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"RED EAST" IN CONFLICT

THE CHINA/INDOCHINA WARS

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1. INTRODUCTION : THE SHOCK EFFECT

The conflicts between Vietnam and Kampuchea and between China and Vietnam which culminated in open warfare in the beginning of 1979 have shocked the international community. This was largely a reaction against naked use of power, and it relfected also the anxiety that regional confrontation, intertwined with great power rivalry, may escalate into a global conflagration. But for many people the shock and dismay went deeper. For all those who had identified themselves with the struggle for liberation of the Indochinese peoples and, in a broader sense, with the socio-political revolutionary changes in post-colonial Asia, the war series involving China and the Indochinese peoples were a severe blow. It was like a crisis of identity - a sad reflection on hopes unfulfilled and energy wasted.

Moreover, for all those who once hoped that socialist transformation - 'socialist' as used in relation to state socialism in Eastern Europe, China, Indochina, North Korea and Cuba - would help to make the world peaceful and at least exclude military conflict in relations between socialist states, the China/Indochinese development added a new link, of a higher qualitative order, to the process of disillusionment as to the ability of state socialism to overcome the impediments of nationalism, national divisiveness, and power politics.

It is true that conflict between socialist states is not a new phenomenon, being well-known from Soviet-Yugoslav and Soviet-Chinese relations;and that events in China/Indochina were not the first instance of military intervention by one socialist state against another, as experienced repeatedly in Eastern Europe and especially in the case of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Yet the spring guns of 1979 in China/Indochina were the first instance of open war between socialist states.

From a historical perspective, a new element appeared on the horizon of contemporary international relations: the danger of war coming from internal conflict in the socialist world. The long-standing Soviet-Chinese contest received added vigor through military operations in Indochina. There are three component parts to this development: First, the China/Indochina region liberated, after protracted war, from Western colonial and neo-colonial intervention, was turned into a new hotbed of tension with state socialist countries as the main actors. Second, the essentially local China/Indochinese conflict, by the active involvement of the Soviet Union and sustained by other Eastern European states, acquired dimensions of a contest implicating the whole international state socialist community. Third, socialist rivalry around the China/Indochina conflicts, because of wide potentials for manipulative and political-military interference by the Western powers, is fraught with dangers for global peace and security.

2. STATE SOCIALISM: NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM IN FOREIGN POLICY

Socialist revolutionary theory aiming to transform human relations has relied mainly on two pillars: (a) the abolition of exploitation of man by man, i.e. the eradication of injustice in the structure of society; (b) the elimination of imperial domination and nationalistic divisiveness between peoples and nations. Whatever the achievements in the first field, state socialism has certainly failed in the second. The guiding principles and declared ideals of state socialism in world affairs, and especially in relations between the socialist states themselves - internationalism, solidarity, brotherhood - succumbed, in the final analysis, to traditional nationalism, spheres-of-influence politics, and dictates of power. From this viewpoint, it may even not be especially interesting to assign the blame for the China/Indochina wars to the Chinese, Vietnamese, or the Russians. Recent events, however, reflect a dramatic failure of state socialism in the application of the ideals of human understanding and internationalism.

One may discover some regularities in this evolution: regularities which confirm the continued impact and survival in conditions of state socialism of such old socio-political, economic and strategic motivating forces in foreign relations as geopolitics, material group interests, nationalistic pressures, military power calculus, and state bureaucratic ambitions. The impact of these influences seems to grow stronger as nationalism becomes institutionalized by powerful centralized bureaucracies in both the political and military domain. The claim that foreign policy in state socialist countries reflects changed internal relations seems to hold true only as far as the state bureaucracy is invested with large authority to exercise power, free of democratic checks, and when the fusion of foreign policy and military might is used to bolster the position of the leadership and to discipline society.

This, however, is not all. Genuine revolutions, with deep social and national roots, tend to develop high national passion and zeal, and energy released by the revolutionary process is easily turned into nationalistic expansionist channels. This has been the historical experience of almost all great revolutions in modern times, from the American and French, to the Russian, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Slowly but surely, slogans of internationalism and brotherhood were replaced by or reinterpreted in terms of national aggrandizement. It is then a case of following a historical regularity that the Indochinese wars, fought under the banners of internationalism, but also of national liberation, in the end produced an explosion of nationalism. In a broader perspective, this evolution is reflected in the nationalist wave in the wake of the anti-colonial revolution. No doubt, state socialism has critically contributed to this process. The outcome is that nationalism has never been so strong as today, and that national divisiveness has become the rule in East and West, in North and South.

Concerning state socialism, the growth of nationalism in foreign relations is to some extent inherent in the dominant theory of socio-political transformation. While foreign policy in a class society, according to this theory, is thought to serve the interests of the ruling classes only, in a presumed classless socialist society foreign policy becomes nation-wide in character. It acquires a quality representative of the interests of the whole nation. To underline this transformation, in the process, official policy tries to cultivate and build upon the ideological front elements of national and cultural singularity, of specific mold and genius, unique identity, heroic national traditions and the import of a cohesive state power; national pride and vanity are nurtured. As an element of the ideological superstructure, this appeal to nationalism serves both the consolidation of the system and the execution of foreign policy, be it in participation in the arms race or in support of expansionist goals.

Furthermore, the dominant theory on the nature of war in the socialist states, both in Europe and Asia, relies on the traditional Western Clausewitz formula of war being simply a continuation of policy by other means. It is then only natural that the ruling bureaucracy, like ruling circles in the West, becomes inclined to use force when foreign policy encounters difficulties in the realization of essential golas by peaceful means, provided external and internal circumstances allow. This is the essence of the Brezhnev doctrine calling for 'military assistance to fraternal countries' in situations of crisis. This is also the underlying logic implicit in

Mao's slogan that 'political power grows out of the barrel of the gun'. Guns which served well the revolutionary goals too often tend to be used to serve foreign policy goals after the seizure of power. The recent China/Indochina wars are a good case in point.

3. THE CHINESE/INDOCHINESE PATTERN

Current Chinese/Indochinese conflicts possibly cannot be understood unless seen in relation to the stormy historical processes of the distant and recent past. Thousands of years of Chinese-Vietnamese relations in ancient history meet with new and modern pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history to result in a complex pattern which dominates the Chinese/Indochinese scene.

The main characteristic feature of the almost 2 500 years old Vietnamese history and the history of Chinese-Vietnamese relations is a population mobility and political pressure in the geographical direction from the North to the South. Coming from South China, the ancestors of the Vietnamese arrived at the Red River delta in North Vietnam in the third century B. C. For a thousand years, from the second century B. C. until A. D. 939, the Vietnamese people formed part of the Chinese empire. From this period comes the historical name of the country - Annam - meaning the 'pacified South'. Vietnam finally won its independence, and for the next thousand years it existed as a sovereign state though dominated by Chinese culture. But twice in this period the Vietnamese had to repell major Chinese invasions: of the Khan (Yuan) Mongols in the thirteenth century, and of the Mings in the fifteenth century.

The last thousand years of Vietnamese history are also marked by a systematic expansion to the South, first as settlers and then as conquerors. In the fifteenth century the Vietnamese rulers conquered the Kingdom of Champa - now central Vietnam - expanding further to the eastern provinces of the Khmer empire - now South Vietnam - and arriving at the region of Saigon at the end of the seventeenth century. The colonization process continued then further to the South and the West with the occupation of the Mekong delta, finally reaching the Gulf of Siam in the eighteenth century.

This North-South expansion is an essential part of the historical memory of the Indochinese peoples: of the Vietnamese resisting Chinese military pressures[1] and the Khmer Kingdom succumbing to Vietnamese mandarines. Yet there is also another memory: of the Vietnamese learning from the Chinese and of the Khmer people getting Vietnamese aid to resist pressures from the Thais. Despite a thousand years under Chinese domination, the Vietnamese knew to preserve their national identity; and while independent the following millenium, they did not cease to absorb the know-how and culture coming from the North. A love-hate relationship developed - love as reflecting common culture, and hate as reflecting the dominance-dependence past.

But on top of historical memory going back far into the past come new experiences of modern history. A century of French colonial penetration and rule created a new political reality in Indochina. It was a contributing factor to contemporary developments in three ways: (a) by the cultural impact, (b) by shaping the Indochinese entity comprising Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea, and (c) by creating opportunities for Vietnamese cultural-political and economic mobility within this larger Indochinese entity.

The century of French domination reduced Chinese cultural influence, brought Indochina nearer to Europe, and increased the distance between the Vietnamese and the Chinese[2]. French culture has been absorbed by the elites of Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Laos. Furthermore, though France followed the principle of divide et impera and established five administrative units - the protectorates of Annam, Tonkin, Kampuchea, and Laos, and the colony of Cochinchina-Indochina became a joint colonial entity. Up to the final years of its rule France insisted on preserving the Indochinese Federation within the French Union. And though by the loss of independence Vietnam's territorial expansion was halted, the Vietnamese gained easy access for economic and cultural expansion to Laos and Kampuchea. The French relied heavily on the better-educated Vietnamese to fill the middle and lower ranks of the colonial administration in the whole of Indochina. Vietnamese functionaries became the real vehicle of the French rule. Too often they also attracted the hatred of the local population more than the French themselves. This was, in fact, part of the policy of divide et impera.

Many elements of the above new reality were absorbed and inherited by the national liberation movements. When Ho Chi Minh, with the mandate from the Communist International, founded the Communist Party in 1930, the name given to it was Communist Party of Indochina, though only Vietnamese and no Laotians or Kampucheans participated in the founding conference. This reflected both the acceptance of Indochina as one entity, and the implicit assumption that the Vietnamese revolutionaries should be assigned the leading role in the Party and in future liberated Indochina.

This was also in line with the then revolutionary thinking and hierarchies established by the Comintern: the more advanced Vietnamese comrades were entrusted, in the spirit of internationalism, with the task of organizing and guiding the revolution in the whole of colonial Indochina. In fact, the organization was then still weak; and not until the post World War II period, in the wake of national liberation, did individual Laotians and Kampucheans join the revolutionary movement.

Thus the convergence of French colonial impact and administrative practice, and of revolutionary strategy, helped to reinforce trends which have survived to the present day.

Laotian and Kampuchean revolutionary movements grew in the course of the First 'Dirty' Indochina War against the French, and more so in the course of the Second Indochina War against US intervention. But they had still to rely on military backing from the Vietnamese. Vietnamese instructors and military units always served as the backbone of the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge. Laos, being geographically nearer to North Vietnam, and with better contacts to Hanoi, developed a relatively stronger revolutionary core. The Kampuchean Left partially made up for their weakness when the war front moved South during the Second Indochina War, and especially when the war spilled over to the Kampuchean territory. Strong Vietnamese units came then to reinforce and built up the Khmer guerillas. But at the same time an undercurrent of discontent spread among the Khmer communist leadership which started to resent Vietnamese paternalism and discipline, and, most of all, subordinating Kampuchean struggle to Vietnam war aims.

On the other hand, China was always sensitive to developments on its southern border - the strategic 'soft underbelly' of the nation. In modern history, both from the Chinese and Euro-American perspective, Vietnam and Indochina served as a spring-board to the Chinese continent itself. France's colonial expansion to Vietnam in the nineteenth century was largely motivated by the desire to conquer Chinese markets, while the US initial cold-war interest in Vietnam grew out of the China complex and the 'railroad' concept of heading through Vietnam to Red China. Peking's strategic thinking throughout the whole Second Indochina War was dominated by the military calculus that Vietnamese resistance serves as a shield which helps to keep the US from attacking China itself. Yet, in the process, as Vietnam acquired resilience and strength and the prospect emerged that a Vietnamese-dominated Indochina might become a Titoist-like independent power on the southern flank, second thoughts arose in Peking. Vietnam's growing reliance on the Soviet Union to counter Chinese pressures added to the unrest in Peking. The specter of encirclement by Soviet 'hegemonism' was unleashed.

In reality, Vietnam certainly is not a country to become a stooge of the Soviet Union. It did not fight France and the United States only to fall under Soviet dominance. It knew many times, both during the First and the Second Indochina Wars, how to defy pressures coming from Moscow, when Soviet Euro-centered policy clashed with Hanoi's interest and strategy. But neither is Hanoi willing to become a pawn in a Chinese-dominated sphere of influence. (This is not too different from the Soviet set-up in Eastern Europe. Great powers inherently behave like great powers - socialist or not.)

In addition, the Chinese-Vietnamese conflict touches on highly sensitive material and territorial issues. This concerns not only the exact borderline between the two countries, which was delimited at the end of the nineteenth century in the time of French colonial rule (thus, as the Chinese maintain, under imperialist duress)[3]. More important is the controversy about territorial waters, continental shelves and economic zones, and two groups of islands in the Gulf of Tonkin and the South Chinese Sea: the Paracel (Xisha) in the north and the Spratly (Nansha) Islands in the south - believed to lie in an area rich in oil reserves. The Paracel and part of the Spratly Islands were under South Vietnamese control, but at the end of the war Peking occupied the Paracel while Vietnam took over the Spratly Islands. Now both Peking and Hanoi claim historical rights and sovereignty over the two groups of islands.

All these conflictual issues were for a long time suspended and overshadowed by the French and US Indochinese wars. As Western colonial and neo-colonial intervention came to an end, the clash of indigenous state national interests came to the fore. The victory of state socialism throughout the region did not change attitudes and behavior of ruling bureaucracies. Old historical contradictions reappeared. Obviously socialism did not undo the traditional pattern in China/Indochina relations: there is a continuum in the process.

4. GREAT POWER INVOLVEMENT

The most dangerous aspect of the China/Indochina conflict is, of course, the great power involvement which tends to fuel contradictions, increase tension, and may lead to larger conflagration. As no other contemporary international conflict, the China/Indochina confrontations serve to activate the triangular dynamics of China-Soviet-US rivalry - a dynamics far more perilous than the bilateral balance-of-power game because of the inherent proneness to shifting alliances, the increase in unknown variables, greater unpredictability, more brinkmanship inducements, and larger arms race incentives involved.

A cursory glance at possible motivating forces and current postures of the great powers in relation to the China/Indochina conflicts indicates a drift towards more intricate and tangled international relations. Also, there seems to be a tendency towards the institutionalization of the use of power at the whim of the strong, and towards anarchy in international law.

In order 'to teach a lesson' to its neighbor and to show its credibility as a great power, China was willing to take calculated risks and gamble with issues of war and peace. In this initiative it had, no doubt, silent consent if not open encouragement from the United States: malicious pleasure in

Washington in seeing Vietnam 'punished' by China; even more, the US posture had in mind the Soviet Union, the ally of Vietnam. While Washington may diplomatically repeat its assurances of not wanting to exploit Chinese-Soviet contradictions, it is quite apparent that it is 'playing the Chinese card', if only to press the Soviet Union for concessions in many ongoing bilateral negotiations. The ostensible neutral stand of the United States in the Soviet-Chinese rift, 'not of our creation', contributes to enhance the US position as the leading international power.

In this power game, the Soviet Union is confronted with difficult dilemmas. Considering the magnitude of the Soviet-Chinese contradictions - the socio-political and ideological rivalry, and the territorial conflict over large sections of the long common border - the feeling in Moscow and Peking is that, in the long run, war is almost unavoidable. Yet, time may not be on the side of the Soviet Union, and military and political decision-makers in Moscow must reflect on suitable opportunities to settle the accounts with China. This time the Soviet Union did not interevene militarily. The exact military-political calculus behind this restraint is not fully known, though one can find good reasons for following such a line in this particular juncture. Anyhow, Soviet behavior in this juncture must be seen as circumstantial and time-conditioned. It cannot be interpreted as an absolute promise of similar conduct in future crisis situations. As conflictual elements accumulate and time-pressure increases, enemy perceptions and attitudes tend to harden, and policy leanings tend to become more extreme.

In a future-oriented perspective, more important than temporary tactical moves are the strategic horizons. It is then of less import to speculate on the gains or losses of particular actors in the spring 1979 round of the China/Indochina conflict. Did China really gain prestige by 'punishing' Vietnam? Did its military show of force prove that the Soviet Union is only a 'paper tiger'? Can any wide-reaching conclusions be drawn from the course of the military operations? Did the Soviet Union gain or lose by showing restraint? Whatever the answers given to these questions, they cannot do away with the central problem: unless ways can be found to defuse the confrontation, the prospects are for a further aggravation and escalation of the conflict with global implications.

5. THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

The crux of the problem is for Vietnam to find a modus vivendi with its powerful neighbor in the North which would safeguard its national independence on the one hand, yet calm Peking's concerns on regional hegemony and Soviet encirclement on the other. Given the long historical record of the conflict and the recent entanglements, this is no easy task. Yet there is urgency in the search for solutions.

A crucial issue is the question of Kampuchea. In a sense, when Vietnam occupied Kampuchea and replaced the Pol Pot regime with the government of Heng Samrin, it acted from somewhat similar security concerns as the Chinese had in relation to Vietnam. As the Pol Pot regime increased its hostility towards Vietnam, Hanoi feared encirclement and a situation where it would be compelled to face a battle on two fronts. Also the dream of Indochina moving united towards socialism, under Vietnamese leadership, was being dispelled.

On the other hand, the Pol Pot regime posed a socio-political, national and ideological challenge not only to Vietnam, but to any known model of state socialism. Not only as seen in the West, but also as seen in almost all the communist ranks (included to some extent China) the Pol Pot regime represented an extreme degeneration of socialism: a mixture of doctrinaire revolutionary zeal, most cruel Jacobine terror, radical peasant ideology, and nationalistic fervor. The ruthless evacuation of the cities in order to destroy any possible organized opposition, and a violence relatively unparalleled in the history of revolutions, aimed at a complete discontinuum with the past, except for a return to the glory of the Khmer empire. From a Hanoi perspective, the Pol Pot heresy reflected both the revival of Vietnamese-Kampuchean national confrontation, and also a clash of cosmologies: one rooted in the Comintern tradition and the other in the schismatic deviations in the wake of the Soviet-Chinese rift.

Judging from reports reaching the outside world from Kampuchea in the spring of 1979, the population did not mourn the fall of the Pol Pot regime. If the choice was between the savagery of the Pol Pot reign and the Vietnamese-dominated Heng Samrin rule, it is quite possible that many Kampucheans opted for the second. But this situation may hardly be maintained for a long time. In fact, the Vietnamese are hard pressed in Kampuchea. According to one report by the France Presse correspondent who visited Kampuchea, there were three Vietnamese advisers for every Kampuchean official and ten Vietnamese military personnel for every Kampuchean soldier[4].

Considering Vietnamese overextension in Indochina, with an army of approximately 50 000 soldiers also in Laos, and the obvious need for peace to recover Vietnam from ruins and consolidate its economy, it must be in the best interests of Hanoi to seek a political solution which could free it from the burden of further warfare and military waste. The longer the present tense situation continues and the more Vietnam is compelled to invest efforts and material resources to maintain its current position, the greater must also be the reliance on Soviet aid which again aggravates all dimensions of the conflict.

In a search for a political solution, it may be fruitful to think in terms of disengagement as developed in contemporary international relations by

Third World actors, and in terms of conflict resolution strategies as developed in peace research theory. Meant here are the notions of neutrality and non-alignment on the one hand, and of dissociative and associative strategies on the other. All these concepts have some relevance to the China/Indochina conflict but need specific adaptation and flexible implementation.

The idea of neutrality dominated the search for solutions to the Indochina conflict for more than two decades, from the end of the First and throughout the Second Indochina war. It was reflected in the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and 1962, and Hanoi itself was one of the strongest promoters of the idea of a zone of peace and neutrality comprising Kampuchea, Laos, and South Vietnam. Correctly understood, neutrality does not mean a standstill in socio-political relations. On the contrary, a status of neutrality in a democratic framework may well suit progress and radical reform in the structure of society. Such a shift in Kampuchea, with Prince Sihanouk as a possible central figure, and with international guarantees, may also well serve security and the political interests of both Vietnam and China. It could become a cornerstone for the solution of the China/Indochina conflict.

Parallel with the concept of neutrality goes the concept of non-alignment It originally came to symbolize independence and non-engagement in the struggle between the military blocks of East amd West. In the meantime, world power-political fragmentation has spread into the socialist world and the sharpest divisions now are, in fact, cutting the socialist camp. The Vietnamese led by Ho Chi Minh were those who deplored this development perhaps more than any other members of the socialist community. They feared that the split might weaken the flow of aid so badly needed in the struggle against the US military might. However, they soon learned to capitalize on the Soviet-Chinese competition and to get even more aid from both sides - a pattern the nonaligned countries applied for a long time in relation to East and West. Vietnam's problem may now lie in the need to adapt the policy of non-alignment to its specific conditions, i.e. to mark independence from all military powers at an approximately equal distance, and bind its international position more to the nonaligned, neutral and smaller states. While such a policy shift might soothe the apprehensions of the Northern neighbor, it may at the same time help Vietnam to raise its international standing and mobilize more resources for the urgently needed tasks of reconstruction.

Provided the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment are accepted as guidelines for the search of political solutions to the China/Indochina conflict, it remains to find the right balance between the strategies of dissociation and association in the relations between the countries of Indochina and China. The distinction is between an initially low interaction leading gradually to closer cooperation, and high interaction from the start.

The Vietnamese demand for the establishment of a demilitarized zone on the China-Vietnam border follows the dissociative strategy: demarcation of a border which separates the fighting forces but does not divide the countries, and promotes peace. But, certainly, the goal both in Hanoi and in Peking has to be a return to close cooperation and association in shaping peaceful conditions and stability in the whole region. The guiding principles have, in fact, been accepted by both parties as formulated in the Pancha Shila principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. True, because of the interrelationship of the China-Vietnamese settlement with an intricate complex of foreign affairs issues as indicated above, normalization may need time and political will, resolution and perseverance. The alternative to compromise and a political solution of the conflict is protracted confrontation, destruction and war. The consequences may be disastrous for all concerned.

Notes:

1) During the decisive stages of the Vietnamese resistance against the French, when Red Chinese support was of crucial importance for the guerillas, Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese leaders often recalled as examples of national resistance the 'solidarity and enthusiasm', 'patriotism and unity', of the Vietnamese people in 'defeating', 'smashing', and 'safeguarding our freedom and sovereignty' in the struggle against the 'Yuan and Ming invaders'. See Ho Chi Minh: "Appeal on the Occasion of the 4th Anniversary of the Nation-wide Resistance' (Dec. 1950) and "Appeal on the Sixth Anniversary of the Founding of the DRV" (August 1951), in: Selected Works, Vol. III, Hanoi 1961.

2) E.g., in the beginning of the twentieth century Chinese characters were replaced by the Latin Alphabet for writing the Vietnamese language.

3) Though in 1957-58 the Central Committees of the Chinese and Vietnamese Parties affirmed in an exchange of letters that both sides respected the border lines laid down in the Sino-French agreement and agreed to the maintenance of the status quo of the borders.

4) Jean Pierre Gallois: "Inside the Silent City", New Statesman, 13 April, 1979.

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