

China's dilemma in East Asia

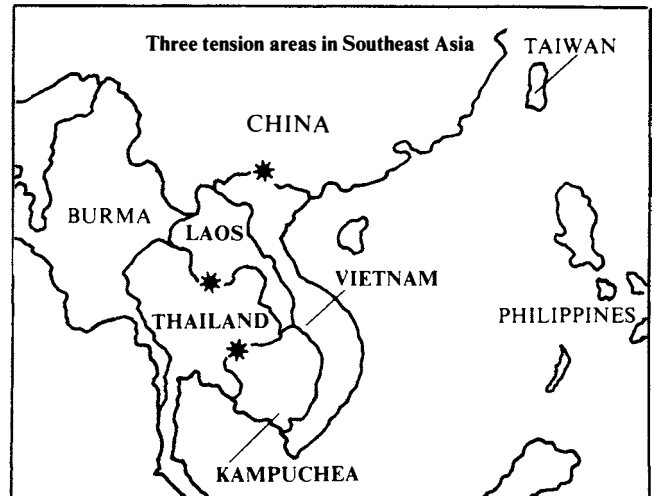
by Daniel Sneider

The memorial service for the late Japanese Premier Masayoshi Ohira in Tokyo has turned into a mini-summit meeting on the present strategic situation in East Asia. Gathered in Tokyo are President Carter (accompanied by Brzezinski, of course); Chinese Premier and Party Chairman Hua Guo-feng; Thai Premier General Prem; Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser; Khmer Rouge "Deputy Premier" Ieng Sary; and the Japanese themselves, who are still officially between governments.

The Hua-Carter meeting, taking place as we go to press, has rightfully occupied the greatest attention. While official sources have gone to great lengths to emphasize the "symbolic" nature of the almost two-hour meeting, the White House listed areas for discussion as Afghanistan, relations with the Soviet Union, bilateral relations, and the Southeast Asian situation. However, as one top member of the New York Council on Foreign Relations put it: "Sure, they will exchange views on the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, but the real item of importance is Southeast Asia. They will be probing each other for their intentions in that situation."

The "probing" takes place under conditions of great tension in the Southeast Asian region, the greatest since the February 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war. The constant political-diplomatic warfare between those two countries threatens once again to erupt onto the military plane, with telltale signs of direct fighting along the northern Vietnam-China border, Chinese charges of "violations" by Vietnam, and threats to teach Vietnam a "second lesson."

The danger of this situation is not simply a return engagement of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam—the last time that show played town it came perilously close, closer than most people knew, to a U.S.-Soviet showdown, with the Soviets intervening in support of allied



Vietnam and the United States in support of "ally" China. While Carter administration spokesmen and State Department desk officers are fond of the nuance of difference between "alliance" and terms like "parallel strategic interests," the fact remains that present U.S. policy is committed to a strategic alliance with the People's Republic of China.

The content of that alliance has been gradually evolving, passing recently into open defense and military cooperation; but it has yet to be really tested in a full-blown strategic crisis. How far will the U.S. go in defense of Peking? Is there a divergence between Peking's interests and those of the U.S.? What does Peking really want out of this relationship? These questions in one way or another will underpin the probing in Tokyo. Certainly the U.S.-China alliance is at a crucial turning point.

The present strategic crisis in Southeast Asia then must be examined from multiple viewpoints and policies. For now we take a brief look at the situation from the standpoint of the three basic sides of the "triangle"—from Peking, from Washington, and from Moscow and Hanoi. (We leave out a lesser but important side, the views of the other nations of the region itself.)

1 The view from Peking

It is Peking that faces the greatest problems in the present situation. The objective of Chinese policy, when looked at stripped of camouflage, is to carry out a long-term economic and military buildup which looks to a point sometime in the next century when China has the muscle to act as a real "superpower" in a bid for world domination. Aside from the continued problems of internal instability and the desperate weaknesses of the Chinese economy, the success of this Han ambition depends on securing (again) Chinese hegemony over the south-

ern rim of Asia as well as its position regarding Korea and Japan.

The immediate key to that is Southeast Asia although the Chinese remain deeply entwined in the affairs of South Asia as well. The Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea (Cambodia), which murdered almost half the population, was the Chinese foothold in the region, combined with the influence wielded to great effect in countries like Thailand and Singapore by the millions of the Overseas Chinese community. The greatest obstacle to Chinese domination was and is the nation of Vietnam, a dynamic people with a centuries-long history of resistance to Chinese expansion in the region.

The maintenance of the diplomatic fiction of the deposed Khmer Rouge regime and the continuation of Chinese-backed military operations inside Kampuchea since the January 1979 Vietnamese-backed overthrow of that regime have been the primary objective of Chinese policy. These in turn have served Chinese influence among the non-communist nations of ASEAN (Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines). Peking's nightmare is the consolidation of the Indochinese alliance of Laos, Kampuchea, and Vietnam, a breathing space to allow them to begin to realize the considerable economic potential of that grouping, and the establishment of some kind of entente and economic cooperation between Indochina and ASEAN.

While there have been ebbs and flows during the past year and a half, the trend of events has gradually moved out of Peking's control. The situation within Kampuchea has been stabilizing, although massive problems remain; and more importantly, despite continued public opposition to Vietnam's military presence, some of the ASEAN nations have begun to acknowledge the necessity of accepting the status quo and abandoning the fiction of recognition of the Pol Pot regime. Over the past few months Vietnamese diplomatic overtures toward ASEAN have intensified as Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, a highly able diplomat, toured the region and sought to reassure the governments of Vietnam's desire for stability in the region.

There is no doubt that these efforts were bearing fruit, particularly with Malaysia and Indonesia. Peking, of course, had deployed its own representatives, including Foreign Minister Huang Hua, on "counter-journeys." But it is well known that among many in the region who have viewed the Overseas Chinese communities within their own countries with great suspicion it is China, not Vietnam, that is considered the real threat. The Indonesians characteristically see Vietnam as a "buffer" between themselves and China.

Recent events have not really helped Peking's situation. The Thais, who are closest to Peking, staged a neat provocation on the border, and continue to allow Peking

free access and assistance in maintaining the anti-Vietnamese armed forces. Thailand did manage to induce a setback to Vietnamese diplomatic efforts at the recent ASEAN ministerial meeting. However, such setbacks are of lesser concern compared with the military reality—which is that the Vietnamese have successfully smashed a long-planned rainy-season reinforcement of the Khmer Rouge and are now delivering heavy blows to their foes along the border region.

The successful crushing of the Pol Pot remnants in Kampuchea and the disruption of the staging areas in Thailand threatens to wipe out Peking's immediate assets. The entire infrastructure, including the flow of food into the Khmer Rouge carried out through Thailand with the aid of the international relief agencies, is collapsing with every passing day. Consolidation of this situation will, with the passing of some months, bring opportunities for Hanoi to renew its diplomatic offensive in the region. The announced Indian recognition of Kampuchea will considerably aid those efforts.

This, then, is Peking's strategic dilemma. They can of course adopt last year's course, as they have been threatening to do over the past days; that is, to directly assault Vietnam, at the least "bleed" the Vietnamese and set them back. The problem with that is that the Vietnamese are even better prepared than before to meet Chinese aggression, and such a course runs a great risk of inviting Soviet intervention—an intervention that could set back Peking's 21st-century dreams by decades at least.

They must do something or lose either way. Peking's classic answer is to maneuver the Carter administration into bearing the brunt of the confrontation, positioning the U.S. into confrontation with Moscow and minimizing the direct risks to China. The stepped-up U.S. arms aid to Thailand, potential U.S. military intervention in "defense" of Thailand, deployment of U.S. naval and other forces into the region, and escalation of U.S. defense technology and potentially arms sales deliveries to China—all these are likely to be on the Chinese agenda with Carter. Thailand remains the key point because, most of all, it is the rear base for the Chinese operations into Kampuchea. This does not rule out other actions, including a Chinese attack on Vietnam (and/or Laos), in which the clear impression is given that Washington stands behind Peking's actions.

2 The view from Washington

Perhaps the most difficult aspect to assess is just what the Carter administration thinks it is doing in this situation. Increasingly the policy of the administration has been one of pure propitiation of Peking's desires and objectives. U.S. interests and policy in East Asia have

been identified almost totally with those of China. Benchmarks of that policy in the recent period included Chinese defense chief Geng Biao's visit to Washington and the lifting of restrictions on sale of defense-related technology to China, followed by the much-publicized speech by Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, which declared a public end to the policy of U.S. "even-handedness" toward the Soviets and China.

An interesting signal of prevailing views on the eve of the Tokyo meeting is the visit by Holbrooke to Peking this past week. While the visit has been described by State Department officials as a "routine" one scheduled in advance, it clearly took on new importance. Very little has been reported from the visit, but one item, reported by Japan's *Kyodo News Service*, is indicative—Holbrooke reached an agreement with the Chinese to hold regular "consultative meetings" of the two countries' "working-level defense officials" at regular intervals every three to four months. Holbrooke had flown to China from the ASEAN meeting; he was joined in Peking by Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, who apparently sought to reassure Peking about the continuity of U.S. policy in the context of the election-year situation.

The common use by Washington and Peking of a formula linking the issue of Afghanistan with that of Kampuchea is evidence of how far U.S. policy has gone in placing the United States behind Peking's plans, including of course the maintenance of their Pol Pot assets. Within ASEAN, the U.S. has deployed its considerable remaining influence in support of the Chinese view of events. All this suggests, taking into account Brzezinski's well-known obsequious attitude toward Peking, that Washington will be all too ready to "aim to please" the Chinese. Interviewed on Japanese television just before his meeting with Hua, Carter openly called for a triangular U.S.-Japanese-Chinese axis as a "means by which we can share our long-range strategic concern to minimize the threat of the Soviet military buildup."

3 The view from Moscow and Hanoi

The last crucial element is Vietnam and its Soviet allies. While the views of Hanoi and Moscow are not necessarily identical, there is clearly a great degree of closeness under the present circumstances. The top Vietnamese leadership, led by Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Le Duan and Premier Pham Van Dong, met with their Soviet counterparts in Moscow last week. The Soviet leadership delivered a clear statement of support for Vietnam and a warning to Peking not to attempt an escalation of the present tensions.

On the official level, the final communiqué gave a clear statement of their views on the situation in South-

east Asia. It states: "They noted that with the support of the United States, Peking wants to destabilize the situation in the area of Indochina, is organizing for this purpose military demonstrations on the Sino-Vietnamese border, is encouraging provocations by the remnants of the Pol Pot bands against the People's Republic of Kampuchea, and is exerting undisguised pressure on ASEAN member states. The recent complications on the Thai-Kampuchean border are also directly connected with Peking's hegemonistic policy. Assertion of an atmosphere of peace and stability in that region would accord with the vital interests of the countries of Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union displays understanding and approval of the actions and initiatives of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea and also other countries of Southeast Asia directed at the attainment of this aim."

Neither Moscow nor Hanoi is in any mood for compromise regarding Peking. It is known that during the last war with China, the Vietnamese made it clear that they did not want direct Soviet intervention, and Vietnamese diplomatic officials would not comment on the possibility of Soviet attack on China. Sources in the Indian capital of New Delhi now report a changed attitude on this question, with the Vietnamese clearly acknowledging that Soviet retaliation against a Chinese attack is a serious possibility.

At the same time, neither country desires such a situation. Despite their military prowess and their readiness to battle the hated Chinese, the Vietnamese have paid a heavy price—particularly in setbacks to their economy and postwar reconstruction plans as a result of the Chinese war and the burden of their present defense requirements in Vietnam and Kampuchea. The Vietnamese seek a period of some stability, perhaps without a diminution of the Chinese threat, to tackle their severe economic problems. Moscow is providing large-scale economic aid to the Indochinese states, and seeks stability in the region to pursue its own diplomatic-political inroads among the ASEAN states; the Soviets are therefore likely to share this desire.

The now legendary toughness of the Vietnamese leadership suggests that they will not go out of their way to seek accommodation with Peking. They are also wary, as is Moscow, of the U.S.-China relationship; on July 7 the Vietnamese Army daily *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, commenting on Holbrooke's visit to Peking and the Carter-Hua meeting, cited a "new plot" by the two against Vietnam. In short, the Vietnamese are ready for war but will look to avoid it. They will also seek to press home to ASEAN that the path of alliance with the U.S.-China axis will be fruitless, and that eventual detente and even cooperation with Indochina can provide stability for everyone in the region.