CHAPTER V
CHAPTER V: ASEAN IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN REGION

The Cambodian Conflict

Cambodia had suffered grievously since 1969 through a cycle of war, civil war, genocide, invasion and civil war again. Following Vietnam's invasion in December 1978, the international community was faced with a country under an externally imposed administration, opposed militarily by three factions - one of them the Khmer Rouge. The civil war that ensued, and related economic hardships, caused the exodus of nearly 500,000 Cambodians. The situation had particular international significance because each of the factions had powerful external backing. The situation had the potential to destabilise the region. Vietnam withdrew its military presence from Cambodia in late 1989, at a time of global geopolitical realignment. Meaningful negotiations between factions began in 1990.

During the late 1980s, several international meetings were held in an attempt to resolve the conflict, culminating in the First Paris Conference in mid-1989. While this failed to achieve a comprehensive settlement, it mapped out a broad strategy, which subsequently faltered on
the proposed four-faction composition of the transitional administration. A peace proposal put forward by Australia advocated that the UN itself assume direct control of the civil administration during a transitional period enabling elections to be held, a constitution adopted and a new government formed. The plan was taken up by the Security Council and the agreement on the plan was reached in mid-1991, with the final agreements signed at the Second Paris Conference in October 1991.

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) mission was the UN's most ambitious and complex peace keeping operation. During the eighteen months of the operation, repatriation of nearly 370,000 displaced persons from the Thai border was completed successfully, all political prisoners were released, and political parties were established and were to operate and campaign widely and with a degree of security. The UN-organised elections were held without serious incident and with massive popular participation, leading to the establishment of a provisional government. Cantonment, disarming and demobilisation did not take place because of the refusal of the Khmer Rouge to participate in the peace process after June 1992.
The success of the elections has given Cambodia its first real chance in over twenty years to escape from the civil war and political repression and to build a stable and prosperous country.

ASEAN had played a constructive role in resolving the Cambodian conflict. While it is too early to predict whether lasting peace will prevail in Cambodia, there is no denying that ASEAN and other regional countries took the lead in bringing the problem to international attention and working with the UN towards a peaceful and equitable solution for the Cambodian people. That free and fair elections were finally held in that troubled country is a feather in ASEAN's cap and testimony to the effectiveness of regional security cooperation.

At the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore, the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN had reiterated their commitment to help in Cambodia's reconstruction, with Malaysia calling for an immediate channelling of funds for development as well as continued support from the international community. Echoing Malaysian's stand on Cambodia, Singapore's Foreign Minister Mr. Wong Kang Seng called for continued international effort to maintaining stability in Cambodia, saying that "a divided Cambodia
would not be good for the region. Mr. Wong added that ASEAN should assume the role of a "think-tank" in the international community for its continued involvement in Cambodia.

Given the present scenario in Cambodia, there is a need for foreign powers not to meddle in the internal affairs of Cambodia. The United States had indicated that it would not extend aid to Cambodia if the Khmer Rouge was included or given representation in the Cambodian government. On this threat, Cambodia had warned foreign powers to stay out of its internal affairs and let it pursue its national reconciliation and establish its own government. ASEAN is of the view that it would be guided by what the Cambodian people want.

ASEAN has called for the United Nations to continue its presence in Cambodia to ensure development in the country would proceed smoothly during the initial period of the new government. As regard to regional security dialogue with its other dialogue partners, ASEAN would want to see Cambodia and other states in the region notably Laos and Vietnam to participate in future ASEAN-Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) dialogue.


ASEAN-Vietnam Relations

There can be little doubt that ASEAN-Vietnam relations have improved considerably over the last few years. Confrontation has given way to detente and this has opened up opportunities for lasting peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

Before 1975, relations between Vietnam and the non-communist states of the region were shaped by the context of the Cold War. The end of the war in Vietnam in 1975 opened up the prospects for systematic reduction of tension and conflict among regional states. The fall of Saigon (now Ho Chin Minh City) caused alarm in many Southeast Asian capitals. With the U.S. failure in Vietnam and the consequent reduction of American commitments in Southeast Asia, it was believed that great powers would no longer be predominant in this region. This created opportunities for the regional states to pursue their own interests and aspirations to bring about peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia.

From the period between 1977 to October 1978, ASEAN-Vietnam relations have been cordial. The bilateral joint communiques issued during visits by the former Prime
Minister of Vietnam, Mr. Pham Van Dong stressed the need for relationships of coexistence, non-interference in one another's domestic affairs and economic and functional ties.

However, by the end of 1978, Vietnam had invaded Cambodia. Phnom Penh was captured on 7 January 1979, the Democratic Kampuchea Government was ousted, and the People's Republic of Kampuchea proclaimed under the leadership of Heng Samrin. Vietnam saw that her legitimate security interests lay in forging solidarity with her Indochinese neighbours, Laos and Cambodia. ASEAN saw this solidarity as a threat to the security of one of its members, that is Thailand. This encroachment of Cambodia was a fundamental challenge to ASEAN efforts to create a region of peace.

The differences in strategic priorities between Vietnam and ASEAN lasted over a decade. Both sides made clear their willingness to avoid an escalation of hostilities. In the diplomatic fronts, the process of diplomacy had never ceased. It was not until the late 1980s that diplomatic efforts to resolve the Cambodian conflict were intensified and the Cambodian peace process was allowed to advance for a comprehensive Cambodian settlement.
The period between 1990 and 1991 were the watershed years. In September 1990, Vietnam implemented the policy of military disengagement and in 1991, the Cambodian peace agreement was reached in Paris. For ASEAN, Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia meant that Vietnam was no longer considered a threat to Thailand. Developments in 1992 brought new advances in Vietnam-ASEAN relations. Vietnam's accession to the Bali Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and its status as observer in ASEAN since May 1992 have marked a new, important step in regional cooperation development. These positive developments in ASEAN-Vietnam relations marked a great potential in enhancing ASEAN-Vietnam relations and forging regional peace in the region.

Today, Vietnam's neighbours, particularly the ASEAN states, are giving strong support to the programmes of economic reform being applied by Hanoi. This change or transition from communist-oriented economy to that to a market economy can be construed as a safeguard against instability and a means for peaceful evolution to non-Communist government. By opening up to foreign trade and investment, Vietnam is becoming market for ASEAN nations.
The importance of Vietnam to Southeast Asia was echoed by the Malaysian Deputy Minister Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim, when he commented that there must not be two Southeast Asias, one rich and the other poor. He added that "Our goal must be shared prosperity for all."³

It seems that the Vietnamese leaders are seeking to maintain their political system while using market-oriented policies to generate the economic growth that communism failed to produce. Apparently, the Vietnamese leaders would prefer that the Communist party retain its monopoly on political power rejecting multiparty politics. Former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew has said that he did not foresee multiparty politics in Vietnam for a long time because there was no alternative to the entrenched system in which one party was dominant.⁴

From the above, it could be said that the successful search for an appropriate mechanism and different forms of cooperation provides a very important factor for security and stability in the region. It appears that as far as Vietnam is concerned, she would try her best for the highly effective results of the multi-sectoral cooperation between herself and ASEAN.

⁴Ibid.
On February 4, 1994, a dramatic shift in U.S.-Vietnam relations occurred when President Clinton of the United States announced his decision to lift U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam. The embargo was imposed on what was then North Vietnam in 1964 when the U.S. plunged into a conflict that cost 51,000 American lives and ended with the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.⁵

The decision by the United States to lift its trade embargo against Vietnam would benefit Asia-Pacific region. Philippine President Fidel Ramos commented that the lifting of the embargo would help form a liberal trade environment and promote regional peace and stability. Reflecting this sudden development, China, which fought a border war with Vietnam after Hanoi's 1978 invasion of Cambodia felt that improved U.S.-Vietnam relations would benefit stability and prosperity in the region.⁶

The U.S.-ASEAN Council, a non-profit organization that works to strengthen trade and investment ties between the U.S. and ASEAN countries said the trade and investment opportunities in Vietnam may be worth US$2.6 billion in the first two years following the lifting of the embargo.⁷


For ASEAN, this sudden change in U.S. foreign policy is very much welcomed and is timely towards realising peace in the region.

**Conflict Zones in the South China Sea**

For the first time in a generation, Southeast Asia has an opportunity for lasting peace. The end of the Cold war, the restoration of order in Cambodia, the conciliatory relationship between Vietnam and China, and between Vietnam and ASEAN, have set the stage for a new regional security relationship. However, the peaceful resolution of the multilateral dispute over the Spratly Islands looks unlikely. Six countries—China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei—have claims to all or part of the Spratly Islands and adjacent maritime area. The dispute contains seeds of conflict in which regional powers may vie for control of a highly strategic area, attracting the interest and possible involvement of outside powers. Indeed in a post-Vietnam, post-Cambodia, post-Cold War era, these disputes may even test the political solidarity of ASEAN itself.

The countries involved, and China, have made public their stand that they do not want to resolve the dispute by force. Despite these assurances, many of them are said to have some kind of military presence on these
islands. China is reported to have been behind the construction of an air-strip on one of these islands. Meanwhile, Taiwan may build an airport, a port and a lighthouse on the disputed islands to underscore its claim of sovereignty over them.\(^8\)

There are reasons to believe that the Spratly Islands issue, if not resolve peacefully within a regional framework, will soon become a crucial variable in the emerging equation of the new world order. If the issue of the Spratly Islands, is not resolved amicably at the regional level, this will provide fertile ground for outside powers to exploit the situation for their own global aims.

The failure to solve it amicably may lead to either an arms race among the countries involved or a direct military confrontation. In both cases, the Asian countries in the region, whether big or small, will suffer. Although the economies of many of these countries can afford to arm themselves heavily, it will spur an unending spiral involving billions of dollars of spending on a regular basis.

It is evident that the Spratlys, if not solved

peacefully within the region, may turn out to be either a military nightmare if the actual military conflict takes place, or an economic black hole for all the Asian countries involved, thus weakening them severely and keeping them only as pawns in the new world order.

On the other hand, if this problem is solved amicably, through negotiations, then is has the potential to build more cooperation and confidence not only among the nations involved but it will also pave the way for greater cooperation among ASEAN countries at a much wider level.

The six claimants to the potentially oil-laden area in the South China Sea are not ready for formal talks, and will stick for now to exploratory talks between low-level officials and scientists. Security experts peg the Spratlys, caught smack between the booming economies of Southeast Asia, as one of the region's few potential trouble spots. All claimants but Brunei have troops stationed in the islands and China and Vietnam have already come to blows once in 1988, when three Vietnamese naval boats were sunk by China killing 72 Vietnamese. ASEAN favours a freeze in the number of troops in the area. Hanoi is viciously opposed to Beijing's proposal to shelve the issue of sovereignty over the Spratlys in favour of joint development of the area's marine and mineral resources.
ASEAN have voiced the same fear, saying China may be trying to buy time to strengthen its military capabilities before physically asserting its claims on the islands. Former Philippines Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo had said that the conflicting claims of sovereignty over the Spratlys would "test our ability, wisdom and will to manage a situation of incipient conflict through dialogue and consultation, through measures that allay suspicion and build confidence."^9

The six claimants differ on approaches toward a resolution of the territorial conflict, and have so far shield from sitting down together to discuss their overlapping claims. Romulo said that by developing and expanding cooperation over the area, "we move closer to creating the environment for peaceful consultations on contentious territorial and jurisdictional issues as well."^10

Dr Tien Hung-mao, chairman of Taiwan Institute for National Policy Research has said that Taiwan was interested in participating in any multilateral negotiations to resolve the conflicting claims on the Spratlys Islands. However, he stressed that Taiwan would

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^9"Manila calls for arms freeze at Spratly conference," The New Straits Times, June 1, 1993.

^10Ibid.
not endorse Chinese military activity in the area, adding that China's hardened stand and inflexible attitude on the question of sovereignty would further complicate the issue. Dr. B.A. Hamzah said China's interest in the South China Sea was not only for resources such as oil, minerals and marine life, but for strategic and military reasons.

Dr. Lee Lai To, vice-chairman of Singapore Institute of International Affairs proposed that several steps be taken by claimant States to prevent military encounters in the South China Sea. They are, firstly, avoiding taking provocative action in strengthening their claims. Troops already stationed in parts of the Spratly islands must exercise restraint and caution so not to spark conflicts. Secondly, freezing the number of troops deployed by the claiming States and give prior notification of troop manoeuvres should be given to all concerned parties. Thirdly, ensuring that troops are not stationed on unclaimed rocks, atolls or reefs. Finally, no contender should sign contracts with foreign companies nor send scientific missions and seismic survey ships unilaterally in disputed areas.11

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The importance of Sparty's to ASEAN was voiced by the former Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas when he said that ASEAN would continue to explore ways to transform the South China Sea from an area of potential conflict into an area of cooperation among its littoral states without in any way prejudicing their various territorial and jurisdictional claims.

In July 1992, ASEAN declared in Manila that it supported a peaceful solution to territorial disputes and endorsed joint development. As for some application of "exclusive economic zones" (EEZs) to the Spratlys, the EEZs would be meaningless given the geography of the area. Joint development is probably the only multilateral solution. However, if the participants cannot get a convention on the sovereignty issue via a settlement of the territorial dispute, then foreign corporations will be reluctant to proceed with large-scale investments in oil and gas exploration.

The Chinese military and naval build up in the region has shifted the balance of power and has provided the PRC with a capability that is now greater than Vietnam's. Also important, unlike the situation in the 1980s, the PRC no longer has to calculate the possibility of Russian support for Vietnam in any South China Sea scenario.
Some ASEAN nations, notably the Philippines, want a U.S. pledge to ASEAN for support of a peaceful solution to the Spratlys. However, the official U.S. position on the Spratlys and the South China Sea is one of neutrality in the territorial disputes. Washington is not making judgements on the merits of the claims and has no legal position; it is for preserving the freedom of navigation; it supports peaceful resolution and opposes any country dominating or enforcing its claims militarily. In a November 1992 statement in Manila, Adm. Charles R. Larson, the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, warned the PRC not to act to enforce its claims in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{12}

A new twist appeared in January 1994, when experts attending a two-day conference on Southeast Asian security in Manila said that China was losing interest in unofficial talks aimed at settling a dispute over the Spratly Islands. The experts said that ASEAN may be forced to bring the issue to the United Nations to head off any conflict in the region.\textsuperscript{13}


Four rounds of talks, through workshops organised by Indonesia, involving security experts and government officials from claimant countries have been held over the past two years but progress have been marginal.

There are suggestions that the claimants should try to agree on a formula to share the development and resources of the Spratlys. This proposal would be like the one agreed between Australia and Indonesia involving a sea boundary dispute in the Timor Gap. Both countries had agreed on a formula to jointly-administered and develop the area.

It is obvious that there is no immediate solution to the issues in the South China Sea in view of the complexities of the conflicts. There should be continuous search for solutions to the conflicts. This process may take quite some time and a lot of effort have to done to reach an amicable solution to the problem. Nevertheless, there is always room for improvement in whatever talks or workshops to be carried out in the future. However, there is the need that the agenda for the talks be adjusted to suit changes and new requirements. Perhaps the Spratlys issue should be taken up and be included in the agenda in the next ASEAN Regional Forum in Bangkok in mid-1994.