

The nations of Southeast Asia are forced to look again at "the military option"

Hanoi and Its Uneasy Neighbors

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Leon Trotsky said that those who yearned for the quiet life had no right to be born in the twentieth century. The lover of the quiet life certainly had no right to be in Southeast Asia in the past year. The speed of events, many of them unexpected and "irrational," has left a trail littered with hasty analyses and wrong predictions (to which this article will no doubt contribute its fair share). It is plain enough, however, that the dust has not yet settled; neither the Kampuchean question nor the recent thrust of Sino-Vietnamese relations have run their course. It is also undeniable that too little is known about the internal dynamics of decisionmaking that resulted in the first and second open inter-Communist wars in history.

The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea demonstrated the role and value of conventional warfare—a point to remember in an age when war by conventional means appears to many as a thing of the past. It is natural for regimes fighting guerrilla wars to be mesmerized by those struggles, but it is worth noting how few governments have been toppled by guerrilla wars and how many have been overturned by other means. Even in the military theorizing of the Communists, the guerrilla's place is at the beginning of revolutionary wars; the end game is still reserved for conventional military means.

It is arguable that in the Kampuchean case there was substantial misreading of Vietnamese capabilities and intentions. Despite the irrefutable facts regarding Hanoi's military might, many—including the Chinese and possibly the Russians—were surprised by the speed with which Vietnam's military machine romped home. On the very eve of the fall of Phnom Penh, many Vietnam watchers believed that the Christmas Day offensive was intended to destroy Kampuchean military capability, to teach Mr. Pol Pot a lesson, and to put an end to military and political "provocations." The analysis was similar to current conventional wisdom about Chinese intentions

in their own invasion of Vietnam. The weight of known evidence today argues that Vietnamese ambitions were cast in the classic imperialist mold and did not fall far short of overthrowing an unfriendly, albeit Communist, government, installing a puppet regime, and setting Indochina well on the road to an Indochinese federation subservient to Vietnam.

The fact that the Vietnamese have not been able to pacify Kampuchea even militarily (and will not be able to do so for some time) despite the past and continuing atrocities of the Pol Pot madmen and despite a military force augmented by probably sixty thousand troops (possibly eighty thousand) is indicative of the force of Kampuchean nationalism when it confronts external aggression. (There is no reason to believe that the nationalism of the Thais will be less forceful against external aggression.)

The Kampuchean affair also highlighted the importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN. What, one wonders, would have been the Thai response to the Vietnamese military conquest of Kampuchea had ASEAN not been there to provide psychological, political, and diplomatic support and assurance? In the absence of ASEAN, it is not difficult to imagine, first, panic in Bangkok, then an overresponse from the Thai Government and a political-military alliance with China, the natural enemy of a Hanoi-centered Indochina. This option has by no means been closed. But Bangkok's response (like ASEAN's) has in fact been measured and mature. The entire Kampuchean affair also demonstrated ASEAN diplomatic weight—at the U.N., among the nonaligned, and in the world community.

Perhaps the most interesting fact about the Sino-Vietnamese war was China's willingness to take grave risks, risks immeasurably greater than any taken by a Great Power since, possibly, the Cuban missile crisis. Even before the start of the Christmas Day offensive, it appears that China deliberately kept fully open the option of war with Vietnam and felt it might be necessary. (In December, Yang Teh-chih, who had been commander of the "volunteers" in Korea

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and is a Chinese commander with experience in large-scale operations, was moved from his Wuhan post to the Kunming military region and given responsibility for the buildup of Chinese troops facing Vietnam.)

China's first resort to war in seventeen years imperiled its new relationship with the West, rousing latent anxieties so recently lulled. It has also been argued that Peking's aggression damaged the image of China as a growing force for moderation, peace, and stability and has strengthened the Taiwan lobby in the United States. Clearly, the whole "teaching-a-lesson" rhetoric lays bare Peking's Great Power mentality, however much it harps on its self-assigned status as a humble Third World developing country. Interestingly, too, China evidently felt that, like the United States of the Sixties, it needed to demonstrate the credibility of its commitments by containing Hanoi's "expansionism" and the hegemonism of a Great Power.

Both the Kampuchean-Vietnam war and the Sino-Vietnam war bring home the point that wars between Communist countries should no longer come as a surprise to anyone. This despite the fact that in the ideology of communism such wars are an impossibility.

Before dealing with the consequences for the ASEAN area of the two inter-Communist wars, it is interesting to note some of the extra-ASEAN consequences. Without doubt, the Kampuchean war immediately split much of the Communist world and led to the open alignment of North Korea with Peking. The move to mend fences between Belgrade and Moscow received a setback, and a Brezhnev-Tito summit was sabotaged. Kampuchea can now look forward to mass starvation, Phnom Penh and Hanoi to continuous guerrilla warfare. The war destroyed Laos's room for maneuver and very greatly compromised its independence. (There are, in fact, more Vietnamese than Lao troops in Laos today.) China has been deprived of its closest ally in Asia. The Soviet Union has strengthened its presence in the continent, its influence in Indochina, and its leverage over Hanoi.

The installation of a puppet regime in Phnom Penh has resulted in the signing of a twenty-five-year Vietnamese-Kampuchean peace and friendship treaty identical to the one Vietnam signed with Laos in July, 1978. Under Article 2 of the treaty, what is in effect a Vietnamese army of occupation is legitimized. Article 3 provides for the training of Communist cadres in Hanoi. To all intents and purposes an informal and loose Indochinese federation has been established, controlled by Vietnam and loyal to Moscow.

On the other hand, Vietnam's prospects as an economic power and for domestic development have probably been wrecked for a generation. Its Kampuchean military "success" is an economic disaster of massive proportions, followed as it was by the war with China, which will require a massive and long-term diversion of material and manpower resources. Two disastrous agricultural years have not helped matters. The economy of South Vietnam is said to be collapsing from the strains of socialist transformation. The exodus of Vietnamese talent over land and sea has reportedly reduced Vietnam to importing even manual labor from the Soviet Union to run the port of Haiphong. The massive loss of skilled

manpower has many long-term implications. It has been estimated that Vietnam will need to import four million tons of food grain this year in order to meet the requirements of Kampuchea, Laos, and its very own needs. The USSR is said to be pouring (U.S.) \$2 million a day into Vietnam. Soviet influence must invariably accompany Soviet assistance.

The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea has, of course, also had a tremendous impact on the ASEAN area. But it is as important to note also what has not changed and will not change.

The invasion has not destroyed the general ASEAN belief that Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Laos will not want to be mere pawns of Moscow. It is most likely that the ASEAN states will continue to try to play a positive role, if they can, to ensure the independence of the countries of Indochina; they will continue to remain neutral in the Sino-Soviet cold war; if they can, they will also want to continue to refrain from interfering in the affairs of the Indochina states. The ASEAN commitment to the zone of peace concept remains basically unaltered. The fear of a military spillover effect into Thailand has not materialized. It is arguable that the events in Indochina do not greatly diminish tomorrow's prospects for peace in the ASEAN area. An important point: although there are apprehensions, there is no general assumption that Thailand will be the next target of blatant Vietnamese aggression.

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As for what has changed, there is no doubt about the evaporation of ASEAN's goodwill toward and trust in Vietnam. In an interview published in the last 1978 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review*, even as Vietnamese troops were advancing on Phnom Penh, Indonesian Vice-President Adam Malik called for a more understanding attitude toward Vietnam and the other Indochinese states in order to realize ASEAN's objective of a neutral Southeast Asia. The invasion of Kampuchea destroyed that goodwill and confidence meticulously cultivated by Hanoi and shook Vietnam's credibility as a country sincerely committed to the concept of peaceful coexistence and domestic rehabilitation. It is the stated view of Singapore that no combination of forces in

Southeast Asia can militarily stop the Vietnamese and that, once Kampuchea is "mopped up," Vietnam-backed Communist insurgency in the ASEAN countries will be stepped up. There is no ASEAN consensus on Singapore's view, but it is nonetheless important. Most certainly, Vietnam's war on Kampuchea was a major setback to the process of building a regional structure of confidence and peace between Communists and non-Communists; it halted the momentum toward accommodation in the region. But it is arguable that the hopes for a Southeast Asian community of peaceful coexistence have not in the long term been destroyed. On this matter there are, of course, hawks and doves in all ASEAN capitals.

With regard to the Thai equation, the events in Indochina have obviously removed Kampuchea as a buffer state, a fact that has military as well as psychological relevance. There are fears that Vietnam's next target will be several parts of northeast Thailand. The Thai climate for investment has no doubt been damaged. The Thais have been burdened with a large and dangerous Kampuchean refugee problem. Between the fall of Phnom Penh and the end of May, 138,000 Kampuchians fled into Thailand. The Thais are understandably apprehensive that this could be a "sixth" column capable of camouflaging the fifth column, that a substantial presence of Kampuchians in Thailand could provide a future cause for political and military exploitation, and that a large residue would saddle them with a Palestinian-type problem. Although Thailand's position has been eroded, there have been a few positive aspects, not the least being, at least for now, a greater national unity. In the short term, the pro-Peking Communist party of Thailand has been denied its bases in Kampuchea. The loss in supplies, logistics infrastructure, and safe sanctuary has resulted in the shift to a low-key posture. The outcome of a Hanoi-Peking-Moscow contest for the loyalties of the Communist movement in Thailand is more problematic.

The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea has given added impetus to cooperation between the ASEAN Five, increasing political solidarity and enhancing the view that the Five must stick even closer together. The word has been given to Vietnam that it cannot act with impunity even in what it considers its own political backyard; and the message has been delivered to the Soviet Union that it cannot back aggression without paying a price.

Perhaps one of the most important consequences of the Kampuchean war has been the political resurrection of the Manila Pact of the early Fifties. In April, the Chinese ambassador in Bangkok openly stated that China was ready to guarantee Thailand's security in the event of Vietnamese aggression (and to come to the aid of all countries so threatened). The Americans have not been outdone. Two months before, in early February, President Carter had assured Prime Minister Kriangsak in Washington that the U.S. would help Thailand ward off the potential dangers arising from Vietnam's action in Kampuchea. Mr. Carter stated that the U.S.

remained deeply committed to Thailand's freedom, integrity, and independence. Assistant Secretary of State Holbrooke stated that Washington would keep its commitment to Thailand and other Southeast Asian allies under the 1954 SEATO treaty. Secretary Cyrus Vance said in early July, after the Bali meeting of ASEAN, that the U.S. had told the Soviet Union and Vietnam that it was committed morally and by treaty to support *the ASEAN countries* in the defense of their independence, freedom, and territorial integrity. Vance reported that President Carter had confirmed to Prime Minister Kriangsak "the continuing validity of U.S. commitment under the Manila Pact." He added: "I reaffirm that today." The key clause of the pact states: "Each party recognizes that aggression by means of armed attack in the treaty areas against any state or territory which the parties by unanimous agreement may hereafter designate, would endanger its own peace and safety and agrees that it would in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes...." The treaty requires each party to serve a formal one-year notice should it wish to end its obligations to the others. The U.S. has never served such a notice, of course; but it remains to be seen whether Washington's resurrection of the Manila treaty is only a political move devoid of military significance.

The Sino-Vietnamese war, on the other hand, has not been so consequential to the ASEAN area as the Vietnamese war on Kampuchea. Certainly it was quietly received with satisfaction by most in the ASEAN area, who view Vietnam as *the* threat to peace and security in the region. However, it would appear to bolster the perception of important elements in the Indonesian military, who hold that the main threat is China, not Vietnam. It is also worth noting that Chinese aggression against Vietnam apparently resulted in greater persecution of the Chinese in Vietnam and a stepping up of its "purification" program, with results that have adversely affected the ASEAN countries.

As to the security consequences of these events, three questions come to the fore: First, will ASEAN move toward becoming a military organization? Second, will the ASEAN states abandon their search for security and independence through self-reliance and attempt to build a balance of power system, drawing to their side an external Great Power? Third, will the present emphasis on a political and economic approach to ensuring security and stability be replaced by an emphasis on military means?

The recent events in Indochina have unleashed forces that will continue to push ASEAN into the military mold. Military alliances are essentially devices for countering external conventional military threats. The Vietnamese invasion dramatically strengthened the specter of conventional external aggression. It has added weight to the arguments of the hawks in every ASEAN capital. It is reported that the Singaporeans, the Indonesians, and the go-along Thais are pushing for the most

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serious and active consideration of the military option, with the Malaysians and the Filipinos dragging their feet. If there was any moral antipathy toward an ASEAN military alliance, Vietnam's actions have changed that.

If all hope is lost for ASEAN's past and present policy of drawing Vietnam into a system of peaceful coexistence, if the defense of Thailand against external encroachment is believed to be of vital interest to all its ASEAN partners, if the threat of Vietnam is perceived as one seriously threatening the security of all the ASEAN states, if an ASEAN military alliance is seen to be a credible military counter, then it may be inevitable that the ASEAN countries will go for a full-bodied, formal, multilateral military alliance. But these are big ifs.

The fact is that, although the hope of building a region-wide system of accommodation and peaceful coexistence has been badly shaken, it has not been destroyed. General optimism still exists that Vietnam must surely now concentrate on consolidating its position at home and, now, in Indochina. Hanoi's ambitions beyond Indochina have not yet been demonstrated. There is still willingness to give the Vietnamese the benefit of the doubt. Then too it is not clear that no ASEAN state perceives the possibility of a private accommodation with Hanoi. There may be closer bilateral military collaboration or informal multilateral cooperation. It is possible to envisage in the foreseeable future the frontline stationing of military units from several or even all the ASEAN countries to serve as hostage, tripwire, and a demonstration of solidarity. But a crucial factor is simply the lack of credibility of any

multilateral ASEAN arrangement—without the assistance of an external Great Power.

Military self-reliance is an economically expensive way of ensuring national security. It is invariably cheaper to band together. However, you cannot make a partnership without a partner. Very clearly, the Southeast Asia zone of peace concept and the policy of self-reliance are to a large extent the result of making a virtue out of necessity. It is obviously wise, if you cannot have a Great Power partner, to get all Great Powers out. The ASEAN states have two big-brother options: They can go with the Chinese, which nobody wants to do for domestic as well as other reasons, or they can go with the Americans. The difficulty with the American option is the problem of American policy and American credibility. After Vietnam, the reassertion of Congress in foreign affairs, and the uncertainty of the presidency, can an American commitment be relied upon by states whose capacity to manipulate American politics is practically nonexistent? In any case, what was once the alliance-hungriest power in history shows no sign of returning to its old ways. For all these reasons, the creation of a traditional balance of power structure with external Great Power help is simply not on, at least in the near future.

Does this mean that there will be greater expenditure on military self-reliance against conventional external military threats? It surely must. Already, every country in the ASEAN area has taken steps to enhance, albeit undramatically, its conventional warfare capability. In July the Thais held their first large-scale military maneuvers. Indonesia is increasing its army recruitment. So is Malaysia. Nevertheless, even in the case of Thailand, it is unlikely there will be abandonment of the policy of giving priority to the political, economic, and social over the military means. Even in the case of Thailand it is probable that domestic threats will continue to be seen as posing a more serious threat than external aggression. It has been argued that Thailand will respond to Vietnam's threat in the way that it has traditionally responded to external threats—through diplomatic means.

It would be untrue to say that in the ASEAN area the more things change the more they remain the same. But the continuities are as profound as the discontinuities in the aftermath of the dramatic events in Indochina this past year. The ASEAN states' game remains fundamentally unaltered. **[wv]**