
Interview

Vietnam's Foreign Minister Thach on China, ASEAN, and the U.S.



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The following interview with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Nguyen Co Thach, was conducted by EIR's Asia Editor, Daniel Sneider in Hanoi, Vietnam, on Aug. 12. Both the questions and answers were given in English.

Nguyen Co Thach is a veteran Vietnamese diplomat and member of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Thach was deputy to Le Duc Tho, the chief of the Vietnamese negotiating team at the Paris peace negotiations and is considered an expert on the United States. He became Foreign Minister about two years ago.

Sneider: The first thing I want to ask you is for your assessment of the results of the United Nations conference on Kampuchea.

Thach: If you take only the conference, that is not a complete picture. You must see a complex of many things, including the conference. Since March 1981, they [the opponents of the present Cambodian government] would like to set up a united front so that in the international conference they could have not Pol Pot, but Pol Pot and a mask.

Secondly, from May, they have prepared to escalate the military hostility in Kampuchea. They have given a big supply of arms to Pol Pot from May.

So their intention was that on July 13, the conference is there, there is a united front, and an escalation of hostilities. They could have a big impact.

But on July 13 there is no united front, there is no escalation of military hostilities—so the conference is alone. Now, secondly, the conference. The number of participants is 79 [member-states of the U.N.] and 14 observers. But take the 79—if we compare it with the countries who had voted for the conference, it was 97. And now only 79. So at least [a difference of] 20, because in the 79 there are two countries who had not voted for the conference, Finland and Sierra Leone. So 20 countries who had voted for the conference did not come to the conference.

The number 79 is a big number, but in June it was the last day to register for the conference. On June 15 there were only 40 countries, participants, so they must delay

the date for participants to register. So now there is no deadline for registration. They said that every country could participate even in the last session of the conference. So from June 15 to the end of the conference, there were 39 additions. You can look—40 and 39—half were the hard core of the conference. The 39, they must come under pressure: Saudi Arabia, for example. Saudi Arabia had given a reply to the Secretary General that they would not participate. But after, under American pressure, they must come. Burundi's President, he had declared that Burundi will not participate. In the end, Burundi must participate. Very interesting.

The 40 countries were only the Western countries and Asian countries, about 11 Asian countries—that means China, Japan, ASEAN, and South Asian countries, excluding India. So mostly they are all imperialist countries, or colonialist countries, and China, and their allies. And 39 countries in addition, they are mostly from Africa and Latin American, the Arab countries, so most of them are non-aligned countries and under pressure. The non-participants are the socialist countries and 56 non-aligned countries, compared to 39 non-aligned participants.

Sneider: You have studied these numbers very carefully.

Thach: Yes. It is very, very important. You know among the non-participants is India—it is very important. So the participants were mostly the countries who had committed aggression against other countries, and who are against the independence movement, and who are in military blocs. But the non-participant countries are mostly the countries who are fighting for peace and independence.

There are two sides—two sides very clearly. And two sides on the matter of Kampuchea. It is very interesting that the number is big, but it doesn't mean that they have covered all opinions on the Kampuchean problem. Only one side. So it is one hand clapping [laughs].

Secondly, on the resolution [of the conference]. The resolution differs from the United Nations resolutions of 1979 and '80. In 1979 they asked for immediate withdrawal of Vietnamese forces. In 1980 they ask for phased

withdrawal. But in this conference the withdrawal is a matter of negotiation. It is different.

Especially if you see their contradictions. They are united on the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces but they have divergence on who will control Kampuchea after the withdrawal. Only China would like to have Pol Pot come back. The others, they would like not to accept the return of Pol Pot. But in the last minute, all the participants, ASEAN, America, and so on, they must accept the position of China. And China was supported only by Pakistan and Chile. But ASEAN, they are against [the Chinese position]; the Americans, they are against.

Why can the Chinese, supported by only two others, win, can impose their position? Because China didn't care about whether the conference succeeded or not. But others, they are afraid the conference will be a failure. They must accept the position of China—that means China can dictate their will.

That is very important. That means, who is the main author of the struggle in Southeast Asia? It is China. Now the Chinese appear to be the author of these problems. They have exposed themselves. ASEAN, they are exposed as only having to accept or to support the Chinese position.

Sneider: Do you have some signs that the ASEAN position is gradually shifting in a more positive way, if you look at the Manila meeting of ASEAN. . . .

Thach: I will tell you. Let me finish on the conference. Thirdly, on this conference, they would like to put the emphasis on the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces. On the contrary, the emphasis is on the condemnation of Pol Pot. Because Haig or others, they come there to support the representation of Pol Pot, but at the same time they must defend themselves against the criticism at home. At the same time, they vote for Pol Pot, they support Pol Pot, but they condemn, violently condemn, Pol Pot. And not the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese were condemned, but not as strongly as Pol Pot.

One thing is very important. Everybody sees, with the resolution, that means Pol Pot will come back. Why? Because the Chinese opposed the disarming of Pol Pot and others would like to disarm Pol Pot, disarm all Kampucheans. All Kampucheans means especially Pol Pot, because they are the strongest [external] forces, but the Chinese say no disarming of Kampuchean forces; that means they would like to have Pol Pot come back. They have refused to have U.N. troops in Kampuchea after a Vietnamese withdrawal and they are against the setting up of a coalition government [in the resolution—D.S.]. That means they would like to maintain the Pol Pot government and not a coalition government.

The military forces of Pol Pot are stronger. Secondly, the legal government [in the U.N.—D.S.] is Pol Pot. That means the return of Pol Pot. It is very interesting.

That means everybody can see the scheme of China—that means that China must dictate. We can see that ASEAN, the Americans, they support only China. Supporting China, that means the return of Pol Pot.

Sneider: Normally the Chinese are very clever. They like to disguise their activities. But this time they were not so clever, it seems to me. Why do you think they acted in this way?

Thach: Normally they are very clever. In one thing they are not very clever—they stick to their ambitions. This is one thing that is not clever.

For instance, the invasion of Vietnam. I think it was not wise. Very stupid, very stupid to invade Vietnam. But they must do that, because to have this collusion with the United States, they must create some crisis so that the interests of the United States and China could be combined.

Sneider: That's a very interesting idea. In other words, what you are saying is that the Chinese must create the circumstances to force the United States to do what they want them to do?

Thach: Right. In the case of the aggression against Vietnam, you must consider the Cambodian problem first. After the liberation of Phnom Penh in 1979, the Chinese have helped Pol Pot and stopped helping us. In 1976—Heng Samrin or Hun Sen [Foreign Minister of Cambodia] had told me the other day when I was in Phnom Penh—they [the Chinese] advised Pol Pot to build up bases in the jungle so that in the war with Vietnam, if they must retreat, they have the bases in the jungle.

Sneider: In 1976?

Thach: Yes. I don't know if you have read it or not—I have read also the memoirs of Enver Hoxha of Albania. Enver Hoxha had written that in 1969 he was advised by the Chinese how to fight against the Soviet Union. They must also prepare bases in the mountains. Aha! The same thing in Albania and the same thing in Cambodia. I think they would like to encourage [a renewed Pol Pot attack on Vietnam]—because the Pol Potists had illusions that they liberated Phnom Penh before the Vietnamese [liberated the south], so they are much stronger than the Vietnamese.

If you had read the Sihanouk memoirs, it is very important. What was the thinking Pol Pot had? They had great illusions to rebuild the Angkor empire: to recuperate the territory of southern Vietnam, in Thailand, in Laos, and so on, to have a very big empire.

So the Chinese have encouraged them. They had built some bases near Phnom Penh, even air bases, for retreat if they were beaten. They encouraged them to attack Vietnam, and if this war between Vietnam and Cambodia

in the time of Pol Pot is a big war, then they would have a polarization of the forces in Southeast Asia.

Sneider: You are saying that the original intention of China was to have a very big war between Vietnam and Cambodia. Now that intention was disrupted. . . .

Thach: That's right. But not only in Cambodia, but also on the frontier between Vietnam and China, they began to have border incidents from 1974. In 1974 they invaded the Paracel Islands. They combined in the north and the south to put pressure on us.

If you go back to history, from the 10th century to the 18th century, the Chinese, when they invaded Vietnam 10 times or 11 times, it was always by two directions—one from the north, and one from the south. If you remember, in 1978, the Chinese had proposed an alliance between China and ASEAN. Li Hsien Nien [then Peking's Vice-Premier], when he was in the Philippines, had proposed this kind of alliance—the united front. Indonesia and Malaysia particularly had rejected it.

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping had proposed to be NATO in the East. But these things could not come to reality. They think a big crisis in southeast Asia will oppose ASEAN and Vietnam, a crisis to create the opposition of ASEAN and Vietnam. For instance, in Europe they would like to oppose NATO and the Warsaw Pact. In the world, they would like to oppose the United States and the Soviet Union. And here they would like to oppose ASEAN and Vietnam. Because, from 1976-78, we had many efforts to have cooperation between Vietnam, Laos, and ASEAN. My Prime Minister was touring Southeast Asia. So they would like to defeat these initiatives and to create opposition. If this cooperation between ASEAN and Indochina could be realized, it is very bad for China.

Sneider: Look at the situation now. All right, this U.N. conference is a failure. The ASEAN countries, even if they did give in to China at the conference, nonetheless, at least what I perceive, is that there is a gradual movement of ASEAN toward the necessity of negotiations with the Indochinese countries. And if nothing disrupts that movement, then eventually it will reach a certain point.

Thach: I agree with you that there are many eventualities. We think that the first eventuality is that the present situation goes on, that means more or less the same as from 1979 up till now. The second eventuality is that if they see, they realize, that the two years of confrontation from 1979 up to now has not been beneficial for them and not beneficial for Vietnam, but more beneficial to China. But even between Vietnam, or Indochina, and ASEAN, who has paid much more? It is ASEAN, not Indochina.

Because you see the situation in Cambodia is improv-

ing. The situation in Vietnam, we have many difficulties, but it is improving, and consolidating. They have many coups d'état there in Thailand. If they see that they are paying much more than the Indochinese; secondly, if they see that the international conference—the commission for negotiation—will not work, our proposal for a regional conference or regional consultations could have some more strength. At least, if they could not accept it for the time being, I think, year by year, this idea of regional negotiations will take force.

Sneider: Do you see now a narrowing of the differences between the Indochina position and the ASEAN position? What would you describe as the major points of disagreement between the two?

Thach: For Indochina there is no question of negotiation on the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces with ASEAN, because [the presence of] Vietnamese forces [in Cambodia is] linked to the Chinese threat. So there is no negotiation with them. But we can withdraw partially if they stop their help to Pol Pot and the Chinese on the border [with Thailand—D.S.], withdraw partially. I think the main disagreement is on the total withdrawal, but on the partial withdrawal we can talk.

Sneider: You mean on the conditions under which that withdrawal would take place?

Thach: Yes. And you know I think another problem, which is much more important for both sides, is peace and stability in Southeast Asia. I think in the confrontation now, we paid, they paid, but they paid much more than the Indochinese. It is in the common interest to have peace and stability. That means there is some kind of peaceful co-existence between the two groups of countries in Southeast Asia. But if they don't accept this, we don't mind, because this situation could drag on, and we don't mind whether they accept it or not, whether they accept this kind of solidarity between the three Indochinese states or not, because we exist and they cannot do *anything* to change this situation. That is the main problem—they cannot do anything to change this state of affairs.

Sneider: What do you think the Chinese are thinking right now, given that they are watching this process? They can also see into the future, the eventualities that are there. What is their immediate objective?

Thach: Their immediate objective is to maintain the confrontation between the two groups of countries.

Sneider: How do they do that?

Thach: At least if they can gain Thailand, and maintain the supply of arms through Thailand to Pol Pot on the border. At the same time they will put military pressure on the border between Vietnam and China and between



Daniel Snieder/NSIPS

One of the Friendship Pass military outposts, a few kilometers from the Chinese border.

Laos and China. And they give them [Thailand, et al.] some illusion that Vietnam cannot endure many years, that within three or five years, Vietnam will collapse.

Sneider: I was going to ask you about this question because is not only the Chinese. . . .

Thach: But others.

Sneider: Specifically Secretary Haig, because he and other officials have said that the U.S. will maintain economic, political, diplomatic, military pressure; Vietnam will be isolated and will have a crisis. What is your response to that view?

Thach: You must draw the lessons from these two and a half years, 1979 up to now. What happened? We have difficulties in the economic field; but now the situation has changed a little, in the positive sense. I think it is the opinion of all foreigners here.

Secondly, who has suffered this state of affairs here?

It is not the Vietnamese; not the Cambodians. The Cambodians now are strong enough, and Pol Pot—they say that Pol Pot has about 40,000 soldiers and Pol Pot

can do something very, very noisy during the international conference. But—nothing! During the general elections in Cambodia, they would like to sabotage the elections, but nothing happened. Why is this? These 40,000 soldiers, they could not do anything, because there is no support from the people. Very important.

We are very poor. You can see this in the street. But nobody can say that Vietnam is the most vulnerable country in Southeast Asia. And nobody can say that Thailand is the most stable country in Southeast Asia [laughs]. And thirdly, the difficulties are very big for us, but those difficulties are not the biggest during these 35 years. How can we collapse if it is not the biggest difficulties? We can overcome [them]; it is not the biggest.

I tell you, there was a French journalist who came here and asked me a question: “Your people have suffered 35 years of sacrifice. How long can you force your people to endure more sacrifice?” It is a very intelligent question. I have told him. I personally, if I accept all this sacrifice, I will refuse to have sacrifice only. But sacrifice to gain something—I can accept more sacrifice.

I told him of my visit to my native village, 80 kilometers from Hanoi. My village was very poor during the French domination. The people of my village were well known, because they were the best labor force for the rubber plantations, or for mines etc., because they were very poor. In all the village we had only one brick house; it was the chief of the village. In all the village we had only one bicycle, of the chief of the village.

Now I come back. I see that all houses are of brick. Every family has two or three bicycles. They are people who could not ride bicycles, but they buy the bicycle as furniture in their house. In my country, the bicycle is some criterion for—it is like cars for your country. So I have asked my countrymen in this village, if the Chinese come here, will you fight against them? “Why not? If we don’t fight they will take all these bicycles and destroy all these houses.” These are the fruits of our labor, our fortune.

* The standard of living in the city is coming down, for the intellectuals; for the people who were working in the former administration, it is coming down. But for myself, I am very lucky, because all my life before, I was only in jail or in the jungle. I am here.

Sneider: The question that the French journalist asked you. I must admit that, not in the same sense, this also is in my mind. I am looking around and I can see that life here is hard. . . .

Thach: Very hard, in comparison with other countries. In comparison with the past, it is not as hard as in the past; much better than before.

Sneider: But, in the recent period in terms of the discussions in your National Assembly and in some talks I’ve had with people here, people admit that there is a problem of motivation of the workers and the peasants.

Thach: Right now there is more motivation, before only patriotism and so on, but now we combine the three interests: the interest of the motherland; the interest of the collectivity; the individual interest. There are new measures, for instance, for economic development in the countryside: the piecework system.

Take agricultural cultivation. You have eight main types of work; five are cooperative labor, but three are distributed for personal responsibility. And they will gain more or less if they do good work in these three areas. For instance, irrigation is for the collective, not for the individual; the seeds; the fertilizer; the plowing; pesticides, these five things must be in the care of the collectivity because the individual cannot do it alone. But for the individual—the planting [transplanting]; secondly, the everyday care; thirdly the harvest—these three types of work must be looked after by individuals. The harvest is the last work and the most important. So if the peasants are looking after this work, they put more care,

and they will gain more or less if they put less or more attention. This is the motivation.

Or in the factory, we are now thinking about the same thing. Before we had only the interests of the motherland and the interests of the collectivity. We didn’t care about the work of the individual; now we must look after the work and the interests of the individual too.

Sneider: I don’t think that General Haig’s illusions will become reality.

Thach: No, never. Illusions are illusions.

Sneider: But I can see, in terms of the economic development of Vietnam, that you need some important assistance from outside, particularly large-scale capital goods imports, not the things that you can do yourself, but the technology and so on that you need from the outside. In that sense I can see that the efforts to isolate Vietnam may slow down your progress somewhat.

Thach: If you look from one aspect, you can say that it could slow down or delay our development. From the other aspect, it is not right. Because—the blockade of the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1933—it could be used to motivate the population. We say that America, they would like to blockade us, strangle us, so we must make much effort.

Here we can accept a very simple life. For instance, somebody asked me last year: how about the food situation? I had told them we need 18 million tons of rice, but this year we have only 15 million tons (that is last year, this year is a very good harvest). They ask me, how to bridge the gap? I told them, it is very easy. For them it is very difficult, for us it is very easy. Why? We can get 1 million [tons] from the Soviet Union. It left 2 million [tons]. One million, we grow shorter-growing plants, vegetables, potatoes, and so on. It left 1 million. It is very difficult? Tighten the belt.

During the past we were hungry many times. Two and a half million died of starvation during the French time. We have difficulties, but not as during the French time. And this year, we have a good harvest, very fortunate.

Sneider: I must ask you another question. Haig and the Chinese (they both speak the same language), they say that Vietnam is acting as an instrument of the Soviet Union; Vietnam only survives because of Soviet aid, and therefore the reason we have to oppose Vietnam is because this is opposition to the Soviet Union. I think recently the Singapore Deputy Prime Minister said the same thing. How do you respond to this?

Thach: [Laughs.] Yes, very interesting. We have co-existed with China for at least 4,000 years. And the Chinese have invaded Vietnam 12 times and subjugated Vietnam for 1,000 years before the birth of the Soviet Union

[laughs again].

So it is only a pretext. When the Ming, the Ching dynasties invaded Vietnam—because we have the Soviet Union? No. Secondly, Enver Hoxha of Albania is very critical against the Soviet Union. Why have the Chinese stopped their aid [to Albania]?

This is not the reason. Somebody put another question: “If you are relying on the Soviet Union, be careful. One day they will withdraw their aid, and it will be very difficult.” They don’t know. Because all these 35 years, if there is no Soviet Union, we could not defend our independence vis-à-vis China, the French, the Americans. The Soviet Union has always had trouble with the United States, and now they have trouble with China. And we have the same trouble; we have common interests.

Sneider: Isn’t there the danger that Vietnam may become too dependent on the Soviet Union as the only supplier of economic assistance?

Thach: If you read the memoirs of Nixon and Kissinger, you will see that when Kissinger and Nixon visited China, China had supported the schemes of Nixon against Vietnam. But when they visited the Soviet Union, they met very hard conditions of Soviet Union supporting Vietnam. It is very clear.

Secondly, who has the biggest concern for, or who has the biggest criticism of, Vietnam having support from the Soviet Union? It is the United States. It is China. It is ASEAN countries, Singapore. And who are these countries? They are always against the independence of Vietnam, and now they are the most concerned about the independence of Vietnam [laughs]!

When the French had invaded Vietnam, they said the French war is to deal with the expansion of communism from China and the Soviet Union because Vietnam is the ally of China and the Soviet Union. American war—the same pretext. Now China: it is very interesting that China uses the same pretext. The thieves crying thief!

When my President, Ho Chi Minh—in September 1954, after the Geneva agreement—when he came to Hanoi, there was some foreign journalist who put a question: “How do you comment on the opinion that Vietnam is a satellite of the Soviet Union and China?” It was in 1954. He declared that it is a silly question. You see this is a point of honor for Vietnam, because we have been fighting for 35 years for our independence. It is not to sell our independence for food or something.

Sneider: There is an argument being made now by some journalists who are saying that Haig is wrong, because the result of these policies. . . .

Thach: Is to throw Vietnam into the arms of the Soviet Union. This is not true. Before I received you this afternoon, I had received a French journalist. He asked me,

“There are some people in France who don’t believe in your overtures to the West, because you are cooperating in all fields with the Soviet Union. It is only to deceive the West.”

I told them, even the Soviet Union would like to have overtures to the West, even the Soviet Union [laughs].

Sneider: I don’t know what expectations you had regarding the Reagan administration. What are your reactions so far?

Thach: This question also has been asked to me by many journalists. I would like to tell you: I think he is not as much a hawk as Nixon. Perhaps the most hawkish was Nixon, and Nixon had signed the Paris agreement with Vietnam.

For us, always for the Vietnamese, we always foresee two eventualities. We must prepare for the worst, but hope for the better, and prepare for the worst so we never are caught by surprise.

Some people have asked me about normalization [of relations] with the United States. I have told them that we would like to have normalization, because it is in the interest of Vietnam, in the interest of America, and in the interest of Southeast Asia. But we are prepared to have no normalization, because we have existed 4,000 years without normalization and we can exist some more [laughs], or some thousand years more. Somebody put some further question about Reagan. I have told them we have experience with seven American Presidents, the dovish and the hawkish Presidents. But we hope that President Reagan will not do worse than Johnson and Nixon. I think that they could not do worse than Johnson and Nixon.

Sneider: Let’s say relations are normalized between the U.S. and Vietnam. Could you visualize what kind of relations we would have? For example, could you visualize large-scale economic relations between Vietnam and the United States?

Thach: I am not very optimistic, because now we think that if the United States would like to develop relations, we are ready, but I think that the United States, they have illusions that we could not exist without their aid or their economic cooperation. That is the problem. So we think that they will use it as leverage against us.

Now, for instance, between Vietnam and France, we have good relations. We have had much more problems in the past with France than with the United States—for 100 years, and with the United States 20 years only.

Sneider: I’d like to ask you a historical question which I have been discussing. Why do you think the Chinese did what they did in Cambodia; why do you think 3 million people were killed in Cambodia?

Thach: I don’t know if it is really the policy of China to

kill 3 millions of people. But there is one thing which is similar to Cambodia, that is the Great Cultural Revolution [of China]. There were 2 million people killed in China.

Sneider: I've heard much higher figures than that.

Thach: I've heard 2 million and hundreds of millions. I think the same policy was carried out in Cambodia. But the pupil did worse than the teacher—they are too zealous to show that they are the best pupils.

I think there are things not found in the case of China which are in the case of Cambodia. In Mao Tse-tung's China, he did enjoy great prestige, but in Pol Pot's Cambodia, even before the liberation and after the liberation, they must have the political etiquette of Sihanouk. So they have no political support in Cambodia and their policy is to repress the opposition. They are afraid of their own people. They must evacuate the people from the cities. Why? Because they have no base in the cities. They are afraid that these bases are "CIA," that these bases are "French," or Sihanouk, or Lon Nol.

After evacuation from the cities, they have opposition from within their own ranks, because many of their members or cadre have family in the cities. So, repression, repression. And they had no confidence in the intellectuals. There are no schools, because if there are schools, there is a place for the intellectuals. There are no hospitals, because they have no confidence in the intelligentsia. No pagodas, because they have no confidence in the monks. There is no money, because they are afraid that if there is currency, the CIA could use the currency to buy the people. They changed the address [the locations] of the people, because they are afraid that there is a network of relations, of intelligence, of CIA. So they are afraid of everything. They must disrupt the society, because they are too weak, politically and militarily.

Before, even to liberate Cambodia, they must ask the Vietnamese to come in. We were four times in Cambodia, from 1970-75. The first time was the coup d'état of Lon Nol, the second time was Operation Chelna I of Lon Nol against Pol Pot, in 1970. Nineteen seventy-one was Chelna II. After Chelna II, the Lon Nol forces were concentrated only in the cities but to liberate Phnom Penh in April 1975, they had no heavy artillery. They asked the Chinese to help them. The Chinese refused, because there was an understanding between Mao Tse-tung and Nixon. So they asked the Vietnamese to come in, to bring heavy artillery, so as to help them liberate Phnom Penh.

Sneider: You mean they asked the Chinese for help in 1975 and they refused but nonetheless after that? . . .

Thach: After that because these people, the Pol Potists, they were afraid, they were weak. They were afraid of the impact of the revolution in Vietnam and Laos within their ranks. They were evacuating the cities, but in

Vietnam we did not have evacuation of the cities. They have repressed the intelligentsia, but in Vietnam, the intelligentsia is there. They disbanded the market, but in Vietnam and Laos we have markets. In Cambodia they had destroyed all the pagodas, but here and in Laos they are permitted. They had destroyed the currency, but here, there [Laos], there is currency.

Pol Pot wanted to create tension on the border, to create chauvinist hate to unite their people. The Chinese tried to use this chauvinism, these weaknesses of Pol Pot, against us.

Sneider: In Southeast Asia now, you've referenced the instability of the Thai situation, and there is also a new government in Malaysia. I'd like to ask you about both those situations. In Thailand, there seems to be some tension around the question of whether they will continue their policy of alliance with the Chinese and Pol Pot. I don't know for sure, but I suspect that former Premier General Kriangsak's candidacy is involved in some way in this question. Do you see a possibility of a change in the Thai situation, in the Thai attitude?

Thach: There are some rumors, some information Kriangsak has some hope to take power. I think that if Prem is in place, this policy of confronting Vietnam and Indochina—if they succeed they will go on, but if it is too costly for them, they must change. And you know Kriangsak, when he was in power, he helped Pol Pot in the beginning. I think now he realizes that if this policy is not working, and if it is not working but the two countries continue this, then there will be problems.

For the Vietnamese, if this situation drags on, we can continue. And if the situation is improving, it is very good. But if the situation is worsening, for example a "second lesson" from China, we are prepared. Now we are better prepared than before, than the "first lesson," when we were not well prepared, but we could still defeat the Chinese [laughs].

Sneider: On the Malaysian situation, there a new government, and the people who are in the new government like the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the new Foreign Minister, your counterpart—they all have reputations of being very strong Malay nationalists and having, let us say, a healthy suspicion of the Chinese. Do you think there could be an improvement in Vietnam's relations with this new government?

Thach: I think that as long as ASEAN makes a front against us, they will not improve bilateral relations. I think they will continue to support Thai policy.

Sneider: So the key is Thailand?

Thach: The key is Thailand, and the key is whether they succeed or fail in the confrontation policy. The key is this, not Thailand only.