Thai officials during 1979 obtained accelerated arms deliveries from the United States, an additional \$30 million credit for arms purchases, and military aid without condition. Subsequent additions have brought the total aid package to \$400 million. The Thai have also decided to increase the army by 20 battalions, a one-third increase. These measures may increase Thai military expenditures by up to \$300 million a year, which cannot be raised by increased taxation. Hence, both domestic and external debt will be increased, with the net effect of reducing productive investment and therefore growth rates.

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of the conflict in Southeast Asia is that resources and attention will be diverted from the necessary political and economic changes that would alleviate the conditions generating the Thai insurgency.

For reasons of physical distance and domestic structure, the impact of these conflicts on Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia is more remote. The most obvious effect is the deferment of Malaysia's hopes of establishing a zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality in the area. Kuala Lumpur has

cancelled aid and technical cooperation agreements with Hanoi and has expressed its extreme unhappiness with Vietnam for dumping Chinese refugees on its eastern shore, where ethnic tensions were already severe. As a result, Malaysia, like other ASEAN states, has grown more interested in regional cooperation on security issues. In addition, Malaysia is tripling the size of its air force (from 5,000 to 15,000 men), doubling the size of its army (from three to six divisions), and enlarging its navy.

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**American behavior toward South-east Asia has been marked by passivity verging on paralysis.**

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The strife in Indochina may have had some role in moderating Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos's position in base negotiations with the United States, although the issue has long been dominated by domestic political considerations. Like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the Philippines is increasing military expenditures: In early May 1979 the government announced a \$200 million increase in its military budget.

Indonesia, toward which Vietnamese leaders held their most hopeful expectations for cordial relations, has begun to pave the way toward restoration of diplomatic relations with Beijing. Defense Minister Andi Mohammad Jusuf has also ordered that 60 army battalions be brought to full strength, modernized, and trained within one year. The main domestic effect of rising international tensions for Indonesia has been the legitimation, at least in the minds of the military elite, of military intervention in politics and in the economy.

The effects of the war have fallen most heavily on Vietnam and Cambodia. For Vietnam, the protracted occupation of Cambodia and Chinese military pressures have exacerbated economic problems that were already acute before the December invasion.

Military resources hitherto engaged in recovery and capital construction have been diverted to defense. Per capita food consumption has declined, and annual shortfalls in foodstuffs of 3 million tons and more must be covered by purchases abroad with limited foreign exchange. The 1976-1980 Five Year Plan has been scrapped in all but name.

Japan, seeing its efforts to build a bridge between ASEAN and Indochina wittingly subverted by the Vietnamese, has withheld disbursement of aid to Vietnam totaling \$70 million for 1979. The USSR and East European countries have made up some of Vietnam's losses in aid, but meanwhile the cost of occupying Cambodia has escalated. Since the USSR is giving Vietnam approximately \$2.5 million a day for its operations in Cambodia, the cost of Hanoi's adventure has proved high for Moscow as well.

#### *Troublesome Clients*

Vietnam's domestic security is not much more stable than in neighboring states. As the international environment has appeared to grow more menacing, Hanoi has cracked down on internal dissidents with force. In the central highlands, there has been a resurgence of armed dissidence by minorities under the banner of the Unified Front for the Struggle of Oppressed Races. In addition, many people have reportedly resisted government authority, and official theft and corruption have reached proportions party leaders consider epidemic.

Although the Vietnamese army has been able to establish dominion in the name of Heng Samrin, president of the People's Revolutionary Council of Cambodia, over the bulk of Cambodia, it has been unable to establish sufficient security in the country to withdraw or even to reduce its strength to the original invasion level. Frustration over the intractability of the conflict and Soviet demands to reduce costs sharply in 1980 are no doubt partly responsible for the Vietnamese resort to the use of denial tactics and toxic chemicals in remote areas.

The Vietnamese have also had to contend with the inability of their Cambodian allies to establish a state structure unassisted due to the lack of administrative and technical personnel. Even Phnom Penh's top leaders lack experience at the national level. In consequence, the Vietnamese have had to supply a large number of cadres from their own strained resources to help set up and run the government. Vietnamese leaders have stated publicly that they wish to minimize their country's presence in Cambodia as quickly as possible, but conditions will permit no significant reductions soon.

The conflict has also swept Laos, whose leaders would have clearly preferred to remain uninvolved. As a close Vietnamese ally and client, the Vientiane government had no choice following China's attack on Vietnam but to ask the Chinese to reduce their presence and withdraw their road-building crews in the north. Now Laos receives the same treatment from China as does Vietnam. Because what little skilled manpower Laos possesses has been mobilized into the armed forces or has fled across the Mekong, development projects and even some basic services have been cut back. A large contingent of Vietnamese advisers and about 1,000 Soviet experts keep state services functioning, much as the U.S. aid mission did for the royal Lao government in the 1960s. Rice production has declined over the past year.

These conditions and dissatisfaction with being forced to serve Vietnam's crusade against China have caused a continuing refugee exodus and a growing trickle of defectors from the party, government, and army.

Although China has withdrawn from Vietnam and the Vietnamese have broken up the main stronghold of Khmer Rouge resistance in Cambodia, tensions and actual fighting sparked by these conflicts will continue for years. Negotiations between Beijing and Hanoi that began in April 1979 will not soon lead to rapprochement.

The Sino-Vietnamese conflict, however, is not likely to take the form of military

thrusts across territorial boundaries—although another Chinese “lesson” cannot be ruled out—but of covert support for each other’s dissidents, propaganda, and diplomatic maneuver. Beijing in particular will attempt to limit Vietnamese-Soviet power by courting the ASEAN states.

In Cambodia, the Vietnamese incursion has become an occupation that may last indefinitely. The Khmer Rouge cannot possibly return to power by force of arms, but the potential for the various resistance groups to harass the Vietnamese for a long time is great. The Cambodians’ strong sense of national identity and fear of impending effacement at the hands of the Vietnamese guarantees that Cambodia will be a most troublesome client, as defections from the Heng Samrin regime to nationalist resistance groups and to Thailand suggest. However, there can be no doubt as to the seriousness of Hanoi’s determination to establish a secure, stable, and compliant regime in Phnom Penh.

The relative permanence of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict and of fallout from the invasion of Cambodia tends to lock Vietnam onto a narrow diplomatic track. The economic policy announced at the sixth central committee plenum in October 1979 suggests that the SRV remains open to economic relations with the capitalist world and that it will attempt to develop them over the next year, but with low expectations of success. Soviet influence is thus likely to increase, unless creative initiatives are undertaken.

### *Divergent Perceptions*

The most likely source of initiatives is ASEAN. Thailand and Singapore hold more negative images of Vietnam than do Malaysia and Indonesia, which are inclined to be more conciliatory. All of these states are wary of China because of its past support for communist insurgencies on their territory, but Indonesia is particularly reluctant to accept the degree of regional Chinese involvement that long-term confrontation with Vietnam

would imply. At the same time, they agree that Cambodia should be independent of foreign control, that the Vietnamese should reduce their dependence on the Soviet Union, and that Vietnam could be a useful block against the Chinese. With these considerations in mind, the ASEAN foreign ministers last December 14 authorized Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen to open a dialogue with Hanoi about Cambodia on the organization's behalf during his visit to Vietnam in January.

A great deal of attention has been focused, first by the Vietnamese and then by U.S. officials since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, on the close parallel between American and Chinese interests. This focus overlooks important differences of perception, however. American behavior toward Southeast

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Asia has been marked by passivity verging on paralysis due to bitterness over past defeats and by reassignment of priorities to the Middle East and Europe. American policy makers perceive the threat posed by Soviet bases in Vietnam and Moscow's increased activities in the region on the whole as much less ominous than Soviet penetration elsewhere. American policy is almost exclusively focused on such current issues as the refugees and the immediate security concerns of U.S. allies. The PRC, by contrast, is concerned with long-range issues, mainly the Soviet threat in Asia. Thus, one of the most important but unacknowledged parameters of current Southeast Asian regional politics is that the tacit cooperation between China and the United States rests on a fragile base of divergent perceptions. This fact bears heavily on how, when, and even whether major regional conflicts might be settled.

The key issue is Cambodia, for it is here that the competing interests of China, Vietnam, and the ASEAN states backed by the United States and Japan all come together. No settlement is possible without the disappearance of the Khmer Rouge and a pragmatic response to Vietnam's effective predominance in the area. A broad spectrum of Cambodians and several nations, including France and China, support the "Sihanouk solution," which envisages a neutral coalition government under former Chief of State Prince Norodom Sihanouk and excludes the Khmer Rouge. But this solution fails to recognize that Hanoi has repeatedly rejected it for strategic reasons. Sihanouk is the only figure with sufficient legitimacy to threaten the verdict imposed by the Vietnamese invasion and to open Cambodia once again to Thai, Chinese, and American influence. Moreover, the Vietnamese cannot accept Sihanouk's return and all it implies for Cambodian autonomy without facing pressures from a restive Lao leadership to loosen their hold on Laos as well.

There are, however, common interests among the major parties to the conflict that must underlie a settlement if one is ever to take place. The Vietnamese wish to limit their dependence on the Soviet Union but will be unable to as long as their economic development is retarded by Chinese military pressure and noncommunist diplomatic and economic boycott. They also need to reduce their costs sharply in Cambodia. As for China, the campaign of attrition imposes direct military costs, increased allocations for defense, pressures for construction of naval forces in the South China Sea, prolonged regional instability, and wariness on the part of foreign investors at a time when Beijing is attempting to launch its own ambitious development plans. The Soviet Union needs to mollify the ASEAN states and to avoid an expensive overcommitment to another in a growing list of impoverished clients.

These factors suggest that the involved parties might be willing to end the conflict

through international recognition of Cambodia's neutrality and of a coalition government in Phnom Penh. The predominance of Heng Samrin's party in the new government would be guaranteed, and participation by Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge would be ruled out. These arrangements would do little more than ratify the status quo but would provide a face-saving way for all sides to retreat from confrontation. They would restore Cambodia, at least in law, to the status of buffer state. Finally, they are the best terms that China and ASEAN can hope to achieve without going to war.

### *Enticing Vietnam*

Unilateral, one-issue threats or inducements will fail to achieve sufficient appeal and credibility to alter Vietnamese policy, and progress toward a solution hinges largely on shifts in Vietnamese policy. For example, the Chinese invasion failed to deter closer Vietnamese-Soviet ties, and threats from the ASEAN countries and the West to cut aid failed to deter Hanoi from further action in Cambodia. Effective diplomacy aimed at restoring a measure of nonalignment in Vietnamese foreign policy and an acceptable regime in Cambodia requires a multilateral, comprehensive, and phased approach that emphasizes positive incentives.

The positive incentives could include recognition of Vietnamese security interests in Cambodia alongside a mutually agreed upon government; normalization of relations with the United States; economic ties with China; improved economic relations with noncommunist countries, particularly Japan and ASEAN; participation in schemes for regional development; movement toward economic relations with the United States; a security guarantee from China; and diplomatic support for improved status in international organizations. Since the negative incentives—in most cases simply the reverse of the positive ones—have already been applied or are inherent in the current structure of relationships, it is mainly in the

coordination of positive incentives that a new approach must be sought. Until mutually beneficial relations are established between Vietnam and the countries hostile to it, conditions encouraging a moderation of Vietnamese behavior will not exist, and no nation aside from the Soviet Union will possess the leverage to force Hanoi to change its policies.

This line of thinking has much in common with that which lies behind ASEAN's attempts to open up a dialogue with Hanoi. Those attempts, as ASEAN leaders know, stand little chance of success without broader coordination of efforts. The United States is not without influence in this area. This was demonstrated by the fact that both the PRC and the SRV tried very hard to normalize relations with the United States before launching their respective invasions. The centerpiece of U.S. policy should therefore be close but self-effacing cooperation with ASEAN. But American influence will have little positive effect if exercised unilaterally.

Southeast Asians would like to see U.S. influence used not to resurrect an American military protectorate but to join the ASEAN states, Japan, and Australia in drawing Vietnam into the Pacific community. After establishing relations with Hanoi, Washington's first act might be to speak to Beijing on Vietnam's behalf.

Implying that Vietnam may be susceptible to enticement is not to suggest that it could have been the Asian Yugoslavia if only the United States had embraced Ho Chi Minh in 1945. The Vietnamese Communist party's ancient ties to the COMINTERN, the ideological propensities of Vietnam's leadership, and geostrategic interests militate against such an outcome. But there are important elements within the Vietnamese leadership that place a very high value on national self-reliance and diversity of international contacts. These elements should be encouraged by demonstrating that the moderate policies Hanoi pursued before it invaded Cambodia can still bring the benefits it was then seeking.