

# THE USSR-DRV-PRC TRIANGLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

by

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**A**s Southeast Asia adjusts to the new realities of the regional distribution of power and its changing connection to the global balance, it becomes increasingly clear that an important element in determining the quality of the relations between the non-Communist states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN: Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore) and the principal Communist states will be the nature of the relations among the Communist states themselves. The local Communist victories in Indochina have thrown into stark relief the Southeast Asian salient of the USSR-People's Republic of China (PRC) competition, the basic strategic terms of which call for each other's exclusion from the region. The termination of the military conflict has removed the restraints imposed by the situational need for solidarity with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the war. The DRV in turn is exposed to more open pressures from both Communist giants, which has the effect of constraining the DRV in articulating its own autonomous regional interests.

Both China and the Soviet Union have interests in Southeast Asia that can be defined in traditional political, economic, social, and cultural categories. Increasingly, however, their efforts to exert influence in the area have focused on the specific terms of their global confrontation. For the Soviet Union, the test of its policies in Southeast Asia has become their contribution to its search for regional allies in the containment of China. For the PRC, the test of its policies has been their contribution to the isolation of the Soviet Union from Southeast Asia. In this conflictive structure, the DRV seeks to maintain political flexibility while leaping to the revolutionary vanguard and promoting policies that enhance its own power position independently of either the USSR or the PRC. While Soviet and Chinese political activity in the Southeast Asian region including Indochina derives from their appreciation of each other's competitive interests and ambitions, for the DRV, Southeast Asia—and particularly Indochina—is

the primary geostrategic sphere of interest. DRV policies can be either complementary or antagonistic to the political lines of the USSR and PRC in the global framework of Sino-Soviet bipolarity; but with the introduction of the DRV as an independent actor in Indochina and ASEAN Southeast Asia, the regional structure of Communist power is no longer bipolar, but involves a triangular contest for influence. The purpose of the following pages will be to seek to identify some of the terms of that contest in order to suggest a probabilistic pattern of future interactions among the DRV, USSR, and PRC, as well as between them and non-Communist Southeast Asia.

### THE SOVIET UNION'S POLITICAL LINES ON CHINA

The Soviet Union's universal political attack on the PRC has many different themes for different audiences. In Southeast Asia that which is most often played is "expansionism," seeking to arouse on two levels of response latent fears of Chinese domination. On the one hand, the Soviets allude to the "age-old tradition" in China of "great-Han chauvinism," which is expressed as the Maoist recreation of the Chinese emperors' traditional great power position among the states to the south and southwest of China. On the second more contemporary level, the Soviets warn against the subjective nationalism of Maoist China which aspires to great power status requiring a foundation of hegemonism.

Moscow cautions that Southeast Asian nations should not be deceived by the "double-faced" tactic of Peking's "diplomatic smiles," while its real intentions are clearly demonstrated by continued support to the armed activity of anti-government forces. Soviet denunciation of "Maoist expansionists and saboteurs"—that is, the insurgent forces in Southeast Asia—puts them squarely on the side of the legitimate governments in their counterinsurgent struggles. Any possible political ambivalence in this posture is eliminated by the explanation that the real Communist parties in Southeast Asia have

been cynically betrayed by Peking. The model case which the Soviets use to demonstrate Chinese perfidy is Burma, where—the Soviets point out—not only do the Chinese provide support for the Maoists, but also collaborate with right-wing reactionary forces (i.e., ethnic minority insurgents) in an attempt to destroy the state. This Soviet line is meant to underpin its own political tactic of correct state-to-state relations in Southeast Asia, as opposed to the dichotomous Chinese policy which has not abandoned symbolic support for insurgent forces within the states, despite the accomplishment of diplomatic relations with the government of the states.

**M**oscow is quick to call attention to Peking's alleged territorial ambitions in Southeast Asia as another proof of the hegemonic ambitions of the Maoist leadership. Soviet sources regularly raise the spectre of Mao Tse-tung's claimed expansionist line, supposedly secretly pronounced in August, 1965:

We [PRC] should by all means take over Southeast Asia, including South Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore. . . . This part of Southeast Asia is very rich. It has a great many resources, and is well worth the expense required to get hold of it. . . . After we take over Southeast Asia, we can increase our forces in this region.<sup>1</sup>

The Soviets refer to Chinese "cartographic aggression"—that is, the production of maps showing areas in other countries as part of Chinese territory—and score Peking for armed intervention in Burma and Laos in pursuit of territorial gain. The most prominent current Soviet symbol of the PRC's expansionistic designs is the dispute over the islands in the South China Sea. Here, according to the Chinese, the Soviets are seeking to "stir up" Vietnam against it. In this respect, the Soviet Union can not only capitalize on an immediate territorial dispute between Vietnam and China, but also generalize to its theme of the long-range Chinese threat to Southeast Asia. In January 1974, China used

military force to implement its long-standing claim to sovereignty over the Paracel (Hsisha) Islands, overrunning the South Vietnamese garrison stationed there. Although Hanoi maintained a discrete public silence over this opportunistic grab, diplomatic circles reported that it was disturbed by the use of force rather than negotiation. Hanoi's Soviet allies have not been so reticent and quickly charged the PRC with betrayal of the Vietnamese revolutionary forces and violation of Vietnamese sovereignty.

The issues of sovereignty over the scattered island groups of the South China Sea had long been contested between China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines. They were given new urgency with the coming prospect of offshore oil and new law of the sea regimes. The Vietnamese reponse to the Chinese challenge has been to project its own physical presence into the maritime area by dispatching forces to take control of the Spratly group (Nansha Archipelago) also claimed by China. The full extent of China's claims has recently been reasserted in a long article in the *Kwangming Daily*, picked up and repeated by the New China News Agency. It brings the southern limit to 4 degrees north latitude, which, as Moscow has noted, drops China's "boundary" to within 20 miles of Sarawak. The Chinese warning to the DRV is unmistakable. "All islands belonging to China must also return to the fold of the motherland," adding that China "will never allow others to invade or occupy our territory [i.e., the Spratlys] whatever the pretext."<sup>2</sup> The PRC's intransigence may in part be explained as a function of its general concern about the restoration of its integrity and recovery of lost territories, one of the major issues of the Sino-Soviet dispute.

**T**he Soviet Union continues to decry PRC "aggression" against the Vietnamese and suggests wider implications. China is aiming at "getting a strategically important spring board for future attacks on Southeast Asian countries and also demonstrating China's determination to solve territorial problems by armed force."<sup>3</sup>

Moscow also seeks to exploit the

preexistent indigenous Southeast Asian concerns and prejudices against their resident ethnic Chinese communities. In a heavy-handed way, the Soviets caution that the overseas Chinese are "a kind of fifth column," piously stating that the "incessant attempts to use Chinese emigres living in these countries to further Peking's selfish interests are a cause for legitimate anxiety on the part of the governments and peoples of Southeast Asia."<sup>4</sup> They have gone so far as to suggest that the Maoist regime deliberately organizes the emigration of Chinese so as to create overseas Chinese colonies that will be responsive to Peking's policy requirements in the target countries.

The Soviet Union argues that the PRC's strategic view is that there is a power vacuum in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, the PRC seeks to fill that power vacuum itself, but until it has the capacity to do so, it pursues three tactics. First, through anti-Soviet acts, it seeks to deny the legitimate interests of the USSR in Asia. The principal tool is the "thesis of the struggle against hegemonism," which is implemented as a requirement of normalization of relations between Asian states and the PRC. Secondly, through policies of "divide and rule," it seeks to prevent the emergence of strong, independent indigenous actors in the region. It is this, according to the USSR, which explained

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Chinese coolness towards the reunification of Vietnam. Peking obviously wanted a divided and weak Vietnam: "Peking would like to have obedient neighbors near its border, therefore a united, independent and socialist Vietnam obviously does not fall into the framework."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Peking has sought to give the "Indochina incident" (i.e., the Soviet locution for its sustained recognition of the Lon Nol government) an anti-Soviet color so as to drive a wedge between the liberation movement and its natural ally—the Soviet Union. Finally, in the prosecution of the PRC's general line of "from-a-position-of-strength," Moscow charges that the Chinese do not really want to see the expulsion of the US presence in the region. Attacking the concept of Sino-American "collusion" against the Soviet Union, Moscow reviles "the Peking leaders open appeals for the preservation of the US military presence in East, South and Southeast Asia," charging the PRC with "direct complicity with imperialism and neocolonialism."<sup>6</sup>

**T**he major initiative undertaken by the Soviet Union towards the region was proposition of a collective security agreement for all Asia. This scheme, first floated in 1969, has never been given real structural substance, nor have the ASEAN states shown any inclination to replace the entangling alliance of SEATO—now disbanded—or the Five Power Defense Agreement—now lapsed into desuetude—with the unpromising future of a Soviet-sponsored collective security agreement. It has been purposely ambiguous so that real objections cannot be raised. Its value base is appealingly but vaguely formulated to encompass the principles of peaceful coexistence. How these can be consolidated into a juridical framework for international order in Asia has only been ambiguously suggested: "Such a security system can probably be created step by step, through both collective and bilateral efforts by states."<sup>7</sup> Bilaterally, the model is obviously the web of relationships that connect the USSR to India. With the conclusion of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the principles of the

Final Act at Helsinki are now advanced as the basis for a security formula applicable in Asia as well as Europe. If the proposal ever reached such a programmatic stage, then the connection between the general strategy of the all-Asia collective security scheme and Soviet national security interests would be more evident: the legitimation of a growing Soviet political-military presence in the region; containment of the PRC; maintenance of access to the region; provision of a security alternative in Southeast Asia preempting the PRC and possibly forestalling a nuclear Japan.

### PRC PERCEPTIONS

It is in its Chinese containment aspect that the collective security proposal continues to fuel the fires of the Sino-Soviet conflict in Southeast Asia. Despite Soviet protestations that it is an all-Asia proposal meant to include the PRC, the Chinese perceive it as a strategy of encirclement by the Soviet Union. Moscow retorts by claiming that PRC rejection of the collective security scheme is proof of its threatening posture:

Only the sick imaginations of the Peking leaders could conceive the idea of using a security system for the 'encirclement and isolation' of the C.P.R. . . . The assertion that such a system can be used to establish hegemony in Asia is just as ridiculous. . . . Peking refuses to accept such a system precisely because it dreams of hegemony in Asia, under which all the other countries would be its private domain.<sup>8</sup>

This illustrates the distorted mirror image-like lines characterizing the Sino-Soviet versions of the universalistic ambitions of their rival. Moscow's vision of a Chinese policy of hegemonism founded on Han chauvinism and nationalistic great power aspirations operating in collusion with the United States is balanced by the Chinese thesis of superpower contention for world hegemony. According to the Chinese, the main danger in the world today is the struggle of the USA and USSR for world hegemony—the one impelled by its

capitalist-imperialist structure, the other by its social-imperialist structure. Of the two, it is Soviet social-imperialism that is the most dangerous, because as the balance of forces in the world has shifted, the Soviet Union has become increasingly militaristic and aggressive as it seeks to act as global overlord in place of the United States. The PRC's behavioral advice to Southeast Asia is aphoristically expressed in the saying: "Guard against the tiger at the back door while repulsing the wolf at the gate."

As the Soviet Union has attempted to raise its profile in Southeast Asia through bilateral economic and cultural connections, Peking rails against penetration, espionage, sabotage, and other nefarious activities of Soviet agents working under such cover activities as shipping, fishing, and journalism. Its greatest scorn has been directed at the revitalization of the collective security scheme. Peking warns that the collective security system "is only a tool with which to contend for hegemony in Asia and to disintegrate and control the Asian countries," noting approvingly that in 1975, "with the exposure of the sinister Soviet designs almost all Asian countries either disapproved, boycotted, or rejected the system."<sup>9</sup> The Soviet suggestion that the principles emerging from the CSCE Final Act are applicable to the security of Asia brings the Chinese retort that this is Soviet revisionist humbug! "It is crystal clear," say the Chinese examining real acts of the USSR, "that 'international agreements' such as the so-called principles guiding relations between states have no binding force on Soviet social-imperialism as a mere scrap of paper."<sup>10</sup> The PRC singles out the principle of the "inviolability of frontiers" as being particularly noxious, since if applied to East Asia it would legitimate Soviet "occupation" of territory taken from China by Czarist imperialism.

**T**he PRC's strategic response to the Soviet Union's challenge has been the implicit promotion, indirectly and ambivalently, of a regional balance of power. This has involved three tactics in Southeast Asia: attempting to deny the USSR political access

to ASEAN through the collective security scheme; normalization of bilateral relations with Southeast Asian states and neutralizing them as possible allies of the Soviet Union; and Sino-American detente. The Chinese line on a continued American presence puts the PRC at odds not only with the USSR, which demands immediate and total American withdrawal, but more importantly for the ASEAN states, with the DRV. Their divergent views are apparent in their diametrically opposed perceptions of the meaning of the trip through Southeast Asia made by Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib in late May-early June 1975. An important Chinese commentary placed Habib's reassurances about America's role in Southeast Asia in the context of Soviet social-imperialism's efforts to take advantage of "the increasingly weak and strategically passive position" of the United States in Southeast Asia. The article noted without comment that:

Although the United States has been compelled to readjust its strategic deployment in Southeast Asia, it is reluctant to abandon its interests in this region. Washington recently sent its assistant secretary of state, Habib, to tour Southeast Asian countries. It repeatedly stressed that the United States is still an Asian and Pacific country and will play its deserved and responsible role for the sake of the interests of the United States and this region.<sup>11</sup>

The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, placed the Habib pilgrimage in the context of the persistence of the US imperialists' evil intentions in Southeast Asia following the bankruptcy of their policy in Indochina.

Habib's trip was designed to appease the US allies in Southeast Asia and strive to keep the remainder of this area within the US sphere of influence, and, also to endeavoring to set up a new defense perimeter to counter the revolutionary movements which are rapidly developing following the US defeat in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.<sup>12</sup>

## THE DRV'S VIEW

According to Hanoi, the new balance of forces in the region has led to the collapse of the decades-old US defense line designed to dam up the rising national liberation movements and forces of socialism. In this historic confrontation, the defeat of the US represents the bankruptcy of its policy and strategy that had the support of reactionary elites elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese victory is seen as mobilizing all of the people in Southeast Asia to rise up and seize their revolutionary destiny. Indicators that the people are determined to free themselves are the facts that, even where there had been "collaboration" with the American aggressor, already there is talk of neutralism, extension of relations into the socialist world, and review of military connections to the United States. Hanoi warns, though, that the United States is still not reconciled to total defeat, adding that in the region itself, "some individuals are still showing an attitude incompatible with the new situation in Southeast Asia,"<sup>13</sup> and cautioning the "ruling circles" in ASEAN that "to blindly follow the anti-Communist road and to continue to tail after the US imperialism is unwise and will only bring them misfortune. The tragic collapse of the US henchmen in Saigon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane is a very obvious lesson for the pro-American forces."<sup>14</sup>

**H**anoi's view of Southeast Asia and its putative role as leader of the revolutionary forces in the region sharply distinguishes its policy line from that of either the USSR or the PRC. The USSR is committed to nonrevolutionary state-to-state relations in the region. The PRC has sharply separated state behavior from the international connections of fraternal revolutionary parties and movements. Hanoi's revolutionary line is undifferentiated.

Vietnam's victory... has given rise to a new strength in Southeast Asia—the unyielding strength of the revolutionary people in that region who are becoming

masters of their own destiny—and has contributed significantly to the common struggle for peace, national independence, democracy and socialism in the world. Vietnam's victory is eloquent proof of the offensive posture of the world revolutionary movement. *The offensive strategy has defeated the compromise and negative strategies* [italics added].<sup>15</sup>

The censure of the "compromise and negative strategies" is a slap at both the PRC and the USSR, who were less than eager to sacrifice their policies of rapprochement and detente with Washington on the altar of Vietnamese unification. In the period leading up to the Paris Accords and in the implementing of them, Hanoi had reason to feel that its "revolutionary" interests were being subordinated to the interests of its principal supporters and suppliers in the tensions of the Sino-American-Soviet global relationship.

## THE HANOI-MOSCOW LINK

Hanoi's current inclination to the USSR as opposed to the PRC results from a mix of motives; the primary one being probably a pragmatic appreciation of the economic requirements of the task of socialist construction in a unified Vietnam. The reconstruction and development program of the DRV, particularly as embodied in the targets and sectoral emphases of the 1976-80 Five Year Plan, are attuned to the Soviet model of development as opposed to the Maoist model. "For us," say the Vietnamese, "socialism is the magnificent image of the Soviet Union."<sup>16</sup> In order to even begin to approach the targets of the plan, Hanoi will need important infusions of capital and technical assistance from the East European socialist economies, particularly the Soviet Union. In October and November 1975, Le Duan and Le Thanh Nghi, Deputy Premier and Minister of State Planning, visited Hungary, the USSR, Bulgaria, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Rumania, formally signing a well-planned and coordinated procession of

technical and economic assistance and loan agreements. In Moscow, in addition to the usual joint communique, Le Duan and Brezhnev issued a declaration that gave the main directions for the strengthening of relations "between the parties and the peoples of the two fraternal countries" in all fields. In this declaration, it was agreed that economic and technical cooperation, "including the coordination of economic development plans," would take place on a bilateral basis as well as within the framework of multilateral cooperation among the socialist countries. The effect, of course, is to partially integrate the North Vietnamese economy into the Comecon economy.

There are naturally certain political *quid pro quos* involved. According to the October 31, 1975, declaration, "The two sides held completely identical views on the matters brought to discussion." Although the PRC might view the North Vietnamese pandering to the Soviet line as a product of social-imperialist neocolonialism, before far-reaching conclusions about the degree or depth of DRV political subserviency to the USSR are formed, it is important to note that those issues on which the DRV has accommodated the USSR can be viewed as rather remote from the Hanoi's central political and geostrategic concerns. Endorsement of the MPLA in Angola or the Final Declaration of the Helsinki meeting might be considered a rather cheap price to pay for the economic leadership. The DRV has not, however, paid any political price with respect to its own interests in Southeast Asia. It has not endorsed Soviet policy lines on the ordering of the region, holding firmly to its central theme that the future of Southeast Asia is for the Southeast Asians to determine, implicitly excluding, along with the United States, the USSR and PRC as Southeast Asian actors. The DRV has not accepted the Soviet collective security scheme. Although Soviet commentators have claimed that the Vietnamese victory in Indochina is part of the headway being gained by the idea of collective security in Asia, there is no evidence to suggest that the DRV recognizes such linkage. The contrary seems evident in

the differing DRV-USSR perceptions of ASEAN's role in the region. The Soviet Union has viewed ASEAN's gropings towards a neutralization formula as the first step towards the realization of an Asian collective security system. Hanoi, on the other hand, has viciously attacked the "pro-American neutrality" of ASEAN as another proof of its essential imperialist and neo-colonialist orientations. A sentence in the November 1975 joint communique between Rumania and the DRV may accurately define the kind of relationship that the Vietnamese seek with the Soviet Union: "The two sides declare that all the Communists and workers parties are independent and equal. They base themselves on the political conditions in their own country and on the principles of Marxism-Leninism to work out their own policies and to support each other."

**T**he DRV has refrained from taking stances openly critical of the PRC or its leadership by name. It has not allowed the Soviet Union to use the DRV relationship as a weapon against China. On the other hand, the PRC presents the greatest threat to Hanoi's realization of its own ambitions and even, perhaps, independence. The sources of antagonisms between the DRV and the PRC are many, having deep historical and psychological roots. From the point of view of the DRV, the PRC is encroaching on its territory, i.e., the Paracel Islands dispute and its wider implications. We should not underestimate the possible threat perception from the north that the DRV elite may feel. Although they continue to mouth the stereotyped phrases of friendship and cooperation, it does not require a great deal of reading between the lines to find coolness and mutual suspicion. The principal pre-revolutionary symbols of Vietnamese nationalism are anti-Chinese, and these are wielded by the revolutionary leadership with gusto. Le Duan, celebrating the April victory, attributed the glory to the heroic Vietnamese people in whose veins flows the blood of the Trung sisters, Lady Trieu, Ly Thung Kiet, and Tran Hung Dao—all of whom had led the people against the "northern invaders."<sup>17</sup>

Chinese sponsorship of what from Hanoi would appear to be a truly autonomous Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRGSV) regime—as opposed to rapid unification—combined with the PRC-Phnom Penh axis, gave substance to the charge that China wanted a dependent, fragmented Indochina.

The Chinese have been preoccupied with the fear that the DRV would become a kind of Soviet satellite, a block in the wall of containment that Peking argues is Soviet strategy in Asia. When the Cambodian leader, Khieu Samphan, visited Peking in August 1975, Teng Hsiao-ping told him that after the United States had been defeated in Vietnam, “the other superpower seized the opportunity by hook or by crook to extend its evil tentacles in Southeast Asia.”<sup>18</sup> In an unparalleled way, the terms of the Sino-Soviet dispute were brought home to the North Vietnamese on North Vietnamese soil by the Chinese Vice-Premier Chen Hsi-lien. In a speech to the workers of the Thai Nguyen iron and steel works, September 3, 1975, Chen detailed the terms of the “superpower contention for world hegemony” which is getting, “more fierce and the factors for war are increasing.”<sup>19</sup> In a thrust at the DRV, Chen said the superpowers “are doing their utmost to place other countries under their sphere of influence, interfering in their internal affairs, violating their independence and sovereignty,” indirectly hinting that the Vietnamese should not sell themselves out for a mess of USSR economic pottage. Chen’s military career makes his remarks even more acute. There was no public Vietnamese reaction to this undiplomatic but unmistakably pointed speech. The Soviet reaction was angry. Soviet spokesmen took this “act of political provocation” to attribute to the Vietnamese a position in the Sino-Soviet dispute that the DRV has sought to avoid: “The Vietnamese people clearly know the difference between friend and foe.”<sup>20</sup> The fact that this was an escalation of the struggle for influence in Indochina was duly noted:

The Maoist leaders attempt to move the

‘cold war’ which they are waging against the USSR and the entire socialist community onto Vietnamese soil, too, cannot be regarded as anything but an attempt to counterpoise their anti-Marxist viewpoint to the well-known position of the Vietnam Workers Party and anything but gross political tastelessness.<sup>21</sup>

When Le Duan travelled to Peking in late September 1975, Teng Hsiao-ping, speaking at the banquet given for the Vietnamese party by the Central Committee of the CPC, elaborated on the superpower thesis, “the biggest international exploiters and oppressors of today,” and, in words that had particular relevance for his guest, went on to say: “More and more people have come to see now that to combat superpower hegemonism is a vital task facing the people of all countries.”<sup>22</sup> Le Duan’s trip to China was part of the DRV’s efforts to gain commitments of material support for the Five Year Plan. Apparently there were difficulties encountered. Le Duan did not give a return banquet; there was no joint communique; the Vietnamese Party left China with little fanfare; there was no long-term agreement on Chinese assistance to the DRV. It may be that the political price the PRC was asking was too high.

#### CAMBODIA

Although Peking’s strategy of countering Soviet encroachment in Southeast Asia has met with little success in Vietnam, it is being applied elsewhere in Indochina, where it may have the effect—probably intended—of limiting the DRV’s influence as well.

The primary foreign policy problem faced by the Cambodian leadership relates to the capacity and ambition of the DRV. The question is the degree to which the North Vietnamese require a Cambodian client or dependent as part of a grander scheme of Indochinese hegemony, now that the military requirement for Cambodian facilities for the North Vietnamese Army no longer obtains. This potentiality has to be viewed against a cultural, political, and ethnic history of traditional antagonisms between the Khmer

and Vietnamese peoples independent of the particular regime structures. Even during the prosecution of the Indochinese wars, the conflicting Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge interests led at times to armed clashes between the parties despite their ideological militant solidarity. After the war ended in Cambodia and South Vietnam, tension between the Khmer Rouge and NVA in eastern Cambodia persisted.

Not only was there a problem of the presence of North Vietnamese soldiers in Cambodia, but the Vietnamese quickly demonstrated a willingness to use force against the new Cambodian government as a means to delimit the maritime sovereignty of the PRGSV in areas that had been territorially disputed. In May 1975, the Vietnamese imposed control on the island of Phu Quoc, militarily confronting the Cambodians in the north of the island. This was followed in June by an air and sea assault against the Khmer Rouge garrison on Puolo Wai, which the Vietnamese seized after three days of fighting. This extended the continental shelf of South Vietnam in an area of proved offshore oil resources, solving by force a problem that the antecedent governments had by agreement put off to the postwar future. The aggressive Vietnamese behavior revived persistent Cambodian apprehensions about its neighbors' designs on its territorial integrity. This concern has been a central thread of Cambodia's modern external relations. In this respect, the new ruling elite is perceptually linked to its nonrevolutionary predecessors. It is reported that after the June incident, a high-ranking Cambodian delegation journeyed secretly to Hanoi to protest the Vietnamese incursions. This was followed by a singularly unpublicized trip by Le Duan to Cambodia in late July or early August. A very brief and nonelaborative communique was issued which noted that: "The Cambodian and Vietnamese delegations held cordial conversations in an atmosphere of brotherhood on questions of mutual interest. The two delegations reached unanimity of views on all questions raised."<sup>23</sup> Apparently this "unanimity of views" did result in some retreat by the Vietnamese from the position they had previously staked out by arms.

The Khmer Rouge's diplomatic response was paralleled by a vigorous internal campaign to heighten the Cambodian peoples' "absolute determination to defend their territorial integrity, territorial waters, sea, islands, and air space,"<sup>24</sup> an invocation of nationalist sentiments that became a regular part of the government's mobilizing symbols. Verbal defense was accompanied by some readiness precautions on other offshore sites that might be the object of Vietnamese ambitions. For example, the forces stationed on Kaoh Tunsay and Kaoh Puo, off the coast at Kep, were praised for transforming "these two islands into fortified bases so as to insure the defense of territorial waters."<sup>25</sup>

Further security was sought by neutralizing the other Indochina front. Cambodia has obtained satisfaction on the issue of territorial integrity from the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). In mid-December 1975, the first official Lao delegation to visit Cambodia agreed in a joint communique to "respect each other's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity *on the basis of present borders*"<sup>26</sup> [italics added]. This mutual endorsement of the territorial status quo formally ratified the pledge made in the Joint Declaration of the Indochinese Summit Conference, April 25, 1970, to which both the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front were also signatories.

It is possible to interpret the development of Thai-Cambodian relations within the framework of limiting the influence of the DRV. At first the Thai-Cambodian relationship was marked by frontier friction caused by the movement of refugees, poor command and control over foraging Khmer Rouge units, and a certain arrogance of victory on the Cambodian side. The intermittent conflict on the border was inconsistent with the general foreign policy line of the new Khmer regime and specifically with its wish "to exist in peace with all peace and justice loving nations in Southeast Asia, and particularly with the peoples of neighboring countries with whom we are bound to live forever by history and geography."<sup>27</sup> Rapid progress was made towards a normal relationship once the Chinese-Thai accommodation was finalized in

July 1975. The Chinese role in bringing the Thais and Khmer Rouge together seems evident. It is reported that Chou En-lai told Kukrit in Peking that the minor problems between the two countries could be sorted out once diplomatic ties were established. Low-level official talks took place at the border in July and August, followed at the end of October by a Cambodian mission to Bangkok led by Vice Premier Ieng Sary. A joint communique was issued which pointed to eventual diplomatic relations. The two sides also agreed to accept the present frontier between the two countries and to fashion their relations on the basis of the principles of peaceful coexistence.

It is in its ties to the People's Republic of China that the new Cambodian regime most clearly demonstrates independence from the DRV. While DRV-PRC relations have cooled, Cambodia has forged new, close links with its Chinese supporters. The different treatment accorded Peking and the DRV is clearly evident in the May 10, 1975, message greeting the peoples who had wished the Khmer Rouge well.<sup>28</sup> Chinese-Cambodian relations were depicted as characterized by "militant solidarity" founded on a long-standing tradition of "friendly and fraternal" relations. The strong, developing, and flourishing bonds between the PRC and Cambodia were called "a radiant model of international relations based on sincere support and mutual respect." On the other hand, the Vietnamese were merely listed with Laos and North Korea as "three other close comrades-in-arms of the Cambodian people in Asia." It has only been with the Chinese that the Cambodians have admitted to a special bilateral relationship. This was formalized when Khieu Samphan visited Peking in August 1975 and signed a joint communique with his Chinese hosts in which Cambodia publicly subscribed to the Chinese "superpower thesis" and praised China as the leader of the socialist world.

#### LAOS

The situation is quite different with respect

to Laos. An appraisal of the ideological orientations of the Revolutionary Party's elite, the power relationship that exists between Laos and its neighbors, and the substantial material requirements for the building of a socialist society in Laos indicates that the North Vietnamese position in relation to the decisionmaking of the LPDR is as strong today as it was to the decisionmaking of the Pathet Lao. The two Lao Communist leaders who have emerged to take direction of the new government, Kaysone Phomvihane and Nouhak Phomsavan, made their way to power through their political and personal ties to the North Vietnamese Communist elite. On the other hand, the former public leaders of the "patriotic side" who had been identified with nationalistic potential—for example, Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit—have been relegated to secondary roles in the structure of the LPDR. Kaysone points with pride to the ancestry of the Laotian party in Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party and the clear-sighted leadership given by the Vietnamese. There has been no effort to downgrade the contribution made by the North Vietnamese to the Lao revolution. Giving immediate substance to the omnipresent psycho-historical Vietnamese connection is the physical presence of DRV cadres, technicians, and NVA elements still in Laos. The DRV's military posture there seems to be equally a function of Hanoi's perception of its own "forward basing" needs as well as the Lao Communist's desire for a guarantor against possible adventurism from across the Mekong.

The most pressing problem for the LPDR is the reorientation of its economy, a question which assumed crisis proportions when, as a result of the Thai closure of the border in November 1975, Vientiane was cut off from its normal access to the goods of the world economy. The severe shortages of essential imports, such as gasoline, rice, sugar, milk, and kerosene, although mitigated by emergency relief activities by the DRV and the USSR in particular, solidified the LPDR's resolution to economically turn away from the dependent and uncertain relationship it

had with Thailand. Intense road building activity has been undertaken to secure all-weather transport routes to the Vietnamese coast at Haiphong and Vinh. Although self-reliance is the mass slogan, the LPDR leaders are aware of what in fact is their reliance on others, resulting from geography as well as political sympathy. As Kaysone has said: "In economic building our country now very much needs the assistance and cooperation of all fraternal countries, first of all Vietnam."<sup>29</sup>

**A**long with the DRV, the USSR has shown a high profile in revolutionary Laos. Certainly, a prominent Russian role is not contrary to the Lao Communists' perception of the Soviet socialist world role: "The status and role of the USSR in the international arena have risen, becoming the leading banner of the socialist bloc and the strong pillar for all national liberation struggles on the five continents."<sup>30</sup> Laotian ideological solidarity with the DRV is consistent with ideological solidarity with the Soviet Union.

The question is whether the PRC will attempt to maintain a presence in Laos. During the existence of the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU), the Chinese vied with the USSR and DRV as a provider of assistance. For the LPDR, the network of roads linking China to northern Laos may be as strategically intimidating today as it was for the non-Communist governments in the past. Although the Russian media may scornfully refer to Chinese "occupation forces" in Laos, the Lao cannot avoid the geographic fact of a common border with a much more powerful neighbor. One analyst has concluded that: "There will surely be limits to the extent to which Laos can free herself of Chinese influence even if she wished to do so. In the long run, the impact of the People's Republic of China is likely to be much greater than that of the Soviet Union."<sup>31</sup> This is a reminder that the same kind of limit operates to mediate the DRV-PRC breach.

For the immediate future, however, the LPDR seems to find what is almost a

"younger brother" relationship to the DRV congenial. This was apparent in the exchanges that took place during the February 1976 visit of the leading members of the Lao party and government to Hanoi. The final communique established that the bilateral connection between the two was different from that which might link them to other socialist states:

The special, pure, consistent, exemplary and rarely-to-be seen relationship that has bound Vietnam to Laos constitutes a factor of utmost importance that has decided the complete and splendid victory of the revolution in each country. This is also the firmest basis for the solidarity and cooperation between the parties and the two countries, and for the victory of the revolution in each country in the new stage.<sup>32</sup>

The two sides evinced their determination to consolidate and build upon this special relationship. The kind of economic and financial links presaged in the February document suggest that the USSR-DRV model might find its pendant in the DRV-LPDR connection.

#### THE ASEAN SPHERE

Of more than passing interest to non-Communist Southeast Asia is whether or not the Lao-Vietnamese special relationship means LPDR support for DRV external goals. The joint communique adverts to the revolutionary ends of policy: "The two sides fully support the just and surely victorious struggle of the peoples in this region for peace, national independence, democracy, social progress, and will actively contribute to helping the Southeast Asian states become really independent, peaceful and neutral ones." Although the DRV has indicated its willingness to organize on a "step-by-step" basis relations with the countries of Southeast Asia on the principles of peaceful coexistence, it is clear that the controlling definitions of the terms of coexistence will have to be Hanoi's. The *sine qua non* of independence is

the complete elimination of the American presence. Hanoi demands that the ASEAN states "must escape from the influence of US imperialists, dismantle all US bases, abandon the policy of tailing after the United States, and adopt a truly cooperative and friendly attitude."<sup>33</sup> All subordinate links to the United States—political, military, economic, and cultural—must be broken as a condition of friendly and cooperative relations with revolutionary Vietnam.

**T**he touchstone for the quality of the relations that the DRV intends to develop with the rest of Southeast Asia is Thailand. The Thai case presents undiluted the many issues outstanding between the DRV and the ASEAN states: the residual US commitment, domestic anti-Communism, support for insurgent forces, and ASEAN integration. For the DRV, Thailand has been an enemy, allowing its territory to be used by the United States to prosecute the war in Indochina, as well as being a party to the conflict itself. Even before the DRV victory in Indochina, the two governments began to address the problem of postwar relations. The Thais demanded that the DRV should stop assisting Thai Communist insurgents directly, or indirectly through Vietnamese refugees in Northeast Thailand. The DRV, on the other hand, required as an absolute condition preceding relations with Thailand that all US military forces should be expelled from Thailand, and all US bases and facilities be closed. The DRV position remained unchanged. If anything, it hardened with the complication for Thailand of the South Vietnamese aircraft and equipment which arrived in Thailand in April 1975. The PRGSV, backed by the DRV, immediately demanded that it be returned to the new owners.

The controversy over the return of the equipment and planes was the background of the initial contact between the Thais and the new authorities in South Vietnam. A PRGSV delegation arrived in May to negotiate the issue. It left claiming that Thailand's failure to meet the demands of South Vietnam did not create favorable circumstances for the

establishment of relations between Thailand and the PRGSV. More progress was expected when the first direct bilateral DRV-Thai discussions took place at the end of May 1975. Unfortunately, the talks were preceded by an outbreak, inspired or spontaneous, of anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in the Northeast. The DRV mission had been preceded by a DRV protest and demand that the Thai government assume responsibility for the incidents and take the measures necessary to prevent a reoccurrence. The perennial question of the Vietnamese minority in Thailand leaped again to the forefront and became a third major issue in the normalization process. The Thai side in the negotiation was under strong pressure from its domestic left and center not to raise the thorny issues of DRV support to Thai insurgents or DRV troops in Laos.

The negotiations ended with a joint communique:

The two delegations reached agreement on many issues of common interests. However, several other problems remain to be discussed. With this in mind, the Thai delegation has accepted the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's invitation to visit Hanoi. The date of the visit will be set later.

There is no evidence that the DRV retreated from its unconditional demands about the US presence or the return of the aircraft. This, combined with continued sporadic attacks on the Vietnamese in Thailand and deteriorating Thai-Lao relations as the PGNU became the LPDR, has resulted in a stand-off. The exchange visit has not taken place. Thai-DRV relations remain frozen in a state of official hostility.

**B**angkok's willingness to allow its relations with the DRV to slide towards permanent "cold war" relates to a number of internal and external factors, one set of which connects the Thai "DRV policy" to the Sino-Soviet-DRV triangle. On July 1, 1975, the Thais and the PRC established diplomatic relations. The official

communique followed the pattern established by the Malaysian-Chinese recognition formula a year earlier. The "anti-hegemony" clause was present. All official relations between Thailand and Taiwan were terminated. It was agreed that aggression and subversion or other internal interference into the affairs of the other country were impermissible. Peking declared that it did not recognize dual nationality for the Chinese residents in Thailand and called upon the overseas Chinese to abide by Thai law. The official opening of diplomatic relations climaxed a process of normalization of relations with the PRC that had begun in an exploratory fashion even before the democratic revolution of October 1973.

While in Peking, the Thai Prime Minister, Kukrit, and his party received numerous informal and unofficial signs and signals from his hosts about the distribution of power in Southeast Asia. The usual warnings about letting the tiger in the back door was given, and the Thais were warned not to be unduly hasty in putting an end to the American military bases. Of particular interest was the suggestion that the tiger might have cubs. Kukrit quoted Teng Hsiao-ping as saying that an Asian third world non-superpower was attempting to establish hegemony over other countries. In a speech made from Canton, the Thai Prime Minister claimed that the Thai and Chinese governments had almost identical views regarding the Indochina issues. In a remark on Thai television, Kukrit made explicit what some saw as one factor in the Thai-Chinese link—the intention to outflank the DRV—when he said that Thailand should not fear certain "small countries" after having made friends with such a big country.<sup>34</sup>

**T**he real test for Thailand has been in Laos. The radicalization of the PGNU was paralleled by escalating charges and countercharges across the Mekong River. The barrage of accusations of intervention, spying, and plotting was punctuated by numerous armed incidents involving Thai patrol craft on the river. Finally, in November after the forced grounding of a patrol craft, the Thais closed the border, with serious economic

consequences. The Lao Communist elite suspect the "reactionary clique" in Bangkok of conspiring with Lao "rightist" elements to undo the revolution. Thai policy towards Laos continues to be viewed as aggressive and interventionist, backed by US imperialism. The Thais, on the other hand, suspect the Laotians of harboring ill-disguised irredentist ambitions in Thailand's 16 northeastern provinces. More real is the Thai concern about the changed strategic position along the Mekong in relation to what it perceives as implacable DRV hostility now being vented through a puppet. Thai stubborn claims that the deterioration in Lao-Thai relations has been caused by the instigation of a third country obscures one of the real issues between Laos and Thailand: the Thais no longer are dealing with a weak and compliant Vientiane regime. The PGNU and its LPDR successor have forcibly asserted a Lao revolutionary nationalism and insistence on sovereignty that invalidates the old patterns of trans-Mekong contact.

There has been some suggestion from Thai quarters that the DRV—and through the DRV, the Lao—attacks on Thai policy have been inspired by the Soviet Union, disturbed over the evolution of Sino-Thai relations. From the pattern of Thai diplomatic consultation following the November incident on the Mekong, it appears that the Thais feel that the Soviet Union is a proper agency for communication with their Indochina antagonists.

**O**nly in Indonesia is there significant deviation from the patterns of the triangular competition. The Jakarta authorities are not prepared to accept the dichotomous policy characteristic of Peking. Continued PRC verbal support to the Communist Party of Indonesia (largely in exile) serves to confirm Indonesia's decisionmakers in the correctness of their judgment about Chinese intentions. Indonesia reacted to the Malaysian, Thai, and Philippine normalization of relations with China by insisting that these did not directly concern Indonesia. At the same time, however, the Indonesian leadership called for greater



Adam Malik, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, scoffed at the idea that Thailand could manage to guarantee its security from North Vietnam by friendship with China. In its strongest words yet, the DRV has called on the Southeast Asian insurgent warriors to step up the fight against the non-Communist regimes. In Hanoi's words, "time has never been so good in Southeast Asia" for revolt.

It is easy to identify the indigenous loser of such a struggle if the DRV-backed forces should win. It is not so easy, however, to say within the context of the Sino-Soviet dispute who would be the winner, or even if there would be a "winner," other than Hanoi.

In its search for allies in Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union has been singularly unsuccessful in exploiting the very fluid and dynamic security environment. In the first place, the Chinese potential power presence is felt by Southeast Asian leadership to be more compelling than the Soviet actual presence. The policy thrust in Southeast Asia has been towards the normalization of relations with the Chinese, thus precluding acts that would be viewed as anti-PRC. On the other hand, the Soviet Union still is viewed as being rather remote from the central interests of the Southeast Asian states. The USSR has no real sanctions—political, economic, or military—to forestall anti-Soviet acts such as acceptance of the anti-hegemony clause as the price for diplomatic relations with the PRC. The USSR has no significant indigenous political forces to deploy in support of its policy ends. In its efforts to mobilize support for its anti-PRC stance, it has articulated basically oppositional symbols, defining a common enemy against which Southeast Asian states have to be alerted. One aspect of that enemy is the internal revolutionary forces in ASEAN, linked verbally and perhaps materially to Peking and Hanoi.

The DRV's vanguard position in the revolutionary movement creates problems for the Chinese as well. It may be that as the Chinese find it necessary to make revolutionary compromises with the anti-Communist regimes of Southeast Asia in a kind of tacit balance of power alliance with

the United States, the DRV will seek to preempt the "Maoist" leadership of Southeast Asian insurgency, conserving revolutionary purity, but at the same time in a *realpolitik* manner, limiting PRC influence in the ASEAN region. In the long run, however, the PRC's proximity and relative power means that it cannot be excluded.

The DRV views Southeast Asia as being the center of "contradictions." Perhaps the most important one today is that which goes unmentioned by Hanoi: the contradiction of "socialist" competition for power. Predictions about the DRV's political behavior in Southeast Asia cannot be based on assumptions about "alliance" or "subordinate" links to the USSR. In terms of the interests of the ASEAN states—and by extension, the interests of the United States—because of the USSR-PRC competition in Southeast Asia, the DRV cannot become a hegemonic regional power. On the other hand, interacting with the USSR and PRC, the DRV's relative political independence makes it less likely that either of the Communist superpowers will gain hegemonic ascendancy.

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