

CHAPTER FIVE

1975-1978: FROM ACCOMMODATION TO THE CAMBODIAN CONFLICT

5.1. Introduction

The fall of Saigon in spring 1975 brought about a major shift in the balance of power in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indochina. The fall of the whole of Indochina into the hands of the communists tended to reinforce the Domino Theory. It also marked the end of the Republic of Vietnam-Malaysia relations and opened a new chapter in Vietnam-Malaysia relations.

The period from 1975 to 1978 witnessed interesting developments in Vietnam-Malaysia relations. The mutual accommodation process by Malaysia and ASEAN on the one hand and communist Vietnam on the other, bode well for peaceful co-existence of nations with differing and even opposing ideologies in the region of Southeast Asia. Various forms of bilateral relations including assisting Vietnam in its reconstruction process were in progress and to a certain extent gave a promising picture at least until the invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese in December 1978.

This chapter aims to examine firstly, the process of accommodation between Vietnam and Malaysia in the

aftermath of the fall of Saigon, and secondly, Hanoi's reconstruction efforts including the various obstacles encountered in the bilateral relationship.

5.2. The Fall of Saigon and Process of Accommodation

The fall of Saigon to the communists on 30 April 1975 had significantly changed the balance of power in the region of Southeast Asia. Vietnam had emerged not only as a unified nation, but the whole of Indochina was now in the hands of the communists posing an ever greater threat to the nations in the region in the context of the Domino Theory. This was further affirmed by the fact of United States (US) withdrawal from Vietnam after the Nixon Doctrine, signifying the diminution of an active American role in Southeast Asia.

For Vietnam-Malaysia relations, the unification of Vietnam ended the bilateral relations between the Vietnamese government in Saigon and Kuala Lumpur. The victory however, was not merely seen by Hanoi as an internal civil-war victory but as having greater significance. In a victory speech in Hanoi on 15 May 1975, Le Duan, the Secretary General of the Vietnam Lao Dong Party (Workers' Party) declared that Hanoi's victory was not only in terms of the success of national independence and socialism in Vietnam, but also had great international

significance. The victory, he declared, "inaugurated a new era highly favourable to the revolutionary movement in the world."¹ Such statements could certainly inject fear in many ASEAN states, notably Malaysia, which still faced an internal communist insurgency.

Nevertheless, the statement could well be true in the case of many third world countries which have to battle Marxist insurgents in their country. The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) however was more Chinese-Maoist oriented,² and split into several factions hostile to one another.

Tun Abdul Razak, the Malaysian Prime Minister promptly dismissed such a threat when he said that "the situation in Indochina and in Malaysia are different. There is no connection."³ Earlier he had also dismissed the idea of the Domino Theory,⁴ indicating that Malaysia's view was that the Vietnam war was merely a civil war between the people of Vietnam. In line with this policy, Malaysia accorded official recognition to the Provisional

1. Vietnam Courier, June 1975.
2. Jacques Bekaert, "Insurgencies in Southeast Asia in the Context of Future ASEAN-Vietnam Relations", in William S. Turley (ed), Confrontation Or Coexistence: The Future of ASEAN-Vietnam Relations, Institute of Security and International Studies, University of Chulalongkorn, Bangkok, 1985, p.122.
3. New Straits Times, 5 May 1975.
4. Straits Times, 2 May 1975.

Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRGSVN) on 2 May 1975.⁵ In a message to Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, Foreign Minister of the new government in southern Vietnam, Ghazali Shafie, Malaysian Home Minister expressed hope that both Vietnam and Malaysia would "...have with increasing faith learnt a lesson from it [the Vietnam war] that nations in [the] region must be free from all forms of external interference."⁶

Malaysia's stand towards the newly unified Vietnam, appeared somewhat perplexing given the country's staunchly anti-communist orientation.⁷ This attitude could best be explained by the fact that Malaysia had since the seventies, adopted the position that the Vietnam war was a civil war between the Vietnamese people who fell victims to the big power politics of the cold war. The cease-fire in the Vietnam war was seen by Malaysia as heralding prospects for a durable peace and stability in Southeast Asia where countries in the region could shape and determine their own future without interference from any

5. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Vol.8, No.2, 1975, p.64.

6. New Straits Times, 3 May 1975.

7. It was reported that at least 1.2 million rifles and vast amounts of ammunition fell into the hands of the communists. See Harvey Stockwin, "Togetherness: Key to Stability", Far Eastern Economic Review, 16 May 1975, p.39. The figure did not include the various heavy equipments that ended up in the same hands.

big powers.

Furthermore, after almost thirty years in which international alignments were strongly influenced by ideological reactions, regional politics since the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in the early 1970s shifted more towards conventional power politics. While external forces continued to be important in the region of Southeast Asia, the disengagement of US forces from Vietnam paved the way for individual states, and regional groupings such as ASEAN to assume a more significant role in determining the direction of their external policies.

Thus, Kuala Lumpur was confident that without foreign or external interference, nations in the region would not meddle in each others' internal affairs. It was therefore logical for Premier Tun Abdul Razak to declare that, "the resilience of our own [Malaysia] political and social structures will be able to withstand any onslaughts from outside communists or otherwise."⁹ Nonetheless, Kuala Lumpur did prepare itself for the worst. In fact in the 1975-1976 period, the Malaysian Government's arms purchases from the United States exceeded all previous levels, implying fear of external aggression. The official explanation was to be well-equipped to meet local

8. New Straits Times, 8 July 1975.

9. Ibid.

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insurgencies.

As for Vietnam, even though the victory caused leaders like Le Duan to make strong statements on the effect of the communist victory in Vietnam on what the Vietnamese regard as 'revolutionary movements of the world', it was clear that Vietnam had to focus its attention on reconstruction of the war-devastated nation. Politically, efforts were being made to rehabilitate the populace in the South, especially urban folk who have always lived under a free market economy. The education towards socialism was considered a manageable job which it could handle on its own. However, Hanoi was lacking the necessary funds and expertise in the area of socio-economic reconstruction, particularly the economic sector which was greatly devastated by the war.

The need for the Vietnamese to rehabilitate and reconstruct their country was clearly recognised by Malaysia and its ASEAN partners. Having extended its recognition to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, Kuala Lumpur was willing to assist in the reconstruction of Vietnam and other Indochina states. For

10. The figures of arms purchases from the US for 1976 and 1977 were expected to increase ten-fold to US\$51 million, with another US\$28 million in planned cash purchases. See Ho Kwon Ping, "Washington Aids ASEAN Build-Up", Far Eastern Economic Review, 23 July 1976, p.28.

this, Malaysia joined ASEAN to extend offers to assist¹¹ these Indochina states in their reconstruction efforts.

This goodwill offer on the one hand could be viewed as a demonstration of Malaysia's and other ASEAN states' apprehension towards a militarily strengthened Vietnam. On the other hand, a communist Vietnam also encouraged renewed interest in strengthening ASEAN as a force to counter Vietnamese power politically if not, militarily. Nevertheless, in this respect, Malaysia and ASEAN were more inclined to adhere to the expressed purpose of ASEAN as a grouping committed to economic and political co-operation.

Even then Malaysia's and ASEAN's goodwill overture did not evoke an immediate positive response from Vietnam which even until 1977 remained skeptical of ASEAN as a whole, and especially towards Thailand and the Philippines¹² owing to their strong links with the United States. However, Vietnam valued its bilateral relations with other individual ASEAN states including Malaysia. In May 1976, the Vietnamese Government took steps in setting up the Embassy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Kuala Lumpur, three years after the establishment of diplomatic

11. New Straits Times, 5 May 1975.

12. New Straits Times, 25 July 1975.

relations on 30 March 1973.¹³ Similarly, the Malaysian Government reciprocated by appointing Yusof Hitam as the¹⁴ first Malaysian Ambassador to Vietnam.

Bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia achieved a break-through when the Vietnamese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Phan Hien paid a visit to Malaysia in July 1976. Phan Hien announced Vietnam's desire to promote bilateral relations and co-operation with Malaysia. He also stressed that it was his country's policy to establish and develop relations with other countries in the region.¹⁵ During his visit, Phan Hien also had the opportunity to learn from the Malaysian leadership the purpose of ASEAN as an association for economic and cultural co-operation. He was also briefed on the ZOPFAN concept by the Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, and in return explained Hanoi's policy.

A significant stand on the communist guerillas was made by Phan Hien when he assured the Malaysian leaders of Vietnam's abstention in lending support to the local Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). This was confirmed by the

13. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam joined to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on 2 July 1976 after the newly elected National Assembly made the official proclamation.

14. New Straits Times, 28 May 1976.

15. Straits Times, 6 July 1976.

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Malaysian leadership. Thus it helped to explain Tun Abdul Razak's earlier statement of minimum threat from the Vietnamese communist victory in May 1975.

In August the same year, Malaysia was again given an assurance by Phan Hien that the arms left by the US in Vietnam would be used for Vietnam's own defense and would not be given to the insurgents in neighbouring countries.¹⁷ Vietnam's denial of support to the CPM and non-hostile attitude was important in its bilateral ties with Malaysia. This was evident especially when Malaysia offered technical aid to help Vietnam in rehabilitating its rubber industry and develop its oil palm sector. Malaysia also expressed willingness to help in other aspects.

There was no doubt that Hien had not only succeeded in dispelling fears in certain quarters about Hanoi's expansionist scheme, he had also allayed the fear that the Vietnamese were backing Malayan communist insurgents.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Malaysian officials were unable to persuade Hien and Vietnam in accepting Malaysian and ASEAN objectives -- to work for "peace, freedom and neutrality"

16. Straits Times, 7 July 1976.

17. Straits Times, 3 August 1976.

18. Nayan Chanda, "Vietnam's Dove Flies Home", Far Eastern Economic Review, 30 July 1976, p.11.

for the region. Hanoi's stand was based on its own objective of creating a Zone of "Genuine, Independence, Peace, and Neutrality"(ZOGIPAN). The Vietnamese version of a neutral Southeast Asia or ZOGIPAN differed from ASEAN's ZOPFAN concept on the meaning and interpretation of "freedom".¹⁹ Not long after Hien's visit, Hanoi dropped a 'bomb-shell' to the developing bilateral relations by backing Laos in opposing Malaysia's proposal to reaffirm the Kuala Lumpur Declaration at the Non-aligned Summit at Colombo,²⁰ claiming that the 1971 declaration was inspired by the United States.²¹ Nevertheless, Vietnam and Laos did not object totally to the peace zone concept itself, which would be also beneficial to them. Hanoi's main contention was that there had been no discussions with it on the matter.²² Hanoi also together with Laos called for support against colonialism, which implied a challenge to the legitimacy of the governments of Malaysia and other ASEAN states.²³ Nevertheless, the heated dispute between Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Van Trinh and Malaysian Prime Minister Hussein Onn at Lusaka over the question of

19. Ibid.

20. The ASEAN resolution in the form of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration was accepted by the 1973 Non-Aligned Movement conference in Algiers.

21. New Straits Times, 26 August 1976.

22. Ibid.

23. Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Vol.II, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p.628.

ZOPFAN, did not affect Hanoi's policy towards Malaysia and
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ASEAN.

The unification of Vietnam under the communists put pressure on Malaysia to do its best to avoid a confrontation with Vietnam. The thought of a direct confrontation with Vietnam would bring about unbearable consequences, thus further jeopardizing the realization of the concept of ZOPFAN, apart from causing greater
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suffering in the region. For Vietnam, even though it remained skeptical in dealing with Malaysia and the ASEAN states, it nevertheless did not want to risk a confrontation with the group. Hanoi had launched its second Five-Year Plan (1976-1980) in the midst of an intensified Sino-Soviet rivalry leaving it with little commitment or strong financial backing from the communist

24. Ibid.

25. New Straits Times, 3 April 1976.

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giants. A confrontation with Malaysia and other ASEAN states which have expressed their willingness to assist in the reconstruction would jeopardise the success of the plan. Hence both Vietnam and Malaysia were clearly accommodating each other, with Malaysia and its allies balancing their security concerns with Vietnam's need for financial and technical support for its reconstruction and socialist building programme.

5.3. Issues in Bilateral Relations

Three important issues have influenced the conduct of bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia, namely:
(a) the refugee problem, (b) Hanoi's support for the communist insurgents, and, (c) the question of ZOPFAN. All these issues have contributed in one way or another towards limiting a stronger bilateral relationship

26. In 1976, the Vietnamese Communist Party declared that the nation's economy had entered the period of "transition to socialism". Party ideologues subsequently refined the periodization as follows:
- a) First Phase: The Second Five-Year Plan 1976-1980.
 - b) Second Phase: Devoted to "socialist industrialization" and subdivided into a 1981-1990 stage and a 1991-2005 stage.
 - c) Third Phase: "perfecting" the transition between 2006 and 2010.

Tap Chi Triet Hoc [Philosophy Journal], Hanoi, December 1984, pp.93-98, quoted in Vo Nhan Tri, "Party Policies and Economic Performance, The Second and Third Five-year Plans Examined", David G. Marr & Christine White (eds), Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1988, p.77.

between Vietnam and Malaysia, even if they did not encourage mutual suspicion in the years to come.

5.3.a. Refugee Problem

As mentioned earlier in the previous chapter, an exodus of refugees began to leave Vietnam and Cambodia to escape the menace of the war. There were two different categories of refugees: first, those who traveled to a neighbouring country on foot (land-people), and second, those who departed by sea, usually in small boats heading for neighbouring coastal areas (the boat-people). It was the second category that was the source of the refugee problem for Malaysia.

Malaysia received its first batch of Indochinese (Vietnamese) refugees on 3 May 1975.²⁷ The initial response to these arrivals was one of deep concern and sympathy. Help poured in as camps were set up in Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang, and in Pulau Besar and Pulau Bidong. Pulau Perhentian was the first transit camp with a total of 1,251 South Vietnamese waiting to be resettled.²⁸

27. New Straits Times, 4 May 1975.

28. New Straits Times, 21 May 1975.

Malaysia's humanitarian stand received an almost immediate praise from Hanoi through Le Duy Van, the leader of the Vietnamese Afro-Asia Peoples' Solidarity Organisation. Van even went to the extent of assuring the Malaysian Government of Vietnam's decision to refuse support for the CPM.²⁹ The Vietnamese and Indochinese refugees were given temporary stay in Malaysia prior to resettlement in a third country that is willing to accept them. Out of the total, only about 7,000 Muslim Cambodian and ethnic Chams refugees were given permission to stay permanently in the country.³⁰

As the number of refugees reached the 5,000 mark, the Malaysian Government became apprehensive, and in November 1977 adopted a strong stand concerning the refugees by classifying them as illegal immigrants under the Immigration Act, and thereby denying them entry into Malaysia. The refugee camps were also classified as restricted areas and refugees were barred from moving freely beyond the boundaries of the camps. By 1977, the boat-people that had arrived in Malaysia outnumbered those who had entered Thailand, and Malaysia since then had become the 'top receiver' country. (See Table 5.1)

29. New Straits Times, 11 June 1975.

30. Cerut Robinson, "Southeast Asian Refugees: Critical Mess ?", Indochina Issues, No.77, December 1987, p.5.

For Malaysia, the constant influx of Vietnamese refugees created problems both at home and in its external relations, especially with Vietnam and other receiving countries. Domestically, the Vietnamese refugees were seen as aggravating existing economic, social, political and security problems in this multi-racial country.³¹ There have been cases of clashes between Vietnamese refugees and the local populace, leading to the stoning of Vietnamese boats off the coast of eastern Peninsular Malaysia.³²

Table 5.1

Boat People-Arrival and Departure to Third Countries:
Comparison Between Malaysia and Thailand.

	1976	1977	1978	1979
(Arrival)				
Malaysia	1157	5819	63120	53365
Thailand	2699	4536	6325	11928
(Departure)				
Malaysia	276	2814	17427	68646
Thailand	560	3085	5749	9305

Source: UNHCR Regional Office, Kuala Lumpur, quoted in S. Sothi Rachagan, "Vietnamese Refugees: The ASEAN Response", in K. K. Nair & J. Chandran (eds.), The Southeast Asian Perspective of Great Power Interests, International Affairs Forum, Malaysian Economic Association, Kuala Lumpur, 1980, p.98.

31. K.S. Nathan, "US-ASEAN Dialogue", Malaysian Economic Association Bulletin, March 1980, p.10.

32. New Straits Times, 29 November 1978.

There were also cases of enormous black market dealings. Many Vietnamese refugees arrived with large quantities of valuable ornaments and jewelleries and were willing to pay high prices for essential goods resulting in inflation in the local markets. To make things worse, a great influx of foreign counterfeit US dollars also accompanied the arrival of the refugees. Moreover, from the perspective of national security, the aftermath of the war had its effect on the refugees, many of whom were ex-soldiers who brought with them large quantities of arms. Between 1975 and 1978 alone, Malaysian Police in the state of Terengganu seized from the refugees 526 arms, 14³³ grenades, and 51,000 rounds of ammunition. The prospect of all these arms falling into the hands of the CPM was viewed as a major security concern for the Malaysian Government.

The problem of arms brought in by the refugees was constantly questioned in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) despite assurances by the government of improved security.³⁴ Then there was the fear of social instability with the increased influx of the Vietnamese

33. S.Sothi Rachagan, "Vietnamese Refugees-The ASEAN Response", K.K. Nair & J. Chandran (eds), The Southeast Asian Perspective of Great Power Interests, International Affairs Forum, Malaysia Economic Association, Kuala Lumpur, 1980, p.101.

34. New Straits Times, 17 January 1978.

refugees who were mainly ethnic Chinese. The incoming refugees could cause a racial imbalance against the Malay population in Malaysia should they be given the freedom to integrate with the local populace.

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The refugee problem also fueled political disputes in Malaysia. The Government was under constant attack from both its own members and also from the opposition over measures taken to cope with this problem. Many government members used the issue as a platform to attack the government's softness in dealing with the matter, while the opposition would accuse the government of not doing enough on humanitarian grounds to assist the refugees. To make things worse, the Malaysian Government was forced to spend thousands of dollars for the maintenance of naval patrol ships to detect the influx of refugee boats. Besides, Malaysia needed to bear part of the cost of maintaining the various refugee camps, while the rest came from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Externally, the refugee problem had given Malaysia numerous difficulties especially with regard to the expatriation of the refugees, as many third countries would select the more skilled refugees, leaving behind

35. New Straits Times, 28 December 1978.

what the Malaysian Home Minister referred to as the
"scum".³⁶ The Deputy Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad had
made calls to third countries not to "just talk", but act
more responsibly in accepting the refugees.³⁷ Within the
region, the Malaysian Government was accused of towing the
refugee boats out to high sea after refueling them upon
arrival. Indonesia which shares sea boundaries with
Malaysia was especially critical of Malaysia's policy.

As the refugee numbers continued to swell through the
years to 1978, despite the fact that the war in Indochina
had ended in 1975, it was not difficult to identify the
problem that had caused the exodus. The problem, according
to Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen must
be tackled "at source". The Vietnamese government however
did not seem to be keen on assisting Malaysia in settling
the refugee problem. Instead, there were numerous
indications of it encouraging the exodus as claimed by the
Malaysian officials.³⁸ There were reports that the mass
exodus of the Vietnamese refugees was well organised in
collusion with Vietnamese officials.³⁹ The arrival of the
Vietnamese ship 'Hai Hong' in Malaysian waters on 14

36. S. Sothi Rachagan, op.cit., p.100.

37. New Straits Times, 24 November 1978.

38. New Straits Times, 20 November 1978, also 11 December 1978.

39. S. Sothi Rachagan, op.cit., p.103.

November 1978 was a classic case. The 'Hai Hong' which carried with her more than 2,500 refugees, was denied landing by the Malaysian Government. It is incomprehensible that such an eventuality could materialise without the sanction or even cooperation of the ever watchful Vietnamese Government.

Outwardly, Hanoi's stand on the Vietnamese refugee problem was rather indifferent, as clearly implied by the visiting Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong's statement in Malaysia in October 1978. Dong conveyed his regrets over the burden caused by the refugees from his country to Malaysia. He however, could only express hope for greater international aid to lessen the burden of the Malaysian Government without enunciating any positive measures on his part to curb the exodus. Vietnam's reluctance to resolve the refugees problem was confirmed by more boat people landing on Malaysian shores even after Dong's visit.

Vietnam's move in encouraging the mass exodus was an attempt to maintain control of its population in the face of severe economic problems that ensued after the Vietnam war, and which worsened in 1978 and 1979. Pushing the

40. New Straits Times, 15 November 1978.

41. Straits Time, 17 October 1978.

refugees out will help solve several problems at one and the same time: first, it conserves food in the face of great shortage; and second, it helps to eradicate the urban middle class which the communists regarded as an implacable enemy. Economically, the taxing of these departees yielded Hanoi another source of hard currency income. As for the year preceding June 1979 for instance, approximately US\$115 million was collected contributing⁴² about 2.5% of the total Gross National Product.

Perhaps the strongest reason for the Vietnamese Government to encourage the exodus of its population was to get rid of the Chinese minority in the country, many of whom had originated from Cholon in the newly renamed Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). This was especially important in the face of growing tension in Sino-Vietnamese relations that eventually led to an open armed conflict in 1979. The exodus of Vietnamese refugees that had beleaguered Malaysia and other ASEAN nations was perceived by Hanoi as a measure to overcome several problems simultaneously, and hence should not be discouraged.

Some observers, especially those from Singapore, went to the extent of maintaining that Hanoi's sanction of the exodus was Vietnam's plan to throw Southeast Asia off

42. S. Sothi Rachagan, op.cit., p.104.

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balance with a view to eventual domination. To what extent this was true remained to be seen, but the view was upheld by Malaysia and several other ASEAN countries. There were however no such indications in Hanoi's various statements. Hanoi's keen move in encouraging friendship and lobbying support amongst Malaysia and its ASEAN allies in late 1978 however showed that Hanoi harboured no such intention, at least at that moment, as it was preparing to face a growing security threat from China.

5.3.b. Lao Dong Party and the Communist Party of Malaya

Evidence suggests the absence of a strong connection between the Lao Dong Party (Workers' Party) of Vietnam and the Communist party of Malaya (CPM) insurgents in Malaysia. Nonetheless, there were exchanges of messages as well as radio broadcasting of each other's activities. On 18th February 1975 for instance, the CPM-run 'Suara Revolusi Malaya' broadcasted a full coverage of the grand rally held in Hanoi in celebration of the 45th Anniversary of the founding of the Vietnam Lao Dong party, including a speech by Secretary General Le Duan. In return, the Lao

43. Ibid.

44. 'Radio Suara Revolusi Malaya Broadcast,' Mandarin Voice, 18 February 1975 at 0615 hrs. C.C. Too, "Notes on the History of the Communist Party of Malaya", University of Malaya Library, Kuala Lumpur, p.271.

Dong party sent a congratulatory message to the CPM on its 45th anniversary on 26 April 1975. Although there was no clear evidence of Vietnamese material aid to the CPM, there is no doubt that communism in Vietnam would not differ significantly from communism in Malaysia, as indicated in Secretary General Le Duan's speech in May 1975. Thus, as long as the situation permits, the prospect of the CPM receiving aid from Vietnam would only be better.

The effect of the communist victory in Vietnam upon the morale of the CPM was obvious although direct relations between the two parties were minimal. The victory had given a tremendous boost to the CPM which had earlier launched a campaign of urban terror in late 1974 and early 1975. Furthermore, the various tactics used by the Vietnamese communists were adopted by the CPM in

45. 'Radio Suara Revolusi Malaya,' 17 June 1975. C.C. Too, op.cit., p.315.

46. Premier Pham Van Dong admitted of such assistance but which ceased since 1978. See Straits Times, 17 October 1978.

47. The campaign of activities in the urban area however was argued by C.C. Too to be not a direct effect of the Vietnam war but rather a manifestation of rivalry by the three factions in the CPM with each trying to make its presence felt in the country. The three factions were: (1) Chin Peng's original CPM, (2) CPM (Revolutionary Faction) and (3) MCP (Marxist-Leninist). See C.C. Too, op.cit., p.317.

countering operations by Malaysian security forces.

Hanoi however, could not give strong support to the CPM due to the fact that it needed the friendship of Malaysia and other ASEAN states. Hence, connections with the CPM were denied.⁴⁹ There were however, some reports of CPM members receiving training at the Hoa Binh School in the DRV.⁵⁰ Even if such connections did exist, they were discontinued in 1978. This was reiterated by Premier Pham Van Dong who made a pledge to Malaysia in order to maintain Vietnam's cordial relations with Malaysia. Nevertheless, Hanoi was critical of Malaysia's stand on anti-communist activities as demonstrated in reports by the Vietnam Communist Party newspaper, Nhan Dan which described Malaysia-Thai joint operations against communist guerillas on the Malaysian-Thai border as promoting a military alliance against communism.⁵¹ Hanoi's policy was that it wished to maintain, whenever possible, a dual-track policy regarding government-to-government relations and party-to-party ties. Nevertheless, it could not afford to antagonise regional friends like Malaysia

48. These tactics included booby traps and ambush techniques. See Tim Huxley, Indochina and Insurgency in the ASEAN States, 1975-1981, Working Paper No.67, The Research School of Pacific Studies, the Australian National University, Canberra, 1983, p.23.

49. Straits Times, 7 July 1976.

50. Tim Huxley, op.cit.

51. As reported by Straits Times, 8 August 1977.

although at the ideological level, it could continue to support the international socialist revolutionary struggle⁵² which it maintained as a goal by itself. Hanoi was also keenly aware that the three factions within the CPM were⁵³ more Chinese-Maoist oriented than anything else. The racial composition of these factions, the majority of whom are Chinese, also underscored the fact that the CPM was more supportive of the PRC's policy and stand in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict. For Vietnam, it would be more beneficial to denounce its links with the CPM in comparison to maintaining government-to-government relations with Malaysia and its ASEAN neighbours.

In disclaiming the ties with the CPM at all levels, Hanoi would gain economically, politically, and strategically in terms of Malaysia's support in the on going Sino-Vietnamese rivalry. Hanoi maintained that it badly needed aid that was available from all quarters, especially from Malaysia which seemed so keen to help. By denying support for the CPM, it also helped to justify

52. Secretary General Le Duan in a speech on the basic principles of Vietnamese Foreign Policy given before the new United National Assembly in June 1976. Such a goal was manifested in at least four out of the seven basic principles. See "General Resolution", Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Communist Party of Viet Nam, 4th National Congress, Documents, Foreign Language Publishing House, Hanoi, 1977, pp.248-250.

53. Interview with Dr. Nguyen Thu My, Secretary for Science at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and also a member of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Interview held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Hanoi, 6 October 1992.

Vietnam's stand of non-interference in each other's internal affairs and support for the neutralization of Southeast Asia.

In the Sino-Vietnamese conflict that developed later, Vietnam's total abstinence on party-to-party relations was a plus in Hanoi's effort to win sympathy from Malaysia in its struggle against the Chinese threat, as the Chinese refused to denounce the dual-track approach⁵⁴ even after⁵⁵ establishing official relations with Malaysia.

5.3.c. The Concept of ZOPFAN

The idea of the neutralization of Southeast Asia and the creation of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) for the region was initiated by Malaysia and accepted by ASEAN in 1971 through the Kuala Lumpur

54. For studies on the 'Dual-Track Diplomacy' by the PRC, see William R. Heaton, "China & Southeast Asian Communist Movements: The Decline of Dual Track Diplomacy", Asian Survey, August 1982, and Jay Taylor, China and Southeast Asia: Peking's Relations With Revolutionary Movements, Praeger, New York, 1974.
55. The Communist Party of China continued to give flagrant support to the Communist Party of Malaya even after the establishment of official diplomatic relations at governmental level on 31 May 1974. In a Radio Peking broadcast of New China News Agency on 1 May 1975 on the 45th Anniversary of the CPM, the statement read: "The MCP has for a long time stood together with the Communist Party of China headed by Comrade Mao Tse-Tung...". See C.C. Too, op.cit., p.293.

Declaration. Malaysia since then had been the foremost and, usually the only member state of ASEAN to have campaigned vigorously for ZOPFAN as a major pillar of its foreign policy. Thus when the Vietnam war was over, it also became important for Malaysia to 'sell' the idea to the Vietnamese in search of a durable peace and a stable region especially in the face of a stronger Vietnam.⁵⁶ Although the matter had been put forward much earlier to the Vietnamese, Hanoi remained wary of the concept which it described as "an attempt to paint the same neo-colonial edifice with a different colour",⁵⁷ referring to the close relations ASEAN had with the United States. The concept was explained on a first hand basis to the visiting Vice Premier Phan Hien in July 1976 by the Malaysian leadership. The immediate response was rather encouraging as Vietnam's expressed policy of establishing relations with other countries in the region did not contradict the ZOPFAN concept.⁵⁸

In August of the same year, as mentioned earlier, Vietnam supported Laos in attacking the concept on the ground of non-consultancy on the matter prior to the Non-

56. K. Das, "The Pipe-dream That Became a Long-term Goal", in 'Malaysia '75 Focus', Far Eastern Economic Review, 29 August 1975, p.6.

57. Nayan Chanda, "A Prevailing Mood of Confidence", Far Eastern Economic Review, 8 August 1975, p.21.

58. New Straits Times, 7 July 1976.

aligned Summit in Colombo. On the other hand, the feedback from the conference indicated that Vietnam did not object to the peace zone concept. It was certain that Hanoi's objection was an indication of it wanting to be taken seriously in any decisions made on the region, showing willingness to be part of the family of Southeast Asian nations. Vietnam remained silent on the matter even during Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen's visit to Hanoi in June 1977.⁵⁹ The turning point came in early 1978 when Vice-Minister of Foreign affairs, Vo Dong Giang visited Kuala Lumpur and indicated Vietnam's readiness to discuss with Southeast Asian countries "an appropriate form of regional co-operation." Giang said:

I'm convinced that with goodwill and stronger bilateral relations between the various countries, we shall be able to reach regional cooperation in a new form and a new spirit conforming
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to the new situation.

Giang further stressed the importance of non-foreign military interference and aggression in the region. Although there was no clear-cut mention of the concept of neutrality, it nevertheless marked a turning point for Vietnam.

The official acknowledgement by Vietnam of its readiness to talk to Malaysia and ASEAN countries in

59. Straits Times, 14 June 1977.

60. New Straits Times, 7 January 1978.

1promoting the "Zone of Peace" concept came in July 1978. Visiting Vietnam Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Phan Hien put forward suggestions on the proposed zone to Malaysia:

The situation is now favourable for the establishment of a zone of peace and neutrality. Of course, there are a number of complications (referring to the problems between Vietnam and China and with Cambodia) which will have certain effects, but they cannot deter efforts to advance the Zone of Peace

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concept for this region.

Vietnam's proposal differed slightly from the ZOPFAN proposal, but indicated willingness to hold further discussions with Malaysia and its allies in ASEAN. The Vietnamese were more keen in advocating their own neutralisation programme which put emphasis on what they regard as genuine independence, thus proposing the idea of a Zone of Genuine Independence, Peace and Neutrality (ZOGIPAN) in opposition to the Malaysian-sponsored ZOPFAN. There is no doubt that Vietnam at this stage (1978) was clearly informed of the idea of neutralisation:

We are ready to discuss the formation of a peaceful and neutral Southeast Asian region with the countries concerned in Southeast Asia. Such a region will play an extremely important role in international life, in achieving peace and prosperity

61. New Straits Times, 25 July 1978.

throughout the world.

Hanoi's strong support for the idea albeit with some modification, seem paradoxical at one stage. In late 1978, the growing fever of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict contributed significantly to Hanoi's willingness to accept the idea of neutrality of Southeast Asia. As the People's Republic of China has been significantly vocal in its support for the Malaysian proposal, it was important for the Vietnamese to do so in the struggle to win support from Malaysia and the ASEAN states.

5.4. Socio-Economic Relations

Socio-economic relations between 1975 and 1978 took a turn from the trend of the early seventies showing improved, if not promising prospects, especially in trade-ties. The favourable conditions resulted from Vietnam's willingness to co-exist and co-operate with Malaysia.

Hanoi's need for both financial and technical aid was heeded by Malaysia which took the lead among ASEAN nations to extend help to Vietnam. ⁶³ During Phan Hien's visit to Kuala Lumpur in July 1976, technical aid was offered to

62. "The Trend Toward Independence, Peace and Neutrality in Southeast Asia", Vietnam Courier, No.76, September 1978, p.13.

63. Straits Times, 2 October 1975.

help Vietnam to rehabilitate its rubber industry and to develop its oil palm sector. Vietnam, which used to be one of Malaya's main rivals in rubber production, saw most of its rubber plantations devastated during the war by bombings and toxic spraying. Malaysia also urged Vietnam to join the Association of Natural Rubber Producing Countries (ANRPC). Malaysia also indicated willingness to help in the reconstruction of Vietnam in various fields like timber, railway sleepers and pre-fabricated timber houses, in all of which Malaysia enjoyed a lead in the region.⁶⁴

Vietnam clearly appreciated Malaysia's offers and further sought help to set up a rubber laboratory and training facilities costing US\$2 million. It also requested palm oil seedlings for the development of palm oil plantations on an experimental basis.⁶⁵ A team of Malaysian rubber experts later completed a two-week study on Vietnam's rubber industry.⁶⁶ Their report resulted in the Malaysian Government's approval of an allocation of M\$900,000 in the form of equipment and training facilities in April 1978 to help Vietnam rehabilitate its rubber industry.⁶⁷ A month later, six Vietnamese rubber

64. New Straits Times, 9 July 1976.

65. New Straits Times, 19 March 1977.

66. Straits Times, 27 September 1977.

67. New Straits Times, 21 April 1978.

technicians arrived in Kuala Lumpur to undergo training in
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rubber production.

In terms of bilateral trade, there was a tremendous increase in the volume though it remained small in terms of each country's total trade. A few years prior to the end of the war in 1975, bilateral trade between the Republic of Vietnam and Malaysia basically ceased to exist -- the volume of bilateral trade between the DRV and Malaysia was recorded to be only M\$500,000 for the year 1975.⁶⁹ However, total bilateral trade in 1976 alone rose to M\$5.6 million, an almost ten-fold increase from the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.⁷⁰

A trade agreement between Vietnam and Malaysia was signed on 5 January 1978 which included the provision of most favoured-nation treatment in terms of customs duties and export regulations.⁷¹ This agreement in the context of the bilateral relationship, also served as a boost for peace and stability in the region. Vietnam exported rice, onions and potatoes as well as handicrafts to Malaysia and in return, imported palm oil, tin, rubber and textile

68. New Straits Times, 18 May 1978.

69. New Straits Times, 19 March 1977.

70. New Straits Times, 6 January 1978.

71. Ibid.

goods.⁷² Besides the direct bilateral trade, unrecorded larger trade through a third country,⁷³ presumably Singapore, was carried out.

Bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia were strengthened in October 1978 when an Air Agreement was signed to allow reciprocal landing rights for airlines from both sides. Malaysia was given landing rights in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, while Vietnam was accorded the right to land in Kuala Lumpur and another destination in Malaysia.⁷⁴

However, social relations during this period especially in terms of people-to-people contacts were somehow lacking probably due to the different value systems of both countries and the many restrictions imposed upon Vietnamese citizens regarding travel abroad.

72. New Straits Times, 6 March 1978.

73. New Straits Times, 6 January 1978.

74. The agreement was signed on 15 October 1978 during Premier Pham Van Dong's visit to Kuala Lumpur.

5.5. The Cambodian Issue and China

Ever since the communists came to power in Indochina, Vietnam had been uneasy with the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, even though both adhered to the same ideology but held different orientations. While Hanoi was interested in maintaining the goal of an Indochina Federation which would comprise of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia,⁷⁵ the Khmer Rouge were more inclined to Beijing and wished to maintain their independence. Thus, whenever Hanoi attempted to assert authority over Cambodia to shape the pattern of power in Indochina between 1975 and 1978, it encountered serious difficulties in Cambodia, although not in the case of Laos. Such a conflict of interest between Hanoi and Phnom Pehn did not surface during the earlier stages between 1975 and 1978. Malaysia therefore was unable to foresee this mounting tension that could lead to the realisation of the Domino Theory -- not in anti-communist ASEAN, but in communist Indochina itself!

The Vietnam-PRC relationship since 1975 had turned sour when the Chinese refused to extend further aid to assist Vietnam in its reconstruction effort. In bilateral negotiations in September 1975, Beijing pointed out that, with the war over, Hanoi must learn to apply the famous

75. Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Communist Party of Vietnam, 4th National Congress: Documents, op.cit., pp.248-250.

dictum of self-sufficiency.

The growing rift between Vietnam and Beijing was further aggravated by Beijing's opposition to what Hanoi saw as a necessary "revolution" in Laos and Cambodia,⁷⁷ manifested in Hanoi's attempt to assert influence over these two states. China's conflicting interest with Vietnam caused Hanoi to perceive Beijing as its main security threat.

Economic and security concerns caused Vietnam to review its China policy and to move closer to Malaysia and its allies in 1978, despite suspicions over the intentions of ASEAN. This explained the reduced hostility towards Malaysia and ASEAN's ZOPFAN proposal in early 1978, when Hanoi showed keen interest in the proposal. Hanoi's peace overtures towards Malaysia and other ASEAN states was manifested in the various trade agreements, and visits of Hanoi Ministers particularly that of Premier Pham Van Dong to Malaysia and Singapore in October 1978. Hanoi's overtures could also be interpreted as aimed at seeking a less negative response from Malaysia and the ASEAN countries on Vietnam's intention to sign a treaty with the

76. Fox Butterfield, "Peking-Hanoi Talks Marked by Coolness", New York Times, 15 August 1975. See also Beijing Review, 7 September 1979.

77. K.K. Nair, Words and Bayonets: ASEAN and Indochina, Federal Publications, Kuala Lumpur, 1985, pp.195-196.

Soviet Union.

The twenty-five year Soviet-Vietnamese treaty on 3 November 1978 had given Hanoi what it needed urgently for economic and social reconstruction. Vietnam has thus far failed to attract western assistance and was unable to persuade the US to establish relations on Vietnam's terms. The treaty also contained provisions for military aid through mutual assistance in defence, which naturally would benefit Vietnam more than it would the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ Although the treaty would indirectly encourage Soviet presence in Southeast Asia thus further complicating prospects for the realisation of ZOPFAN, Vietnam-Malaysia relations remained cordial. Nonetheless,⁸⁰ Kuala Lumpur did view the treaty with suspicion.

Ironically, Hanoi was to a great extent forced by Washington and Beijing into alignment with the Soviet Union, especially after the US refusal to lift the trade embargo imposed against Vietnam since 1975. In view of its failure to gain access to western aid for its urgent

78. K.K. Nair, op.cit., pp.200-201.

79. Article 6 of the treaty of Friendship. See "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation Between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics", Vietnam Courier, No.79, December 1978, p.4. See also Appendix Three.

80. K. K. Nair, op.cit., p.201.

reconstruction programme, Hanoi turned to Moscow which was searching for an ally in Southeast Asia for its naval expansion, and at the same time to counter Chinese power and influence in the context of Sino-Soviet rivalry.

The turning point in Vietnam-Malaysia relations came on Christmas Day 1978 when Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia to overthrow the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge Government under the pretext of assisting the Heng Samrin nationalists to free their country of foreign dominance (i.e. China). The train of events prior to Hanoi's decision to invade Cambodia provided substantial evidence that the invasion had been planned by the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Committee. While keenly promoting its peace overtures, Hanoi had been stealthily preparing⁸¹ for the invasion. The economic and military ties with the Soviet Union, the escalation of the massing of Vietnamese troops along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border and the creation on 2 December 1978 of the Kampuchea National United Front for National Salvation confirmed Hanoi's intentions.

Hanoi's daring venture into Cambodia can also be viewed through the prism of the balance of power in the form of the declining US hegemony in Southeast Asia,

81. Nayan Chanda, "The Timetable for a Take Over", Far Eastern Economic Review, 23 February 1979, p.33.

particularly after its disengagement from Vietnam in the early 1970s through the Nixon Doctrine. Vietnam's action was based on the calculation of a limited or no military response from the United States. Hanoi perceived the US inability to act (in contrast to its massive intervention in 1965) as a 'greenlight' to invade Cambodia. Furthermore the Vietnamese had just signed the Mutual Assistance Treaty with the Soviet Union which virtually guaranteed them strong Soviet backing even in the event of a remote possibility of massive retaliation by the United States. With respect to ASEAN, judging from the peace overtures it has made, Hanoi evidently expected Malaysia and the rest of the regional grouping to accept the incorporation of Cambodia into its sphere of influence without damaging any future relations with them.

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Malaysia viewed the invasion of Cambodia with alarm. The fear of greater regional conflict came into the picture when China launched a "punishment" raid into Vietnam in early 1979, jeopardizing hopes for the realisation of ZOPFAN. Malaysia, which also viewed Vietnam's intrusion as a crime against the sovereignty of a nation refused to accept Hanoi's contention that the invasion of Cambodia was merely a bilateral issue between Hanoi and Phnom Penh. Kuala Lumpur joined the rest of

82. Michael Leifer, Conflict and Regional Order in Southeast Asia, Adelphi Paper No.162, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, 1980, p.26.

ASEAN in supporting the anti-Heng Samrin forces, thereby giving the impression of being aligned with China on the matter and causing Vietnam to oppose the move.⁸³

The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam reactivated Kuala Lumpur's suspicion of Hanoi's long term motives in the region. There were again talks of the revival of the Domino Theory.⁸⁴ The invasion that sparked off the so-called 'Third Indochina War', put a halt to the many promising bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia. Planned trips of a diplomatic and business nature were called off.⁸⁵ Even the Malaysian Foreign Minister had to cancel his planned visit to Hanoi in July 1979.

All these developments contributed to Malaysia's negative perception of Vietnam. Nevertheless, the strained relationship was reflected in the long-standing refugee issue. In an interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review in January 1979, Malaysian Premier Hussein Onn warned that if Vietnam were to send communist cadres under the guise of refugees, he would not hesitate to break-off

83. K. K. Nair, op.cit., p.202.

84. New Straits Times, 7 July 1979.

85. The trade and Industry Ministry's economic mission to Vietnam had to be called off in March 1979. See New Straits Times, 22 March 1979.

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diplomatic relations with Hanoi. Evidently Malaysia was disappointed with Hanoi on the Cambodian issue and also the way Vietnam's high-level officials encouraged the exodus of boat refugees who were largely ethnic Chinese. Nair described Kuala Lumpur's and ASEAN's perception of Hanoi's act as an 'unforgivable' attempt to destabilize the political, social and economic conditions of Malaysia and other ASEAN states.⁸⁷ Thus, bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia since then returned to the pre-April 1975 DRV-Malaysia type of relations which were marked by mutual distrust and suspicion.

5.6. Conclusion

The bilateral relations of Vietnam and Malaysia between 1975 and the early part of 1977 were marked by mutual efforts by both sides to accommodate each other. Newly unified Vietnam was concerned about its task of building a socialist country that required first, economic and technical reconstruction and second, the incorporation of the South into the socialist system. As Vietnam was denied aid by both China and the United States, ASEAN states like Malaysia provided an alternative avenue for external aid. For Malaysia, which at this period acted more frequently within the framework of ASEAN, the unified

86. Straits Times, 30 January 1979.

87. K. K. Nair, op.cit., p.202.

Vietnam did pose an immediate security threat to the peace and stability of the region, despite the fact that it always held the opinion that the war in Vietnam was a civil war, and hence the need to accommodate Hanoi.

Various elements of bilateral relations developed, especially in terms of greater bilateral trade and co-operation. There were also, however, issues which constantly prevented a strong and open bilateral relationship. The long-standing refugee problem, the communist insurgency issue which was amicably resolved and the question of the concept of neutrality and ZOPFAN all contributed in one way or another to the ebb and flow of bilateral relations.

While the refugee problem remained to be solved, the change of tone in Hanoi's acceptance of the concept of ZOPFAN though with some modification, opened avenues for stronger bilateral relations as evidenced by the signing of a Treaty of Peace between the two nations in October 1978.

Hanoi's peace-overtures during the whole of 1978 had overshadowed Vietnam's intentions for the signing of a Friendship and Mutual Assistance Treaty with Moscow, followed by the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops a month later. Hanoi-Kuala Lumpur relations were never

better than this period (1975-1978) prior to the Cambodian invasion.

Thus, the period between 1975 to 1978 saw the postwar relationship between Vietnam and Malaysia develop to an unprecedented height with promises of stronger ties. It was however, shattered by the invasion of Cambodia, causing bilateral relations to deteriorate.