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**The Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese  
Triangle in the 1970s:  
The View From Moscow**

**Stephen J. Morris**  
**Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International  
Studies**  
**Johns Hopkins University**

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## **Introduction**

In November 1978, the Soviet Union and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The treaty, following upon a series of events highlighted by Vietnam's admission into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) the previous June, culminated the process of Vietnam's gradual integration into the Soviet bloc which had begun in 1969.

The Hanoi government's alignment within the Communist world had fluctuated over the years since the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) had abandoned their international solidarity against "imperialism." In early 1963, shortly after the open split between Moscow and Beijing, the North Vietnamese communists gravitated to the Chinese side on a number of important issues of contention between the two communist powers. Then, following Khrushchev's ouster in October 1964, the Vietnamese tilt towards China quietly ended. The Vietnamese embraced a position of neutrality in the Sino-Soviet conflict throughout the years 1965-68. After 1968 the Vietnamese shifted to a pro-Soviet position, even though until 1978 the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship was extremely nuanced.

This monograph does not attempt any comprehensive causal analysis of the evolution in the relationship among the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam. Instead it seeks new insights into the triangular relationship by providing, through examination of secret reports by Soviet officials

stationed in North Vietnam, some of the behind-the-scenes texture of relations during the early to mid-1970s.<sup>1</sup>

The secret Soviet documents reveal, beneath the public posture of Soviet-Vietnamese friendship and solidarity which both sides' propaganda presented to the rest of the world, real tensions between patron and client—a finding that is particularly interesting because during the period under analysis the Vietnamese leaders had shifted away from China and towards the Soviet "general line" on international affairs. The documents also reveal two contrasting aspects of Vietnamese-Chinese relations. First, Chinese anger with the Vietnamese tilt towards the Kremlin that exploded in a private meeting in 1975. Second, the Vietnamese leaders held a subtle and evolving set of attitudes towards China, attitudes far more complicated than those allowed by the broad explanatory concept of "Vietnamese nationalism," subscribed to by most Western academic and journalistic analysts and commentators.

Part of the complexity seems to have derived from factional splits within the Vietnamese leadership over the party's relationships with both the Soviets and the Chinese. Western analysts have long debated whether factional differences existed within the Vietnamese communist party (until 1976 the Vietnamese Workers Party [VWP], or Lao Dong) and how important they were. The archives provide us for the first time with strong evidence of factional differences in Hanoi based at least in part upon attitudes toward China and the Soviet Union, as well as evidence of important policy splits which were not tied to this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> The only other study of Soviet-Vietnamese relations using Soviet party archives has been by the Russian historian Ilya V. Gaiduk, in *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996). However, Gaiduk's ostensible topic is Soviet-Vietnamese relations spanning the years between 1964 and 1972—a period which overlaps with but is not identical with the period examined here. Moreover, he makes different references to Vietnamese-Chinese relations than are contained in my own research. In fact Gaiduk's primary focus is on what may loosely be termed the American-Soviet-Vietnamese triangle.

The source material for this monograph does not include all relevant documents available in the USSR, even for the time period examined, for several reasons. First and most important there is the problem of inaccessibility to certain key archives, especially the Presidential Archive, where documentation of Soviet policy and strategy debates is to be found.<sup>2</sup> Second, because of

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<sup>2</sup> This study is based upon documents from the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Central Committee (CPSU CC), found in the *Tsentr khraneniya sovremennoi dokumentatsii* (TsKhSD) [Center for the Storage of Contemporary Documentation], located within the former CPSU CC headquarters complex in Moscow. The main files within this archive relevant to the topic considered here are those of the *Otdel TsK KPSS po svyazyam s kommunisticheskimi i rabochimi partiyami sotsialisticheskikh stran* (Department of the CPSU CC for Ties with Communist and Workers' Parties of Socialist Countries). The bulk of those seen were made available to researchers by TsKhSD in the winter of 1992-93, and subsequently closed to all researchers by the archives administration in the spring of 1993 [Ed. note: On the circumstances surrounding this closure, see Mark Kramer, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 3 (Fall 1993) pp.1]. A few others were among those which have been officially and permanently declassified by the Russian state archives since 1992.

Most of these documents are copies of reports originating in the embassies of the USSR, especially the Soviet embassy in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)—renamed the SRV after the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1976. The Soviet embassies in Beijing and Paris were also important sources of information on the political and military situation in Vietnam for the Foreign Ministry [MID] and hence the Central Committee, though obviously less important than the Hanoi embassy. Fortunately, some of the TsKhSD documents are copies of intelligence reports from the civilian and military intelligence agencies—the *Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti* (KGB) and the Soviet Armed Forces General Staff's *Glavnoe razvedivatel'noe upravlenie* (GRU)—which has been forwarded to the Central Committee. They often provided both a supplement and a balancing to the information available to the CPSU CC from the Foreign Ministry through its embassies.

Other Soviet communist party archives also contain important details of the shifting triangular relationship. The most important information is undoubtedly in the Presidential Archive, the Russian repository of documents dealing with policy decisions at the highest level. There were many important meetings between the top Soviet and Vietnamese leadership over the years, in both Moscow and Hanoi. The limited accounts of or references to these meetings contained in reports in TsKhSD suggest the vital importance of materials in the Presidential Archives—access to which is still tightly-restricted—for a more comprehensive account of Soviet-Vietnamese (and Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese) relations.

The separate archives of the KGB and GRU also contain documents of very great significance. The GRU materials are probably more important than those of the KGB, especially from 1969 onwards, because of the significant role of Soviet military advisors and specialists in assisting the Vietnamese armed forces after that time. The advisory function gave military officers more access to Vietnamese counterparts than would have been available to a KGB officer working under diplomatic cover, because of restrictions the Vietnamese authorities placed upon movement by diplomats, even of allied nations (this will be discussed later).

Finally the *Ministerstvo inostrannikh del* (MID) [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] archive contains an enormous amount of material relevant to a study of the Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese triangle. This judgement is based upon seeing copies of MID documents that have been lodged at the Central Committee archive. However, although the MID supposedly operates on a 30-year secrecy rule, even the more important MID documents which are more than 30 years old still have not been made available to researchers through the MID's own archive. This is particularly unfortunate when one considers important historical events such as the Geneva Conferences of 1954 and 1962, and the planning for them, in which the ministry was an important participant, even if not a formulator of policy.

Unfortunately the important Presidential, KGB and GRU archives are not open to independent

time constraints on the author and the premature closure of the international affairs files of the CPSU Central Committee archives (TSKhSD), the documents seen do not reflect an exhaustive examination of all relevant documents once made available in the TsKhSD archive to the author, but rather a concentration upon certain documents and certain years in the 1970s relevant to two other research projects the author was undertaking. Third, even within the framework of the TSKhSD files, only a small part of the archive's total collection was opened to researchers. For example, those files dealing with policy recommendations by the Central Committee departments and most of the important decisions of the Secretariat were not released. Finally, several requested files were denied to the author, allegedly on security grounds.

Thus the material examined constitutes a skewed selection of the materials in Russian archives on the Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese triangle. It consists mostly of the reports from the Soviet embassy in Hanoi, supplemented by a smaller number of KGB and GRU documents (only a fraction of those located in the KGB's and GRU's own archives), on Vietnam's foreign policy and internal conditions. The documents selected reflect the prejudices and political purposes of the Soviet observers. But they nevertheless constitute an invaluable historical source for two reasons. First, they open a window into the secret interactions of the communist powers not previously visible to Western scholars. Second, the perspective is from the Soviet home, and thus gives us a very substantial part of Moscow's view of the relationships.

### **Background: Vietnam's Tilt Towards the Soviet Union 1968-75**

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researchers, even under the constraints of a 30-year rule. But the significance of these archives may be judged on the basis of the quality of the documents which were selectively provided to the Central Committee by these agencies.

To evaluate the revelations from the archives one must examine the political context. In the late 1960s, North Vietnam tilted from a position of neutrality in the Sino-Soviet dispute towards partial alignment with the Soviet Union. However, prior to 1978 no Western academic writer had perceived any Vietnamese communist alignment with the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Even serious scholarly analyses produced after the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance had been publicly formalized in 1978 failed to discern that North Vietnam had already shifted before 1975.<sup>4</sup>

The failure of the Western experts to detect a shift in North Vietnam's position, and their reiteration of a view of Hanoi's foreign policy as equidistant between Moscow and Beijing, stemmed, I argue, from a failure to examine and interpret correctly all of the relevant evidence. The relevant evidence is the Vietnamese communists' positions on the issues which divided the Soviet Union and China. During the years 1968-75 Hanoi took a stand on several issues of contention between the USSR and the PRC which affected neither the national security nor economic well-being of the Vietnamese communist state: (i) the Soviet invasion of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Robert F. Turner, who has written a sober and empirically sound history of Vietnamese communism, stated in that book in 1974: "By 1973 North Vietnam was in a position approximately midway between China and the Soviet Union in the Sino-Soviet dispute, experiencing cooler relations with both than had been common during the previous decade." Robert F. Turner *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development*. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1975), p. 304. Ellen J. Hammer, author of a reputable history of French Indochina covering the period 1940 to 1955, wrote in early 1976: "In early 1975, Ho Chi Minh's dictum that Vietnam should steer a middle course between the Soviet Union and China, accepting aid from both and alienating neither, was still the basis of Hanoi's foreign policy." Ellen J. Hammer, "Indochina: Communist But Nonaligned," *Problems of Communism* 25:3 (May-June 1976), p. 7. Two years later, only months before the Vietnamese and Chinese conflicts became highly visible, the academic Carlyle Thayer wrote: "As a member of the socialist bloc Viet Nam has avoided taking sides in the Sino-Soviet dispute. Indeed the imperatives of Vietnamese nationalism dictate balancing Soviet and Chinese power." Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam's External Relations," *Pacific Community* 9:2 (January 1978), p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> In the most careful of these, Robert Ross wrote that after Saigon's fall to the North Vietnamese, Soviet leaders tried "to move Hanoi away from its relatively centrist position in the Sino-Soviet conflict." Ross noted a shift by Vietnam towards the Soviet Union as taking place after August 1975. Robert Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy 1975-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 30, 61. In a later work, Steven Hood noted Vietnam's move toward the Soviet Union as occurring in mid-1975. Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War*, (Armonk, N.Y., and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), p. 30.

Czechoslovakia (1968);<sup>5</sup> (ii) Soviet-West German detente (1970);<sup>6</sup> (iii) the attempted *coup d'etat* in the Sudan (1971);<sup>7</sup> (iv) the military coup and political revolution in Portugal (1974-75);<sup>8</sup> and (v) the civil war in Angola (1975).<sup>9</sup>

A communist party's stand on any single issue alone does not provide evidence of alignment in the Sino-Soviet dispute. Only a *sequence* of stands indicates either alignment or independence. On all of these issues the Vietnamese had the chance to avoid taking a public stance by either (a) mere factual reporting of events, (b) reporting both sides equally, or (c) reporting nothing at all. Yet in all of these cases the Vietnamese chose a public stand in support of the Soviet line.

That the timing of the Vietnamese communist tilt to the Soviet Union is roughly as I have suggested is corroborated by the published memoir of the former Justice Minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, Truong Nhu Tang.

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<sup>5</sup> Hanoi radio Domestic Service, 21 August 1968, in *FBIS-APA-68-164*, 21 August 1968, p. K5.; Moscow TASS International Service, 26 August 1968, in *FBIS-APA-68-171*, 30 August 1968, p. K8.

<sup>6</sup> Hanoi Radio VNA International Service in English, 14 August 1970, *FBIS-APA-70-159*, p. K1

<sup>7</sup> Hanoi Radio VNA International Service in English, 29 July 1971, *FBIS-APA-71-146*, 29 July 1971, p. K9. "We Vehemently Protest the Brutal Terrorist Acts of the Sudanese Authorities," Hanoi Radio domestic service, 30 July 1971, *FBIS-APA-71-152*, 6 August 1971, p. K22. Hanoi Radio VNA International Service in English, 30 July 1971, *FBIS-APA-71-152*, 6 August 1971, pp. K21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Hanoi radio VNA in English, 13 June 1975, *FBIS-APA-75-100*, 17 June 1975, pp. K3-K4; Hanoi radio VNA, 3 December 1975, *FBIS-APA-75-233*, 3 December 1975, p. K3; Hanoi radio VNA, 28 January 1976, *FBIS-APA-76-20*, 29 January 1976, p. K2.

<sup>9</sup> Hanoi VNA, 30 October 1975, *FBIS-APA-75-212*, 3 November 1975, p. K17; Hanoi VNA, 9 November 1975, *FBIS-APA-75-218*, 11 November 1975, p. K9; Hanoi VNA, 12 November 1975, *FBIS-APA-75-220*, 13 November 1975, p. K2; *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 21 November 1975, Hanoi in Vietnamese to Vietnam, 21 November 1975, *FBIS-APA-75-229*, 26 November 1975, p. K5; *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 24 December commentary: "The Angolan Revolution Is Steadily Advancing," *FBIS-APA-75-250*, 29 December 1975, p. K6.

I knew that the Party had already decided to ally itself with the Soviets. Movement in that direction had begun as far back as 1969, and Ho's death had opened the way to formalizing the decision. Though nothing like an open declaration could be expected while there was still a need for Chinese aid, in fact, by 1974 the bitter infighting had resulted in a clear victory for the pro-Soviet faction led by Secretary General Le Duan and Paris negotiator Le Duc Tho.<sup>10</sup>

Given the Vietnamese leaders' decision to tilt to the Soviet Union, what is interesting is that the Soviets nevertheless found the alliance relationship difficult for the first few years. The archives provide fascinating new information on this matter.

### **Soviet Attitudes Towards Vietnamese Foreign Policy 1970-75**

One important source of Soviet thinking about Vietnam was the evaluations provided by Moscow's embassy in Hanoi. It should be cautioned that the views of the Soviet Foreign Ministry did not determine the views of the CPSU Politburo. However, we should note that the CPSU CC's Department for Relations with Communist and Workers' Parties in Socialist Countries was one source of information and analysis for the Politburo's deliberations. A large proportion of all the information provided to that Central Committee department came from the Foreign Ministry, especially the embassy reports. Moreover, the ambassador and other key figures in the Hanoi embassy were always party functionaries. Thus the Foreign Ministry's embassy reports would have been one factor influencing Politburo deliberations. And they certainly illuminate diplomatic relations at the higher levels.

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<sup>10</sup> Truong Nhu Tang *A Viet Cong Memoir* with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, p. 248.

At the end of 1970 the Soviet embassy in Hanoi showed little acknowledgment of Hanoi's foreign policy tilt towards the Soviet Union. The exception was their reference to a change in Vietnamese communist strategic thinking in 1968. In that year, the Vietnamese began to speak of three types of combat—military, political, and diplomatic—which the Soviets interpreted as a departure from China's position, which emphasized the military, and as "an acceptance of our views."<sup>11</sup> However, the embassy still perceived Hanoi as following a policy of balancing between Moscow and Beijing.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless the bulk of the Soviet embassy evaluation of Vietnamese foreign policy was highly critical. In the first place the Soviet Union was eager to coordinate the two nations' foreign policies. By contrast the Vietnamese not only were resistant to such an idea, they indicated explicitly that they would not tell the Soviets in advance about tactical aspects of specific foreign policy moves that they were undertaking, and that they would not consult on specific issues. This upset the Soviets, who had been providing the Vietnamese with information and advice about internal and foreign policy matters. But the lack of reciprocity by the Vietnamese had to be accepted, the Soviets felt, because the Chinese were also providing the Vietnamese with information and advice.<sup>13</sup> Yet some bitterness seemed to remain:

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<sup>11</sup> "Politicheskii otchet posol'stvo SSSR v demokraticeskoi respublike v'etnam za 1970 god" ["Political report of the embassy of the USSR in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for 1970"], TsKhSD, fond (f.) 5, opis' (op.). 62, delo (d.) 495, list (l.) 100.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

... on account of the DRV's narrow national interests, which continue to exist among the Vietnamese leadership in relations with the Soviet Union and socialist countries of Eastern Europe, they are to this day not sufficiently sincere and trustworthy; they are not truly brotherly. Our friends were not adequately sincere with these countries concerning their plans for solving the Indochina problem. They have evaded agreeing and coordinating their actions with them.<sup>14</sup>

The Soviet embassy analysts were also upset that the Vietnamese approached the Soviet and Eastern European allies separately, secretly making similar requests for assistance to more than one of these countries with the view to creating what the Soviets called "an unhealthy competition of a sort between socialist countries." The Soviets also felt that the DRV maintained closer relations with East Germany, Bulgaria, and Hungary, and also with North Korea and Cuba, than it did with the USSR.<sup>15</sup>

Despite substantial Soviet military aid which was re-equipping and providing training, repair and maintenance support for the Vietnam People's Army, the 250-300 Soviet military specialists in the DRV faced difficulties. The Soviet embassy complained that the Vietnamese army command tried to limit the Soviet specialists' activity in every possible way to technical assistance only. Decisions on the combat use of military equipment and combat action tactics were said to be zealously guarded from the influence of the Soviet specialists.<sup>16</sup>

But particular distress was expressed for the working conditions of Soviet diplomats, who were said to be subjected to a system of various bans and restrictions. In spite of the fact that the Soviet Union was undertaking great efforts in support of the DRV, and that hundreds of Soviet

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

specialists were working for "the Vietnamese people," nevertheless "the Soviet embassy has been placed under unjust and severe conditions; it is under surveillance and suspicion."<sup>17</sup>

By the middle of 1971 the Soviet embassy had come to recognize a significant shift in Hanoi's foreign policy which was favorable to Moscow. In a political letter to Moscow in May, Ambassador I. Shcherbakov analyzed the shift as having two indices. First was the decision of the Vietnamese in 1968 to broaden their strategic approach to the war to incorporate military, political and diplomatic forms of struggle (apparently connected with their decision to enter into negotiations with the United States in Paris). Second was the fact that the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) "understands and apprehends more the policy of the CPSU."<sup>18</sup> Later in his report, the Soviet ambassador noted that "by leaning toward the Soviet Union, the VWP has endured the crude pressure of the Chinese leaders."<sup>19</sup>

The ambassador's main grievance was Hanoi's failure to exchange opinions and information on a future settlement for Indochina, and its refusal to arrange with the Soviet-bloc socialist countries "a fully valuable coordination of actions, especially in the foreign policy sphere." The Hanoi leadership was accused of "trying to preserve for itself the exclusive right

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.190-1.

<sup>18</sup> Posol'stvo SSSR v DRV. "O politike partii trudyashchikhsya v'etnama v reshenii problem indokitaya i nashikh zadachakh, vitekayushchikh iz reshenii XXIV s'ezda kpss" (Politicheskoye pis'mo) [Embassy of the USSR in the DRV. "About the Policy of the Vietnam Workers' Party Towards a Solution of the Problem of Indochina and Our Tasks, Flowing From the Decisions of the 24th Congress of the CPSU" (Political Letter)], 25 May 1971, p. 2. Located in TsKhSD, f. 89, op. 54, d. 10, l. 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 13. TsKhSD. loc. cit.

to a solution of the Vietnamese and Indochinese problems" and of "trying to impede, at least at the present stage, the broad involvement of the socialist countries on the matter."<sup>20</sup>

The embassy noted that in 1971 the Chinese policy towards Indochina had begun to "acquire the appearance of moderation and some flexibility," which was reflected in Beijing's granting of supplementary aid that year, in China's public recognition of the program of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRGRSV) as a just basis for a Vietnam settlement, in China's indirect "rehabilitation" of the Paris peace negotiations, and also in Zhou Enlai's visit to Hanoi. These moves by Beijing were said to have led to some warming of Sino-Vietnamese relations. However, China's moves towards rapprochement with the USA—highlighted by the surprise July 1971 announcement that U.S. President Nixon would visit Beijing—were said to have shaken the Vietnamese leaders, who feared new frictions with the PRC and possibly renewed Chinese pressure. The Vietnamese tactical response was said to be to attempt to compromise with the Chinese on minor matters of difference while avoiding compromise on the most important matters for them, especially on a settlement of the conflicts in Vietnam and Indochina generally.<sup>21</sup>

The Vietnamese communists were said to have understood the connection between their primary task—finding a solution to the problem of Vietnam in Indochina—and receiving moral and material support from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, including China.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the ambassador's report ended with two policy suggestions: (i) to inform the Vietnamese

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 8. (TsKhSD. loc. cit. l. 30).

<sup>21</sup> loc. cit. l. 7, TsKhSD loc. cit., l. 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 8, TSKhSD l. 30.

about Soviet-Chinese relations, and (ii) to request the Vietnamese to mediate between the Soviet Union and China.<sup>23</sup>

By 1972, the Soviet embassy was reporting extensively on the tensions which had arisen between the Soviet Union and the DRV as a result of U.S. President Richard M. Nixon's May 1972 visit to Moscow, despite the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and the mining of North Vietnamese ports, and the efforts which the Soviet side had undertaken to diminish those tensions.

Although the Vietnamese communist leaders had publicly supported Soviet detente with West Germany in 1970, in 1972 and 1973 they expressed a very different view about detente between the United States and the major communist powers.

Nixon's policy of detente is aimed at achieving the objective of dividing the socialist camp in an attempt to weaken the revolution. In implementing a policy of "detente" with the big countries, the U.S. imperialists are scheming to "control" the socialist countries in their movement to develop the revolutionary offensive, while the United States is continuing its limited counteroffensives against the revolutionary movement in various areas and small countries.<sup>24</sup>

According to the Soviet embassy in Hanoi, the Vietnamese leaders were most upset by Nixon's visit to Moscow in May 1972. They had been told about the visit as far back as October 1971, during a trip to Hanoi by a Soviet delegation headed by Nikolai Podgorny. According to

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<sup>23</sup> I. Shcherbakov, loc. cit., l. 19, TsKhSD, loc. cit. l. 41.

<sup>24</sup> *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* (Hanoi), 24 November 1973, p. 1. *FBIS-APA-73-234*, 5 December 1973, p. K2.

the embassy, at that time the Vietnamese did not express any protest against the Nixon visit taking place. But as the time for the visit drew closer, the Vietnamese public stance changed.<sup>25</sup>

The Soviet embassy explained the anxiety of the Vietnamese over Nixon's visit to Moscow as a response to the unfavorable consequences of his visit to China for the Vietnamese communists. That is, after Nixon visited Beijing in February 1972, the USA broke off negotiations in Paris, mined the sea approaches to North Vietnamese ports, and increased military pressure on Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> In fact these American actions were a response to the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive, not the Nixon visit to China. But nevertheless the Soviet Union experienced a negative reaction from the DRV. Hanoi feared that it would suffer from friendlier relations between its patrons and its main enemy. This reaction, in spite of being restrained, demanded a response.

Several high-level Soviet delegations visited North Vietnam and high-level Vietnamese delegations visited Moscow in 1972 in order to try to smooth out the differences between the two countries. The most difficult period in their relationship was said to have been between April and September (the precise period of North Vietnam's Easter Offensive). But during the autumn of 1972 Vietnamese attitudes towards the Soviet Union improved.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately it was the US-China rapprochement, not US-Soviet detente, which would be perceived by the Vietnamese as treacherous.

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<sup>25</sup> "Politicheskii otchet posol'stva SSSR v demokraticeskoi respublike v'etnam za 1972 god" ["Political Report of the Embassy of the USSR in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for 1972"], TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 64, d. 472, l. 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

The Soviets also voiced their dissatisfaction with the VWP's alleged policy of equally friendly relations with the USSR and PRC. The Soviets spoke of how news of polemics between Moscow and Beijing was prohibited in the DRV, while news of each country was presented evenly. This had restrained the deepening of Soviet-Vietnamese relations. Interestingly, the embassy also remarked that "objectively one should recognize that the VWP for the present cannot foresee a single alternative to this policy." Soviet tolerance for Hanoi's situation was justified so far, the report noted. Yet the Maoists were said to be abusing this policy by trying to drive a wedge between the VWP and the CPSU. "One must hope that the VWP is aware of this."<sup>28</sup>

As in previous years, the embassy was most dismayed by what it described as the Vietnamese communist leaders' distrustful and deceitful behavior towards the Soviet Union. It was noted that unofficial contacts by Vietnamese with foreigners, even Soviets, were not permitted. But even in their official contacts, Vietnamese officials were said to be "insufficiently frank, they conceal a lot, they dissemble etc." In spite of the fact that the Soviet Union's leaders kept the Vietnamese leaders informed on many political issues, the Vietnamese were accused of holding back information on their foreign and internal policies. For example, the Vietnamese were said to inform the Soviets more candidly about developments at the Paris peace negotiations only when they needed Soviet assistance and support. Information provided about party building, about the economic situation of the country, about losses incurred from American bombing, and

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<sup>28</sup> "Politicheskii otchet posol'stva SSSR v demokraticeskoi respublike v'etnama za 1972 god" ["Political report of the Embassy of the USSR in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for 1972"], TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 64, d. 472, l. 22.

about ties of the DRV with other countries, was said to be of poor quality and acquired by the Soviets only with great difficulty.<sup>29</sup>

But the most telling example was provided by the experience of a Soviet delegation headed by Marshall P. F. Batitski (Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Air Defense Forces) which visited North Vietnam in March 1972. According to the Soviet embassy, when the Vietnamese leaders requested the provision of new arms from Batitski, they said nothing about the fact that they were planning to launch the biggest military offensive of the war immediately after his delegation's departure.<sup>30</sup> This incident, if true—and it is hard to imagine why it would not be true—is a stunning reflection on Hanoi's distrust of its main patron at that time. Referring to these events, the Soviet embassy report concluded its evaluation of Soviet-Vietnamese relations for the year 1972:

These and similar negative moments are gradually being overcome, but they are leaving certain impressions in our relations. However on the whole we repeat that the leadership of the DRV continued on the course of strengthening ties with the Soviet Union, seeing in that the main buttress of its struggle and of peaceful construction.<sup>31</sup>

A year later the Soviet embassy's view of the relationship was more upbeat. The embassy's annual report for 1973 spoke of the aspiration of "the Vietnamese comrades" to rely upon the Soviet Union in deciding the most important questions of domestic and foreign policy, during what was called the transformative period from war to peace after the signing of the Paris

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 22-23.

Peace Agreement in January 1973.<sup>32</sup> The report claimed that the visit of a high-level Vietnamese party and government delegation to the USSR in 1973 helped to weaken Chinese influence in the DRV, in particular undermining its anti-Soviet propaganda.<sup>33</sup> The report explained only indirectly what might have been the decisive factor in this matter, when it specified the details of the 14 August 1973 agreement on new Soviet aid. The most significant feature of this agreement was the section in which the Soviet Union forgave the DRV a debt of \$1.080 billion dollars from earlier credit deliveries.<sup>34</sup> Trade relations involved the USSR providing goods worth 132.7 million rubles, of which 108 million rubles worth were on credit and 7.2 million rubles were an outright gift. Besides this, social organizations in the USSR sent free aid worth 10 million rubles.<sup>35</sup>

The embassy saw 1973 as the year in which the Vietnamese leaders "began to take a significantly critical approach to several steps of the Maoists." In so doing it was breaking from the previous VWP party line of standing aside from the "hostile, anti-Soviet line of Peking" and promoting "externally identical friendly relations with the Soviet Union and the DRV."<sup>36</sup> As we have seen in our previous discussion, the Vietnamese leaders actually began to take these steps much earlier, at some point between 1968 and 1970, at the same time as it continued to support

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<sup>32</sup> "Politicheskii otchet posol'stva SSSR v demokraticheskoi respublike v'etnam za 1973 god" ["Political Report of the Embassy of the USSR in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for 1973"], TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 66, d. 781, l. 6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 14-15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 10.

"externally identical friendly relations with the Soviet Union and the PRC." The Soviet embassy had not been as acutely cognizant of this trend as it should have been and the Kremlin's desire for the unconditional loyalty of other communist states may have blinded it to more subtle tendencies, such as Hanoi's tilt. But in the aftermath of the tensions of 1972, it was now finally recognizing some change in Vietnamese foreign policy.

By the beginning of 1975 the Soviet embassy could speak of "the further closeness of the positions of both of our parties and countries on a whole series of important international problems." However, the embassy noted the continuing existence of "specific negative phenomena" in the policy of the Vietnamese friends. One of these was the aspiration of the VWP leadership to remain "aloof from the struggle of the CPSU and other fraternal parties against Maoism." Moreover the Vietnamese were not interested in establishing broad ties with the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) although they had told the USSR representatives that they were studying the question of their participation in this organization.<sup>37</sup>

The report recognized that the China factor was exercising a restraining influence on the cooperation of the DRV with the socialist countries. But so too was "the narrowly nationalistic path of the Vietnamese comrades" which caused them to form their attitude to the most important international problems "through the prism of the solution of the Vietnamese question." That is why the Vietnamese leaders remained skeptical of Soviet-American dialogue. Yet, the report noted, their reaction to the 1974 Brezhnev-Nixon summit was calmer than before, because the

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<sup>37</sup> "Politicheskii otchet posol'stva SSSR v demokraticeskoi respublike v'etnam za 1974 god" ["Political report of the Embassy of the USSR in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for 1974"], TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 67, d. 655, l.35.

Vietnamese leaders "are certain of the Soviet Union's position in relation to the Vietnamese people's struggle" and they regard the meetings as "an internal [Soviet] affair."<sup>38</sup>

### **Political Factionalism within the Vietnamese Leadership**

The issue of factionalism within the leadership of the Vietnamese communist party has long been a source of speculation among Western observers. Particular attention has often been paid to the possibility of a split along pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet lines. The existence of such a factional split was asserted by the British analyst P. J. Honey as early as 1962. Honey identified the leaders of the pro-Soviet faction as Vo Nguyen Giap and Le Duan and the leaders of the pro-Chinese faction as Truong Chinh and Nguyen Duy Trinh.<sup>39</sup> Honey speculated that personal patronage and rivalries would put other Politburo members in one of the respective camps, and he specified that Le Duc Tho's rivalry with Le Duan was likely to make Tho pro-Chinese. Subsequently the American analyst and former official W. R. Smyser criticized this view, asserting that there was "no definitive public evidence of such factions."<sup>40</sup> More recently the expatriate

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 35-36.

<sup>39</sup> P. J. Honey, "The Position of the DRV Leadership and the Succession to Ho Chi Minh" in P. J. Honey ed., *North Vietnam Today. Profile of a Communist Satellite* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), pp. 50, 58.

<sup>40</sup> W.R. Smyser, *The Independent Vietnamese: Vietnamese Communism Between Russia and China 1956-1969* (Ohio University, Center For International Studies, Papers in International Studies: Southeast Asia No. 55, 1980), p. 122.

Vietnamese analyst Thai Quang Trung revived Honey's interpretation, while using the advantage of hindsight to place Le Duan rather than Giap at the head of the pro-Soviet faction.<sup>41</sup>

The Soviet communist party archives corroborate the view that the Vietnamese party was divided into factions, and that these included pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions. However the archival evidence also indicates that membership in either a pro-Chinese or pro-Soviet faction did not determine each party leader's stand on all important issues. There were other factional divisions which cut across the pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese divide.<sup>42</sup>

The most direct and credible evidence of pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions comes from party secretary Hoang Anh during his report to a 1971 VWP CC plenum.<sup>43</sup> At several points during his report Anh spoke of a small group of "opportunists" within the party whom he said opposed the party leadership's line on a number of issues, including agrarian policy, military policy and foreign policy. It was implied, though not explicitly stated by Hoang Anh, that the opposition elements comprised the same group of people on all of these separate issues.<sup>44</sup> But as we will see, there was obviously a connection between the opposition faction's views on military and foreign policy.

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<sup>41</sup> Thai Quang Trung, *Collective Leadership and Factionalism: An Essay on Ho Chi Minh's Legacy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> This matter is extremely complicated and will be the subject of another study by the author.

<sup>43</sup> General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR. Main Intelligence Directorate. "Report of the VWP CC Secretary Hoang Anh to the 20th Plenum of the VWP CC, held at the end of December 1970—beginning of January 1971," TsKhSD, f. 89, op. 54, d. 8. Hereafter referred to as Hoang Anh Report.

I am well aware that the numbering of the plenum at which this report was presented as the 20th does not coincide with the public record, according to which this should have been the 19th plenum. However it is my view that the public record is probably incorrect, for reasons which I will explain in another article.

<sup>44</sup> Hoang Anh Report, l. 25, in TsKhSD, l. 209.

On military policy, Hoang Anh stated that the "opportunists" wanted to escalate the war and achieve a decisive military victory. To this end the opposition faction wanted the Vietnamese government to invite the Chinese government to send troops to fight alongside the North Vietnamese forces in Laos and South Vietnam. On diplomatic policy, the so-called "opportunists" allegedly accused the party leadership of pursuing a concessionary line towards the Americans by pursuing negotiations with them in Paris. They also regarded the Soviet leadership as "revisionist" and supported China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.<sup>45</sup> Anh's rebuttal of this line emphasized the importance of the patient and careful strategy of "people's war," which also incorporated political and diplomatic elements with military strategy. One could be forgiven for a little confusion on this division of strategies into pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet, since the concept of "people's war" was originally a Maoist invention. However, some sense can be made of it when one remembers two things. First, the Vietnamese themselves had coopted the Maoist strategy and modified it according to their own strategic and political situation. Second, at that time China was still under the influence of a radical and optimistic phase of Maoism, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, which emphasized the primacy of violence over political and diplomatic approaches to conflict. Hence, being pro-Chinese and therefore Maoist in 1970 meant taking a more radical approach than the Maoist Chinese approach of earlier periods.

Hoang Anh did not outline exactly how pervasive this "opportunist" faction was, but asserted that it included some of the higher military leaders and that its main party members included 16 VWP CC members. Six were identified by name: Le Liem, Nguyen Quang Toan, Ha Huy Giap, Bui Cong Trinh, Nguyen Van Vinh, and Song Khao—not all of whom were full

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 10-11, 23, 26, in TsKhSD, ll. 194-5, 207, 210.

members of the Central Committee. However, of these six the last was a lieutenant general and head of the DRV Defense Ministry's Main Political Administration—a most senior military position.<sup>46</sup> No Politburo member was identified as a member of this faction, although this does not preclude the possibility that one or more in fact were. (Recall that one Politburo member of the period under review, Hoang Van Hoan, established that he was pro-Chinese when he defected to China in 1979.)

Secondary evidence of a split of the Vietnamese leadership into pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet factions comes from a report of the Soviet military intelligence directorate, endorsed by the signature of Soviet Chief of Staff General Ogarkov.<sup>47</sup> The GRU report, dated November 1972, does not refer to a pro-Soviet faction but instead to a "moderate group" which was said to have been in conflict with the "pro-Chinese group." These two groups were said to have been "finally formed" only in 1970-71, which is somewhat surprising given the longstanding historical factors which would have given rise to them, and which should have seen their emergence long before that date, as some Western analysts have previously speculated.

But what is most interesting about the GRU report is the specification of which Vietnamese leaders were members of which faction. The "moderate group" was said to have been headed by the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party, Le Duan, and Prime Minister and Politburo member Pham Van Dong. Politburo members said to have supported them included Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, chairman of the VWP bureau

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 30, in TsKhSD. *Ibid.*, l. 214.

<sup>47</sup> TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 64, d. 478.

for South Vietnam Pham Hung, Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi, and unspecified others.<sup>48</sup>

The "moderate group" was said to enjoy the support of "an overwhelming number of workers of the central apparatus and the intelligentsia."<sup>49</sup>

The "pro-Chinese group" was said to have been headed by Politburo member Truong Chinh, ostensibly the party's leading theorist, and Secretary General of the party until 1956. The Politburo members who were said to have supported him were Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh, Hoang Van Hoan, and Le Duc Tho, the special adviser to the DRV delegation at the Paris negotiations. This group was said to include about 20 senior party, state, and military figures, and to have the support of party and administrative workers in agricultural regions, and pro-Chinese oriented elements in the central party and state organs. This group was said to favor resolving the Vietnam problem by primarily military means, closer intimacy with China, and a weakening of ties with the Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup> (Note that the GRU analysis of membership of the two factions correlates closely with the factional membership analysis P. J. Honey published ten years earlier.)

The GRU analysis considered these factional disagreements to be one of the main causes of what the GRU regarded as inconsistency in the North Vietnamese leaders' approach to solving important questions, "especially the Indochina problem." At the same time, the analysis asserted that the Politburo was "of one mind" in approving the plans for the Spring 1972 military offensive. And subsequently the failure of that military action led to a new split within the

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<sup>48</sup> TsKhSd, loc. cit., l. 168.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 169.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Politburo, especially pronounced from July 1972 on, over how to pursue the struggle. This split saw a realignment of Politburo members into factions which in the West would be labelled "hawks" and "doves." But these two new factions were different from and cut across the previous "moderate" and "pro-Chinese" split, with Le Duan and Truong Chinh then together in arguing for a primarily military solution to the conflict, and Pham Van Dong leading the faction, which included Le Duc Tho, arguing for a political settlement.

A discrepancy exists between certain pieces of evidence we have considered here. On the one hand, some Western analysts and the 1972 GRU report place Le Duc Tho in the pro-Chinese faction. On the other hand Truong Nhu Tang identified Tho with a pro-Soviet orientation. How do we explain this discrepancy?

It may be the case that Tho was originally a member of the pro-Chinese faction but changed to the pro-Soviet faction in the early to mid-1970s. It may also be the case that Tang, who was a senior member of the southern revolutionary political front but not a communist party member, and thus acquired his information second-hand from friends within the party, was wrong on Tho's orientation. But if we accept that latter possibility, and that Le Duc Tho was in fact pro-Chinese, then we have to explain how Tho retained and even enhanced his power after the Vietnamese party's shift to the side of the Soviet Union.

There is an easy explanation for this latter possibility. Most top party members of the Vietnamese communist party identified with the purported pro-Chinese faction submitted to the majority line. The major exception was Hoang Van Hoan, who after being dropped from the Politburo in December 1976, defected to China in 1979. In particular the alleged leader of the pro-Chinese faction, Truong Chinh, retained his politburo position until the 1986 Party Congress

(which saw the nominal retirement of all of the old guard leaders regardless of their purported faction membership). This evidence is consistent with the competing possibilities of Tho being pro-Chinese and then becoming pro-Soviet, or being pro-Chinese but, like Truong Chinh, submitting to the Politburo majority.

The case of Truong Chinh highlights the more important fact that these factional differences, even if they were significant political realities, were not as important politically as the individual party member's commitment to the majority's "general line." The GRU document itself supports this view when it describes the purported leadership split in 1972 over the relative role of military versus political and diplomatic approaches to the struggle for South Vietnam. It thereby suggests that, because of the cross-cutting nature of party elite factional membership, factional identifications would not be decisive in any individual's decision on whether or not to adhere to the majority viewpoint. The existence of these factional splits within the Vietnamese party leadership suggests the lack of a commanding figure within the Vietnamese communist party leadership, at least after the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969.

### **China's Displeasure With Vietnam's Tilt to the Soviet Union.**

The Chinese had subtly indicated their grave displeasure with the Hanoi leaders during their private bilateral meetings even before the North Vietnamese victory over South Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> But the most serious private manifestation of tension between Vietnam and China came in a secret meeting between the leaders of the two parties in September 1975, five months after war's end;

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<sup>51</sup> Truong Nhu Tang with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *A Vietcong Memoir*, pp. 248-249.

details of this meeting and a subsequent report by Le Duan to the Vietnamese Politburo were never published, but an account of both was conveyed to the Soviets in October 1975.<sup>52</sup>

On 22-28 September 1975, a Vietnamese party-government delegation, headed by Le Duan, visited China. The Vietnamese, in their communications with the Soviets, indicated that their goal during the visit was to improve Vietnamese-Chinese relations. In particular they wanted to assure the Chinese that Vietnamese relations with the Soviet Union and China would remain as before.<sup>53</sup>

This assurance apparently provided little comfort to Beijing. According to Hanoi, the Chinese leaders "openly and officially" showed their dissatisfaction with the conduct of Vietnamese foreign policy, in particular in Vietnamese relations with the Soviet Union. Insofar as Vietnam continued this political line, they warned, it would not find support from China. Le Duan claimed that the visit enabled the Vietnamese leadership to show the Chinese, "officially and openly," that the VWP stood steadfastly by its political platform, regardless of the Chinese reaction. If relations between the two parties should worsen, Le Duan told the Soviets, all the fault would lie with the Chinese.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, Le Duan noted, even if relations between the VWP and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) worsened in the future, the VWP would act in support of the principles

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<sup>52</sup> The contents of the Vietnamese report to the Soviets on the details of this meeting are contained in: "Results of the Visit of the Vietnamese Party-Government Delegation to China (1975)," TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 73, d. 1933.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 31.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 31-32.

of solidarity, mutual support and unity of the world communist and workers' movement, and the "unity of all socialist countries." It would not insult China over its activities.

Yet Le Duan's overall evaluation of the results of the visit was grim. In his own words, a difficult period in relations between the Vietnamese and Chinese parties had set in. VWP-CCP relations were in an "alarming, critical condition." Therefore the VWP had to be careful, vigilant, and patient, and do everything to avert a split between the two parties and countries.<sup>55</sup>

Le Duan noted that there was no serious discussion of important political questions of mutual interest. The Chinese indicated that they did not want to discuss such questions and the Vietnamese did not insist on such. Thus there was no published document or communique confirming the results of the visit.

However, Le Duan reminded the VWP Politburo, Vietnamese-Chinese discussions about the territorial water border in the Tonkin Gulf and the littoral continental shelf were due to commence at the beginning of October. The Vietnamese side intended to continue fishing on the shelf without waiting for the outcome of the negotiations. But Le Duan felt that the negotiations would be an important indicator of the intentions of the Chinese leaders to develop relations with the Vietnamese in the future.

Le Duan's report demonstrated alarm about the decline of relations between the two parties and countries. Despite this concern the Vietnamese leader opposed making any concession on the issue of most concern to China—Vietnam's relations with the Soviet Union.

China had begun to demonstrate its displeasure in tangible material ways. China's assistance to North Vietnam declined rapidly during the second half of 1975. A number of DRV

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

departments reported to the Soviet embassy that the amount of freight being unloaded off Chinese vessels in the port of Haiphong during that half year was half of what it had been for the same period of the previous year. Furthermore, the Vietnamese claimed, at the beginning of 1976 China recalled several groups of its specialists from Vietnam and delayed work on a number of projects being built with Chinese aid.<sup>56</sup>

By early 1976 the Vietnamese leaders were telling the Soviets that they were very anxious about their relations with China. They specifically cited the lack of an agreement for long-term economic aid from China, and the failure of the Chinese to settle outstanding territorial disputes, particularly over the Tonkin Gulf and the Paracel and Spratley Islands. Furthermore, Hanoi leaders were especially anxious about the activities of Beijing, conducted through its contacts within the Chinese colony in South Vietnam, which was said to be "in conflict with the line of the revolutionary authorities." The Hanoi leaders claimed that they detected a connection between what they described as "the subversive appearances of the Maoists in Indochina" (a cryptic reference, possibly to the ideological orientation of the Cambodian communist leaders).<sup>57</sup>

These anxieties had led to repeated discussions of Vietnamese-Chinese relations at the highest level in the CC of the VWP. Yet in spite of this concern the Hanoi leaders expressed to the Soviets their determination "not to withdraw from a principled political position," while at the

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<sup>56</sup> V. Sviridov (2nd Secretary, Embassy of the USSR in the SRV), "O nekotorykh aspektakh v'etno-kitaiskikh otnoshenii" ["About several aspects of Vietnamese-Chinese relations"], April 1976, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 69, d. 2313, l.18.

<sup>57</sup> Sviridov, "O nekotorykh aspektakh...", loc. cit., ll. 18-19.

same time attempting to "normalize relations with the PRC, in the first instance on a state-to-state basis."<sup>58</sup>

How then would the VWP repair relations with the Chinese and avoid a total split? Subsequent events suggested that the Hanoi leaders did not understand how to pursue that goal realistically.

### **The Fourth Vietnamese Party Congress and Hanoi's China Policy**

The Vietnamese communists held their Fourth Party Congress—their first after sixteen years of war—in December 1976. As with all Party congresses the meeting served to ratify political decisions which had already been made by the higher echelons of the Party leadership. The CCP did not break its custom of not sending delegations to foreign party congresses, even though a Chinese delegation had been present at the Vietnam's Third Congress in 1960, and even though this time the Soviet Union sent a high-level delegation led by Politburo member and chief Soviet ideologist Mikhail Suslov.<sup>59</sup>

The Chinese informed the SRV Embassy in Beijing of their decision not to send a delegation in advance. However, Le Duan, in his conversation with Soviet Ambassador B. Chaplin during November 1976, claimed that there were people in China who "are now expressing opinions against the orientation of the [Chinese ambassadorial] delegation in Hanoi."

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.19.

<sup>59</sup> For the best informed and detailed analysis of the Congress see P. J. Honey, "The Fourth Congress of the Lao Dong Party," *China News Analysis* 1072 (11 March 1977). See also William S. Turley, "Vietnam Since Reunification," *Problems of Communism* 26:2. (March-April 1977), pp. 36-54.

He noted, as if in support of this point, that the Chinese had sent the VWP CC a "long congratulatory telegram, in which was contained wishes for successes in the work of the Congress."<sup>60</sup>

It seems that Le Duan thought that Vietnam's problems with China were heavily rooted in the political outlook of the Chinese embassy in Hanoi. The Vietnamese leaders were acutely aware of, and deeply interested in the outcome of, the factional struggles in Beijing. But insofar as they thought that their problems with China could be solved by the ascendancy of one Chinese political faction over another the Vietnamese were greatly misinformed.

During the Fourth Party Congress the Hanoi leaders removed the most pro-Chinese elements from the leadership. This included most notably the dropping of Hoang Van Hoan—the former Vietnamese ambassador to China (1950-57), and a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party—from the Politburo and Central Committee (Hoan defected to China in 1979). Those dropped from the Central Committee also included Ngo Minh Loan, Ngo Thuyen, Nguyen Trong Vinh, and Ly Ban. These individuals also had all served in China, three as DRV ambassador.<sup>61</sup> The demise of these figures could only have been interpreted in Beijing as a further and now overt repudiation of Chinese influence. Notwithstanding the demotion from alternate membership of the Central Committee of one former ambassador to the Soviet Union, the sacking of these prominent former ambassadors to China would have been interpreted as a further affirmation of Hanoi's desire to deepen its already close relations with Moscow. Finally, given

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<sup>60</sup> B. Chaplin, "Record of conversation with the First Secretary of the CC of the VWP Le Duan," 16 November 1976, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 69, d. 2314, ll. 112-113.

<sup>61</sup> Honey, "The Fourth Congress of the Lao Dong Party," p. 4.

its earlier explicit expressions of concern about the pro-Soviet drift of Vietnamese foreign policy, Beijing may well have considered these new Vietnamese party actions as an insult by the Vietnamese leaders to China. Thus in February 1977 Beijing notified Hanoi that it was unable to provide any new economic aid.<sup>62</sup>

### **Hanoi's View of the Chinese Political Succession Struggle**

The Vietnamese leaders were not only aware of but also paid close attention to the political faction conflict in China. Their interest was linked to their belief that one faction rather than another would be more considerate of Vietnam's foreign policy.

During a conversation with the Soviet ambassador in Hanoi in April 1976, Vietnamese Foreign Minister and Politburo member Nguyen Duy Trinh spoke of the factional struggle within China as one between "moderates"—including Deng Xiaoping—and "young activists." Trinh was impressed with the apparent strength of the "moderates" because they dared to criticize Qing Jiang, Mao's wife. He believed that their popularity derived from the fact that they had worked with Zhou Enlai.<sup>63</sup>

Later that year, in early November, SRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong spoke favorably of the fall of the Shanghai group from power. While he felt that it was at that time too early to

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<sup>62</sup> *Beijing Review*, 30 March 1979, p. 22, cited in Pao-min Chang, *Beijing, Hanoi and the Overseas Chinese* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1982), p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> "Zapis' besedi s chlenom politburo TsK PTV, zam. prem'er-ministrom, ministrom inostrannikh del DRV Nguen Zui Chinem" [Report of a conversation with a member of the politburo of the VWP CC, deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DRV, Nguyen Duy Trinh], 6 April 1976, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 69, d. 2314, ll. 46-7.

draw conclusions about the current situation in the PRC, he felt that so far "little had changed" in the Chinese foreign policy. The only signs of possible improvement in Sino-Vietnamese relations were said to consist of the more friendly attitudes of the Chinese at meetings with Vietnamese representatives.<sup>64</sup>

The following year the Vietnamese leadership was still uncertain and concerned about the evolution of the political situation in China. In October 1977, Le Duan told the Soviet ambassador in Hanoi that part of the Chinese leadership, especially Hua Guofeng, but also Ye Xianin, "do not understand us," whereas Deng Xiaoping "treats Vietnam with great understanding." Le Duan predicted that if Deng Xiaoping should win the power struggle then changes in Chinese policy could be expected because Deng Xiaoping did not follow in the path of Mao Zedong and even expressed opposition to several of his ideas. Although, Le Duan noted, Deng Xiaoping's attitude towards the Soviet Union is "well known," nevertheless "his words in connection with the USSR show that ... he is convinced that the Soviet Union is a socialist country." This together with the restoration in key posts of repressed former activists like Lo Xitsin who had earlier expressed himself in favor of rapprochement with the USSR, was treated hopefully by Le Duan.<sup>65</sup>

This interest by Le Duan in whether or not Chinese leaders favored a foreign policy of rapprochement with the USSR was not merely in response to Soviet inquiries. It had been a

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<sup>64</sup> "Zapis' besedi s chlenom Politburo TsK PTV, Prem'er-ministrom SRV Pham Van Dongom" ["Report of a conversation with a member of the Politburo of the VWP CC, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong"], 6 November 1976, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 69, d. 2314, l. 100.

<sup>65</sup> "Zapis' besedi s generalnim sekretarom TsK VKP Le Zuanom" ["Report of a conversation with the General Secretary of the VCP CC Le Duan"], 6 October 1977, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 73, d. 1409, ll. 122-3.

longstanding position of the Vietnamese communists that international solidarity among all the "socialist countries"—particularly the USSR, PRC, and SRV—represented an important foreign policy goal. That objective was stated again by the top Vietnamese party leaders in their private meetings with the Chinese in November 1977.<sup>66</sup>

But by the end of 1978, with Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorating rapidly, the Vietnamese attitude to the Chinese leadership struggle had changed. Le Duan told the Soviet ambassador in September 1978 that while the Chinese leaders had serious disagreements on domestic policy, in foreign policy they shared a common conception.<sup>67</sup>

What is important about this information, however, is the fact that the Vietnamese communist leaders were not imbued with an indiscriminating distrust of all Chinese communist leaders, as Western analysts assumed. Initially the Vietnamese leaders considered their political problems with China to be tied to the activities of the Maoist faction, which later came to be known as the Gang of Four. As a corollary they were initially favorably disposed towards Deng Xiaoping. Zhou Enlai was a Chinese leader towards whom the Vietnamese were always favorably disposed. The Vietnamese evaluated each Chinese leader according to what they imagined to be his political line vis-a-vis Vietnam and the USSR. That the Vietnamese leaders changed their minds about Deng Xiaoping's views, and came to adopt a more indiscriminating hostility towards the entire Chinese leadership, is explained in any case by the conflict which

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<sup>66</sup> "Zapis' besedi s sekretarim TsK KPV, nachalnik otdela inostrannikh otnoshenakh Tsk KPV, Zuan Tuinom" ["Report of a conversation with secretary of the CPV CC, director of the department of foreign relations of the CPV, CC Xuan Thuy"], TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 73, d. 1409, l. 133.

<sup>67</sup> "Zapis' besedi s generalnim sekretarom TsK Kpv Le Zuanom" [Report of a conversation with General Secretary of the CPV CC Le Duan"], 5 September 1978, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 75, d. 1061, l. 102.

evolved over the different Chinese and Vietnamese foreign *policies*, especially towards the Soviet Union and Cambodia.

## **Epilogue**

By the mid-1970s, Chinese-Vietnamese relations were exacerbated by the intensifying conflict between the communist leaders of Vietnam and Cambodia. This conflict exploded into major military battles between the armies of Vietnam and Cambodia in 1977, and the breaking of diplomatic relations between the two nations by the Khmer Rouge on 31 December 1977.

During 1978, Vietnamese-Chinese relations deteriorated even further, ostensibly as a result of Hanoi's policy of discriminating and persecuting Vietnam's ethnic Chinese minority, though the struggle for Cambodia influenced both sides' view of the ethnic Chinese problem. In May 1978, China cut back aid and in June, after Vietnam joined COMECON, China cut off all of its remaining economic assistance to Vietnam.<sup>68</sup>

In November 1978 Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Then, in December 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia, occupying Phnom Penh on 9 January 1979.

China, furious with Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, decided to "teach Vietnam a lesson" by launching a cross-border invasion in February 1979. Though the Chinese army performed poorly from a military standpoint during the three-week war, and Vietnam was not pressured to

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<sup>68</sup> The issues summarized in this and the previous paragraph are discussed and analyzed in great detail in my book, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia* (Stanford University Press, 1999), especially chapters 4 and 7.

withdraw its army from Cambodia as China was demanding, the action had some impact on Vietnamese policy. The Chinese attack conveyed to the Vietnamese leaders the full significance of having China as an enemy, and by obliging Hanoi to keep troops in the north to repel a possible future Chinese attack, prevented Vietnam from applying its full military resources to winning the war in Cambodia.

All of these different bilateral conflicts had their own origins. But Hanoi's decision to move towards a closer relationship with Moscow at the end of the 1960s, however fitfully and strangely applied in practice over the first half of the next decade, had a profound impact upon all of the other conflicts in the region.

## Conclusions

The Vietnamese tilt towards the Soviet Union in the early 1970s marked a subtle policy shift with great ramifications. While it did not satisfy Soviet expectations, it nevertheless managed to antagonize China profoundly. The Soviet archival evidence suggests that the North Vietnamese leaders were extremely difficult clients for their major communist patrons to work with.

The record of Soviet-Vietnamese relations in the first half of the 1970s was one of public amity coexisting with private enmity. In contrast with the public posture of deep friendship, the Soviet archives reveal a relationship marked by paranoid suspicion from one side and resentment from the other. The Soviets expected that in return for their considerable aid to North Vietnam they would have a powerful influence over Vietnamese foreign policy and the form of a political settlement in Indochina. They were to be very disappointed for many years. The Vietnamese did not treat the Soviet Union as a trustworthy ally, let alone as a powerful patron, in spite of the fact that the Soviet Union was in fact a patron upon whom the Vietnamese Communist Party (VWP) depended in order to achieve its political and military objectives in Indochina.

Part of the problem may have been political cleavages within the Vietnamese communist party's elite, who were, according to Soviet analysts, divided into "moderate" and "pro-Chinese" factions. But part of the problem was the paranoid political culture of the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership.

It is hard to imagine the United States tolerating from its clients the kind of treatment which the Hanoi leaders inflicted upon the Soviet representatives in North Vietnam. Of course,

as the memoirs of U.S. and South Vietnamese policy makers show, tensions frequently hampered relations between Washington and Saigon.<sup>69</sup> But nothing in that difficult alliance compares with the recurring duplicity and draconian security measures Hanoi imposed upon its Soviet ally. Soviet tolerance of its treatment, albeit reluctant and resentful, can be attributed to two factors. First, it needed to maintain a functioning relationship with the North Vietnamese in order to advance its strategic position against its two main adversaries, China and the United States. Second, though they may have personally resented their treatment, the Soviet representatives could hardly raise moral objections. After all their own political system was hardly the embodiment of interpersonal trust and respect, and the Soviet Union's political leadership of the 1970s was itself a product of the same moral and political upbringing under Stalinism as the North Vietnamese leadership. But an outsider may conclude that the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship in the early 1970s was a strange manifestation of international solidarity.

Still, the Soviet resentments towards the Vietnamese communists were minor compared to the anger of the Chinese. By 1975 the Vietnamese shift towards closer ties with the USSR had brought Chinese-Vietnamese relations close to the breaking point. The Vietnamese privately expressed a desire to maintain a working relationship with China, if for no other reason than to ensure the flow of economic aid. But Hanoi soon antagonized Beijing even further by dropping some of the more pro-Chinese figures from the leadership of the Vietnamese party.

Yet the Hanoi leaders seemed blithely unaware of the fact that their policies on several international issues were central to their future relations with China. They wanted to maintain

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<sup>69</sup> See, e.g. Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), especially chapters 33-34; Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schechter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

at least reasonable relations with China. But they took little account of their need to make hard choices, and for many years did not recognize that they could not achieve all of their foreign policy goals while remaining on reasonable terms with China. Hanoi mistakenly looked to the outcome of the factional power struggle within the Chinese leadership, not to their own policies, for a guide to prospects for their future relations with Beijing.

## **About the author**

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