

THE INDOCHINA WARS:

GREAT POWER INVOLVEMENT - ESCALATION AND DISENGAGEMENT*

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1. The historical perspective

The Indochina wars, a function of the Vietnam conflict, will undoubtedly be recalled in history as the central human and political drama of the post World War II period. The chain of wars which raged for three decades in Indochina - in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia - produced turmoil far beyond the borders of the Indochina peninsula. They had a world-wide impact and contributed substantially to a radical transformation of the world scene. Paramount for this development was the fact that Vietnam was the only drawn out armed conflict after World War II with direct or indirect involvement of all the great powers. Though a local war in a strict geographical sense, this was in reality a global conflict.

Initiated in 1945/46 by France in an effort to reconquer her colonial empire, the war was in the fifties and sixties taken over by the United States, to wind up with US withdrawal and the collapse of the US supported Saigon regime in 1975. Seen in historical perspective, this conflict was unique in many respects. It was one of the most complex, protracted and cruel wars in history, and yet one of the least understood. Discussed in the West mainly in terms of the success-failure syndrome, the conflict was rarely perceived in its real socio-political context, and seldom was its dynamics well grasped. Yet its scale and magnitude can easily be appraised by the marks it left. It bequeathed a deep and lasting imprint on

international affairs and the world political horizon.

The Vietnam conflict had, first of all, a major political impact on relations between East and West, as well as on internal developments in both East and West. It was among the prime agents to weaken the cohesion of the Western alliance on the one hand, and to deepen the split between Moscow and Peking on the other. It thus contributed to the shift on the international scene from bipolar to multipolar relations. The somewhat strange outcome, considering the ideological fervor in some of the stages of the conflict, was a decline of ideology and a rise of nationalism in world politics. At the same time, the Vietnam agony was crucial for the process of internal change in France and the United States, and its impulses were strongly felt in China, the Soviet Union and other countries. Moreover, the example of the Vietnamese resistance had a profound influence on evolution and revolution in the Third World. Anticolonialism was strengthened and the struggle for independence acquired added vigor. It is then right to say that the Vietnam conflict stands out in post World War II history as a leading source of ferment, and a driving force behind the transformation in East-West and North-South relations.

2. The roots of the conflict: means and ends

To some extent, the course of the conflict was set and shaped by its colonial roots and the parallel Cold War fallacies. It started as a French colonial adventure and was initially disliked by the United States which, as indicated by a 1950 National Security Council report, "since the Japanese surrender, pointed out to the French Government that the legitimate nationalist aspirations of

the people of Indochina must be satisfied, and that a return to the prewar colonial rule is not possible."¹⁾ But for reasons of global policy, strategical considerations, and anti-communist anxieties France soon got the support of the United States and all Western allies. In messages to the US Embassy in Paris in February and May 1947, the US Secretary of State, General Marshall noted that "we are essentially in the same boat as French, also as British and Dutch. We cannot conceive setbacks to long-range interests of France which would not also be setbacks of our own."²⁾ And further: "We do not lose sight of the fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by philosophy and political organizations emanating from and controlled by Kremlin ... In our view, southern Asia is in a critical phase of its history with seven new nations in process of achieving or struggling for independence and autonomy. These nations include a quarter inhabitants of the world and their future course, owing sheer weight of populations, resources they command, and strategic location, will be a momentous factor for world stability."³⁾

With the development of the Cold War, all these economic, strategical and political factors making for US Indochina involvement⁴⁾, were reinforced by a series of moves and events in Asia and Europe. Of paramount importance among them were: a) the proclamation in 1947 of the Truman Doctrine "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure"⁵⁾; b) developments in China in 1948 and 1949 culminating in the establishment of the People's Republic of China, perceived in the United States as a real poli-

tical calamity; c) the Korean war which - according to William P. Bundy - reflected "a recognition that a defense line in Asia, stated in terms of an island perimeter, did not adequately define our vital interests, that those interests could be affected by action on the mainland in Asia"⁶⁾, and thus had to be maintained by a vigorous forward strategy; and, last not least, d) the growing East-West confrontation expressed in the formation of two military blocks: NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

Yet after eight years of waging war, France had to admit defeat, and the 1954 Geneva agreements closed the first chapter of the Indochina conflict. There were many causes of this defeat. However, one of the main reasons lie in the pursuit of military solutions for what was basically a political problem: the satisfaction of the social and national aspirations of the Indochinese peoples. But though Washington, as early as 1950, recognized this weakness, i.e. "that a conclusive military solution was unattainable" and that, therefore, the search for a political solution was imperative⁷⁾, the United States in later stages of the conflict followed exactly in the footsteps of the French. Underlying US policy was the simplistic believe that the situation could be mastered by a higher input of strength which the French could not afford. This resulted in the noted "arrogance of power" stance - an overconfidence in American economic, technological and military superiority. As stated in hindsight by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, "we believed that we could overwhelm problems through the sheer weight of resources."⁸⁾ And the outcome was a failure even greater than in the case of France. It was a difference of scaple, the size of the defeat directly proportional to the incomparably

larger and more brutal use of force by the United States.

3. U.S. involvement

Though driven by economic and strategical considerations, the main theme of US involvement was of a political and ideological nature: to halt the global expansion of communism. Underlying the Cold War anxiety was the image of a monolithic world communism directed from Moscow and bent on conquering the whole world. For a long time in the fifties even economic and strategical aims were formulated in ideological terms. In many official statements tending to justify US involvement, American leaders spoke of a "monstrous conspiracy of the communists in the Kremlin" (Truman), of "communist imperialism, subversion and aggression" (Truman), and the threat of "international communism" to Asia and the rest of the world (Dulles).⁹⁾

This line of thinking was especially reinforced by the "loss of China" debate, a spectre which haunted US foreign policy for two decades since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. As late as April 1965, President Johnson dramatically pointed to China as the main root cause of US Indochina engagement: "The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy. Over this war and all Asia is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China."¹⁰⁾ And a secret memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of Defense, J.T. McNaughton, approved by McNamara, noted at the same time: "U.S. objective in South Vietnam is not to 'help friend' but to contain China."¹¹⁾

Even when the rift between the Soviet Union and China became visible and intense, betraying and exposing its nationalistic roots, the United States judged it as a

problem of tactics, and the conspiratorial theory of world communism labouring for global conquest persisted in Washington. In his 1963 State of the Union message, President Kennedy maintained that "the Soviet-Chinese disagreement is over means, not ends. A dispute over how best to bury the free world..."¹²⁾ And three years later, in May 1966, speaking before the New York Council of Foreign Affairs, Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, offered the following analysis: "Significant changes have occurred within the Communist world. It has ceased to be monolithic... But the leaders of both the principal Communist nations are committed to the promotion of the Communist world revolution, even while they disagree - perhaps bitterly - on questions of tactics... 'Wars of liberation' are advocated and supported by Moscow as well as by Peking."¹³⁾

It looked as if US policy moved away from a matter of fact historical thinking in international relations, and accepted instead the ideological framework propagated by orthodox Marxism, in theory and utopia assuming unselfish internationalism, brotherhood, and elimination of national quarrels in relations between socialist countries. US policy seemed to give credence and accept as a reality the theorem of a monolithic "world socialist camp" propagated by Moscow, despite such evident proofs to the contrary as the case of Soviet-Yugoslav relations or upheavals in Eastern Europe. In fact, the national and territorial issue was from the time of the establishment of the People's Republic of China a thorny problem in the interstate relations between the Soviet Union and China. As early as 1954, according to Soviet sources, China in talks with Moscow officially brought up territorial claims.¹⁴⁾ This was rather natural as nationalism tends to grow strong-

er when institutionalized by powerful centralized bureaucracies, political and military. It is really astonishing that US policy and diplomacy should have lost sight of realities grounded in history - in geopolitics, tradition, power, nationalism, cultural separateness, and state ambitions - and should have based its judgment on ideological notions and images born in the atmosphere of the Cold War.

This state of mind led to basic misconceptions and misjudgements concerning the behaviour and conduct of the adversaries, and contributed to miscalculations and mistakes which brought the United States deeper and deeper into the war. Very often in the course of the conflict actions undertaken independently by Hanoi or other local actors were attributed to Moscow or Peking, or both together, and the response, shaped to great power politics was accordingly increased in strength, fuelling the process of escalation.¹⁵⁾ This kind of dynamics became a constant feature of the Indochina conflict.

The greatest blunder occurred in the inaugural days of the Kennedy administration. The occasion was an ideological speech held in Moscow by Nikita Khrushchov on January 6, 1961, following the November 1960 Moscow conference of the Communist parties, the last in which the Chinese still participated, devoted to the sharply debated problems of war and peace. Reflecting these divergencies, the speech was naturally meant as a plea against Peking's radical line. As customary in such cases, Khrushchov used the cryptic and esoteric but strongly worded ideological language of communist liturgy, trying himself to appear as an ardent revolutionary. The Chinese were not mentioned by name but their theory of revolutionary wars was

forcibly attacked on different grounds of international strategy, among other things the need for peaceful co-existence. In words Khrushchov even supported "wars of national liberation" but in fact he vigorously opposed initiation of local wars which may lead to a world conflagration.¹⁶⁾

The speech caused confusion in Washington. It was misread by the Kennedy leadership and interpreted as an exposition of a new united strategy by Moscow and Peking to expand and conquer the Third World by "wars of national liberation", under the protection of the nuclear umbrella. And the conclusion was that the United States has to stand up to the challenge, respond in force, build up counter-guerilla capability and prove in Indochina that this strategy will not work and is doomed to failure. As told by Kennedy's historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger: "The speech (by Khrushchov) made a conspicuous impression on the new President, who took it as an authoritative exposition of Soviet intentions, discussed it with his staff and read excerpts from it aloud to the National Security Council ... The meeting of the Communist leaders from eighty-one countries the previous November appeared for a moment to have composed the argument between Moscow and Peking."¹⁷⁾

In a special message to the Congress on the Defense Budget on March 28, 1961, President Kennedy then stated:

"The strength and deployment of our forces in combination with those of our allies should be sufficiently powerful and mobile to prevent the steady erosion of the Free World through limited wars... Our objective now is to increase our ability to confine our response to non-nuclear weapons, and to lessen the incentive for any limited aggression by making clear what our response will accomplish... We must be prepared to make a substantial contribution in the form of strong, high-

ly mobile forces trained in this type of warfare, some of which must be deployed in forward areas..."¹⁸⁾

And in a parallel secret "Program for Action for South Vietnam", approved by the President in April 1961, a set of detailed instructions were elaborated for operations in the military, economic and psychological fields, incl. "covert actions in the field of intelligence, unconventional warfare, and political-psychological activities."¹⁹⁾

This was a turning point in the history of the Indochinese conflict. What followed in later years, including the massive US military engagement, was only a consequence of this misguided decisions taken secretly by the Kennedy administration. Even when later it became clear that Moscow and Peking differed on the problem of peace and war in the nuclear age, and in particular on the extent of violence in Vietnam, there was no return and no way to halt the military machinery set in motion by the dynamic and effective McNamara.²⁰⁾ The more so as in the meantime the Vietnamese, independently of Moscow and Peking, stepped up their resistance to US intervention.

The theme of the conflict, always deeply grounded in the contest with communism, was in subsequent years bestowed with a number of names, according to specific international and local circumstances. In various periods and contexts the labels changed to stress such preoccupations as containment, roll-back, liberation, resistance to the domino-effect, counter-insurgency and resistance to "wars of national liberation", nation-building, pacification or vietnamisation. The change of labels in fact reflected failures of subsequent strategies. The preoccupation with global issues never allowed for a real comprehension of local problems. Growing misconceptions final-

ly produced the quagmire effect: getting stuck more and more into a conflict which could not be brought under control. Finally all US thinking boiled down to the success-failure syndrome: the inability to grasp why there was only defeat and why victory was beyond reach. The ultimate concern of the US foreign policy then turned to international credibility and face-saving. The Vietnam conflict became a devastating experience in US history.

4. Soviet and Chinese policies

Because of secretiveness of government in socialist states, we do not possess as ample documentary evidence on their policies, aims and involvement in the Vietnam conflict, as available in the West, especially after the publication of the so called "Pentagon Papers". Circumstantial evidence, however, is strong.

An analysis of the behaviour and conduct by Moscow and Peking in different stages of the conflict shows clearly a duality of postures: while outwardly and in official statements always invoking revolutionary goals and stressing ideological motives in asserting solidarity and support for the struggle of the Indochinese peoples, in real policy moves and practical dealings both powers acted on their own national, strategical and security considerations. The interests of the Indochinese peoples often coincided with the interests and *raison d'etat* of Moscow or Peking, but there were also cases when separate state interests of these powers generated pressures and produced policies to the disadvantage and disregard of the interests of the Vietnamese, Laotians or Cambodians.

In the predominance of state and national interests over ideological motives lies also the root cause of the

Soviet-Chinese clash over the Indochina issues. While the Soviet Union followed a Euro-centered policy - giving priority to interests in Europe, and showing a readiness and propensity to exploit developments in Indochina in dealings with France and the United States, in order to gain advantages in Europe and elsewhere - China led an Asian-centered policy, first and foremost preoccupied with its own security, and was not ready to accept the old Stalinist theory of the priority of security concerns of the "first socialist state". Peking was especially suspicious of Soviet efforts to reach accomodation with Washington, at a time when the United States surrounded the Chinese mainland with a chain of military bases in Taiwan, Japan, Korea and the Philippines, and eagerly worked to increase and tighten this military build-up through the establishment of SEATO and getting a military foothold in Indochina. Coupled with Soviet reluctance to provide China with modern weapons, especially nuclear arms, and the revival of old territorial revindications, the Chinese-Soviet rift developed to almost irreversible enmity.

The Vietnamese were first shocked by this reality, fearing a weakening of their political and military potential to resist US pressures. But they soon learned to exploit the competitive relations between Moscow and Peking in order to obtain more aid from one or the other ally, or from both together. Hanoi, too, became disillusioned with ideology in international relations, except as an instrument of mobilizing support, and acted in practical politics in a pragmatic way, on the best understanding of its national interest.

The pattern of pursuing separate state and national policies by Moscow and Peking became clearly evident at

the 1954 Geneva conference on Indochina. A study of the available Geneva documentation points to two main facts²¹⁾: a) the general framework of the accord reached at this conference was shaped in substance in secret diplomatic talks led bilaterally, over the heads of the Vietnamese, between France and Great Britain on the one hand (while the United States made behind the scenes strenuous efforts to dissuade its allies from any compromise), and the Soviet Union and China on the other - with USSR Foreign Minister Molotov and Chinese Prime Minister Chou En Lai granting concessions on such issues central for the Vietnamese as partition²²⁾, elections and cease-fire control; the Viet Minh remained under constant pressures, left with a feeling - as noted by the Pentagon historian - "of having been undercut by allies."²³⁾ And b) Molotov and Chou En Lai clearly were preoccupied with different concerns, Molotov with an eye on European affairs, and Chou En Lai with details of security arrangement on China's southern borders. The memory of these strains in the negotiations process, which the Vietnamese again experienced at the 1961/62 Geneva conference on Laos²⁴⁾, induced Hanoi to enter into negotiations with the United States in 1968-73 without the presence at the negotiations' table of either the Russians or the Chinese.

In one point the interests of the Soviet Union and China coincided in Geneva. Both powers were then in the midst of diplomatic offensives to ameliorate their positions in Europe and Asia respectively, under the slogan of "peaceful coexistence", and both feared that an internationalization of the Vietnam conflict, after the French debacle at Dien Bien Phu and the ensuing threats by John Foster Dulles of "united action", might destroy their ef-

forts. While Soviet diplomacy laboured hard to prevent German remilitarization, Chou En Lai developed an intensive activity to reverse political trends in Asia, to crush US policy of containment and pave the way for alternative models of Asian security with the participation of China. It was at a recess of the Geneva conference that Chou En Lai met with Nehru and U Nu of Burma, and signed with them the famous "Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence". But in concretes, and also concerning the framework of the prospective agreement on Indochina, the diplomacy of both powers in Geneva was aiming at different goals and developed separate lines of action.

The central goal of Soviet diplomacy at that time was to foil the ratification by France of the European Defence Community signed in 1952. The Western participants at the Geneva conference were aware of this and were conscious of the fact that the outcome of the negotiations would be of decisive importance for the fate of the EDC as it was closely linked to France's freedom of action. Thus, problems of the EDC were prominently in mind of almost all participants at the conference. In fact, the United States - as the Pentagon historian points out - felt compelled to agree to the Geneva negotiations, with China for the first time at the negotiations table together with the other great powers, "if only to blunt the French threat of scuttling EDC."²⁵) In line with this, the Laniel-Bidault French government rejected "global bargaining". Yet not being able to secure needed concessions from the adversaries in Geneva, the Laniel government was forced to resign in the midst of the conference. Premier Laniel was then succeeded by Mendès-France who proved to be much more flexible. In his investiture speech he underlined that he

favours some amendments to the EDC treaty. He then used the EDC bait to get both concessions from Molotov and support from Dulles. When Molotov raised directly the question of EDC with Mendès-France on July 10, 1954, the latter diplomatically deferred any discussion on this subject to the time after the Geneva conference. But it was exactly in the following days that the final agreement on Indochina was ironed out, with the most active involvement of Molotov. And a month after Geneva, in August 1954, the French National Assembly rejected the EDC, with the Government of Mendès-France remaining neutral during the debate, and not taking the vote as a matter of confidence.

The French-Soviet EDC diplomacy at Geneva was then a subtle and intricate game. Considering the delicacy of the situation, and especially the fact that involved were relations of both parties to their allies, it was perhaps natural that the deal had to be worked out more by gestures and concrete moves than by express written accords. It remains a fact of history that the Ho Chi Minh government came to the conference with strong military trump cards, including the capture of Dien Bien Phu, and what it got in the Geneva agreements was far from reflecting these successes. As formulated by the Pentagon historian: "Soviet interests thus dictated the sacrifice of the Viet Minh goals if necessary to prevent German remilitarization."²⁶)

Parallely, the Chinese delegation sought to achieve in Geneva best possible provisions for security at China's southern borders, and to check an eventual US military build-up in Indochina. Peking's main emphasis was on the prohibition of foreign bases, withdrawal of foreign forces and neutralization of Indochina. Chou En Lai repeated

these demands time and again, stressing them in talks with the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden and France's Mendès-France. In return, he expressed readiness to accept withdrawal of the Viet Minh forces from Laos and Cambodia, partition of Vietnam, and even some continuation of Vietnam's links with the French Union.²⁷⁾

One cannot underline sufficiently Peking's preoccupation with its security as the highest priority at Geneva. And when representatives of the Ho Chi Minh government tried to stand out pressures, Chou En Lai traveled to meet Ho Chi Minh personally at the Chinese-Vietnamese border, communicating subsequently to the French that the meeting was "very good" and that the results "would be helpful" to France.²⁸⁾ The Pentagon historian sums up Chinese diplomacy at Geneva as follows: "Simply put, the Chinese were negotiating for their own security, not for Viet Minh territorial advantage."²⁹⁾

The separate pursuit of state and national interests by the Soviet Union and China resulted in increased pressures on the Vietnamese. The French representative in Geneva, Jean Chauvel, was under the impression that he could count on the "moderating influence" of the Russians and Chinese, and on their intervention whenever "Viet Minh demands have gone beyond limits which French can be expected to accept."³⁰⁾

The outcome in Geneva in 1954 was thus inconclusive. In a historical perspective, the provisions and structure of the Geneva accords can be partly blamed for the prolongation of the conflict for another two decades. On the other hand, the well elaborated Franco-Vietnamese agreement on the cessation of hostilities and separation of military forces along a "provisional" cease-fire line

created a reality of partition. Whereas, on the other hand, the vaguely formulated Final Declaration containing the political clauses, providing for general elections in 1956 and the following unification of the country, turned out to be only a deceptive political device which was never meant to be implemented. Hanoi was naturally bitter and its supporters returned to resistance in South Vietnam. Yet of decisive importance for the subsequent course of events was the fact that Washington was even dissatisfied with the loose political promises in the Geneva accords. It judged the agreements as a "disaster" and - as stated by the Pentagon analyst - the United States assumed "a direct role in the ultimate breakdown of the Geneva settlement."³¹⁾

5. The triangle dynamics

With the departure of the French and their replacement by the United States, further developments in the Indochinese conflict became to a great extent subjected to the antagonistic triangle dynamics in relations between Washington, Moscow and Peking. The outer circle of great power rivalry intertwined closely with the inner circle struggle between different local actors, setting in motion a pattern of conflict perpetuation and escalation. In fact, it was outer intervention which fuelled the conflict. Nearly all arms came from outside and the size of outer involvement determined the pace of escalation.

True, all the three powers were anxious not to cross certain thresholds leading to direct confrontation. The United States did not move to the Chinese border, as it did Korea, and did not introduce nuclear weapons; China did not intervene directly and did not impose "volunteers"

on Vietnam; and the Soviet Union, though supplying the Vietnamese with modern weapons, did not introduce offensive arms which might have critically altered the course of the war. But at the same time, for reasons of tactics and strategy, of politics and diplomacy, and even to maintain a testing ground for new weapons, the three powers for a long time showed little eagerness to halt fighting. At least, the hawks in each of the three capitals either pressed for military solutions or saw some benefit in continuous strife. They thus played in each others hands feeding mutual suspicions and sustaining the conflict dynamics.

The prime assault in the renewed contest after Geneva came from the United States which continued to be guided by faulty assessments of the situation in Indochina, as well as by misconceptions concerning relations between Moscow and Peking and the nature of their policies. It is interesting to note that a number of US military leaders saw developments in a more sober light, especially after the experience in Korea. A group led by General Matthew B. Ridgway, former commander in Korea and Army Chief of Staff in 1954, strongly opposed a new US military engagement on the mainland of Asia. Under the slogan "never again" they resisted the prospect of getting bogged down in a new exhausting struggle. Also President Eisenhower to some extent shared these views. In a rather prophetic statement formulated on the eve of the Geneva conference, he warned that "if the United States were, unilaterally, to permit its forces to be drawn into conflict in Indochina and in a succession of Asian wars, the end result would be to drain off our resources and to weaken our overall defensive position."³²)

A few month later, just after the conclusion of the Geneva agreements, General Ridgway voiced even more emphatically his disagreement with official US policy in Asia. In a well-considered secret memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, he pointed to the political shortcomings and inconsistencies of the US position. Instead of an all-out anti-Chinese strategy and of militarily provoking China, Ridgway argued, a right policy should aim "to split Communist China from the Soviet Block... In fact, I would regard the destruction of such a military power (as China) as inimical to the long-range interests of the U.S. It would result in the creation of a power vacuum in which but one nation could move, namely Soviet Russia... The statesmanlike approach would seem to be to bring Red China to a realization that its long-range benefits derive from friendliness with America, not with USSR, which casts acquisitive eyes on its territory and resources; that these benefits could reasonably be expected in time, if Red China would mend its ways..."³³)

But Ridgway's call was not able to penetrate the clouds of Cold War thinking. His advice passed unheeded. It was only understood and taken up years later, after a frustrating, costly and humiliating military and political engagement in Indochina. The execution of the new strategy and the reversal of US China policy fell to the Nixon-Kissinger team.

In the meantime, the United States persisted with the Dulles strategy of containment and roll-back. And one of the unexpected effects was the generation of the triangle dynamics. In the course of events, departing from different perceptions of state and national interests, Moscow and Peking developed divergent responses to US

actions. The Soviet Union interested in a dialogue with the United States, and fearing - as Khrushchov put it in his January 1961 speech - that "a small-scale imperialist war, no matter which of the imperialists starts it, may develop into a world thermonuclear missile war"³⁴⁾, attempted to hold back the Vietnamese from armed struggle. It counseled resignation to partition³⁵⁾ and cut progressively down weapon deliveries to Hanoi, especially after the 1962 Geneva conference on Laos.³⁶⁾ But Peking reacted quite differently. It felt deceived after Geneva and convinced that the Vietnamese US adventure was aimed against China; it therefore came out in strong support of Vietnamese resistance. The Vietnamese struggle was perceived as the first line of defense of China itself. By wearing out the US military forces in Vietnam, the hope was nurtured in Peking that China might perhaps be saved from direct confrontation with the United States. Sharp Soviet-Chinese dissent on aid to Vietnam persisted to the mid-sixties. It was only in 1965, with the US massive military intervention in South Vietnam that Moscow, motivated among other things by rivalry with Peking, renewed large military deliveries to Hanoi.³⁷⁾

Yet, again, Soviet policy and Soviet goals in Vietnam were not identical with those of Hanoi. They rested on a number of tactical and strategical considerations. Firstly, involvement in the conflict offered the Soviet Union an opportunity to gain control over its evolution, and to use this position both against the policy of China and in diplomatic dealings with the United States. In fact, Washington actively sought the help of the Soviet Union to end the war on its conditions, and sustained hope "that the USSR might well find it in its interest to act as an agent

of moderation and compromise, providing the U.S. with an avenue of graceful retreat from a seemingly irretrievable situation."³⁸) On the other hand, while the conflict continued, the Soviet Union did all it could to exploit the American predicament in order to intensify its diplomatic offensive as well as its political and military expansion in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. It used also the aid to Hanoi to enhance its image and position in the Third World and leftist movements around the World.

In the course of the Indochina conflict, as foreseen by Eisenhower, the power relations between the United States and the Soviet Union altered considerably to the disadvantage of the United States. Confronted with the prospect of further enfeeblement and with no chance of a military solution, the Nixon-Kissinger team engaged in a search for an alternative solution. As all efforts to bring pressure on Hanoi through the aid of Moscow failed, US diplomacy turned to the additional help of Peking. And China was only pleased by such a development. Chou En Lai could return to his efforts of the mid-fifties to bring China out of isolation, and to seek greater security by gaining US withdrawal from Indochina. Rapprochement with the United States gave also China more options in confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The US opening towards China marked the beginning of its disengagement in Vietnam. The policy of "persuasion and pressure" on Hanoi by both Moscow and Peking produced almost immediate results. The Nixon administration got a free hand to use most brutal force against North Vietnam, to blockade its ports and massively bombard Hanoi and other North Vietnamese cities, while at the same time conducting negotiations with Hanoi representatives. Except

for formal protests, both the Soviet Union and China did not undertake any concrete action to halt the US military machine. Hanoi commented bitterly: "The imperialists pursue a policy of détente with some big countries to have a free hand... to bully the small countries and stamp out the national liberation movement... With regard to socialist countries..., to care for its immediate and narrow interests while shrinking its lofty international duties not only is detrimental to revolutionary movement in the world but will also bring unfathomable harm to itself in the end."³⁹⁾

The bitterness of Hanoi came only to underline the basic feature of contemporary international relations that great powers act not on premises of ideology but on close selfish calculations of state and national interests, and that in their relations with the outer world they are more inclined to heed to sphere of interest concepts and balance of power exigencies than to the needs of small states, be they allies or not.

Moscow acted pragmatically on its state and global interests both when it supplied Hanoi with weapons and when it withhold these weapons; when on ground of relations with France it did not recognize the government of Ho Chi Minh in 1945-1949, and when in other stages of the conflict it became an ardent advocate of the Vietnam revolution. Similarly, China had mainly its own security and well-being in mind when it fervently supported the Vietnamese guerillas, and when it arrived at an accomodation with the United States, detrimental at that time to the interests of the guerillas.⁴⁰⁾ Significantly, in the course of the Indochina conflict China turned half-circle, altering radically its international position and orientation.

From an ally of the Soviet Union it became its bitterst foe. From an enemy of the United States it became its partner in diplomatic deals.

6. The Paris agreements

The US-Chinese rapprochement led directly to the Paris agreements on Vietnam. In accordance with the triangle dynamics, an understanding providing for US disengagement, reached between the United States and Moscow on the one hand and Peking on the other, took the wind out of the sails of the Indochina conflict. Accord in the outer circle of the conflict undercut also the dynamics in the inner circle.

But peace did not come instantly. The January 1973 Paris agreements on "Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam" in many respects reminded the Geneva 1954 agreements, especially in the vagueness of the political provisions.⁴¹⁾ Negotiating under pressure, Hanoi made important political concessions which it refused all along the time of US escalation. It not only dropped the long standing demand of "disbanding at once" of the Saigon regime together with the immediate resignation of General Thieu, but accepted a formula in which the Saigon regime became one of the potential partners for a coalition government in South Vietnam. The face-saving political clause for Hanoi was the reaffirmation of the essentials of the 1954 Geneva agreement concerning the unity of Vietnam and final settlement through general elections. But taking into consideration the vagueness and ambiguity of the political provisions as a whole, including the endowment of General Thieu with the right of veto, nobody seriously believed that the Paris agreement would solve the political issues.

Weak in its political domain, the agreement was well tailored, however, to US military withdrawal and the return of US prisoners of war - the "peace with honor" formula. And again, beyond this the military provisions were tough. Here Hanoi stood hard on its conditions, and all parties rather became resigned to a military solution. The last minute huge US military deliveries to Saigon were one of the proofs of this orientation. Hanoi rejected all proposals for a continuous cease-fire line, as adopted in the 1954 Geneva agreement, which would have favoured a stabilization of the military situation along status quo lines. Instead, it demanded categorically and was granted the "leopard spot" solution, a cease-fire in place, which favoured the guerilla forces and could not be transformed into lasting peace, unless a political solution was found.

It may be interesting to note that in 1954 the United States, which then thought in terms of continuing the struggle and of offensive actions against North Vietnam, pressed for a "leopard spot" cease-fire in North Vietnam leaving the French in possession of the Haiphong enclave. At that time the Ho Chi Minh government opposed such a solution and its stand was accepted by the French who were not inclined to continue the war. As stated by Jean Chauvel, the French representative in Geneva, such a "leopard spot" solution "was entirely unpracticable and unenforceable."⁴²)

In fact, it was also unenforceable in South Vietnam in 1973. And Washington was certainly aware of this when it signed the Paris agreement. Did it have illusions that in the ensuing military encounter Saigon may hold out? Or did it have hopes that time might be won for the application of alternative strategies? Washington, no doubt, believed

that General Thieu could stay longer in power and that the struggle in South Vietnam would be more protracted. On the other hand, General Thieu, as promised by President Nixon, put hopes on a renewal of massive US bombings in case of emergency. But with the development of the Watergate affair, and President Nixon out of office, also this scenario came to nothing.

Considering all the circumstances, the provisions concerning international control and supervision of the cease-fire were only a face-saving device. The United States needed it for political reasons, to make the agreement appear credible. But rarely anybody believed that, in the absence of a political settlement, this kind of a cessation of hostilities was enforceable. The experience of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the two decades from 1954 was clear and unmistakable. Control and supervision can be introduced only to the degree the parties themselves are ready to tolerate or may be interested in.⁴³⁾ Only when the parties to the cease-fire, for whatever reasons of their own, tactics and strategy included, choose to halt or to interrupt temporarily the fighting, could the International Commission play a useful supervising role, and could well fulfil its duties. In the absence of a will by the parties to abide to the cease-fire provisions, a control machinery could do little. The more so in conditions of "leopard spot" dispersal of the fighting units. No army of controllers could in such circumstances be effective. In reality, after an initial somewhat artificially fanned wave of hope at the time of the conclusion of the Paris agreement - a kind of public relations exercise - the control machinery did not stand any trial, and it was soon out of the news.

The Paris agreement which had to bring "peace with honor" to the United States was actually instrumental in US disengagement, but there was little honor in its general execution and, for that matter, in the history of the whole war. If any honor there was, it manifested itself in the broad popular resistance to the war in the United States, and in the lesson that in our times a democracy cannot engage in a war it cannot legitimize in real national interest and moral terms.

From the Vietnamese point of view, the final outcome of the war - the unification of Vietnam - was a logical consummation of the stand taken in Geneva by both the Vietnamese fractions, of Ho Chi Minh and Bao Dai, against partition.⁴⁴⁾ A united Vietnam reflects a historical trend and ought best to serve the interests of peace in the region.

Notes and references:

- *) A number of references in this paper relate to the documentation in two editions of the Pentagon Papers:
- a) The mimeographed 12 volume US Government edition: United States - Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967. Study Prepared by the Department of Defense, 12 Books, Printed for the use of the House Committee on Armed Services. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971.
Here ref. as Pentagon Papers, Government Edition.
 - b) The printed Senator Gravel Edition:
The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971. Five volumes.
Here ref. as Pentagon Papers, Sen. Gravel Edition.
- 1) Report by the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Indochina, Febru-

ary 27, 1950, Pentagon Papers, Government Edition, Book 8, p.283.

- 2) Ibid., p.100.
- 3) Ibid., pp.98-100.
- 4) In 1954, at the end of the first Indochina War, US aid covered 80% of war expenditures by France.
- 5) Pentagon Papers, Government Edition, Book 1, p.A-51.
- 6) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.III, p.726.
- 7) R.A.Griffin Memorandum for Secretary of State Acheson, May 4, 1950, Ibid., Vol.I, p.367.
- 8) "Moral Foundations of Foreign Policy", Speech before the Upper Midwest Council, July 15, 1975, Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, p.3.
- 9) See chapter "Justification of the War - Public Statements", Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.I, pp.588-629.
- 10) Address at John Hopkins University, April 7, 1965, Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.III, p.730.
- 11) Ibid., p.686.
- 12) Ibid., p.815.
- 13) Ibid., Vol.IV, p.653.
- 14) "Peking Uses Frontier Policy Against Its Neighbours", Soviet News, December 16, 1975, p.435.
- 15) Cf. Marek Thee: Notes of a Witness: Laos and the Second Indochinese War. New York: Random House, 1973, pp.235-253.
- 16) Cf. text of N.S.Khrushchov's speech in Communism - Peace and Happiness for the Peoples, Vol.1, Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1963, pp.37-45.
See also analysis of Khrushchov's speech in Marek Thee: Notes of a Witness, op.cit., pp.19-27.
- 17) Arthur M.Schlesinger, Jr.: A Thousand Days. New York: Fawcett Crest Book, 1965, pp.282-283.

- 18) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.II, p.800.
- 19) Ibid., pp.637-642.
- 20) Cf. McNamara's account of March 26, 1964, on the expansion of the US army's counter-insurgency capabilities in response to Khrushchov's January 1961 speech. Department of State Bulletin, April 13, 1964.
- 21) Cf. The Geneva Conference documentation and narratives in: Pentagon Papers, Government Edition, Book 1, part III, Book 9, pp.212-675, Book 10, pp.676-747. Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.I, pp.108-178, pp.434-573.
Also: Robert F.Randle: Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- 22) The Vietnamese strongly opposed any idea of partition and only at a later stage of the Geneva conference agreed to a "provisional" cease-fire line, with a promise of Vietnam's unification after general elections. But the Soviet Union played with the idea of partition even before the Geneva conference. Two months before the conference Soviet diplomats intimated such a solution to the United States (see Pentagon Papers, Sen. Gravel Edition, Vol.I, p.134). And when the general elections promised by the Geneva agreements did not materialize, the Soviet Union came out in the United Nations with a proposal to accept the two states in a partitioned Vietnam as members of the Organization.
- 23) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.I, p.115.
- 24) Cf. Marek Thee: Notes of a Witness, op.cit., pp.289-292, and pp.324-328.
- 25) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.I, p.115.
- 26) Ibid., p.168.
- 27) Cf. the diplomatic secret reports on Chou En Lai's meetings with Eden and Mendès-France, Pentagon Papers, Government Edition, Book 9, p.582 and pp.589-590.
- 28) Ibid., p.622.
- 29) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.I, p.154.

- 30) Message to Washington from Paris, July 9, 1954, Ibid., p.549.
- 31) Ibid., p.283.
- 32) Dwight D.Eisenhower: Mandate for Change, 1953-1956. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1963, pp.346-347.
- 33) Pentagon Papers, Government Edition, Book 10, pp.712-713.
- 34) N.S.Khrushchov: Communism - Peace and Happiness for the Peoples, op.cit., p.41.
- 35) See point 22.
- 36) Cf. Marek Thee: Notes of a Witness, op.cit., pp.324-328.
- 37) This is not the place to discuss deeper repercussions of the US 1964/5 military assault in Vietnam, on the internal scenes in the Soviet Union and China. One should however note that there exists a large body of circumstantial evidence showing a rise in the position of the military in the Soviet Union which contributed to the deposition of Khrushchov on the one hand, and a revulsion in China resulting in a security debate and the "cultural revolution" on the other.
- 38) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.III, p.301.
- 39) Editorial in the Hanoi Party paper "Nan Dan", The Vietnam Courier, September 1972, p.5.
- 40) The great divide between Peking and Hanoi actually came in 1975 when a dispute arose regarding the occupation of the Paracel and Spratly Islands, long held by the Saigon authorities. Both China and Vietnam claim historical rights to these islands. But Peking was quicker to capture in 1974 the Paracel Islands, while Hanoi occupied in 1975 the Spratly Islands. Cf. Shih Ti-tsu: South China Sea Islands, Chinese Territory Since Ancient Times, Peking Review, No.50, December 12, 1975.
- 41) Cf. Marek Thee: Vapenhvile og fredsslutning i Vietnam, Internasjonal Politikk, Nr.1, Januar-Mars 1973.
- 42) Cable from Geneva by General Smith to Washington, June 18, 1954, Pentagon Papers, Government Edition, Book 9, p.579.
- 43) Cf. Marek Thee: Notes of a Witness, op.cit., pp.53-68.
- 44) Pentagon Papers, Sen.Gravel Edition, Vol.I, p.135.