CHAPTER FOUR

1969-1975: US DISENGAGEMENT TO THE FALL OF SAIGON AND VIETNAM-MALAYSIA RELATIONS

4.1. Introduction

The announcement of the Nixon Doctrine paved the way towards international detente. It formally commenced the United States (US) disengagement from Vietnam and facilitated the path towards normalisation in superpower relations, which in turn influenced international relations at the regional level.

In Southeast Asia, the announcement generated anxiety among nations which were aligned with the west. A series of policy decisions that evidently departed from the staunch anti-communist stand of earlier years became clearly visible by the early 1970s: a proposal for the neutralisation of Southeast Asia, the establishment of relations by non-communist states with communist states and finally, after the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the granting of recognition to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976. Vietnam-Malaysia relations during this period was very much a part of the many changes that began to unfold.

This chapter attempts to examine the impact of the Nixon Doctrine on the conduct of bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia.
4.2. Nixon Doctrine and International Detente

President Nixon's major policy pronouncement on the Pacific island of Guam on 8 July 1969 stated that the United States would no longer assume a direct and active military role in Asia in defence of friendly regimes. In Vietnam itself, the anti-communist military effort will be "Vietnamized", i.e. US ground forces will be withdrawn and replaced by South Vietnamese troops, trained and equipped by Washington. The Vietnamization programme involved the continuing but unscheduled withdrawal of American ground combat troops and the systematic strengthening of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) forces, thus enabling the ARVN to fight its own war. The US, however, would continue to give air and naval support to the RVN. The programme was described by Nixon in his speech on 3 November 1969 as the only feasible alternative to an abrupt American withdrawal from South Vietnam.

In the wake of the Vietnamization Programme, the South Vietnam National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) formed the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet-Nam (PRGSVN) in May 1969, offering itself as a legitimate alternative to the RVN. The officials selected to head the de facto government were all Southerners including prominent figures especially the

intelligentsia, many of whom were without communist credentials. This transformation essentially represented a move by Hanoi to portray the PRGSVN as a genuine alternative to the people of South Vietnam in place of the Thieu-KY regime.

The Nixon declaration was not well received in the RVN, especially among leaders including premier Nguyen Cao Ky. From the beginning the proposal of Vietnamization was far from popular in Saigon. President Thieu's critics were especially bitter at the announcement. President Thieu however saw a need to accept the US decision as there were not many other alternatives. Vietnamization was explained as an opportunity for the RVN for self-determination. The Malaysian government expressed the same view in response to the Nixon Doctrine.

The Nixon Doctrine also injected a sense of anxiety among the ASEAN states. For Malaysia which was in the process of losing the British military presence following the announcement by the British Government to reduce its military commitments "east of Suez", the US


3. The British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson announced in 1965 the withdrawal of British forces east of Suez in 1968 as a measure for reducing Britain's postwar military commitments.
disengagement caused another blow to the security of the region. President Nixon however assured Tunku Abdul Rahman that the US would not allow the communists to take over Southeast Asia. Tunku himself confidently asserted that the US was determined not to leave South Vietnam and Southeast Asia "to the mercy of the Chinese communist imperialists."

In international politics, Nixon's announcement was preceded closely by Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev's proposal in June 1969 for an Asian Collective Security System. The proposal called for the creation of a common security system by the Asian states with the strong support of the Soviet Union. Needless to say, the RVN reacted negatively to the proposal as the Soviet Union had always been one of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) mentors. Malaysia offered no immediate reaction towards the idea but rejected it three years later. By then Malaysia put forward its own neutralisation proposal for Southeast Asia -- an idea which the Malaysian leadership regarded as more practical and feasible.

The Nixon Doctrine was also closely linked to the US

move to get closer to China. By discontinuing direct engagement in Vietnam, the US minimized its clashes with the People's Republic of China (PRC) which at the same time had been backing the DRV and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet-Nam (PRGSVN) forces against the US-supported RVN. Both in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, the Nixon Doctrine significantly affected the course of the war, and ASEAN's concerns regarding regional security in the post-Vietnam era.

The rise of international detente following the Nixon announcement was marked by the Shanghai Communiqué, and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty between the US and USSR in 1972, following President Nixon's visit to Beijing and Moscow. The two events signified the relaxation of tension after nearly three decades of Cold War confrontation. Superpower detente at the global level also affected developments in Southeast Asia in the direction of regional detente.

4.3. Ho Chi Minh's Death

The passing of Ho Chi Minh, the president of the DRV on 3 September 1969 brought to a close an era in the history of Vietnam, particularly in the DRV itself. Ho's death came in the wake of the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine and also in the midst of the peace negotiations
in Paris. While Ho's death did not directly affect the RVN, it however prolonged the Vietnam war. This was mainly due to the conflicting views on how to conduct the war. Questions regarding the degree of communist orthodoxy to be maintained, and persisting differences between the DRV and the National Liberation Front in the South on this issue resulted in the failure to push immediately for a decisive victory.

Ho's death triggered a struggle for top leadership posts among the cadres of Ho's Lao Dong Party (the Vietnamese Workers' Party). The two main factions

6. The US CIA reported that none of Ho's successors had his charisma, and without Ho, the regime loses some of its appeal as the defender of Vietnam's nationalism. United States, Central Intelligence Agency, Reports on Vietnam and Southeast Asia, 1946-1976, 5 February 1970.

7. For a study on Vietnamese leadership after Ho, see Thai Quang Trung, Collective Leadership and factionalism, An Essay on Ho Chi Minh's Legacy, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1985.
were led by Truong Chinh and Le Duan respectively, both trusted lieutenants of Ho. In the struggle, Truong Chinh's emphasis on the policy of building a disciplined socialist state along Maoist lines triumphed over Le Duan's faction which leaned towards the Soviet Union as the model of struggle. Cady argues that Chinh's triumph brought about a policy which emphasised military victory instead of a negotiated settlement. The Le Duan faction's goal of ending the war through negotiation as desired by the Soviet leadership was thus pushed aside.

The failure to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Vietnam War also further intensified anxiety among the ASEAN states. Although Vietnam-Malaysia relations was not

8. Truong Chinh (1908-1988), also known as Dang Xuan Khu, was a leading communist ideologist, founding member of the Indochina Communist Party, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the DRV, and member of the Politburo. He was jailed by the French (1931-1936) and exiled in China in 1939. He advocated the Maoist line of Socialist Building.

9. Le Duan (1908-1986) was First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee and a member of the Politburo of the DRV. One of the early nationalists to struggle against the French, he was imprisoned twice (1931-1936 and 1940-1941). Many consider him as the most influential personality in the DRV during Ho's illness. A staunch advocate of the revolutionary effort in the South, he excelled in the art of reconciling rival factions within the Politburo and maintaining an independent Vietnamese position in the Sino-Soviet dispute. He was responsible for bringing the party into an intimate relationship with the Soviet Union and for causing a bitter dispute with China.

affected directly, it did however cause Malaysia and other Asean states to reassess their policies in the face of changes in the balance of power. Thus it was not surprising when Malaysia established official diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1967. This was followed shortly by Malaysia's support for China's entry into the United Nations.

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Racial riots in West Malaysia in May 1969, as well as the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970, did not receive much attention from the Vietnamese press in both North and South Vietnam. Apparently, to both North and South Vietnam, Malaysia was of little significance, while preoccupation with internal political developments as well as the conduct of the war limited the two Vietnams' foreign relations, except the concern for foreign aid. The lack of direct and active relations


12. Racial riots broke out on 13 May 1969 in major towns in West Malaysia in the aftermath of the General Election.

however did not stop the RVN and Malaysia from signing an Air Services Agreement in 1970 in Kuala Lumpur to permit regular flights by Air Vietnam from Saigon to Kuala Lumpur.

4.4. **Neutralization of Southeast Asia and ZOPFAN**

As the process towards detente progressed, the RVN was facing an ever threatening situation. With the removal of US ground forces engaged in the fighting, the ARVN had no choice but to shoulder the burden of defeating the PRG SVN and the DRV armies on its own. Meanwhile the political situation in the RVN in 1970 resembled that of the Diem era in 1963 with internal leadership strife, civil disorder, and the military rule.

The PRG SVN activities were reported to be linked with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) in Malaysia. Speaking to reporters after visiting Thailand, the Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman said Vietnamese and Chinese communists were infiltrating Thailand to provide weapons and other supplies to CPM...


15. The administration of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky was actually civilian in nature but both leaders' military background overshadowed its civilian image.
guerilla fighters at the Malaysia-Thai border. The infiltrators however did not include the training of recruits for the CPM. The matter was further confirmed by Tun Dr. Ismail, the Deputy Prime Minister under Tun Abdul Razak. Tun Ismail said that the resurgence of the communist activities in Malaysia was "linked with the activities in Vietnam." The CPM he said was "adopting more of the tactics of their counterparts in Vietnam."

There was no confirmation from Hanoi or the PRG SVN on this matter during this period. The Tunku's statement in 1970 was only acknowledged by the Vietnamese in 1978 after Prime Minister Pham Van Dong of the reunified Vietnam disclosed that Vietnam had discontinued its links with the CPM. Nevertheless, moral support continued, especially in terms of sending congratulatory messages from party to party -- a common feature in relations among communist parties.


17. Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman (1917-1973) was a medical doctor by profession before entering politics through the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party. A member of the Independence Negotiation Delegation to London in 1956, he was a prominent politician who also played a very important role in the formulation and conduct of Malaysian foreign policy. He was Deputy Prime Minister under Tun Abdul Razak until his demise.


19. Ibid.

Although the matter did not have any immediate reaction or consequences, it did however demonstrate a two-level relationship between Vietnam and Malaysia: first at the official RVN-Malaysia governmental level, and second at the level of communist guerilla activities on both sides. The latter was to have a significant effect in the 1975 and immediate post-1975 period, that is after the triumph of the PRGSVN and the DRV over the RVN government, which will be discussed later.

The official bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia were maintained through visits and joint participation in international conferences. The RVN sent delegates to join Malaysia and four other countries to attend a two-day meeting of the executive committee of the Association of National Rubber Producing Countries in Kuala Lumpur from 10 to 11 February 1971. On 21 to 26 March of the same year, a party of 15 from the National Defence College of the RVN, led by its Director of Instruction Colonel Nguyen Vinh Xuan, made a study tour of Malaysia.

By the late sixties, shifts in the global and regional balance of power were having an impact on the

Southeast Asian region. US military disengagement since 1969 was supplemented by the growing interest of the Soviet Union and the PRC in the region of Southeast Asia, compelling policy makers in the ASEAN states to seek alternatives to superpower rivalries in the region. The intensification of the Vietnam war in which the RVN was progressively losing ground to the DRV and the PRGSVPN also contributed to the anxiety of the Asean states.

Malaysia under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak took the initiative to introduce the idea of the Neutralisation of Southeast Asia and to turn it into a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The Neutralisation proposal was based on limiting, if not excluding foreign intervention, and obtaining guarantees from the big powers to underwrite the neutrality of Southeast Asia, and thus minimize prospects for major conflicts in the region.

23. For a study on the Neutralisation of Southeast Asia, see Heiner Hanggi, Asean and the Zopfan Concept, Pacific Strategic Papers, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1991.

24. The idea was first mooted by Tun Dr. Ismail in 1968 in the Malaysian Parliament when he was a backbencher. The idea was considered to be obscured by the Tunku who was then both Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Tunku maintained that being neutral was equivalent to being pro-communist. The idea of neutrality en bloc for Asia was first propounded by a Malayan delegate in the Asia Conference in 1947. It was set aside to make way for the idea of non-alignment put forward by India.
Five major factors could have possibly influenced Malaysia's proposal:

1) the accelerated withdrawal of British Forces east of Suez,

2) the announcement of President Nixon's Guam Doctrine (July 1969),

3) the increased interest of the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia with the announcement of the Asian Collective Security System by Secretary General Brezhnev (June 1969),

4) the reemergence of the PRC into international politics after the Cultural Revolution (1969), and

5) the fear of the Vietnam war spreading to the whole region.

All these developments indicated rising prospects for superpower intervention in the affairs of the region of Southeast Asia. The withdrawal of British forces and the limited military presence of the US after the Nixon Doctrine created a vacuum of power in the region. The prospect of the Soviet Union and the PRC filling this vacuum would be a threat to the region, especially with the intensified Sino-Soviet conflict.

Initially Malaysia's proposal did not receive good response from its fellow ASEAN states, as each had its own political inclination. The Philippines and Thailand were still the allies of the US through SEATO and Singapore due to its vast economic interest favoured more a foreign

military presence than the neutralisation proposal. The proposal was however accepted with modification by ASEAN leaders at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 27 November 1971, and the Kuala Lumpur Declaration as it came to be known expressed the desire to make Southeast Asia a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). Hanggi gave two reasons for the agreement by ASEAN states to the proposal: (1) the announcement of Nixon's visit to China at the end of 1971, and (2) the admission of the PRC to the United Nations in 1971. The two developments prompted ASEAN states to reassess their foreign policies to adjust to the changes and realities of a multipolar balance of power.

The ZOPFAN declaration was first reported to be well-received by the RVN leadership. This was denied a few days later by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RVN in a communiqué which insisted that:

...the Government of the Republic of Vietnam has not made any decision regarding the neutralization of Southeast Asia as proposed by the foreign ministers of the five Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The communiqué further stressed that "the Kuala Lumpur

Declaration of November 27, 1971, was but an accord over principles agreed upon by the five participating countries."

The RVN's reaction was understandable as adherence to, and realization of the neutralization programme would halt foreign intervention and end any further US military aid that was so vital to the regime's survival. However, the non-binding nature of the proposal also reduced Saigon's confidence in supporting the idea. On the other hand, the DRV was later contacted by ASEAN to consider the neutralisation proposal, but there was no immediate reaction from Hanoi.

The RVN's attitude towards Malaysia's neutralisation concept changed in early 1972. In an interview by the New York Times, President Thieu of the RVN asserted that his government would be glad to attend a conference on the Neutralisation of Southeast Asian with all Southeast Asia countries including North Vietnam. Nevertheless, the RVN's support for the idea came with a condition that all participating countries must sit together to discuss and reach an agreement on a common position on neutrality. Such a consensus would eliminate any other interpretation,

29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
especially by the Communist side which may abuse neutrality based on their own understanding of the concept.

The RVN's change of policy towards the idea of ZOPFAN came in the wake of Nixon's visit to the PRC which broke the ice of the Cold War. Nixon's visit which initiated the normalisation of relations between the US and the PRC was believed by Saigon to affect the conduct of the Vietnam war apparently in favour of the RVN. The normalisation of US-PRC relations shocked the RVN and its allies. However, the event also signaled for the first time a convergence of interests between China, the DRV's mentor and the US, the RVN's mentor. This development could mean that the PRC may not be supporting the DRV with great zeal as before, thus putting the DRV's war machine in jeopardy. This development would in turn limit the DRV's ability to support the PRGSVN's struggle South of the 17th parallel. Secondly, the normalisation also pushed Hanoi more towards Moscow for help as it felt Beijing had in the course of normalising relations with Washington, betrayed the Vietnamese people's struggle for the unification of Vietnam. To the DRV, the US was considered as the arch-enemy of the Vietnamese people. The Shanghai Communiqué

that was signed by President Nixon and Premier Zhou Enlai was perceived by Malaysia as a step by both China and the US in renouncing ambitions of hegemony and the creation of spheres of influence. Kuala Lumpur also believed that such a measure would contribute to the realization of the Neutralisation of Southeast Asia and also a quicker solution to the Vietnam war.

Malaysia continued to support the RVN's struggle when along with Indonesia and the RVN, it attempted to block the PRGSVN's entry into the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) at the NAM summit in Georgetown, St. Vincent in August 1972. Although the attempt failed, it demonstrated Malaysia's support for the Saigon government despite the lack of popular support for the anti-communist regime. Malaysia however, had since 1971 ceased to train RVN soldiers at the School of Jungle Warfare in Johore as it used to do in the sixties, thus closing the door to further military aid. This move was an indication of Malaysia's belief in a peaceful settlement to the Vietnam conflict: by cutting military aid to the RVN, Malaysia hoped to contribute to the peaceful settlement process.

34. Ibid.
On the Vietnam war, Malaysia expressed sympathy for the plight of the people of Vietnam. In his address to the Malaysian parliament, Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak stressed that:

...there must be negotiation for a peaceful settlement with the objective of ensuring that the people of Vietnam will be free to decide their own future for themselves without any external influence....

It was clear that Malaysia firmly believed that only the neutralisation of the region could save the situation in Vietnam. Tun Razak expressed deep concern over the grim possibility of superpower confrontation. He said that the prospect of big power conflict:

...underlines once more that...the policy of neutralisation to ensure the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states in the area is both correct and timely.

4.5. Developments in 1973-1975

1973 brought with it many developments that were beyond comprehension when viewed against the backdrop of the ideological conflict of the sixties. The year witnessed first of all the signing of the Paris Peace

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37. Ibid., p.133.
38. Ibid., p.134.
Agreements followed by the establishment of diplomatic relations between the DRV and Malaysia, and also an invitation by ASEAN to attend its annual foreign ministers conference.

The Paris Peace Agreements were signed on 27 January 1973 by the two principal negotiators, Dr. Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State and Le Duc Tho, the head of the DRV delegation to the peace conference. The treaty called for an end to the conflict and provided for the release of prisoners of war, the removal of US troops from the RVN, and a cease-fire in-place by the ARVN

39. The Paris Agreements were signed by the DRV, the RVN, the PRG SVN and the United States after four years of negotiations which began in late 1968, with the aim of ending the Vietnam War. For a study on the political, legal and diplomatic aspects of the agreements, see K. S. Nathan, "Law and Politics in the Vietnamese Conflict: An Appraisal of the Geneva Accords (1954) and the Paris Agreements (1973)" in Mohamed Abu Bakar et.al. (eds), Historia, The Malaysian Historical Society, Kuala Lumpur, pp.126-153.

40. Henry Alfred Kissinger (1923- ), chief architect of US foreign policy in the 1960s and early 70s, was Assistant for National Security Affairs from 1968 before becoming Secretary of State in 1973. He was chief negotiator for the US at the Paris Peace Talks, and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 jointly with Le Duc Tho.

41. Le Duc Tho (1910-1990) was born Pham Dinh Khai. He was chief Vietnamese negotiator at the Paris Peace Talks and leading figure in the Vietnam Communist Party. Imprisoned by the French in 1930 and named to the Politburo in 1954, he headed the party's Organisation Department for twenty years. Tho was rumoured to be a possible successor to Le Duan as the party general secretary in 1986, but was later dropped from the politburo.
and the PRGSVN forces. The agreement however made no reference to the presence in the RVN of over 200,000 troops of the PAVN. The agreement also made provision for a political settlement of the war with the setting up of a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord constituted by the RVN and the PRGSVN. The agreement was welcomed by the world as presaging the end of two and a half decades of war.

Malaysia and ASEAN whose peace plan was rejected earlier in August 1972 by Hanoi saw the treaty as a positive step towards future developments and also as paving the way for the realisation of ZOPFAN. There arose even the prospect of offering assistance, both social and economic for the reconstruction of the two Vietnams and the rest of the Indochina states by the ASEAN countries. Tun Abdul Razak stressed in a statement that Southeast Asian countries

...should contribute in whatever way...to a programme of rehabilitation and reconstruction throughout Vietnam and the rest of Indochina and should seek to establish contacts with one another ...

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42. ASEAN's peace proposal was initiated by Indonesia and was supported by Malaysia and other ASEAN members in August 1972.


Immediately after the conclusion of the peace treaty, the DRV Foreign Ministry declined an invitation issued by Thailand on 13 April 1973 and transmitted by Indonesia to send an observer to the annual conference of ASEAN Foreign Ministers. The DRV stated that Thailand was still an accomplice of US aggression against the Indochina countries. It was clear that Malaysia together with the rest of the ASEAN countries was making overtures to the DRV in an effort to bring about peace and stability to the region. The DRV however entertained other ideas, whereas the RVN was silent on the matter.

On 30 March 1973, the DRV established official relations with Malaysia marking the end of antagonism between the two nations. Both countries agreed

...to develop friendly relations between the two countries on the basis of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs of each other, and equality and mutual advantage.

This development was part of the effort by the DRV to gain friends and support for its reconstruction programme. For Malaysia it was a prelude towards the normalisation of

45. ASEAN foreign ministers meet annually at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting to formulate policy guidelines.
relations with the PRC. Malaysia also moved to establish such relations with the aim of further advancing the ZOPFAN concept. Malaysia had already withdrawn from ASPAC thus shedding its staunch anti-communist image, and aligning itself with the concept of ZOPFAN. K. J. Holsti is of the opinion that "diplomatic recognition provides the political unit a form of external legitimacy and support." This mutual recognition marked a significant turn in the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and Malaysia as thus far both had regarded each other with great suspicion, and held back efforts to carry out the normal business of diplomatic and commercial relations with each other.

Malaysia's action was somewhat disapproved by the RVN as Malaysia had always been one of the RVN's strong allies and supporters. The change of policy was looked upon as a threat to the RVN's security, despite the peace treaty which the RVN itself looked upon with doubt.Nevertheless, the RVN continued to maintain cordial relations with Malaysia. Malaysia's position on its relations with the RVN was explained by Tun Abdul Razak as normal and that diplomatic relations with the DRV would in "no way affect

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Malaysia's relations with the RVN."

As the last US troops left Vietnam on 29 March 1973, the peaceful atmosphere was soon to be broken, first with the rejection of the truce proposal in Cambodia by Prince Sihanouk on 9 April 1973, followed later by the death of 55 government soldiers who were killed in two clashes with communist troops on 4 January 1974 in South Vietnam. On the same day President Thieu claimed that the war in South Vietnam had resumed. The resumption of conflict in Vietnam was not well received by Malaysia which firmly believed the Paris Accords to be a realistic basis for the settlement of the problem and hence urged for its "strict implementation and adherence by all concerned." As the ARVN began losing ground rapidly to the PRG SVN and the DRV forces, the RVN Government appealed for foreign help. The US Congress responded to the RVN by placing a $1 billion ceiling on military aid to South Vietnam for the fiscal year ending 30 June 1975.

With the deterioration of the political and military situation in the RVN, the question of recognising the PRG SVN arose in 1974. The problem became more critical as the RVN government was clearly losing the battle militarily as well politically against the PRG SVN. The

situation prompted many countries including ASEAN to reconsider their position on the question of extending recognition to the PRG SVN. The government of the RVN reacted sharply to any effort at recognizing the PRG SVN. In a document prepared by the Foreign Ministry of the RVN, the RVN strongly stated that the "self proclaimed Provisional Revolutionary Government is not a government in South Vietnam." It further claimed that the PRG SVN was merely the creation of the DRV through the presence of a "large NVN [North Vietnam] Expeditionary Corps that has illegally infiltrated SVN." Thus for the RVN, Malaysia and other countries close to South Vietnam should not recognise the so-called "Provisional Revolutionary Government."

Even with the growing urgency in the conduct of the Vietnam war, and with increasing RVN military defeats, the Vietnamese Embassy in Malaysia kept up with its normal functions to foster closer relations with Malaysia. In the crucial year of 1974 for instance, Vietnam Farmers' Day was observed in Kuala Lumpur on 26 March with the holding of a reception, photo exhibition and briefings for Vietna

51. BY 1974, more than 38 countries mostly socialist, had recognised the PRG SVN. See Indochina Chronicle, 1974, p.14.

mese nationals at Vietnam House. Three South Vietnamese officials from the General Commission of Public Service arrived in Kuala Lumpur for a week's visit (15 to 21 July 1974) to Malaysia to study and observe rural development techniques and administration. This was followed by the participation of the Embassy of the RVN in the Pesta Kanak-kanak (Children's Festival) in Kuala Lumpur in conjunction with Malaysia's National Day on 31 August 1974. The Vietnamese National Day on 1 November 1974 was celebrated and attended by Malaysian dignitaries including the Minister of Health, Chong Hon Nyen. All these events clearly showed that Vietnam treasured its relations with Malaysia and with other countries, despite facing serious difficulties at home.

1974 also witnessed Malaysia taking the lead among ASEAN countries in establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC. A joint communiqué which marked this event was signed during the Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Razak's visit to China. This development was naturally looked upon with contempt by the Saigon Government as it still regarded the PRC as the mentor behind the PRGSVN and the DRV's scheme of struggle. There was however no criticism

nor any condemnation from Saigon which maintained that relations with Kuala Lumpur were vital to its survival as Malaysia was one of the few countries that had faithfully lent a hand in its struggle against the communists.

In December 1974, a four-man team from the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) of Malaysia left for Hanoi on a goodwill visit at the invitation of the AAPSO of North Vietnam. The visit, first of its kind after the inauguration of official diplomatic relations was a clear indication of Hanoi's willingness to foster closer relations with Malaysia. The Hanoi leadership took the opportunity to relay its political goals to the Malaysian delegates. The line of reunification and reconstruction was clearly articulated to the Malaysian delegates.

The situation in the RVN at the turn of the year (1975) had rapidly deteriorated, with the PRGSVN armed forces supported by the DRV moving closer to Saigon. The ARVN was forced to concede the fall of Buon Me Thuat, the provincial capital of the Dac Lac highlands to the

57. The team comprised of AAPSO Malaysia Chairman Encik Mazlan Noordin, Encik Abdul Kadir bin Haji Sheikh Fadzir, Encik Shahrir Samad and Encik Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Hamid.


communists in February 1975. The DRV and the PRGSVN effectively pushed towards Saigon in the spring offensive, and between January and April 1975, one province after another in the RVN fell into the hands of the communists. The grim situation in the RVN clearly indicated that there were actually two governments in South Vietnam, the RVN Government in Saigon and the PRGSVN which had wrested control of most parts of South Vietnam. The RVN was again forced to appeal for help from Malaysia and other countries for its war victims.

In the midst of all these developments, a crucial development that would eventually haunt the many ASEAN countries including Malaysia had taken place -- the refugee problem. The problem was later proved to be a thorn in the bilateral relations of the newly formed SRV and Malaysia.

On 3 April 1975, the RVN called for world attention to the plight of its war refugees when as many as 1.5 million were trapped in Danang in the face of the advancing DRV forces. The evacuation plan was supported by Malaysia which sent food and medicine to the RVN. The evacuation operation managed to move a large number of the

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stranded refugees to the South.

The refugee issue however did not stop with the fall of Danang. The invasion from the North prompted thousands to leave Vietnam in anticipation of the communist advance to the South. While most left by land to Thailand, many travelled in boats heading for Malaysia and other island states of ASEAN -- the 'Boat People' i.e. refugees who arrived by sea. At the initial stage of the exodus, there was clear sympathy from the first asylum countries for the refugees, many of whom were ethnic Chinese. Malaysia's amicable attitude changed as the number of refugees escalated -- an issue that will be discussed later.

The Malaysian Government withdrew its embassy dependents from Saigon on 12 April 1975. The Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak however urged Malaysians not to worry over the developments in Indochina. He added that the Malaysian Government,

...is always neutral in its foreign policy and is always prepared to recognise any form of government chosen by the people of Vietnam and Cambodia.

By 15 April, the DRV army captured Xuan Loc situated only 100 kilometers east of Saigon. Phnom Penh fell to

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63. *Straits Times*, 16 April 1975.
the communists on 17 April and on 21 April President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned, making way for General Duong Van Minh who was considered to be more acceptable to the communists compared to Thieu. General Minh's accession was however too late to halt the collapse of the Saigon Government. By then negotiation was the last item on the agenda of the DRV and the PRC SVN as victory was certain. Thus Saigon fell to the DRV and the PRC SVN on 30 April 1975. The fall of Saigon and the RVN also meant that Vietnam would be once again reunified under one government. Three days before the fall of Saigon, the Malaysian Embassy pulled out from South Vietnam.

The news of the fall of Saigon was received with gloom from the ASEAN states including Malaysia. The property of the RVN in Malaysia was frozen and many Vietnamese officials of the former regime sought political asylum and applied to leave for other countries. Malaysia, which since the beginning of Tun Razak's era had departed from an anti-communist and pro-western stand in its foreign policy, moved towards pragmatic action by first of all expressing willingness to recognise the new government of South Vietnam once it was established. This resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level with the new Republic of South Vietnam.

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64. New Straits Times, 27 April 1975.
on 4 July 1975. Malaysia's move was a clear refutation of the myth of the 'Domino Theory'.

4.6. Conclusion

The period between 1969 and 1975 witnessed a series of international political developments that influenced the global balance of power which in turn affected political developments in the region of Southeast Asia. The RVN's preoccupation with its intense anti-communist struggle, especially after the Nixon Doctrine left it with little or no opportunity to pay more attention to improving bilateral relations with Malaysia as well as other ASEAN states. It was clear that by now much of the RVN's foreign relations with Malaysia, and vice-versa was conducted through the ASEAN channel. However in many instances, some definitive forms of bilateral relations continued.

The DRV remained skeptical towards Malaysia and ASEAN, and hostile especially towards the Philippines and Thailand which were members of SEATO. The fall of Saigon

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66. Straits Times, 2 May 1975.
brought about first of all a unified Vietnam which signaled the dawn of a new era of relations with other nations. It also meant that the communists by now had gained a stronger foothold in Indochina, especially in the whole of Vietnam.

67. However, the administration of the country was unified only on 2 July 1976 when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was formerly declared.