NUMBER 182

SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE USSR AND VIETNAM

by Douglass Pike

Prepared for the Kennan Institute/USIA Conference
Series on Soviet Foreign Policy, Washington, D.C.
March 2, 1984.

Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies,
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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PART I

OVERVIEW

Southeast Asia Since 1975. The post-Vietnam War era in Southeast Asia has been marked by four major developments which should be noted in passing so as to provide context.

The first of these is the immediate aftermath effect of the Vietnam War, that is, developments triggered by the fact of the war's ending and the manner in which it ended. A new strategic condition was created in the region as was a new strategic relationship among the major external powers. In Southeast Asia, first and temporarily, a geopolitical vacuum was created, followed by a balance of power struggle which polarized the region. The ASEAN nations at one pole, facing Indochina at the other, stiffened,and increased both concern for their security and determination to assume greater responsibility for it. Among the three major external powers -- the United States, the USSR and China -- a new relationship developed which also involved Japan in a different sense. American military forces were withdrawn from mainland Southeast Asia, an exodus that was important more in psychological than military terms. This caused an irresistible attraction for the USSR, luring it into the Indochina peninsula possibly further than is in its national interest. That, in turn, alarmed the Chinese and produced a change in U.S.-PRC relations. It also engendered a more basic Chinese response: to attempt to create an anti-USSR united front across Asia.

The second major post-Vietnam War development in Southeast Asia was the breakup of the communist brotherhood in Asia. Although these relationships never were as close or durable as most outsiders believed, particularly the one between the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Vietnamese Communists, no one predicted they would devolve into internecine warfare. The breakup of the China-Vietnam alliance was a product of several factors: Hanoi's growing intimacy with the USSR; Hanoi's venture into Kampuchea which was, the Chinese charge, a move to start the process of forming a Federation of Indochina, and Hanoi's mistreatment of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. The breakup of the Vietnam-Kampuchea alliance essentially was a manifestation of ancient antipathies, exacerbated by Pol Pot's efforts to indoctrinate the next generation of Khmer with militantly hostile attitudes toward Vietnamese, thus"reversing history" and moving Indochina away from federation. In part, the hostility was a result of Hanoi's manipulative efforts within the Khmer Rouge through the so called "Hanoi Five Thousand". The upshot was Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea, now bogged down, followed by China's punitive strike against Vietnam which now has subsided into a cold war between the two countries. One result of the breakup of the communist alliance was a resurgence of indigenous nationalism, by the Khmer with respect to the Vietnamese and by the Vietnamese with respect to the Chinese.

The third development was the decline and failure at nation building that settled on Indochina. Flushed with victory in 1975, Hanoi's prospect was for a prosperous, successful future -- possibly one that held a threat to the other Southeast Asian countries. But soon Vietnam was beset by economic stagnation, social malaise, internal security,

the flight of refugees as boat people and, for a moment, a two-front war. In Kampuchea, holocaust descended at once with Pol Pot, then came another war. Laos was the least altered and, in its own peculiar way, may move quickest to an arrangement acceptable to all involved. These developments appeared all the more stark against the resilience and good luck characterizing the rest of Southeast Asia. It has been an ironic and in some ways inexplicable phenomenon, the Indochinese countries losing and the rest of Southeast Asia winning the struggles of independence and nationhood. A double helix of fortune developed, upward to a vastly improved condition for the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia and down into stagnation and suffering for the people of Indochina. The two spirals appear to be continuing.

The fourth development has been the rise of regionalism in the area. On the one hand ASEAN, as an Association, flourishes, developing steadily and showing good resilience. On the other, the Indochina Federation concept moves forward perceptibly. It seems clear that regionalism will be a major historical force for the remainder of the century. The ASEAN countries, in their initial post-colonial stage, experimented seriously with regional groupings dedicated to the ideal of international non-alignment, a shimmering dream of a region isolated from the world power struggle. That notion appears to have run its course, but the institutional impulse remains, taking some form of integrated regional association. Such an impulse appears equally strong in Indochina, at least in Hanoi, and in all likelihood a full blown Federation of Indochina will be in existence by the year 2000. In any event, regionalism is a key indicator in the area to be watched and measured in attempting to determine what the future is holding.

The USSR in Asia. Southeast Asians see the USSR as a status quo power and as a European nation. Because it is alien and because of local nationalistic sentiment, Soviet efforts to control events and influence decisions in Southeast Asia frequently have been thwarted or ruined.

The USSR's central impulse in Southeast Asia has been and remains essentially ideological. Its specific orientation in attempting to influence regional policies and behavior is China. Most Soviet moves in Asia over the past 50 years have not been actions but reactions. The USSR is a counterpuncher. It has not followed any well defined and pre-determined course of action, rather over the years has reacted to unfolding events. Its experience with this reactive approach has been that considerable investment yields only modest return. Nothing seems to work very well for the Soviets in Asia, and despite the expenditure of much money and years of effort, it today has surprisingly little to show. Vietnam represents a promising exception to this historical experience, and that probably is one reason why it is so important in current USSR thinking.

There never has been much warmth or empathy between Soviet communists and the communists in Southeast Asia, not even the Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh regarded his Moscow connections as possessing great utility, but he treated Soviet communism -- beyond the few valuable lessons in organizational technique it could teach -- as irrelevant in Indochina, even counterproductive for his purposes. Vietnamese communist theoreticians today still consider Moscow's brand of communism of small use in their problem solving, although they do use it as an icon for its emotive value. On the other side, Lenin probably never thought at all about a relationship with Southeast Asia, including Indochina, while Stalin's

continental mentality kept him from developing much interest.

When Ho Chi Minh plunged into his anti-colonial struggle with the French in the Viet Minh War, he expected sturdy Moscow support. Instead, he found Moscow willing to sacrifice what for Ho were life and death interests for some marginal Soviet advantage. This left him and other ruling communists in Hanoi (most of whom still are in power today) with a memory of bitterness and distrust. The Soviet record with respect to the anti-colonial struggles in Malaysia, and with the later communist challenges in the Philippines and Indonesia, is similar to its Indochina record.

During the Vietnam War, the USSR, as leader of the international communist movement, represented one of the three major sources of support for the Vietnamese communist cause (the other two being true believers within Indochina and the pacifist and anti-American forces scattered around the world). USSR material and psychological support made it possible for the Vietnamese communists to fight a protracted war, something they could not otherwise have done. However, Soviet war policy was a mixture of pragmatic self-service and judicious commitment. Moscow was wary of entrapment, fearful of escalation, conservative in risk taking and constantly plagued by ideological dilemmas. It is clear now that throughout the war Msocow was more uncertain about the situation than was recog nized at the time. However, it managed to be on the winning side when victory came in 1975, although had there been a compromise settlement (which the Soviets long had considered likely), it would have been in an equally sound position. It managed to fund the war for the Vietnamese communists -- indeed only with USSR help could war have continued -- without this banker role devolving into a

confrontation with the United States. For the USSR it was an ideal arrangement; it financed a war against the United States, yet remained only an adversary not an enemy.

In striking a balance on the Soviet role in Southeast Asia, we should recognize and always keep in mind that in Asia particularly the USSR usually has not fared well and more often than not has been its own worst enemy.

PART II

SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE GEOPOLITICAL SCENE

Soviet Objectives. The basic USSR objective in Southeast Asia is ideological dominance, to be achieved without Soviet participation in war. This theme -- dominance without war -- explains virtually everything the USSR has done in Asia in recent times. Its objectives revolve around the desire to influence if not dominate both ideologically and geopolitically the countries bordering China. This is a regional goal, part of a broader intent to lessen Chinese influence all over Asia.

Within this goal several finite regional objectives seem clear. First, fill the vacuum left by the United States in Indochina; second, reduce U.S. influence in the region, eliminating the U.S. military presence entirely if possible; third, woo ASEAN nations (opposing ASEAN as an institution but without appearing to do so) with three levels of policy: (a) open door policy, i.e., ASEAN insulated from global power politics as a "zone of peace", (b) increased ASEAN-USSR economic and political ties that it is hoped will tilt the region toward the USSR and away from China, and (c) an ASEAN-USSR collective security arrangement, in effect a renovated SEATO aimed at containing China; fourth, improve bilateral relations in the region, particularly

with Indonesia; fifth, intimidate Japan in its efforts to move more deeply into regional affairs, and sixth, increase Soviet naval/air/military presence, develop a base system in Indochina and gain naval ascendency in the Indian Ocean.

The USSR clearly is making a renewed effort to increase its capacity to project force over long distances in Southeast Asia and to translate this into policial clout in the region. It wants to be a factor to be reckoned with when regional decisions are taken. The date the effort has manifested itself chiefly in increased intimacy with Hanoi, made possible by Vietnamese dependency on the USSR for petroleum, weapons and other necessities.

ASEAN - U.S. Response. Southeast Asia is vulnerable to Moscow pressure. The ASEAN impulse, as has been noted, was to attempt to opt out of the power struggle by embracing non-alignment. Increasingly, it appears this is being viewed in the region as a good but forlorn hope. However, ASEAN defense thinking still is in its infancy.

Basic U.S. policy with respect to the ASEAN countries should be to keep Moscow from coercing or intimidating them. The United States wants them to be self-reliant and independent, as do they themselves, but this is one thing they cannot do for themselves. The United States should be Southeast Asia's surrogate representative in Moscow.

Most of the countries of the Pacific -- chiefly China, but also Japan, the United States and ASEAN nations -- would like to see a reduction of Soviet military presence in Vietnam. Opinion on how outsiders could encourage this falls into two schools of thought. The first favors the carrot and stick approach: Vietnam should be treated with a mix of economic inducement and economic punishment, making it profitable for it to move

away from the USSR, painful if it does not. ASEAN nations and Japan generally belong to this school. The other school of thought is what might be called Maoist and is endorsed chiefly by China. It holds that far from trying to wean Vietnam away from the USSR, all interested parties should do everything possible to drive them even closer together. The calculation here is that eventually the dynamics of the relationship will cause it to self-destruct, obviously following the pattern of the 1950's China-USSR relationship.

As to bilateral relations between the USSR and individual ASEAN countries, current associations have not changed much from what they were at the end of the Vietnam War. The USSR has made gesture and overtures -- most of them symbolic -- to the various countries and generally has been politely rebuffed. It can be expected to continue its efforts.

Strategic Meaning of the USSR in Vietnam. The USSR has established a series of air and naval bases in Vietnam as part of its general augmentation of force in the Pacific. This represents a certain degree of threat to the United States and its allies. The exact nature of the threat, however, is variously interpreted by analysts and observers. A common view in influential circles in the United States and Europe is that Soviet post-Vietnam War moves in the Pacific result from a natural growing concern for a region which increasingly will come to affect USSR security and economic interests. Soviet actions therefore are normal and essentially benign, or at least not the product of some deliberate aggressive calculation. Standing opposed to this rather sanguine view--and the preponderant opinion in the U.S. government--is the contention that Soviet bases in Vietnam do

constitute a strategic threat, but one essentially psychological and useful in time of peace rather than in a total war. Most analysts believe that Moscow's military planners have concluded that Soviet bases in Vietnam would be ultra-vulnerable in the event of a war with the United States, and therefore have not incorporated their use into U.S. war scenarios. Short of total war, however, the bases can have great utility. They help encircle China, and would be useful in a limited war. They would be essential for Soviet intervention in the region, Afghan style. And such bases do intimidate Asian countries, both by representing direct Soviet military action and by identifying Vietnam with Soviet military power and thus enhancing the threat posed by Hanoi.

In general the USSR has handled the Vietnam base issue with skill and care. Soviet naval vessel visits to Vietnam (and Kampuchea) now average about five a week. There has been a quiet increase in Soviet naval deployment off Vietnam. The Vietnamese Navy has been beefed up with missile and torpedo boats, landing craft and frigates. Several hundred planes have been added to the Vietnamese Air Force. Soviet reconnaissance aircraft regularly fly out of Da Nang over the South China Sea. All of this activity increases incrementally, slowly, in typical Soviet use of the camel's-nose-in-the-tent technique.

The USSR has not forced a formal base agreement on Vietnam, nor is it likely to do so. Enlargement and increased use of Vietnamese facilities are paced so as to prevent a quantum jump in regional anxieties. Further, every Soviet military installation and activity in Vietnam can be explained or justified (at least superficially) as support for the Vietnamese armed forces in meeting the China threat. In other words, Moscow can argue that no base has been established in Vietnam for the sole benefit of the Soviet armed forces.

Soviet officials speaking privately to Americans candidly admit the fact of the new military association. They offer a rationale: that it is purely defensive, seeking only to hold back the Chinese and that it was forced on Vietnam (and the USSR) by Chinese hegemonism and attendant heightened tensions of the region. Further, say these officials, when China ceases to threaten and regional tensions evaporate, there no longer will be need for an ever -burgeoning Moscow-Hanoi military relationship. The United States can contribute to reducing Soviet military presence in Vietnam, they conclude, by embracing policies which help control China and reduce regional tension.

PART III

THE USSR AND VIETNAM

Character of the Relationship. The essential nature of the present Soviet-Vietnamese relationship is a complicated compound of history, economics, geopolitics and national psychology. Vietnam and the USSR today are bound together in an extraordinarily close, even intimate, association in military, economic, diplomatic and pscyhological terms. There now exists between the two a military alliance in all but name. Becoming a member of CEMA, Vietnam in effect joined the socialist world economic system. On the international scene, the USSR and Cuba represent Hanoi's only two close dependable associates, a fact made doubly important by Vietnam's isolation; it is surrounded by adversaries and remains largely friendless throughout the world. For these and for cultural reasons, Vietnam has great need for a relationship that provides psychic assurance, something the USSR presently supplies.

The genesis of the association in 1975, looking back on it now, was reflexive. It seems clear that Moscow rushed somewhat incautiously into the geopolitical vacuum left by the sudden end of the Vietnam War. It saw an opportunity, moved quickly to exploit it, and only later addressed itself to the implications and consequences of the move. The genesis on Vietnam's part clearly was compounded of blunder and miscalculation. The Politburo after the end of the War made a series of policy decisions that proved disastrous for the country and had the net effect of throwing Vietnam into the arms of the USSR. It was something never intended by the Politburo and not desirable from its standpoint.

The relationship is built on, and is a product of, opportunism and dependency. The USSR's moves in Indochina are in pursuit of anticipated strategic opportunities which it is prepared to seize and exploit to the maximum. At root, this is probably the sole motive behind Soviet policy and consequently the policy may last only so long as the perceived opportunities remain. Hanoi's dependency on Moscow is primarily economic and military. At one point, Moscow was supplying Vietnam with some 20 percent of the rice consumed, without which rice riots would have erupted throughout the country. Since no arms factories operate in Vietnam, the USSR must also supply all the weapons and miltiary hardware Hanoi requires to pursue its intervention in Kampuchea and defend itself against China.

Vietnam, in the past year, has managed to raise its rice production to the point of bare self-sufficiency, which means it no longer fears rice riots. However, it still is on the socialist world dole, dependent on the USSR for its petroleum, certain raw materials and weaponry. Vietnam and the USSR by now also have an extremely close financial and economic planning association. Working through the CEMA mechanism, the USSR has cornered an

increasing role in economic planning and in day-to-day administration of the economic sector. On Oct. 31, 1983, the USSR and the SRV signed what was called a Long Term Agreement of Economic Development and Scientific and Technical Cooperation, a five-year multi-billion dollar program for the economic development of Vietnam. Presumably it will be funded by the USSR and will further integrate Soviet planners and Soviet economists and technicians into the Vietnamese economic structure.

The central issue in the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship -- around which all developments revolve -- is China. In the short run, a clear identity of interest is to stand in alliance. As long as China maintains its present confrontational policy -- to "bleed" Vietnam -- Hanoi has little room for maneuver. But this is unlikely to endure. China is simply too large and to near to permit Vietnam the luxury of permanent hostility, nor is there reason to think China desires permanent intransigence. Eventually there will be a return to at least nominally friendly relations between Vietnam and China, which might or might not prove to be in Moscow's interest. The point is that Vietnam and the USSR, in facing China, are so dissimilar -- the USSR large and formidable and Vietnam small and vulnerable, to say nothing of the cultural gulf between Vietnam and the USSR and Vietnamese and Chinese cultural similarities -- that logically the two cannot in the long run hold identical national interests.

Also of central importance to the Vietnamese-Soviet relationship is Kampuchea, largely because Kampuchea is the eye of the storm in Southeast Asian instability. The situation at this moment is more or less at an impasse. No sharp differences over Kampuchea divide Moscow and Hanoi so far as can be determined; there is only a common intractable problem both would like to see resolved.

In psychological or cultural terms the Vietnamese-Soviet relationship is a meeting of opposites. There is little affinity in the association, rather is what might be termed a case of "poor chemistry". Privately the Vietnamese hold the Soviets among them in contempt, consider them racist, insensitive to things Vietnamese and largely incapable of appreciating the subtle characteristics of the Vietnamese mind, in other words, barbarians. For their part, the Soviets with extended first hand experience in Vietnam say privately the Vietnamese are very demanding of material goods and are unappreciative of the assistance provided them at considerable sacrifice by the Soviet people.

Probably the relationship carries the seeds of its own destruction, as the Chinese believe, although any marked change will not come until the present basis -- opportunism and dependency -- ends. History stands as an argument against good permanent relations. Vietnam in 2,000 years never has had permanent good relations with any country. A paradoxical law appears to be at work: any successful relationship with Vietnam is a potential catastrophe. No nation nor any group of non-Vietnamese ever has had a long term successful relationship with the Vietnamese. Not the Khmer, the Thais or the Burmese. Not the Montagnards within Vietnam or the now extinct Cham. Not the Chinese, the French or the Americans. In each were moments of mutual benefit and harmony, but each carried the destructive seeds which in the end doomed it. Perhaps Moscow will be able to surmount the challenge of history, but it is not very likely.

Berkeley, California
February 1984