

# A journey to Vietnam: its true strengths and weaknesses

by Daniel Sneider, Asia Editor

*"Khong Co Gi Quy Hon Doc Lap Tu Do"*—in English this means, "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." This most famous slogan of the late Vietnamese President and nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh can be found on walls, on signboards, and on giant billboard paintings from the smallest village of Vietnam to its largest cities.

The average official in Washington will quickly sneer and dismiss such an exhortation as mere "propaganda." Such reactions reveal far more about the extent to which Washington, in all its aspects, remains a prisoner of the same myths and illusions that were so dramatically shattered by reality during the Vietnam war.

During almost two weeks of this writer's tour of Vietnam, a tour which took me from a point in the north on Vietnam's border with China, to the capital of Hanoi and south to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), I had a chance to talk with tens of Vietnamese officials, including lengthy informal and private discussions of a wide-ranging nature, as well as an hour-and-a-half exclusive interview (printed below) with Vietnam's respected Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach.

Talking one August afternoon in Hanoi with a senior political leader of Vietnam, I was told some "war stories" which in a very particular way illustrate the gap between Washington's illusion and reality. The Vietnamese leader told me with unconcealed ironic humor about "how we defeated the B-52," illustrating for me how it was that a "small country can defeat a big country."

"The Americans," he recounted, "had sown electronic devices to detect our troop movements. Our soldiers, they had great imagination. They took an empty barrel of oil and they dragged it around the device. The device gave signals that there is a big convoy, so the B-52s came in, and bombed and bombed."

"One soldier told us, 'I can defeat the B-52 with a box of matches and a loaf of bread.' The U.S. aircraft were looking in the jungle for our troop concentrations. So

here was a unit of our army. The one soldier takes with him the bread and the matches and goes very far away from the unit. Very deep in the jungle, he lit a fire—smoke; lit another fire—smoke; and so on. Then he runs very far away and waits there. To wait, he must eat—there is the bread, only bread not like the GIs. Soon the B-52 comes—a big concentration of troops they think, and they bomb and bomb."

With this last note, the official laughed at the illusions which no doubt recorded such bombings as many "kills" on McNamara's Pentagon computers.

The computers and their operators are still there. So are the myths used to satisfy the U.S. policy of support for the Pol Pot butchers of Cambodia, the clients of our "ally," the Peking regime. Vietnam is portrayed as an armed machine, bent only on conquest, ready to gobble up Thailand after Cambodia; as a country acting as mere puppets of the Soviet Union; and, in apparent contradiction to all this, as a country in severe economic and social crisis, which can be damaged, if not toppled, by a policy of imposing isolation through political, economic, and military pressure.

Like the light that passes through a door left slightly ajar, there is a sliver of truth in such myths but only enough to distort, not to illuminate reality.

## **Vietnam: poverty with determination**

The image of "power" associated with Vietnam, a power of some "dark," ruthless kind, is jarred from the very first moment of a visitor's arrival in Hanoi. International flights arrive at an airfield outside Hanoi that consists of one airstrip and a "terminal" little more than a shed. As you drive out, bomb craters left from the American bombing can still be seen pockmarking the area around the field. Road traffic backs up as you approach Hanoi, choked up at the only bridge over the Red River, a bridge partially destroyed by American bombing and patched up to allow one lane of traffic to

pass slowly into the city.

Hanoi itself is an old city, in many parts a faded but preserved French colonial center in its appearance, a city still recovering from 30 years of war. The sound of the city is the quiet swish of the tens and hundreds of bicycles, which are the main occupants of the city's streets.

The overall impression is one of striking austerity of life, a combination of the poverty common to all developing countries with the austerity and discipline of a population that has endured conditions of war and semi-blockade since the founding of the Vietnamese republic by Ho Chi Minh in late 1945. Particularly in the north, one is struck by both the simplicity of life and the apparent determination of the population, out of sheer patriotism, to endure it.

It is difficult to imagine that a country as poor as Vietnam fought and won the wars against the French and the Americans—and even more difficult to see this as the capital of a Southeast Asian juggernaut ready to roll over countries at will. Vietnamese officials, including the Foreign Minister, are frank in admitting the tremendous economic difficulties that Vietnam is grappling with. The basic infrastructure of the economy—transport, power, and industrial inputs—is very slowly emerging from the damage of war, and Vietnamese expectations are extremely modest in this area. Total electricity production, for example, is only 5,000 megawatts for this country of 56 million, and Vietnamese officials plan to add only 1,000 megawatts over the next five-year-plan period. With outside aid, vital for the capital-goods sector, coming almost entirely from only the socialist bloc, these plans are a product of necessity rather than desire.

The main aim for the period ahead is to solve food shortages, largely a result of several years of bad weather combined with a lack of infrastructure and inputs, such as chemical fertilizers and machinery. While this year's harvest promises to be good, restoring production to the post-war high of 1976 levels, Vietnam is a country that has no chemical fertilizer plants at all: its only source of such inputs is phosphate mines located in the northwest and destroyed by the Chinese during the 1979 invasion.

Any idea, however, that such difficulties are beyond the reach of the Vietnamese leadership to solve, or that they will bring about serious political problems in the country, is sheer wishful thinking. I discussed this with an Asian diplomat resident in Hanoi. "The most impressive thing here," he told me, "is the determination for independence." "Yes," he said, "there are hardships and some discontent, but there is no opposition to the leadership, who are Vietnamese first and Vietnamese last."

The Asian diplomat told me there is a question of

succession to the next generation of leaders, but he finds no evidence to contradict the impression that the current leadership is very strong. "Their difficulties will not be overcome in a few years," he told me, "but the most important thing is that the leadership acknowledges the difficulties exist and knows what they are. The big problem in the economy is the lack of managerial and technical skills—they know what to do but they cannot always carry it out.

"How is it," he asked then, "the U.S. has such vast means for collecting information but you always misunderstand reality here?"

### **Southeast Asian realities**

The same question is equally relevant when it comes to Vietnamese foreign policy and the situation in Southeast Asia. The shadow of the Chinese, and the danger of a second large-scale Chinese invasion of Vietnam, is without a doubt the single most important factor today in shaping Vietnamese foreign policy. The current confrontation between the Indochinese countries—Laos, Vietnam, Kampuchea—and the ASEAN countries—Thailand, Malaysia, Indochina, Singapore, and the Philippines—is understood in Hanoi as a product of Chinese efforts to keep these two groups of Southeast Asian states apart. Even American hostility towards Vietnam is viewed as a product of Chinese manipulation and the subordination of U.S. policy to that of Peking.

The singular importance of China, contrary to the views of both Peking and Washington, has not produced fear in Vietnam. The Vietnamese are strikingly confident that they will defeat Chinese efforts to destroy them and that, in good time, they will reach a *modus vivendi* with the rest of the Southeast Asian countries, based on a common understanding of the long-term Chinese threat to the region.

The Vietnamese, when talking of China, think and talk in terms of centuries, even millennia, of Vietnam's struggle against Chinese domination and control. I listened to a tour guide in the Vietnamese war museum in Hanoi tell a group of ordinary Vietnamese about the exploits of Vietnamese heroes a thousand years ago in battles against the Chinese.

A senior Vietnamese foreign ministry official, who had participated in the post-'79 border negotiations with the Chinese, told me that the Chinese have contempt for Vietnam. "They are Great Han chauvinists," he told me, "and they view us as a 'little country.'" The official told me there are three options in the region: things will stay the same; ASEAN will agree to talk with Vietnam and its allies; or the Chinese will attack again. In the last case, he said, "we will defeat them—without any direct help by the Soviet Union."

Privately, I was told that Vietnamese officials believe that the ASEAN countries will inevitably come around

and enter into direct negotiations with the Indochinese countries, negotiations that will establish a regional understanding which will include ASEAN acceptance of the political status quo in Indochina, and the Vietnam-backed government in Kampuchea. The Vietnamese confidence is based on two crucial facts—one that the key countries in ASEAN, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, and to a lesser extent the Philippines, agree that China, not Vietnam, is the threat to stability in the region.

The Vietnamese thinking on ASEAN views is confirmed by recent reports of the dispatch of semi-secret envoys from Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines to Hanoi in the past month to keep open channels of talks between the various countries. According to Vietnamese sources, the Malaysian envoy told the Vietnamese to ignore its diplomatic posture regarding Kampuchea as a current necessity and assured the Vietnamese that they agreed with them completely on the “Chinese threat.”

The second crucial fact flows from this first reality—that the obstacle within ASEAN to movement toward serious talks, namely the position of the Thai government, will be worn down in time. It is well known that as long as the Thais continue to support a policy of confrontation with Indochina, manifested in the use of Thai territory as a base for Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge and as a conduit for Chinese arms to the Pol Pot and allied forces, ASEAN’s public posture will not change. However it is equally true that the Thais are therefore under great pressure from within ASEAN on one side, and from the Vietnamese on the other, to soften, if not shift, their stance.

The Vietnamese view, communicated to me in private and stated by the Foreign Minister in his interview with me, boils down to the belief that Vietnamese determination not to yield to what they see as Chinese-U.S. pressure will outlast the will of an unstable Thai regime. A Vietnamese foreign ministry official specializing in this region asked me insistently why the U.S. doesn’t comprehend the failure of its policy as manifested in the recent attempted Thai military coup and the ensuing political turmoil in the country. It was rather difficult for me to explain to him there are few people in Washington able to recognize that such realities even exist.

### **Russia and America**

Perhaps the final, and for me most important, irony in the gap between American illusion and the Vietnamese reality, is on the question of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. After 20 years of war, when there are few people in official and unofficial American circles willing even to contemplate the most basic step of establishing normal diplomatic relations between the two countries,

I found the Vietnamese open, even eager, to establish relations with the United States.

In every conversation I had with officials from a wide range of ministries and responsibilities, I was questioned about U.S. policy toward Vietnam and about the attitude of the new U.S. administration. Almost without exception, I found my own views far more pessimistic about such prospects in comparison to those of the Vietnamese, who, even at this point, are far more willing to give the new administration the benefit of the doubt. The consensual view, though I was given to understand not the only view, is that U.S. policies toward Vietnam and the region are still not fully formed and that the source of problems lies in Peking much more than in Washington.

Such openness toward the United States—reflected in the friendly treatment I myself received—should not, however, be seen as weakness on Vietnam’s part. As the Foreign Minister emphasized, they are willing to wait, “a thousand years” if necessary.

The same reality can be seen in relation to the issue of the Vietnamese relationship with the Soviet Union. While there are numerous stories reported of anti-Soviet views being widespread in Vietnam, I did not myself encounter this. There is naturally a feeling in Vietnam that the Soviets stood by them during the war and, equally important, that they share with the Soviet Union a common enemy in China.

Openness toward the United States, then, does not translate into anti-Sovietism. Rather the Vietnamese clearly have no desire to be dependent on *any* power—as the Foreign Minister told me, the Vietnamese did not fight for 35 years for their independence “to sell it for food or something.” Clearly as well, the Vietnamese economy suffers from the U.S. embargo, particularly in the south where spare parts for American-made equipment are not available. But again they have no intention to sell themselves to the U.S.—or the Soviets—for spare parts.

In the end, it is now clear to me, the U.S. will end up the real loser in Southeast Asia. We have staked ourselves entirely on the Peking regime, on lending American prestige and power to Chinese ends. In the process we have blinded ourselves to the fact, which any fool can see, that the future vector of development in the region is going against the Chinese, not with them.

Ironically enough, we once justified our war against Vietnam as a war against “Chinese communism.” Today we justify our war against Vietnam as support for that same Chinese communism. Ultimately the most devastating thing is what we are *not* doing, the opportunities that are being lost—again—for the establishment of a real American national interest in this region, an interest in a stable and economically developing Southeast Asia.