

THE KAMPUCHEAN CONFLICT 1975 - 1985

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGIN

Introduction

Kampuchea originally stretched over a vast land territory which encompassed the Malay archipelago, south and east Thailand, Laos, the Mekong Delta area and Annam. Immediately to its north was the Vietnamese Kingdom of Nam Viet centred around the Red River Delta. In 1100 AD this little kingdom succeeded in casting off 1000 years of Chinese rule and after a period of consolidation began expanding southwards, encroaching upon the territory of Kampuchea. This inexorable expansion which commenced from 1650 led to the extension of Vietnamese territory first over Annam and finally by 1750 over the whole of the Mekong Delta region. Meanwhile Thailand's inclination towards establishing a secure eastern border also resulted in further shrinking of Kampuchea. In an attempt to frustrate further Thai expansion, Vietnam in the 1830's established a Vietnamese protectorate over the remaining part of Kampuchea.

Vietnamese overlordship was accompanied by harsh rule and forced acculturation. Believing itself to be a minor Middle Kingdom, Vietnam took upon itself the task

of civilizing the "barbaric" Khmers. The consequent uprisings and revolts by the Khmers were ruthlessly put down. The Vietnamese suzerainty ended in 1863 with the advent of French imperial rule in Indochina and Kampuchea once again found itself under the overlordship of an alien culture.

French colonial rule over Indochina set the stage for the first Indochina war which ended with the Geneva Agreement of 1954. The terms of the Agreement forced a partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, which was stipulated as a provisional military demarcation line to be politically within two years, gave the communist Pathet Lao control over two provinces in Laos and disbanded the communist movement in Kampuchea. Be that as it may, the North Vietnamese were not about to surrender the cherished dream of unification of the whole country. Sensing that a negotiated settlement was not possible, as the Diem government of South Vietnam was being increasingly greatly assisted by the United States, the North began organising and strengthening the insurgency in the South. This was effected through the National Liberation Front (NLF) established in 1960. Meanwhile in Kampuchea, Prince Sihanouk while declaring the neutrality of Kampuchea, covertly aligned himself with Hanoi. Vietnamese communists were allowed use of Kampuchean territory as operational areas for forays against the Diem and United States troops in the South. North Vietnamese involvement in Kampuchea was greatly

increased after the March 1970 coup which led to the establishment of the Lon Nol administration in Phnom Penh. Acting independently or in concert with the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam began establishing base camps and organising political and military campaigns against the republican government. North Vietnam was also involved in assisting the Pathet Lao in Laos, to undermine the delicate coalition government in Vientianne.

The United States, fuelled by fear of the "domino theory" which theorized that a fallen South Vietnam would leave the path open to extension of communist influence to the rest of Southeast Asia, promptly filled in the vacuum left by France's retreat. To circumvent the Geneva Agreement which disallowed military alliances, it established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), in September 1954. The latter unilaterally offered direct military assistance to Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea. The United States also began providing these countries with greater amounts of economic, technical and administrative aid.

So it was that, the United States, in attempting to halt the encroaching tide of communism found itself engulfed as the French before it, in an anti-imperialist war with all the three Indochina countries. Its deep involvement in the Indochina theatre of conflict is starkly testified by the commitment of more than half a million of its ground combat troops at the height of the war in South Vietnam, the 1970 invasion of Kampuchea and

the penetration into Laos in 1971. This second Indochina war came to an abrupt end in April 1975 with the communist seizure of power in all the three Indochina countries.

Asean reaction

Even before the end of the second Indochina war, there was little optimism among Asean member countries on its probable outcome. Be as it may the suddenness of the fall of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975 and Saigon on April 30 shocked Asean. Asean realised that the region now faced a new security equation which necessitated a coordinated Asean strategy. But lacking relevant information on further Vietnamese motives, Asian was unable to formulate a clear strategy. Hence when the Government of National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK) was announced, only Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines extended their recognition. In the absence of a co-ordinated corporate strategy, each Asean member country chartered its own terms for a modus vivendi with the emerging communists regimes.

More than any other Asean country, the new regional strategic alignment had the most profound effect on Thailand. Long used to relying on friendly border states to provide security to its border, Thailand had now to contend with having neighbouring regimes not well disposed towards Bangkok.

After the war, leftist forces had gained domination in Laos. Consequently frequent defections of prominent Laotians into Thailand had led to the strain in Thai-Lao bilateral relations. Relations declined further when on 16 May 1975 after an abortive coup attempt by the Laotian air force, several ministers, generals and civil servants defected to Thailand, resulting in Laos accusing the former of harbouring criminal elements.¹ There were also several United States reports which indicated that elements of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the north and northeast had been provided with logistical support by Vietnam during the war.² This represented serious insurgency problems to Thailand.

Of more immediate concern to Thailand was the question of the 25,000 United States military personnel and four United States bases present in Thai territory. This had become a sore point in Thai-Vietnam relations. There were obvious strategic and economic benefits for continued United States military presence but since the end of the war, public opinion was building up against retention of this presence. Several developments helped to terminate this presence. The Thais were furious to learn that captured Vietnamese planes had been secretly flown out of Thailand by the United States. The Thais were believed to have wanted to return these planes to

¹ Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), 30 May, 1975.

² K.K. Nair "Words and Bayonets" p. 27.

Vietnam as a token of appeasement for its previous policy of supporting the US war effort against Vietnam. The Thais were equally livid when without its knowledge the United States base in U-Tapao was used as a taking-off point for the United States attempt to rescue its container vessel, the Mayaguez, on 13 May 1976, after its capture by Kampuchean patrol boats.

Mounting domestic pressure thus compelled Thailand to remove United States military presence from its territory. There were also other considerations. There was the need for Thailand to portray a policy of equal-distance in the wake of its normalisation of relations with China on 1 July 1976, and dismantling of SEATO following that. However the October 1976 coup which led to the establishment of a strong anti-communist government under Thanom Kraivichien changed the Thai perception. The new administration was bitterly opposed to United States military withdrawal and deeply concerned with increasing rapport between Vietnam and Laos - thereby reducing Thai leverage over landlocked Laos. It was equally worried over overlapping claims along the Thai-Kampuchean border and in the Gulf of Thailand. The situation was again reversed when Gen. Kriangsak came to power following another coup in October the following year. Against the backdrop of increasing Vietnam-Soviet and Sino-Kampuchean relations and deterioration of Vietnam-Kampuchean relation Kriangsak decided to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam in December 1977.

Malaysia recognised that the new development in Indochina could provide a positive contribution to the concept of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) even in the face of Vietnamese accusation that the concept was nothing more than another neo-colonialist edifice.³ To this end it accorded almost immediate recognition to the new communist regimes in Phnom Penh and Saigon.

The Philippines had relatively less problem in normalising relations with Vietnam, the presence of United States bases notwithstanding. The Vietnamese felt that the bases were part of an old United States-Philippine treaty not directly related to the United States war effort. Recent moves by the Philippines to assert its independence by way of extending its sovereignty over the US bases and in establishing relations with socialist countries - with China in June 1975 and the Soviet Union the following year, had softened Hanoi's attitude and paved the way for normalisation of relations in July 1976.

Among all the Asean nations, Singapore was most sceptical of Vietnamese motives and believed Vietnam to be a threat to regional security and stability. Singapore counselled caution to what it perceived to be a scramble by Asean countries to normalise relations with the new regimes in Phnom Penh and Saigon.

³ FEER, 8 August, 1975. p.21.

Nevertheless, it went along with Asean in extending recognition in 1975.

Indonesia stood alone among Asean member countries in having had a long history of diplomatic relations with Hanoi since 1964. Given its own independence struggle against the Dutch, Indonesia felt a commonality with Vietnam. It also shared a similar threat perception vis-a-vis China. Indonesia's apprehension of communist domination in Indochina was only to the extent that it might result in large-scale smuggling of excess arms to regional insurgent movements. Far from sharing Singapore's perception of possible threat emanating from Hanoi, Indonesia believed that the latter could be drawn into a constructive and positive relationship with Asean.

While Asean countries were separately trying to seek rapport with Vietnam, consistent with their own perception and interests, the latter's attitude on the other hand betrayed a contradiction. Different policies were pursued at different levels. At the bilateral level cordiality was evident as testified by Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien's Asean tour in mid July 1976. But at the corporate level Asean was taken issue with. Claiming Asean to be part of the United States forward defence strategy, Vietnam criticised the organisation during the latter's foreign ministers' meeting in Manila in early July 1976 and subsequently

during the Fifth Non-Alligned Conference in Colombo, the following month.

It has been argued that Vietnam's dual track policy was motivated by the political need on the one hand to cultivate good relations iwth its Asean neighbours and on the other, the militant need to demonstrate its revolutionary zeal by attacking all forms of neo-colonialism which it believed Asean to represent. By withholding recognition to Asean, it hoped to thus "apply pressure" upon the organisation to give due consideration to Vietnamese sensitivities.⁴

Unlike Vietnam, Kampuchea was unopposed to either Asean or the Zopfan concept. Indeed its official statements indicated a desire to adhere to the principles of neutrality and non-alignment.

3. Fallout in Vietnam-Kampuchea Relations

The genesis of the hostility between the two communities could be traced to the time of Vietnamese overlordship over Kampuchea, which came about in early 1800 after a long period of gradual Vietnamese encroachment of Khmer territory. The inability of the Khmers to hold back the inexorable expansion of the Vietnamese empire added to the latter's disdain of the former. Vietnam, tutored with about 1000 years of Chinese civilizing influence, had little if any affinity

⁴ For more details, please see K.K. Nair, "Words and Bayonets", pp. 57-58.

towards the Khmers regarded as lowly and barbaric. In an attempt to civilize the uncultured Khmers, the Vietnamese overlords were not beyond resorting to brutal and violent means. Violence begot violence in the form of uprisings and eventually sowed seeds of intense hatred between the two. The establishment of French colonial administration in 1863 freed the Khmers from the overlordship of Vietnam but it did not return to the former, territories lost to the latter. Indeed the French "arbitrarily annexed to what is now Vietnam large tracks of land that, at the time of thier conquest of the region were inhabited primarily by Khmers and under Khmer administration".⁵ Aroitrary and imprecise demarcation of the border between Vietnam and Kampuchea were to lead to future disputed and armed clashes.

Border disputes between the two Indochina states involved both the land as well as the sea. In the former the dispute was not so much on overlapping land claims but rather on the precise delineation of the border. With regards to the maritime frontier, both parties recognised the Brevie Line as delineating sovereignty over the islands in the Gulf of Thailand. But there was disagreement over the division of territorial waters. To aggravate matters, both parties adopted different approaches in attempting to sove the border dispute. The Kampucheans insisted that as the

⁵ Stephen P. Header "The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict" in The Third Indochina Conflict. p. 23.

aggrieved party, only they had the right to ask and make adjustments to the French delineated border. More importantly they demanded that Vietnam recognise the non-negotiability of the frontiers problem and accept whatever re-adjustments to be made. As a quid-pro quo the Kampucheans were prepared to renounce claims on the "lost territories" of Khmer Krom (lower Mekong Delta).⁶ Kampuchea cannot and would not accept anything less than the above position as it would be tantamount to a national betrayal.

The Vietnamese on the other hand, approached the question of the border dispute in a relatively more flexible manner. It acknowledged that the frontier lines were erratic at places and offered to negotiate on their re-damarcation on a principle of mutual give and take. It therefore found the Kampuchean position most incompatible. But during the early negotiations with Prince Sihanouk in the 1960's the Vietnamese found themselves rather constrained. They cannot afford to alienate the Prince for fear that Kampuchean might deny the sanctuary that was offered to Vietnamese soldiers. Thus upon Sihanouk's insistence, in June 1967, the Vietnamese communists unilaterally declared their respect and recognition of Kampuchea's existing borders. This was interpreted by the former as Vietnamese acceptance of the Kampuchean position. Sihanouk subsequently produced new maps of Kampuchea with re-

⁶ Ibid. p. 24.

adjusted land borders. The maritime frontier was left ambiguous for future claims.

While it is highly unlikely that the Vietnamese were happy with the new frontier demarcations, they could not publicly oppose the Prince for fear of antagonising him and thus undermine the anti-United States alliance. However their silence was universally interpreted as acceptance and provided one of the basic cause for hostilities between Kampuchea and Vietnam in 1975.

For historical and other reasons, traditional ethnic animosity was never too far below the surface in Kampuchea-Vietnam relations. Indeed continued domination of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) by Vietnamese communists served to enhance this ethnic sentiment. It was partly for this reason that Ho Chi Minh decided to sub-divide the ICP in 1951.

The Kampuchean section of the Indochina Communist Party became the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). Also known as the Pracheachon (People), the CPK began attracting the anti-French Khmer nationalists known as the Issarak. The Vietnamese influence over the Khmer communists was reflected in the existence of two factions within the CPK - a pro and an anti Vietnamese factions. With the disbandment of the CPK following the Geneva Agreement of 1954, most of the pro-Vietnamese elements of the CPK moved into Vietnam. Among these "Khmer-Vietminh" - as they were subsequently

called, were many of the present leaders of the PRK including Heng Samrin, Pen Sovan, Chea Sim and Chan Sy.⁷

Neither the Lao nor the Vietnamese communist parties were forced to disband. Indeed they were recognised and given specific territories under their respective supervision. While it was China and more so the Soviet Union who pressured North Vietnam to accept the conditions of the Geneva Agreement, nevertheless young radical Khmer communists such as Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) and Ieng Sary were embittered by what they perceived to be Vietnamese betrayal of their struggle.

The defection of the pro-Vietnamese faction allowed the radicals within the anti-Vietnamese faction led by Saloth Sar to consolidate their positions. Between 1954 and 1974. Many of the Khmer Vietminn returned to Kampuchea and the consequent struggle for power within the CPK resulted in the emergence of Pol Pot as the undisputed leader.⁸

Between 1955 and 1961 the CPK launched "a two-pronged programme of attaining its revolutionary objectives. One was through the political process by the participation of the Pracheanchon in the legislative elections. The other was through the conduct of clandestine operations. Subsequently it was outlawed

⁷ Indochina Report, Oct - Dec. 1986. p. 9.

⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

and forced into the jungle by 1962.⁹ Following its instigation of a peasant uprising in Samlaut in 1967, it began to be referred to as the Khmer Rouge.¹⁰

It would appear that the strategy employed by the Khmer Rouge vis-a-vis its revolutionary objectives differed rather sharply from that of the Vietnamese. While the Khmer Rouge would prefer an armed offensive against the regime of Sihanouk, the Vietnamese were dead set against it. Sihanouk had been providing sanctuaries to the Vietnamese communists in its struggle against the United States and the Republican government in Saigon and was thus regarded as a valuable if untrustworthy ally by the Vietnamese. An attack against Sihanouk would undermine the anti-imperialist struggle and would certainly not be in Vietnam's interest (in the short term), although it would be damaging to Khmer Rouge interests. Thus despite objections from Hanoi, Pol Pot began an insurrection against Sihanouk in 1968, much to Vietnam's embarrassment.

The Khmer Rouge was also embittered by what was perceived as Vietnamese treachery in signing a separate peace treaty with the United States in 1973. The Vietnamese has attempted to persuade the Khmer Rouge to initiate negotiations with the Lon Nol administration. Despite Vietnamese warnings of dire consequences, Pol

⁹ For more details, please see Timothy Micheal Carvey "Communist Party Power in Kampuchea: Documents and Discussion." Data Paper No. 106. pp. 4-8.

¹⁰ Opcit. Indochina Report. p.9.

Pot rejected the advice, convinced that the Khmer Rouge could win the war. Subsequently after the Paris Peace Accord, the United States unleashed one of the haviest aerial bombings in Kampuchea between February and August 1973. The KHmer Rouge believed that this could not have been done without Vietnamese collaboration, directly or otherwise.

Even with the subdivision of the ICP, the Vietnamese continued to dominate the communist movements in Indochina on the theory that a co-ordinated struggle is imperative in facing a common enemy. The Vietnamese' insistence on maintaining a special relationship with Laos and Kampuchea was predicated on the vital need to ensure the security of all the three Indochina states. This required the stationing of Vietnamese troops in both Laos and Kampuchea. But to the Kampuchians, special relationship with Vietnam meant a recognition and acknowledgment of Vietnamese domination.

Even before 1975, there were a series of small scale clashes between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese/Vietcong forces. During the anti-imperialist struggle, Vietnamese forces had made liberal use of Kampuchean territory to establish base camps and organise campaigns against the Republican government of Lon Nol. Apprehensive at the increased political influence of the Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge began attacking the former in order to assert its own political independence. Such clashes which began in 1971 became more frequent in 1972

when the Republican government launched a campaign to discredit the Khmer Rouge for being a pawn of the Vietnamese.¹¹

All the above factors combined to create intense hostility between the two erstwhile comrades after April 1975, bringing in its wake a new configuration of forces in the regional security and strategic balance. Clashes occurred on land as well as offshore in the maritime islands. The land clashes were precipitated by Kampuchean perception of Vietnamese reluctance to withdraw from those territories regarded as Kampuchean by virtue of the Vietnamese declaration in 1967.¹² The clashes in the sea were however relatively more serious primarily because of the ambiguity over the sovereignty of the off-shore islands.

Convinced of its invincibility and believing Vietnam to be too preoccupied with domestic consolidation, Khmer Rouge troops assaulted Phu Quoc Island on 4 May 1975. Six days later they occupied Poulo Panjang Island and allegedly killed all the 600-odd Vietnamese inhabitants.¹³ The Khmer Rouge also began to systematically expell all Vietnamese inhabitants along the Kampuchea-Vietnamese border. Retaliating against this sudden provocation, Vietnam launched a combined air and naval assault on the

¹¹ Opcit Stephen Heder, p. 26.

¹² Ibid. p. 28.

¹³ Nayan Chanda "Brother Enemy". p. 13.

Kampuchea Island of Poulo Wai and seized it.¹⁴ Shocked by the ferocity of the Vietnamese response, the Khmer Rouge leadership visited Hanoi on 12 June 1975 but reported failed to get the Vietnamese to discuss their common border problem.¹⁵ However following a return visit to Phnom Penh by Party Secretary Le Duan and other top leaders from Hanoi, on 2 August, a joint communique was issued calling for peaceful settlement of disputes. Poulo Wai was subsequently returned to Kampuchea.

Overlapping claims between Vietnam and China also came into the open when Vietnam seized six islands of the Spratly Group in April 1975. It has been argued that Vietnamese action was to pre-empt Chinese seizure of the islands as was the case of the 1974 Chinese action over the Paracels. Simmering disputes over the land border had also led to clashes in 1974 and more were to come in the aftermath of the second Indochina war.

The emerging conflict between Kampuchea and Vietnam took on a relatively low profile throughout 1976. The year saw Pol Pot launch a series of purges in order to rid the party rank and file of all suspected pro-Vietnamese members. Reportedly some 20,000 alleged sympathisers perished. While the purges were going on, Pol Pot maintained a facade of normalcy in his relations

¹⁴ New Straits Times (NST), 14 June, 1975.

¹⁵ Opcit, Nayan Chanda. p. 14.

with the Vietnamese, through the exchanges of fraternal visits and receiving of ambassadors. Having considerably strengthened his position within the party, Pol Pot then began to expel the Vietnamese population of Kampuchea and encouraged acts of hostilities against them. By April 1977, Pol Pot once again took the initiative in launching armed offensive against Vietnam in an attempt to regain the lost territories. A series of brutal attacks were perpetrated on Vietnamese villages and townships in An Giang province. Vietnamese retaliation in the form of aerial assaults on Khmer Rouge position failed to deter the Khmer Rouge. Indeed in September, the Khmer Rouge launched one of the most vicious massacres of Vietnamese civilians in the province of Tay Minh.

Khmer brutalities against Vietnamese civilians and attacks on Vietnamese territory were deliberately hush by the Vietnamese for fear of provoking China. In the meantime Vietnam was also secretly preparing to respond in kind against Kampuchea. In late December 1977 Vietnam launched a massive military thrust into the eastern part of Kampuchea. Frustrated by his inability to military counter the Vietnamese offensive, Pol Pot decided to go public and launched a propaganda campaign against the Vietnamese occupation of Eastern Kampuchea. Phnom Penh accused Hanoi of encroaching into its territory all along the 700 km border from Ratanakiri in

the north to Kampot in the south.¹⁶ It subsequently broke diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

To counter Phnom Penh's propaganda, Hanoi publicly revealed for the first time Khmer Rouge atrocities against Vietnamese civilians. For the first time the world was thus made aware of the serious rift between the two erstwhile comrades, three years after the end of the second Indochina war. What began as skirmishes in 1973 between the Khmer Rouge and Vietcong guerilla squads, escalated to sporadic fighting between regular troops since 1975 and to full scale battles leaving thousands dead and wounded. It culminated in the Vietnamese invasion and subsequent occupation of some 400 sq. mls. of Kampuchean territory.¹⁷

Sino-Vietnam relations

During the first Indochina War, China had been Vietnam's staunchest ally, providing much needed logistical and armed support for Vietnamese forces under Ho Chi Minh, in the independence struggle against the French. It would be to China's obvious advantage to have as its southern neighbour, a country sharing a common ideology and not indifferent to China's sensitivities. If China hoping for natural ally in Vietnam, she was soon to be disappointed. When hostilities broke out between China and the Soviet

¹⁶ NST, 1 January 1978.

¹⁷ NST, 5 January 1978.

Union, Vietnam chose instead to pursue an independent course which determined that relations with the Soviets should remain cordial. Indeed as events unfurled, as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, Vietnam-Soviet relations improved, much to the dismay and concern of the Chinese.

While China had wished for an independent Vietnam, it did not however cherish the idea of a powerful southern neighbour. The 1975 victory opened the way for the unification of North and South Vietnam. With its huge standing armed force greatly enhanced by the massive fire power and equipment left behind by the United States and its allies, Vietnam emerged as the undisputed dominant power in Indochina.

Chinese anxiety was hardly lessened when the Soviet Union showed signs of desiring to fill in the vacuum created by the US military withdrawal. Increased Soviet commercial and military shipping into Vietnamese waters gave the Chinese the first signs that the Soviet may entertain thoughts of gaining access to shore facilities at the former US bases in Danang and Cam Ranh. Such development which was quite likely, given the enhanced Vietnam-Soviet relations would bring about dire security implications to China.

In an attempt to ease the rift in Sino-Vietnam relations Le Duan paid an official visit to Beijing on 22 September 1975. Nothing positive came out of the visit. However when Le Duan visited Moscow the

following month, he signed a joint communique endorsing Soviet foreign policy directions. Hanoi also managed to sign a joint communique with Vientianne on 12 February 1977. Due recognition was given to the existence of special relations between Laos and Vietnam as a first step towards the realisation of the cherished goal of an Indochina federation.

The Cultural Revolution in China - during which time the radicals reigned supreme, had brought about a hardening of Chinese attitude towards Vietnam. With the death of Mao Tsetung on 9 September 1976 a power struggle ensued between the radicals under the "Gang of Four" and the moderates pursuing the line of the late Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. The arrest of the "Gang of Four" on 6 October gave Hanoi hope that Sino-Vietnam relations could be improved and the emerging pragmatists under Deng would be more sympathetic towards Vietnam. It was in this vein that Vietnam sought assistance from China for the implementation of its second 5 Year Plan. Unfortunately for Vietnam its past actions including alleged mistreatment of ethnic Chinese, territorial disputes with China and its unveiled attempt to establish hegemony over Indochina had evoked the worst fears among China's leaders. Vietnam's gradual shift in its foreign policy orientation towards possible strategic alignment with China's bitterest foe - the Soviet Union, was an unforgiveable act given the blood, sweat and US\$20 billion that China had contributed

towards Vietnam's revolutionary struggle.¹⁸ Furthermore Vietnam's application for assistance could not have been made at a less opportune time. The political situation in China was far from stable and for the emerging leadership to effect a complete reversal in its policy towards a Vietnam would at best be a most hazardous act. Vietnamese hopes for a new moderate line under Deng proved misplaced. "It would not be till the end of 1978 that Deng would emerge as the unchallenged leader, and by then the changed international situation would make him the most resolute enemy of Vietnam."¹⁹

While Vietnam was dismayed that its request for aid was turned down, nevertheless it had not abandoned hope for reconciliation with China. In the month of June 1977 the Vietnamese leadership undertook two separate official visits to Beijing. While Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's visit received a cool reception, that of Premier Pham Van Dong ended in acrimonious and heated arguments. It was obvious to Vietnam that its relationship with China had come to an end.

Chinese hostility added urgency to the Vietnamese quest to consolidate its position in Indochina. Hence on 17 July 1977 Vietnam signed a 25 year Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with Laos to

¹⁸ Claims made by China's delegate during discussion on Kampuchea in Malaysia-China Scholars Collaquium, Beijing 1986.

¹⁹ Opcit. Nayan Chanda. p. 89.

provide a legal basis to Vietnam's security role in Laos. This development added fuel to Pol Pot's fear of eventual Vietnamese annexation of Kampuchea into the Indochina federation. It was in this state of mind that Pol Pot made his first publicised visit to Beijing on 28 September 1977 where he sought and reportedly received Chinese support for his domestic and foreign policy postures. China was ready to provide the necessary logistics for Pol Pot's attempt to wage war against Vietnam in an attempt to recover the lost territories.

Vietnam-United States relations

During the Paris Peace Talks, President Nixon had secretly promised Vietnam some US\$4.75 billion as reparations and assistance to rebuild Vietnam's war ravaged economy. But this was conditional to Vietnam giving a full accounting of all US military personnel recorded as missing in action (MIA). However to Vietnam's misfortune, after the war the mood in the US Congress was one of less sympathy for the Vietnamese. Most Americans would prefer to forget the war and the trauma that it evoked. But the question of the MIA's and Vietnam's failure to account for them stirred the administration under President Ford which slapped a trade embargo upon Vietnam and refused to allow its admission into the United Nations. With the advent of the Carter administration which committed itself to cleaning up the mess of the United States involvement in Vietnam, hopes were revived that the promised US

reparations would be forthcoming. Indeed so anxious was Vietnam to receive US aid that it was prepared to accept it as a moral rather than as a legal obligation of the United States. But President Carter was not prepared to discuss aid prior to normalisation of relations. Vietnam on the other hand placed aid as a precondition for normalisation - an offer refused by the United States despite Vietnamese readiness to be flexible with regards to the amount and means of payment of the long-sought aid. A series of talks held in Paris in 1979 between the Vietnamese negotiator Phan Hien and US assistant secretary of state for East Asia Richard Holbrooke failed to solve the outstanding issues between the two former protagonists. Indeed it only served to enhance Vietnamese fears that no US aid - official or otherwise, would be forthcoming.

Undeterred by the failure to normalise or to open trade relations with the United States, Vietnam began seeking aid from West European Nations. To this end Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong made a tour of European capitals but the amount of aid received or promised was miserably insignificant. In difference to the United States, the Western nations were reluctant to provide substantial aid to Vietnam. Indeed Vietnamese attempts to open up towards the West produced only a paltry loan of US\$35 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and US\$49 million under UN Development Project.

The failure of Vietnam's attempt at closer collaboration with the United States and the West was not without internal repercussions. Given domestic economic reversals coupled with the West's reticence in providing aid, hardliners within the Party managed to eclipse the pragmatists. Testimony to this was the June 1977 Central Committee decision to impose agricultural collectivisation and eliminate capitalism in South Vietnam.²⁰

Vietnam-Soviet relations

Vietnam had attempted to chart a middle course in its relations with the two communist giants - China and the Soviet Union. Despite pressures from either side, Vietnam stuck to its independent posture and refused to be entangled in the growing Sino-Soviet rift. It was indifference to Chinese concern that Vietnam refused to allow the Soviets access to the military bases in South Vietnam immediately after the end of the second Indochina war. It was equally for the same concern that Vietnam refused to join the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, known as COMECON, and to the chagrin of the Soviets, opted instead to join IMF and the World Bank in 1976. However in the face of China's reluctance to provide long term aid, Vietnam was persuaded to seek the Soviet Union. The latter promised

²⁰ FEER, Nov. 19, 1976 in Nayan Chanda Opcit p. 159.

to provide easy credit valued at US \$2.1 billion to help launch Vietnam's 1976 - 1980 Five Year Plan.

Vietnam was too well aware of the risks in being seen to be too cordial with the Soviet Union. It was not prepared to jeopardise the opportunity to procure funds and technology from the United States and the West to help re-construct its devastated country. It was for this reason that it refused to allow either the Soviet Union or China to establish consulates in Ho Chi Minh city. The same restriction however did not apply to the western countries. It was for the same reason that Vietnam set out to woo, albeit unsuccessfully, the United States and Western European nations to provide the much needed assistance. Vietnam's seeming inclination to the West disappointed the Soviets which began to tighten the tap on the allocation of funds and to renege an earlier promises to undertake construction of development projects in Vietnam. Soviet action placed Vietnam in an acute dilemma. The Vietnamese was facing an economic crisis and a severe shortage of basic necessities. With escalating security problems consequent to its border conflict with Kampuchea and escalating tension with China over the South China Sea islands and land border, Vietnam came to realise that it had no option but to reconcile its policies with that of the Soviet Union's. Hence in May 1977 Premier Pham Van Dong visited Moscow for what turned out to be a turning point in Vietnam-Soviet relations. As a result of the visit, Vietnam

joined COMECOM and the Soviets hastened delivery of goods and services for Vietnamese economic reconstruction. A Soviet military delegation flew to South Vietnam and visited places of military interest including Cam Ranh and Danang. Vietnam-Soviet relations was set on a course which was to lead to a full fledged military alliance in 1978.

The invasion

The Vietnamese troops which penetrated East Kampuchea in December 1977 voluntarily withdrew the following month after having laid havoc to the region. The Vietnamese had hoped that this show of military might would be a lesson to the Khmer leadership. Pol Pot was shocked at the manner and ease with which the Vietnamese routed his "invincible" army. He thus sought to provide his army with greater firepower. China was initially concerned that mounting tension between Vietnam and Kampuchea would provide the Soviets a wider window of opportunity for involvement in the region. China thus counselled for a negotiated settlement. However in the face with Pol Pot's determination, and fearful of losing its only ally in Indochina, China began supporting the Khmer Rouge in earnest.

Not all the Khmer Rouge members shared Pol Pot's anti-Vietnamese sentiment. Many cadres, especially those in the Eastern Zone, were appreciative of their former ally's contribution to the revolutionary struggle

and became gradually disillusioned with the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary leadership as conflict with Vietnam escalated. Democratic Kampuchea was administratively divided into seven zones.²¹ It was in the Eastern Zone, given its close geographical proximity, that Vietnam first began training and organising the Khmer Rouge cadres. Inevitably this long association developed an intimate relationship between the Eastern Zone cadres and the Vietnamese. By the same token the Eastern Zone cadres were also looked upon suspiciously by Pol Pot who regarded them as posing the most serious threat to his leadership. The Vietnamese invasion thus provided Pol Pot the excuse he needed to launch one of the most savage purges to rid himself of traitors alleged to be collaborating with Vietnam to undermine his leadership. While the purge killed tens of thousands of Khmer Rouge cadres, it also caused thousands others to flee to the relative sanctuary of Vietnam. Among the battalion and regimental commanders who fled were Heng Samrin, Chea Sim and Hun Sen who were to provide the future leadership for the Peoples Republic of Kampuchea.

The presence of thousands of able-bodied Khmers allowed the Vietnamese to organise an anti-Pol Pot resistance group. A Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation was established on 2 December,

²¹ The seven zones which were named after their compass directions were: Northern, Northeastern, Eastern, Soouthwestern, Western, Northwestern, and Central.

1978. Serious preparations also began for a decisive military campaign against Pol Pot scheduled for December 1978 when the ground would be dry and hard enough to withstand tanks and rice available for the troops.

Meanwhile China already concerned with increasing Vietnam-Soviet rapport, became apprehensive with what it perceived to be a deliberate Vietnamese policy of discrimination against ethnic Chinese residents. In March 1978 Vietnam had begun to confiscate all Chinese holdings of gold and US dollars and to send non-productive residents to the New Economic Zones. With the rumour of impending war between Vietnam and China, Chinese residents began the exodus into China. The latter was by then already aware of Vietnam's military preparation for an invasion of Kampuchean and hence decided upon a limited military action to teach Vietnam a lesson.

While both Vietnam and China were secretly preparing for war, both realised that they would also need to win the battle at the diplomatic front. To this end both commenced to mend fences and win over the friendship of the United States and non-communist Southeast Asia.

Vietnam which had labelled Asean a neo-colonialist lackey of the United States quietly dropped its reservations. During Vice Foreign Minister Pham Hien's visit to Malaysia in July 1978 - the first leg of a tour that was to take him also to Thailand and

Singapore, Vietnam went to the extent of declaring its support for the concept of Zopfan. In September Premier Pham Van Dong also visited the three Asean countries and declared Hanoi's readiness to sign a treaty of friendship and co-operation with Asean. Thailand and Singapore also played host to Chinese vice-chairman Deng Xiaopeng in November.

While Asean was delighted at being wooed separately by Vietnam and China, prospects for peace in the region appeared dim given that each party had its own conflicting self-interests. The emerging tension between Vietnam and Kampuchea and between Vietnam and China had ominous signs and given the alignment to opposed extra-regional interests, gave every indication of much wider conflicts in the near future.²²

The Soviets meanwhile had begun massive secret airlift of fresh arms and supplies to Vietnam. Fully cognizant of the possibility of Chinese intervention in the wake of the military invasion of Kampuchea, Vietnam secretly negotiated a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with Moscow as a pre-emptive move against China. The Vietnamese were not unaware that a treaty with Moscow would place them fully within the Soviet orbit - a development certain to be fully exploited by China to isolate Vietnam from the United States and Southeast Asia. It thus became a matter of national

²² Please refer to S. Rajaratnam's speech reported in FEER 15 September 1978.

priority for Vietnam to normalise relations with the United States prior to signing the treaty with Moscow. Normalisation would at least portray China as pursuing a middle course and possibly add further weight against any possible Chinese military action against Vietnam. The Vietnamese were thus prepared to forego all pre-conditions towards normalising relations with the United States. This was the message delivered by Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thac to Holbrooke during their discussions in New York in September 1978. Unfortunately for Vietnam, the Carter administration placed normalisation of relations with China on a higher priority. Mindful of the strategic importance of alignment with China within the context of the United States own rivalry with the Soviet Union, US National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that normalisation of relations with China "will bring a major change in the international balance" whereas "moving ahead on relations with Vietnam would only be an irritant to expanding our understanding with China".²³

Failing to get the US commitment to normalise relations, Vietnam formally signed the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with the Soviet Union on 3 November 1978.

At midnight on 24 November 1978 under the command of Gen. Hoang Cam, Vietnamese T-54 tanks and

²³ Zbigniew Brzezinski "Power and Principle" in Nayan Chanda. p. 272.

truckloads of troops began assembling at the Central Highland township of Ban Me Thout. Towards dawn they rumbled down route 14 in the direction of Kampuchea. Within five days the first Kampuchean province - Kratie, was captured and within two weeks Phnom Penh was overrun.