The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 14 | Number 1 Article 26

7-4-1984

AMERICAN-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

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by

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The term "normalization" is a slippery one when used in international relations and is best avoided if possible. The United States has "normal" relations with the Soviet Union, Israel, Canada, South Africa, and Japan—but consider the enormous variety within each of these sets of associations. In truth there is no such thing as a "normal" relationship in world affairs today.[1]

What is meant by the term, properly used, is establishment of an official government-to-government connection at some specific level, which can range from the lowly interest section to the fully staffed embassy. As used here, establishment of normal relations would mean that the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam exchange embassies and engage in at least a minimum level of diplomatic intercourse of the kind common among nations throughout the world.

"Normalizing" relations would not mean a new ambiance between the two, or that either has changed its opinion of the other. It does not *necessarily* mean that US economic assistance would be provided Vietnam or that Hanoi would open its POW files to us.

A word should perhaps be said here in defense of diplomatic relations in general. As a working principle it is, I believe, better for a country to have a formal relationship with another than not to have it (even if an enemy), just as it is more valuable to talk and listen (again even to one's enemy or potential enemy) than not to do so. The problem, in those cases in which there is no recognition, always is the initial act of establishment, the getting from here to there. Once accomplished, most would agree that national interest is then better served.

However, diplomatic recognition is almost always regarded as a political statement. It can be argued logically that diplomatic relations are merely facilitative, that recognition is neither a gesture of approval nor an endorsement of past behavior. Despite this flawless logic, the fact remains that diplomatic recognition is almost universally seen as conferring legitimacy, if not honor. In the case of Vietnam, probably few Americans would argue that we should never under any circumstances have diplomatic relations with the present Hanoi government. Such a position in fact is irrational, since it reflexively precludes serving American national interest in the emergence of circumstances in which it would be in our interest to have an embassy in Hanoi. Many Americans, possibly even the majority, are opposed to formal relations (based on public opinion polls of the late 1970s), but probably most of these would not object if they were already in place.

Parenthetically, I would at the outset dismiss out of hand various moral, ethical, and philosophic reasons for diplomatic recognition of Vietnam, first because diplomatic intercourse follows only from perceived national interest (on both sides) and not on abstraction or sentiment, and second because the United States owes Vietnam nothing, has no sins to atone for, nor has

incurred any debt or obligation either as a result of its earlier presence in Vietnam or its conduct during the Vietnam War.[2]

A cautionary note should be sounded early in this article concerning the anticipated benefits that would accrue from establishing a formal relationship with Hanoi. There has been for several years a tendency among advocates to surround the act with unwarranted assumptions. In discussing normalization they list hoped-for developments—diminution of Soviet influence in Indochina, more benign behavior by the People's Army of Vietnam, economic investment opportunities for American business—and imply that these will come about more or less automatically once the American ambassador arrives in Hanoi. Those who hold this idea should be disabused of it as strongly as possible. Diplomatic recognition is no panacea for the problems between the two countries. This is not necessarily an argument against recognition, only counsel that representation is one thing and problem-solving another.

The experiences of various noncommunist countries dealing diplomatically with Vietnam in the postwar years validates this assertion. These also suggest some of the limits the United States might expect if it were to establish relations. About 85 countries now have formal relations with Hanoi. Much of this diplomatic association is nominal. In many instances the ambassador accredited to a nearby country—Thailand or China—is also accredited to Vietnam, an extra duty requiring the envoy to make periodic trips to Hanoi and tending to hold intercourse to a minimum.[3]

The cutoff of foreign aid by most noncommunist countries after Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea of course chilled Hanoi's relations with these countries. Six European countries are now providing aid and seem to have fairly good working relations, particularly Sweden and France.[4] The Japanese and Indian missions are active, but the associations do not appear to be particularly deep. For most nations Hanoi is considered primarily as a listening post. Diplomats posted in Hanoi find their surroundings extremely trying and often regard their assignment as an exile.[5] Those who have worked in Hanoi counsel every arrival to do two things: first, to guard against high expectations; second, to remember that they are dealing not with people but with a system. This can be difficult, for appearances can deceive. Surrounded by generally helpful individuals, it is easy to believe that to succeed one need only to get to the right people. But in this sense there are no "right people"; there is only the system. To enter Vietnam some commercial visitors must fill out 14 separate application forms and supply 16 photographs for nine different Vietnamese governmental agencies. It is the system which determines whether anything will come of an association. The system throws up the barricades and provides the inertia, victimizing Vietnamese and foreigner alike. It is the system that in the end doles out success or failure, resolves problems or makes them worse. This is not to say that the system cannot be dealt with, but it does mean that the chance for progress is diminished and that progress comes only at glacial speed.

Finally, by way of scene-setting, it is well to recount a bit of history. Vietnam had the opportunity to establish diplomatic relations with the United States shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, but threw the chance away in a gesture that in retrospect was pure

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leadership blunder. This missed opportunity is worth examining briefly for the insight it offers on possible future relations.

The Carter Administration, soon after taking office, dispatched the Woodcock Mission (named after its chairman, Leonard Woodcock) to Hanoi to explore official thinking there. Hanoi leaders took a hard-line approach; they spoke of American economic obligations, mentioned the figure $3.25 billion,[6] and even made use of the term "war reparation" in the Hanoi press. The Americans explained the US foreign aid process, how it required congressional authorization and involved domestic politics that are part of the democratic process. They suggested that embassies be exchanged first, and that the newly arrived Vietnamese ambassador in Washington then begin soliciting economic assistance by making representations at the Department of State and lobbying on Capitol Hill, since that is the way it is done. The Hanoi Politburo, however, stood by its "precondition"—aid before recognition. The Americans demurred, and the mission ended inconclusively. There the matter stood for the next year or so, marked by occasional meetings at the United Nations level and deputy-assistant-level talks in Paris.[7] But this was a dynamic period. During 1977-78 Vietnam-PRC relations deteriorated, finally to the point where Hanoi officials were sufficiently fearful of the rising China threat to drop the precondition on establishing relations with the United States. Also during this period, however, US-PRC relations were solidifying. It was the time of the "opening to China," and the Carter Administration increasingly became convinced that the matter was coming down to a choice between Vietnam and China—for the United States, no hard choice to make.[8] The United States took no action on the new signals and overtures out of Hanoi. Then, at Christmastime 1978, the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea, killing entirely the idea of establishing relations.[9] That is where the matter stands today. The point to note here is that Vietnam at the end of the year 1978 was denied what almost certainly it could have had at the beginning—and would have had, but for the poor judgment of its Politburo leadership.

POSITIONS

To provide a framework for examining this question of US-Vietnamese relations, it is necessary to set forth the positions of the various actors in the drama—principally, of course, the United States and Vietnam, but secondarily others in the region and around the world with a vested interest in any change in the US-Vietnamese relationship.

Vietnam. The Vietnamese position on relations with the United States is not entirely clear at the moment, despite what many outsiders tend to believe. Some observers assert that Hanoi is nearly desperate for recognition, but that contention does not hold up under scrutiny.

The surest guide or most reliable analytical approach here is to try to look at the idea in Politburo terms. The two general national-interest goals which the leaders obviously seek to serve are national security and economic development. These have been badly pursued in recent years by the leadership, but still represent basic intent. The Politburo will evaluate the prospect of normal relations with the United States in these terms, asking: will relations enhance our security (or at least not decrease it), and will relations contribute to the nation-building task?

The answers to these questions at the moment appear to be in the affirmative, but not enthusiastically so. Vietnamese leaders from time to time say publicly that they want establishment of diplomatic relations, and when asked point-blank by visiting journalists, of course, are obliged to sound forthcoming. Hanoi media treatment of the subject is infrequent and then usually diffident or so densely ideological as to forestall sure conclusions. Were these editorials and theoretical articles pointedly negative, we could infer something from them, but being what might be called morally affirmative, they tell us very little.

From an analysis of Vietnam's national interest needs—security and nation build-

ing—one can reasonably assume that the Politburo is of the opinion that, all other things being equal, relations with the United States would serve these two interests, if only modestly. On that basis we can conclude that a firm proposal from Washington that embassies be exchanged (through strictly government-to-government channels, of course) would be accepted by Hanoi.

We cannot, however, be entirely sure that the decision would be based on national-interest considerations. As with other governments, domestic influences are at work in Vietnam. The political system operating at the Politburo level in Hanoi, as in the Sinic political system from which it is derived, is rooted in factionalism. The decision-making process within this system is characterized by—some would say cursed by—factional infighting, what the Vietnamese call *bung-di* or "faction-bashing." In the struggle for power among factions of the ruling group, the most common weapons are doctrinal arguments and policy issues. Thus a Politburo debate on whether or not to recognize the United States would in part be a factional struggle, carried on independent of the merits of the issue. One faction might oppose it simply because another faction favored it. That being the case, no outsider (nor even most Vietnamese insiders) can ever be sure of the outcome of a policy proposal.

Other internal Vietnamese factors also would be at work in such a decision, the key ones being the party's determination to maintain ideological purity, the various ongoing programs aimed at solving Vietnam's many economic problems, and internal security threats or the counterrevolution. Part of Hanoi's evaluation would be whether US presence would affect these. Probably the leadership would conclude that the arrival of the American ambassador and his staff would: (a) slightly compromise the party's ideological purity; (b) carry at least some promise of contributing to the improvement of the Vietnamese economy; and (c) have negligible meaning in terms of internal security.

United States. The Reagan Administration's enunciated position as of this writing is that the question of diplomatic relations with Vietnam is simply being held in abeyance and that this is a pragmatic position, not one born of dogma or punitiveness. Establishing diplomatic relations is treated chiefly as a matter of timing, when the correct conditions obtain. One of the correct conditions, perhaps the only one, is withdrawal of Vietnamese army troops from Kampuchea. The implication is that if this does not happen, there will be no change in present policy. Actually this is not so much a policy as a holding operation, or one might say a non-policy. In the longer run the US choice will come down to three policy options: roll-back of communism, presumably by funding and backing the resistance in Vietnam; determined containment of Vietnamese influence, which might be called the China recommendation; or minimal "normal" relations. The present holding operation, however, has not yet run its course and could last another few years.

Within the US government there is a somewhat broader spread of policy opinion than the official Reagan Administration position. The hardest line taken appears to be in the State Department, principally because recognition is seen as damaging US-ASEAN and US-PRC relations, and the softest on Capitol Hill, where a few senators and representatives forthrightly advocate US recognition. This issue within the congressional scene is complicated by cross-purpose interests involving the resolution of Vietnam War casualties. The Pentagon, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, seems to fall between State and the Hill. The rationale employed by those favoring recognition within the Pentagon is that it would offer opportunities to ameliorate to some extent Soviet presence in Indochina. However, as far as can be determined, these differing opinions do not approach anything like an internal policy split.

On the broader American scene—with respect to public opinion throughout the United States—a similar range of outlook exists as in the government, that is, spirited difference of opinion with no real fire in it. A few years ago passions ran higher, but these seem now to have cooled. Then there was more organized political pressure within the

American system—both pro and con pressure—to act on the idea of diplomatic relations with Vietnam. To some extent this division was along traditional liberal-conservative lines, although there were numerous crossovers—conservatives who wanted recognition as a means of inducing Hanoi to account for American MIAs of the Vietnam War, and liberals who opposed it because they wanted to punish Hanoi for its postwar aggression. For a period in the late 1970s, elements of the business community, spearheaded by the US Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, pressed for US recognition of Hanoi. However, that pressure group dried up with the breach of relations between Hanoi and China when most of these businessmen, who were in the export-import business, were told by Beijing to choose, and sensibly most of them chose China. Anti-war activists, once monolithically dedicated to embracing Hanoi, split down the middle after the war over the human rights issue in Vietnam (reeducation camps, new economic zones) and over causes of the holocaust that developed in Kampuchea. In the past couple of years or so we have seen the rise of a new pressure group in the United States, the emigré Vietnamese. These number about 600,000, and while most of them remain apolitical, they are becoming increasingly organized; and most of their organizations are opposed to US recognition.

In sum, American public opinion remains divided, with only a minority favoring US relations with Vietnam, the remainder indifferent or opposed. Without the saliency of view that would seem to dictate policy in Washington, a decision to recognize Hanoi probably would draw no particularly strong or sustained reaction from the country.

Other Nations. A consideration for the United States, and presumably also for Vietnam, in contemplating diplomatic recognition is the effect it would have (or not have) on respective allies and adversaries.

China's position, it is generally assumed in the United States, is to stand against US recognition, even though China itself has an embassy in Hanoi. As far as can be determined, the United States has never formally put the matter to Beijing on the grounds that Beijing would reply it was none of China's business. Those familiar with Chinese attitudes say this is in fact the standard reply received in Beijing, although they put it down to evasiveness more than indifference and believe that China hopes the United States will not act until the Kampuchean question is settled.

Some ASEAN states—chiefly Thailand and Singapore—privately advise against a change of status in the US-Vietnamese relationship at present, meaning until there is a resolution in Kampuchea. The Philippines appears to concur but without strong feelings. Indonesia and Malaysia are somewhat equivocal as attitudes fluctuate; frequently there is disparity between what is said publicly and privately in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. All five ASEAN nations, however, appear to operate on the overriding principle that the issue should not be permitted to cause a division within ASEAN. In none of the five countries does the issue of US recognition of Hanoi seem to be considered a highly important one.

Japan takes something of the same attitude as the ASEAN states. There is mild interest and some concern that US recognition might become a disruptive factor in the region. Australian policies toward Vietnam in general appear at this writing to be undergoing reevaluation.

The Soviet Union may have firm opinions on the matter, but if so they are well hidden. Moscow officials tell Americans in avuncular fashion that the United States ought to recognize Hanoi, possibly hoping that the USSR will get credit for this in Vietnam. Some observers argue that Moscow is dissembling, that it would prefer continuation of the present isolation of Vietnam in the international arena, for this increases Vietnamese dependency and engenders fewer problems for Soviet diplomats in Hanoi. Clearly the USSR does regard the United States as a future competitor in Indochina, but probably does not regard arrival of a US mission in Hanoi as appreciably changing the geopolitical balance.

France and Sweden presumably would welcome US recognition, as would India. The rest of Europe (and the world) seems more or less indifferent to the matter.

ISSUES

A number of issues stand between the United States and Vietnam, some of them fairly important and others not. These, of course, exist independent of whether there are formal relations between the two countries. A few are germane to the question of recognition, but most represent conflicting interests and divergent views. Their existence is not an argument against formal relations—after all, the basic purpose of diplomacy is to resolve outstanding issues and, if this is not possible, to insure that the other side clearly understands the position being taken and why. In any event these issues will continue to exist and continue to plague the United States and the region, and presumably Vietnam, whether or not diplomatic relations exist.

Regional Unity. The fact of regionalism in Southeast Asia—both with respect to ASEAN and to the informally unified three Indochinese states—is central to much foreign policy thinking in both Washington and Hanoi. This is a major issue, not necessarily a contentious one, but one that does imply competing regional organizations.

If there is for the United States any single overarching principle that will guide foreign policy design in the region in the next decade or so, it will be expressed in an effort to move toward sociopolitical, economic, and military equilibrium within the framework of regional institutionalization. The institutions—ASEAN and the fledgling Federation of Indochina—are already in place, and to a large extent will be the forum in which both the struggle for power and ordinary day-to-day diplomatic activity will be conducted in the decade ahead.

Vietnam appears to have tacitly accepted this gauntlet of regional competition that has been thrown down. As a result, its major goal is to secure a cooperative, non-threatening Indochina peninsula—that is the main reason it is in Kampuchea today. It also seeks to prevent development of a regional anticommunist front, either a militant ASEAN, a revived SEATO (which China has implied is necessary), or any other regional group hostile to Vietnam. In the same spirit, it seeks to limit superpower activity in the region, not only the United States and China but also (without appearing to do so) the USSR.

The struggle for power in Southeast Asia in the years ahead may vary in shape—triangular, quadrangular, or possibly polarized—but it will be conducted largely in the context of regionalism, between and among regional organizations. This will, of course, go on whether or not the United States and Vietnam have formal relations.

Kampuchea. The sad, bloodied, little land of Kampuchea currently is the central issue in American-Vietnamese relations, as it is the touchstone of policy for all of the nations in the region. Kampuchea may not be the cause of all the instability in Southeast Asia, but it contributes to all; it is the eye of the storm. Nor will there be much progress toward any sort of regional stability until the Kampuchean issue is settled one way or another.

The Reagan Administration's position, as noted above, is that there can be no formal relationship with Vietnam until Vietnamese troops leave Kampuchea, which is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. This is a comfortable position for the United States, for it minimizes the danger of getting into trouble in Indochina. And, it pushes ASEAN into taking more initiative and assuming more responsibility for war and peace in the area, long a US objective. Its chief drawback is that by definition it abrogates a US leadership role, since it says in effect that the United States will follow the ASEAN-China lead. As noted earlier, in actuality it is only a holding operation.

The most likely prospect for Kampuchea in the foreseeable future is simply more of the same. The struggle will go on with neither side being able to prevail, but neither so weak as to be in danger of collapse, and without any decisive developments or resolution. The second most likely prospect is Vietnamese success, that is, the Vietnamese army

breaking the back of the resistance and more or less "pacifying" the country, or at least confining armed resistance to the more remote parts of the Cardamom mountains. The third or least likely prospect is a political settlement, the establishment of a new governing structure in Kampuchea that provides equitable representation for the major contending elements: the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) (of three parts, the Khmer Rouge, the Sihanoukists, and the Son Sann and other "third force" elements) and the Hanoi-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).[10] A united-front government composed of these elements would be only the first step toward a truly viable government, one that functions at the provincial, district, and village governmental levels and not simply at cabinet level in Phnom Penh. Few realize what a vastly difficult task creating a government in Kampuchea will be, under any circumstances.[11] The Vietnamese troops are not now in Kampuchea for altruistic reasons, but the Vietnamese military government there represents the only government there is. Its precipitous withdrawal without a new governing system ready to move into place would plunge the country into total anarchy in which the power struggle would devolve to the 13th-century warlord level, and suffering by the Kampuchean people would be worse than anything yet experienced.

Soviet Presence. The rather widespread presence of the USSR throughout Indochina represents an issue standing between the United States and Vietnam, although not to the extent that it is an issue between Vietnam and China.

Soviet geopolitical objectives in the region (and worldwide) are beyond the scope of this paper. However, passing mention is required of those Moscow objectives pursued regionally to which Vietnam contributes or plays a part. These appear to be: (a) a desire to dominate the region ideologically but to achieve this by measures short of Soviet involvement in war (in fact that theme—dominance without war—explains most Moscow moves in the region); (b) to intimidate Japan and curtail its efforts to move more deeply into the region; (c) to block resurgent US presence in Southeast Asia, or shut out the United States entirely if possible; (d) above all, to contain and neutralize China and isolate it from the region, militarily and psychologically; (e) to woo ASEAN states (and keep them non-military) with a view to increased Soviet influence; and (f) in principle, to increase Soviet air/naval/military presence in the region.

Some of these objectives do not directly involve Vietnam (and indeed some are counter to Vietnamese interests). The USSR's desire to increase its capacity to project force over long distances in Southeast Asia does involve and possibly even endangers Vietnam. Moscow's motives in this—whether benign and normal for a nation with regional interests, or something more ambitious and ominous—can only be surmised. In any case, Vietnam now cooperates fully. The USSR and Vietnam have a military alliance in all but name. They conduct combined defense planning and presumably are prepared for combined operations. Soviet navy ships and Soviet air force planes make full use of Vietnamese facilities and appear to be granted anything they want. Moscow has paid a rather high price for this, both economically and diplomatically, for its stock in Southeast Asia is the lowest in a decade, but apparently feels that it is getting its money's worth.

This Soviet-Vietnamese defense arrangement does constitute a strategic threat, but one essentially psychological and in conditions short of total war.[12] Most analysts believe that Moscow's military planners concluded early that Soviet bases in Vietnam would be excessively vulnerable in a war with the United States; therefore they have not incorporated their use in US war scenarios. Short of total war, however, the bases have greater utility. They help encircle China and would be useful in any limited war involving the USSR. They would be essential for Soviet intervention in the region, Afghan style. And the bases do intimidate Asia, not only by representing direct Soviet military action, but by associating Vietnam with Soviet military power and thus enhancing the threat offered by Hanoi.

I do not believe that the current Soviet-

Vietnamese association is either as close or as durable as most observers contend. It is based on Soviet opportunism and Vietnamese dependency (for food and weapons), and will last at least as long as the USSR considers it useful and, on Hanoi's part, as long as Vietnam is unable to feed itself and the China threat continues. In any event, I do not believe that a nominal change of US-Vietnamese relations, as in the establishment of diplomatic relations, would have any effect, plus or minus, on the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance.

Vietnam Threat Potential. As is implicit in the discussion above, much of the military threat that Vietnam represents for Southeast Asia, which causes primary concern for the United States, derives from its association with the USSR. Vietnam by itself is not a credible threat to Southeast Asian countries, except Thailand, because it does not have the air and sea power to project force over long distances, to Indonesia for instance.

The People's Army of Vietnam, of course, is formidable—the third largest armed force on earth. Vietnam today has under arms, including its paramilitary troops, at least three to four million persons, with the main force elements now topping one million. Vietnamese troops could invade and occupy Thailand in a matter of days, although there are many compelling reasons not to, not the least of which is that Vietnam probably would find its present Kampuchean impasse extended to all of the Indochina peninsula, and greatly worsened. In terms of limited orthodox war, the Vietnamese army probably could hold its own against an invasion by China for a lengthy period, although not indefinitely.

Besides the orthodox military threat to parts of the region, Hanoi offers a second kind of threat, an indirect one, to the more distant reaches of Southeast Asia. It could fund and support insurgencies in any of the ASEAN countries. These might not in the end be successful, but with Vietnamese guidance and aid they could prove troublesome and costly to suppress.

Hanoi would like to see the countries of ASEAN move ever leftward until finally all become "people's republics." Theoreticians writing in party journals in Hanoi assert this will happen whether or not there is any action by Vietnam. They hold the governments and societies of noncommunist Southeast Asia to be illegitimate and transitory, and soon to be swept "into the dust bin of history," as the communist phrasemakers put it. The doctrinal problem for Vietnam is only a tactical one of how to push this process along: whether to organize and fund insurgencies and other left-wing challenges, to let history take its course, or by some other means.

For the moment at least, Hanoi has ruled out the insurgency approach. There is reason to believe that shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese generals took a long, hard look at the region's insurgents—concentrating on the Thai (actually there are three insurgent groups in Thailand)—and concluded that the guerrillas did not have the required qualities to be successful. Since then Vietnam has largely ignored insurgent appeals for assistance. This policy may change, of course, but clearly Hanoi must be convinced that an insurgent force has real prospects before it will back it with money and weapons.

There is a third threat that Hanoi could offer in that gray area between war and politics—what might be called a cold war or a psycho-political threat. The idea first surfaced in the late 1970s, when confidence was still high in Hanoi and the lure of expansionism still strong. Party theoreticians began developing a kind of economic security strategy for use in Southeast Asia. Its basic concept was that Vietnam should induce and pressure the ASEAN countries to cut their capitalist-multinationalist ties in exchange for guaranteed regional peace made possible by a cooperative, non-aggressive, non-expansionist Vietnam. The strategy was worked out in an elaborate rationale of doctrine, having to do with nationalism, collectivism, and non-alignment. After the time of troubles began in Vietnam, little was heard of the idea, but it is still there in the wings and we may not have heard the last of it.

We should be careful neither to understate nor exaggerate the threat potential Vietnam represents for Southeast Asia. The

determinant—and it is here we should maintain our attention—is the USSR, which can either facilitate or inhibit military action by Hanoi. Moscow continually should be reminded by the nations of the region that they hold her accountable for the behavior of her surrogate.

Resolution of Casualties. In addition to the major issues standing between the United States and Vietnam, there are a number of lesser magnitude. There is an entire clutch of economic problems such as frozen assets, nationalized property, and demands for indemnification on both sides. There are humanitarian problems involving divided families and other difficulties that arose with the exodus of some 600,000 Indochinese to the United States.

And there is the knotty, most difficult, resolution-of-casualties issue, that is, the need for an accounting by Hanoi, to the extent it can, of the fate of some 2500 American servicemen listed as missing in action or as "fate unknown" in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. This is a singular issue, normally not one that appears in foreign affairs. Traditionally and logically, nations treat assuaging of bereavement as a humanitarian matter, not something to be bargained by diplomats. For complex reasons this issue—which now has a long and somewhat peculiar history—has become a more or less permanent impediment standing between the two countries, one that has at times assumed a disproportionate importance in terms of national interest. The issue cuts to the political bone in America, for it has taken on a deep psychological meaning. It affects the fundamental sense of responsibility in our highest officials, both in the executive and legislative branches. Professionals in foreign affairs commonly hold that most issues are negotiable, but not this one, and they become unsure how to deal with it. What should be done is clear. In the interests of both the United States and Vietnam, Hanoi should become convinced that the issue must be lifted from the foreign affairs level to the humanitarian level and dealt with independent of the foreign policy of either country. However, this would require a changed mind-set by the myopic, anachronistic men of the Hanoi Politburo, which is highly unlikely. Solving this problem may have to wait for a generational change in Vietnam.[13]

POLICY

I conclude with some thoughts about US policy and the implications of establishing formal US-SRV relations.

In US policy terms, Southeast Asia, of which Vietnam is part, does not have the importance of most other regions of the world, certainly less than North Asia, for example. It does not loom large in daily defense and foreign policy thinking at the highest levels in Washington; probably Vietnam has never been on the agenda of a Reagan cabinet meeting. The net meaning of this is that Washington and Hanoi have only minimal interest in the other—neither can be particularly useful to the other, nor offer much by way of credible threat. The chief US policy interest in Southeast Asia in general appears to be access to the region and the freedom to traverse it, which Vietnam could not prevent although it could destabilize the region if it chose to do so. Hence, it is a safe conclusion that the operational assumption in both Washington and Hanoi is that in the foreseeable future neither will become for the other a truly serious foreign policy or strategic problem.

Looking beyond the present policy of the holding operation, what can we expect eventually—what is feasible?

If (or when) diplomatic relations are established with Hanoi, it will later be recognized that the first step, the initial move, was the hardest. This is because of the danger that any change in US policy, even some limited overture, is misread in Hanoi as confirmation that the SRV's hard-line policy is succeeding, bringing on an even harder Hanoi line with additional demands for concessions. The central problem in achieving any sort of forward progress is to get past this Politburo mind-set.

Once past this barrier, the exploratory process could proceed expeditiously, become easier, even mechanical. It would involve, on

both sides, a series of confidence-building measures, to use a favorite Marxist term, exchanges, one by one, in sets of two, one at a time. Like a tennis match, the exchanges of bilateral gestures would continue.

What are these confidence-building measures? At first they would be the simple and trouble-free, gradually moving toward the more complex and significant. On the US side these could include an end to the US economic embargo, cultural exchange, academic/intellectual relations, joint health-medical research projects, technology transfer, and economic aid and investment. On Hanoi's part they could include resolution of casualties, orderly departure procedures, simplified entry and currency exchange, tourism, and cultural and academic relations.

Once this process is underway, and only then, can we address ourselves to the more finite US geopolitical objectives: regional stability, benign Hanoi behavior (with respect to our allies and friends, and even others in the region), an Indochinese political configuration (Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea) acceptable to all, less USSR intimacy in Indochina.

One cannot be sure that these goals will be advanced by establishment of more or less normal relations with Vietnam, and their pursuit should not be advertised or sold on the basis that they will. Still, the promise that our interests may be served is great enough to make it worthwhile to pursue this approach.

As the United States moves more deeply into the 1980s, therefore, it seems probable that it will, in part by design and in part as reaction to the rush of events, increasingly be guided in its Southeast Asia/Indochina policies by the principle of equilibrium within the framework of competing regional institutions. Creation and maintenance of this equilibrium will require an entire matrix of organizations, some large and some small, some of broad general purpose and some of narrow specific objective, some governmental, some private and multinational. It will be a vast organized arena in which the struggle for power will be conducted. In such a context, diplomatic intercourse of every country with every other country will become virtually mandatory. This means that establishment of US-SRV relations in the final analysis is not a question of whether, but of when, strictly a matter of timing.

NOTES

This article is drawn from a paper presented at the conference "Defense Planning for the 1990s and the Changing International Environment," the Tenth National Security Affairs Conference cosponsored by National Defense University and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. The paper will be published by the National Defense University Press as part of the proceedings of that conference.

1. A major bibliographic source for this article is the Indochina Archive at the University of California, Berkeley, File 7-A, Vietnam Foreign Relations (US), approximately 15,000 pages of documentary material, of which about five percent deals directly with the subject of formal diplomatic relations; the remainder deals with issues between the two countries and a history of contacts since the end of the Vietnam War. Early material on the subject, circa 1976-77, was more voluminous but of less value in terms of today's policymaking. See Herman Kahn and Thomas Pepper, "United States Relations with Vietnam," Hudson Institute Report, December 1976, and by way of contrast, "Vietnam: 1976," a report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Senator George McGovern, March 1976. The best single source of material on this subject probably is the US Congress, "U.S. Aid to North Vietnam," House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 19 July 1977, a Committee on International Relations Print. "Claims Against Vietnam," a House of Representatives report dated 30 April 1980, outlines the legal issues involved with US nationals' losses incurred through nationalization in Vietnam, and also contains information on Hanoi assets frozen in the United States. "Indochina," a report released by the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific Affairs, 21 August 1978, contains a 150-page study by the author entitled "Vietnam's Future Foreign Relations," which includes a chapter on US-Vietnamese relations. "Adjudication of Claims Against Vietnam," by the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 27 July and 25 October 1979, contains background material on losses by US individuals and companies through nationalization of property in Vietnam and on Hanoi assets frozen in the United States. See also "Relations with the United States," a Congressional Research Service Vietnam Study, April 1982, pp. 63-69. For representative arguments on immediate recognition of Hanoi, see "For Normalizing Relations With Hanoi," by Richard Walden and Gary Larsen, in *The New York Times*, 29 April 1982; also "Diplomatic Relations With Vietnam Should Be Restored," by Rank Price, *National Vietnam Veterans Review*, March 1982.

2. In strict interpretation of diplomatic protocol, Hanoi owes the United States at least an apology for violating the agreements signed with the United States in February and March 1973. The Paris Agreements, whatever else was their meaning (for instance the extraordinary concession of allowing Hanoi to keep 40,000 troops in someone else's country, legally) clearly stipulated no force augmentation, yet virtually the entire North Vietnamese army was in South Vietnam near the end of the war (April 1975). This represented a total breach of our agreement.

3. In some instances this relation is only nominal; one envoy with such an arrangement appeared twice in Hanoi in three years, on arrival to present his credentials and for his farewell call upon departure.

4. The other four are Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Finland. In some instances these countries have picked up economic aid projects dropped after Vietnam invaded Kampuchea. In some cases assistance appears to be only token, for the purposes of quieting domestic criticism.

5. See the author's "Experiences of Various Countries in Dealing With Vietnam," a study prepared for the US Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, January 1979. For a hilarious account of diplomatic life in Hanoi, see "Waiting for the Fruits of Victory," by Siegfried Kogelfranz in *Der Spiegel*, 3 and 13 February 1978.

6. In mid-1973, as part of the Paris Agreements arrangements, representatives from the United States (Agency for International Development) and the DRV held a series of technical-level meetings in Paris. The two sides discussed US economic assistance to Vietnam to which the United States had agreed as part of the "binding up the wounds of war" effort in the Paris Agreements. Among the documents coming out of these meetings was a Hanoi-supplied list of desired US-assisted reconstruction aid. The price tag on the list totaled about $3.25 billion. Another document was a White House memorandum (that may or may not bear Richard Nixon's signature, the matter being in doubt) in which the United States acknowledged this level of economic need, and implied that the United States would make such money available. However, at these meetings and in various other ways (including Kissinger press conferences), the United States stressed two points: that the executive branch representatives in Paris did not have the authority to commit the United States to granting $3.25 billion since this was a power reserved for the Congress, and that the United States considered any economic assistance for North Vietnam dependent on Hanoi's military restraint in the South. In any event, because of these conditional qualifications, there never was a clear and legal US debt obligation.

7. The United States during this period also acquiesced (by refraining from veto) in UN membership for Vietnam; it also pledged to end trade restrictions and other embargo measures once diplomatic relations were established.

8. Some critics have argued that the United States is to be blamed for the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea on the grounds that recognition would have restrained Hanoi. An examination of Hanoi's motives and purposes in attacking Kampuchea suggests that US recognition was an irrelevant matter. Actually the United States can count itself fortunate—it escaped the embarrassment of a Vietnamese act of war at about the time the new US ambassador was arriving in Hanoi to open formal relations.

9. Other factors also had contributed to the slowdown of movement toward establishing relations. These include the refugee exodus, Hanoi's decisions to join CEMA and sign a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR, and the rise of influence of a small but powerful group of congressmen who, in the name of the resolution-of-casualties issue, signaled the White House that it faced a heavy political battle on Capitol Hill centering around the MIA question.

10. The concern here must be with institutions, not individuals. Almost certainly there is no place in the future governing structure of Kampuchea, whatever it becomes, for either Pol Pot or Heng Samrin personally. Both are total anathema to almost all Khmer. Probably other top figures on both sides will also have to go.

11. The British Hanoi watcher, Denis Duncanson, has done some calculations on this and concludes that even with the best political settlement in Kampuchea, it will remain almost a mathematical impossibility for the society to produce in less than a generation sufficient leaders, technicians, and bureaucrats, so completely decimated is its middle class. See "Who Will Govern Cambodia," in *The World Today* (London), June 1982.

12. Not all agree on this. A common view in influential circles in the United States and Europe is that Soviet moves in the Pacific in the last decade are the result of a natural concern for a region that increasingly affects Soviet interests and that its actions there are normal and not aggressive. Some contend that the United States and the USSR actually have little to quarrel over in Southeast Asia, unlike other regions of the world.

13. See the author's "Policy Dimension on the Indochina POW-MIA Issue," a policy-planning position paper dated August 1979 (copy in the Indochina Archive, University of California, Berkeley). See also the SRV White Paper, "On the Question of Americans Missing in the Vietnam War," Hanoi, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1980.