CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the bilateral relations between Vietnam and Malaysia — an aspect of Vietnamese history and international relations which has thus far been neglected, or overshadowed by more popular studies on the Vietnam War and Vietnam's relations with big powers.

Although bilateral relations began only in 1957 with Malayan independence, the period between 1945 to 1957 proved to be crucial in shaping the trend of post-1957 Vietnam-Malaysia relations, especially Vietnam's foreign policy towards Malaysia. The emergence of communism as a political force in post-war Vietnam and Malaya marked the beginning of the move towards different destinies for both Vietnam and Malaya, both still under the rule of their respective colonial masters, France and Britain.

In Vietnam, the communists under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh launched a resistance against the French colonial administration in 1946, and two years later, the Communist Party of Malaya started an armed insurgency against the British and later, the Malayan Government that would last for twelve years. All these events took place within the wider context of the Cold War which was characterised by the struggle between conflicting ideological forces that either engineered or fulfilled the security concerns of a
bipolar world.

The Vietnamese victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 effectively ended the French colonial rule in Vietnam and Indochina, but the country was split into two by the decision of the Geneva Conference on Indochina -- two Vietnams with two different and conflicting political orientations. The northern part had since 1954 been governed by a communist-led government, while in the South, a presumably democratic government was installed, backed initially by the French, and later by the United States.

Thus the foreign policies of the two Vietnams were also formulated and developed along the opposing national ideologies professed by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the North adopting an essentially pro-communist and anti-west approach in its foreign policy, while the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the South adopted a pro-west and anti-communist stand. The twelve-year communist insurgency in Malaya significantly shaped the Malaysian Government's pro-western and anti-communist orientation in foreign policy. The bilateral relations between the two Vietnams and Malaysia from 1957 to the fall of the RVN in 1975 proceeded within the context of this ideological struggle that originated in the Cold War.

The escalation of the Vietnam War in the early 1960s
inevitably dragged Malaya into this aspect of the Cold War at the regional level, though not as a major participant, but whose reactions were significant enough to evoke responses from the two Vietnams. The RVN, as a fellow pro-west nation benefited from the aid and moral support given by Malaysia in countering the communist insurgency and the DRV’s subversive activities in the RVN. Malaysia’s knowledge and experience in counter-insurgency was greatly appreciated by the RVN which not only sent its soldiers and police personnel to be trained in Malaysia, but also modelled its Strategic Hamlets Programme after the New Village Settlement Scheme (Brigg’s Plan) that was implemented during the Malayan Emergency.

Although President Ngo Dinh Diem’s repressive rule until his death in the 1963 coup significantly diminished the credibility of the RVN internationally, the unceasing support given by the western bloc nations including Malaysia enabled the successive governments in Saigon to maintain a pro-west and anti-communist foreign policy. Thus there was no significant change in the bilateral relationship, with anti-communism providing the cement for close ties between Saigon and Kuala Lumpur.

American intervention in the Vietnam War on a large scale was bound to affect the course of Vietnamese history and international relations. Although US intervention did not basically alter the nature of RVN-Malaysia and DRV-
Malaysia relations, it nonetheless intensified the anti-communist dimension of the relationship. Indonesian Confrontation of Malaysia witnessed Hanoi's support for Jakarta in condemning Malaysia. While the RVN was sympathetic to Malaysia's plight, it was unable to extend help as it was engulfed by an ever-growing insurgency that was supported by the DRV, as well as a series of coups. Strong anti-communist sentiments however lay at the root of a promise of military support from the Saigon Government to Malaysia.

The formation of ASEAN in 1967 also did not fundamentally change the course of Vietnam-Malaysia relations as both the RVN and the DRV were preoccupied with the Vietnam War. The DRV however looked upon Malaysia's membership in ASEAN as a further confirmation of Malaysia's pro-west and anti-communist image, as it regarded ASEAN as a US-sponsored programme aimed at containing the DRV.

The announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 aimed at limiting the US military role in Vietnam was followed immediately by the introduction of the Vietnamisation programme. The announcement was not well received in the RVN as it would jeopardise the RVN war effort. In the North, the DRV's confidence soared although it was exhausted by the war. The RVN's fear of a collapse in the
military campaign triggered Saigon's calls for support from friendly nations including Malaysia.

The new administration that emerged in Malaysia under the leadership of Tun Abdul Razak witnessed a significant change in the foreign policy of Malaysia. Instead of being ardently pro-west, it moved to champion the cause of a neutralised Southeast Asia by promoting the idea of establishing ZOPFAN. This change in foreign policy priorities limited Malaysia's support to the RVN in the latter's war effort, though the RVN's policy towards Malaysia remained unchanged.

Ho Chi Minh's death in 1969 aroused speculation about the disintegration of solidarity in the DRV, and the possibility of an early end to the Vietnam War resulting from factional conflict within the leadership. The succeeding collective leadership however managed to maintain regime cohesion, while prolonging the war and maintain a staunch anti-west foreign policy.

Malaysia's campaign in promoting the ZOPFAN idea urged a more accommodationist stance as evidenced by the establishment of diplomatic relations with several communist states including the Soviet Union in 1967, and the DRV in 1973.

Thus, in short, Vietnam-Malaysia relations from 1957
to 1975 were strongly governed by the ideological struggle of the Cold War where the RVN and Malaysia held a common anti-communist stand. On the other hand, the DRV being communist adopted a hostile stand towards Malaysia. The period from 1969 to 1975 also witnessed several changes in bilateral relations, in line with the changes in international politics, especially in the context of superpower detente. This development together with the adoption of a neutralization policy by Malaysia created room for mutual accommodation between the DRV and Malaysia leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations. Nonetheless communism remained a very important factor in governing the flow of bilateral relations.

The reunification of Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975 opened a new chapter in the history of Vietnam. The long war caused the DRV to reassess its overall policies including its foreign policy, with the aim of reconstruction and rehabilitation of the war-torn economy. Thus, though the communist victory in Vietnam could serve as a boost to communist insurgents in the region, including support for the CPM, Hanoi preferred cultivating good relations with its neighbours in order to procure vital aid and assistance for its reconstruction programme.

The Vietnamese attitude coincided with the Malaysian
policy at that period which advocated a neutralised Southeast Asia and at the same time tried to accommodate a united and militarily stronger communist Vietnam that could pose a threat to Malaysia and other Southeast Asian states. Thus began a period of accommodation that would last until 1978. Throughout this period, communism remained as a factor in the bilateral relations, but with diminishing significance as strategic priorities and national interests compelled a more sanguine approach on both sides.

Although the pace of bilateral relations began to accelerate there remained several issues that hindered stronger ties. The refugee problem which was first looked upon with sympathy changed into protest from Kuala Lumpur after the Hanoi Government did nothing to stop the exodus, let alone encouraging it. The question of links and support given by the CPV to the CPM in Malaysia was another issue. Additionally, the modalities for the creation of ZOPFAN served as another point of disagreement between Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur.

Nevertheless, in all these issues, the Vietnamese proved to be more accommodating than the Malaysian leaders anticipated. Hanoi tried to play down all the issues, denounced its link to the CPM, and also accepted the ZOPFAN idea, though with some changes. All these demonstrated Vietnam's seriousness in cultivating better
relations with Malaysia and ASEAN, with the aim of gaining access to aid including from the west.

While Vietnam-Malaysia relations were improving, Hanoi's relations with its two communist neighbours China and Cambodia turned sour. Compelled by several issues including border and ethnicity problems, Hanoi began to sever relations with the two communist neighbours and moved closer to the Soviet Union. This shift in strategic alignments presaged the 1978 invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese -- an event which also brought Vietnam-Malaysia relations to a standstill and ended the period of accommodation.

The entire period from December 1978 to 1986 in Southeast Asia was overshadowed by the Cambodian conflict. Vietnam-Malaysia relations suffered the same fate, where Vietnam remained adamant about its position in Cambodia by denying the existence of the problem, while Malaysia was critical of Hanoi's position. One important development during this period was Vietnam's confidence in Malaysia as a channel to voice its grievances to the outside world. Hanoi also appeared to be less critical towards Malaysia compared to certain ASEAN nations such as Thailand and Singapore. The same period also saw many aspects of the bilateral relations being conducted through the channel of ASEAN.
While the Cambodian conflict and the refugee problem remained on the residual agenda of the bilateral relations, a new problem in the form of a dispute over the Spratly Islands involving several other nations as well had emerged. Despite efforts in trying to solve these problems, bilateral relations were cold and constantly overshadowed by the Cambodian problem. Bilateral relations were at their lowest ebb as official trade was banned by the Malaysian Government in protest against Vietnam's position in Cambodia.

The international politics of this period (1978-1990) was characterised as the Second Cold War -- a development resulting largely from the invasion of Afghanistan and Cambodia by the Soviet Union and Vietnam respectively. Thus regionally, Vietnam's isolation prompted Hanoi to rely increasingly on the Soviet Union for aid. The rapprochement between the Soviet Union and China, as well as the Soviet-American detente under President Gorbachev, however, brought about a change in Hanoi's attitude when it began to move towards the settlement of the Cambodian conflict. The changing scenario was complemented by Hanoi's decision to put economic recovery as its priority, thus commencing a more flexible policy towards its neighbours including Malaysia which Vietnam perceived as a prospective channel for foreign aid.
Steps taken by Hanoi after the 6th national Congress of the CPV in December 1986 effectively moved Vietnam towards a settlement of the Cambodian conflict, which since 1978 had remained as the main obstacle in forging closer relations with Malaysia. However, Indonesia's role in hosting the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIMs) ended Malaysia's role as Vietnam's main channel of communication with the international community.

In conclusion, it was clear that Vietnam-Malaysia relations prior to 1975 was primarily governed by the factor of ideological conflict in the form of communism. The RVN had cordial relations with Malaysia due to the common anti-communist goal, while the communist-DRV was hostile towards Malaysia. Even when signs of change emerged in 1969 to 1975, the bilateral relations were still essentially influenced by the communist factor. The bilateral relationship after 1975 took a dramatic turn for the better with Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur placing greater emphasis on the need for strategic accommodation following the emergence of a stronger communist Vietnam. Nonetheless, the relations were still governed by the Cold War especially after the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in 1978. Bilateral relations were stalemated for some time as both held different views on the Cambodian conflict, as well as on several other issues.
Vietnam-Malaysia relations only took a turn for the better after major shifts occurred in the realm of international politics since 1986. Big power realignments and rapprochements compelled Hanoi to take steps towards resolving the Cambodian conflict. The aftermath of these changes saw Vietnam-Malaysia relations move to greater heights thus surpassing even the level of RVN-Malaysia relations, especially in the form of new unprecedented levels of economic cooperation. In sum, the course of Vietnam-Malaysia relations by 1990 had become strongly influenced by the primacy of economics and the accelerating pace of Asia-Pacific economic dynamism at the end of the twentieth century.