

Why Vietnam invaded

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For its few hard-line supporters in this country, Vietnam's Kampuchea policy is plain enough and free from all blame. They see Vietnam's armed intervention of January 1979 which toppled the Pol Pot regime as a well-deserved punishment meted out to a ruthless dictatorship that had long practised genocide at home and aggression abroad. By its action Vietnam had helped liberate a neighbouring people from a singularly oppressive regime, and it was judged to be everyone's duty to welcome this development and give it every support, rather than carping at finer points of legality. Beyond that, the argument runs, the relations between Kampuchea and Vietnam - or, for that matter, between Vietnam and the Soviet Union - are simply bilateral matters between sovereign states and no concern of the world at large.

There is however another point of view with a greater following, which qualifies its evident relief at the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime with a certain unease at the continuing Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea and the growing intimacy between Vietnam and the Soviet Union, and is anxious to find a solution that would enable or allow Vietnam to pull its troops out of Kampuchea and to reassert its customary independence of the great powers. This interpretation, which rests mainly on stressing the interplay of international power politics, treats Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Kampuchea as a relatively minor issue, which would be put right once Vietnam's legitimate fears as regards its security and national interests were satisfactorily dealt with.

The emphasis of this view is, rather, on the "Chinese threat" which (it is argued) - in the face of American hostility and European indifference - more or less pushed Vietnam into turning to the Soviet Union for badly needed political, economic and military support and help. The proponents of this interpretation consider a greater US "responsiveness" towards Vietnam - in the twofold form of a normalization of diplomatic and commercial relations with Hanoi and the recognition of the Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh - to be the essential starting-point for any political solution to the conflicts in Indochina. (1) Is such an interpretation valid? and will the solution proposed work?

VIETNAM'S REGIONAL STRATEGY

It is implied in the kind of reasoning outlined above that the "real" problem in Indochina not Vietnam, not even Kampuchea, but China. I think, on the contrary, that the real problem facing us is not Kampuchea, nor China, but Vietnam, a problem both political and theoretical. Even a cursory look at the post-1975 developments in Vietnam will in fact show that the invasion and occupation of Kampuchea, rather than being an isolated event, was and is but one aspect of a more general policy of building up, by force if necessary, of an "Indochina bloc" as a system of com-

pulsory and permanent "friendship and cooperation" in furtherance of Vietnam's national unity and "socialist" development. It will show, too, that Hanoi's consummation in 1978 of an all-embracing alliance with the Soviet Union was no sudden and involuntary reaction to the "Chinese threat" but a qualitatively new alignment tailored to the requirements of asserting Vietnam's "leadership" over Indochina and, specifically, for solving the thorny "Kampuchean problem" once and for all.

Kampuchea itself was not a minor issue at all for Vietnam, but almost a life-and-death matter, both because of its intrinsic importance as an integral and indispensable part of Indochina (as the crucial agricultural "hinterland" for Vietnam's industrial revolution) but also, more important, because the fierce nationalism and stubborn defiance of Kampuchea threatened to jeopardize Vietnam's whole Indochina project. Vietnam's decision to assume direct physical control of Kampuchea was and remains an extremely costly business in every respect, and the normally prudent and sensible authorities in Hanoi would not have embarked upon such a risky adventure except as a desperate measure of last resort.

For of course, the very first thing to note about Vietnam's Kampuchea policy is that it is not an isolated nor indeed a passing event, as is assumed by those looking for a political solution. "The situation in Kampuchea is irreversible": such is the common refrain of every pronouncement from Vietnam on the subject, whether by Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong or Nguyen Co Thach, and whether made in Hanoi, Moscow or in New York. (2) Over and over again, Vietnamese spokesmen emphasize that the "unity, friendship and cooperation" of the three Indochinese countries and peoples is a permanent reality or arrangement beyond all question; no political solution will be allowed to alter that basic fact. The only solution that Vietnam wants and will accept is the one which recognises that fact - or, rather, fait accompli - which itself is "not negotiable". The views, to say nothing of the rights, of the Kampuchean (and Laotian) people obviously don't come into the picture at all. One must see that the quest for a political solution conceived in terms of Vietnam's needs and interests runs counter to the independence, and ultimately the very survival, of Kampuchea.

There can be no doubt, in the light of the available evidence, that by 1978 the situation in Vietnam was extremely critical, both economically and politically, both in the north and (particularly) in the South, and both in its regional and international relationships. For reasons of space, we can only touch upon a few aspects of the problems.

The reunification of Vietnam and the "unification" of Indochina are perhaps best understood as two interrelated themes in the context of a sort of economic counter-revolution or "involution" within the Vietnamese revolution. Until 1975 the economic stagnation characterizing the Democratic

Republic of Vietnam (N. Vietnam) could, by rights, be blamed upon the actual destruction and general disruption wrought by the American war of aggression. After 1975 the Party leaders and planners in Hanoi looked to the very considerable economic resources of the South as being essential, even vital, to the development of the North.

RE-UNIFICATION AND CRISIS IN THE SOUTH

Thus, even though prior to 1975 it had been repeatedly proclaimed that the reunification of the South with the North - and, still more so, the socialist transformation of the South - would be a gradual and long-drawn-out process, in fact both the national reunification and the socialist reconstruction of the South were pushed through with extraordinary suddenness and speed, chiefly by administrative methods imposed from the top. In the circumstances the socialist transformation of the South proved to be a singularly hard nut to crack, and Hanoi's expectations of mobilizing the economic riches of the South for the development of the north were largely disappointed.

It was, above all, in the field of requisitioning food supplies that Hanoi's disappointment with the South was particularly marked. As early as mid-1977 the Party daily, Nhan Dan, noted that the grain situation was "generally critical and very critical in a number of provinces". (3) In 1977 the paddy production at 11.2m. tons fell 2.5 m. tons short of target, and in 1978 the authorities in Hanoi privately admitted to foreign governments that the country "faced the gravest food crisis in its history with a record shortage of 4.3 m. tons of grain". (4) Another source states that because of crop failures, "production in 1978 fell to 10.5 m. tons, down from about 10.9 m. tons in 1977". Even in 1979, according to UN estimates, "Vietnam will have to import 2 to 3 m. tons of grain valued at \$400 to \$500 m., a heavy burden for the overall economy whose total annual exports are valued at about \$500 m." (5)

The historian, Alexander Woodside, basing himself on published Vietnamese documents, has recently provided a graphic picture of the failings of economic policy and administration in the South. (6) His views are worth quoting at some length:

... As of September 1978 ... the state commercial organizations in south Vietnam controlled barely 40 per cent of the sources of goods, and about 40 per cent of the retail goods trade, in the entire region. The most visible, and most fatal, gap between the ambitions and the performance of the new revolutionary government in the south has been in agriculture. Not that agriculture did not receive a good deal of bureaucratic attention: between 1975 and 1978, some forty state trading companies, supported by 300 stores, 15,000 cadres, and a network of trading cooperatives which reached into three quarters of the south's villages, were established to manage the south's trade in foodstuffs. But at the end of 1978, this large apparatus had succeeded in collecting and controlling no more than 20 per cent of the south's annual production of food. For certain really crucial products - grains, sugar cane, tobacco, fish - the state's powers of purchase or requisition actually



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declined between 1975 and 1977, when compared to the presumed sizes of the harvests ...

Woodside continued:

Purely to satisfy the local markets of the south, the regime annually needs to dispose of about 100,000 tons of meat (in 1978 it was actually getting its hands on 30,000 tons); 400,000 tons of vegetables (it actually collected 60,000 tons); over 100,000,000 eggs (it actually collected 10,000,000); and 30,000 tons of peanuts (it actually collected 6,000 tons). Yet the south was supposed to help feed the north after the war, as well as itself. And since the north in this period, partly because of unusually bad weather, lived on the edge of famine, it is not very difficult to imagine the desperate state of mind of the Hanoi leadership at the end of 1978 - and its willingness to run international risks even for the sake of minor palliatives. (7)

"SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP" WITH LAOS

Hanoi's frustrations in southern Vietnam were paralleled by similar frustrations in its dealings with its immediate neighbours in Indochina, where it was similarly disappointed in its expectations of exercising its "leadership". Its relations with Laos seemed amicable enough, save for the incongruous presence of some 50,000 Vietnamese troops on Laotian soil. But throughout 1977 Hanoi's relations with Kampuchea steadily deteriorated, constantly soured by charges and countercharges and periodically marked by armed hostilities. These hostilities were particularly extensive in December and led Phnom Penh to suspend diplomatic relations with Hanoi on the very last day of the year. Perhaps the very "special relationship" which Hanoi claimed to have established with Laos might help explain the very special antagonism that Kampuchea felt towards Vietnam.

It is a commonplace now to speak of the xenophobia and chauvinism of the Kampuchean leadership towards Vietnam. But as Communists and not merely as nationalists, the leaders of the Kampuchean Communist Party could not but have been greatly

disturbed by Vietnamese attempts to locate the roots of the proposed Indochina federation in the establishment, way back in 1930, of a Vietnamese-dominated Indochinese Communist Party, as was done in the Vietnam-Laos declaration of 1976, and by the oft-repeated claims of the Vietnamese Communist Party to be a kind of "mother-Party". Nor could the suspicions of Kampuchean Communists be particularly allayed by the sort of "special relationship" that was already taking shape between Vietnam and Laos.

The treaty of friendship and cooperation between the two countries, signed in July 1977, was to last for 25 years, with a provision for automatic extension beyond that date. It was backed up by further agreements made in September 1977 and May 1978. The treaty gave Vietnam the right to help Laos train its Party cadres and to participate in the work of propaganda, broadcasting and the publication of newspapers and journals; thus the levers of Laos' political and ideological life were firmly placed under Vietnamese control. In the economic domain, the treaty linked Laos' economy tightly to Vietnam's by means of special trade preferences, further reinforced by Vietnam's making a series of interest-free loans to Laos, as well as extending other financial aid, thereby embedding the "special relationship" in a creditor-debtor relationship, almost (as Woodside remarks) "as a compensatory miniaturization of the creditor-debtor relationship which now exists between Moscow and Hanoi." (8) Beyond that, as Nayan Chanda has recently pointed out, Hanoi now considers Indochina to be an economic unit and envisages "economic and strategic planning on an all-Indochina scale". (9) For a country like Laos, at the very most, this could only mean a limited degree of development of a few modern sectors of its economy by Vietnam within an international division of labour determined by the latter's overall development needs and priorities. It is hard to resist the conclusion that both its political seniority and experience and the colonial legacy of the region's uneven development were sought to be used by Vietnamese Communists to claim and establish for their country a "metropolitan" position vis-a-vis Indochina.

BUILD-UP TO INVASION

Such a "special relationship" is not after all very different from a classical colonial one, and the Kampuchean Communists were not greatly attracted to it. By the beginning of 1978 neither frequent if limited armed clashes between Vietnam and Kampuchea, nor various attempts to topple the regime in Phnom Penh from within, seemed likely to resolve the "Kampuchean question" to Hanoi's satisfaction. So early that year the authorities in Hanoi decided on a policy of active intervention to dispose of the problem once and for all, and proceeded to deal with the matter in a characteristically methodical manner.

At a full secret session of the central committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party held at the end of February, 1978, the decision was taken to back a rebel movement in Kampuchea with military might, which was finally to sweep the Pol Pot regime from power in January 1979, though in the event the sweeping was actually done by the Vietnamese army rather than by Kampuchean rebels. That "crucial meeting", Nayan Chanda wrote a year later, "was followed by a diplomatic initiative to reassure ASEAN countries, the forging of economic and

military ties with the Soviet Union, a gradual military build-up along the Vietnam-Kampuchea border, the creation of the Kampuchea National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS) and finally by the lightning offensive at the end of December 1978." (10) In short, the Vietnamese invasion was no impulsive or freak reaction to Kampuchean provocations but a long premeditated and well-prepared operation to find a final solution to Kampuchean "intransigence" and "belligerency".

Kampuchean belligerence was duly put down to Peking's encouragement, with Kampuchea being seen as China's "bridgehead of aggression" against Vietnam: and it is interesting that the decision to deal with the Kampuchean problem was taken at the same meeting as the other decision, implemented the following month as "the second battle of Saigon", to crush the economic power of the Chinese business community in south Vietnam, which (while being justified in the name of "socialism") "was seen as a potential Peking tool of sabotage and subversion". (11) Thus were the battles for the revolutionary reunification of Vietnam and the "socialist" unification of Indochina joined together, being directed against the ethnic Chinese at home and against Democratic Kampuchea abroad, and both being tied together with China as the bogeyman.

By the middle of 1978 the Vietnamese war machine started preparing for the final battle against Kampuchea. Preparations were also afoot in the diplomatic arena, resulting in a complete change of tune on ASEAN and a frantic bid for "normalizing" relations with the US. And preparations no doubt went ahead inside Kampuchea itself.

THE SOVIET INVOLVEMENT

But of all the assorted preparations the one that mattered most - the one most crucial to victory - involved the establishment by Hanoi, of a "special relationship" with the Soviet Union, for Soviet military and economic aid was absolutely essential (political and diplomatic support being merely desirable) if the planned military operation against Kampuchea was to succeed. Vietnam joined COMECON on 30 June, having long resisted Soviet pressure to do so and having declared as recently as the previous month that it had no intention of doing so. And on 3 November it finally signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union, supplemented by five other agreements, dealing with defence, economic aid, science, technology and cultural cooperation.

Substantial quantities of economic and military "aid" have in fact been received by Hanoi from Moscow, as is frequently admitted by both sides. According to one estimate, "at least 20% of the rice eaten in Vietnam, and possibly as much as 30% (2-3m. metric tons)", must come from the Soviet Union; while about 65% of Vietnam's total trade is with that country, with its trade imbalance "one of the world's worst". (12) While other COMECON members give Vietnam some economic aid (with a singular show of reluctance, it may be added), military aid is almost exclusively from the Soviet Union:

Total postwar military aid (from May 1975 to January 1979) is estimated at about \$255 m. At the war's end the USSR was supplying about 75% of the military

north Viet Nam to the full. Today, it is no longer so vital for this country to follow that policy. True, Viet Nam borders on the southern part of the big country China, and this neighbourhood has both a positive and a negative aspect. Anyway, the political and cultural pressure from the north must be removed. Therefore, the rapprochement with the USSR plays a very important role for Viet Nam today. There

is a tangible strong Soviet interest coinciding with Vietnamese interests - to reduce Chinese influence in this part of the world.

This interview was recalled by Chinese vice-premier Li Xiannian in a June 1977 memorandum given Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong in Peking. Full text in Beijing Review, 30 March 1979; the interview cited is on p. 18.
