

Transformation of National Strategy in Postwar Vietnam: Dependency to Engagement

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Abstract

A national strategy is a composite of orientations and approaches that provides contextual bases for the formulation of specific foreign policies. In postwar Vietnam, the national strategy has been both to maintain national independence in international relations and to secure necessary resources for economic development. In the two decades between 1975 and 1995, Vietnam's national strategy has shifted from Marxist-Leninist formalism to new pragmatism; in turn and during the same period, Vietnam's policy has shifted from pro-Soviet dependency to an adaptive engagement with the United States and a transition to the market. Not only have conjunctures in international relations significantly affected the trajectory of Vietnamese national strategy, but also political leaders' self-reflection relative to the nation's development path has expedited a pragmatic adaptation for accessing international resources by way of normalization with the United States. In comparison to the Vietnamese case, the political situation in North Korea, preoccupied by the military-first politics, overshadows a strategic shift in the near future.

Keywords: adaptation, national strategy, new pragmatism, engagement, military-first politics

Introduction

About a decade has passed since the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the United States. This time span might suffice for outside observers' objective appraisal of Hanoi's shift from the anti-American armed struggle, which ended in 1975, to normalization of relations with Washington in 1995. During the past decade, the expanded bilateral relationship, both in diplomacy and in trade, might have cleared up any possible bias in relation to the background of the postwar Vietnam's shift to the normalization. This shift was radical in comparison to the Chinese and the North Korean cases. Each of the three countries—Vietnam, China, and North Korea—had engaged in a war with the United States in the Cold War era. But their respective approaches to the Western adversary have differed from one another. The time period that characterized the building of a new relationship with the United States was, in the Vietnamese case, shorter than the three decades that characterized the Chinese case, which extended from the communist takeover in 1949 to normalization of relations with the United States in 1979. And in contrast to the North Korean case of maintaining an antagonistic posture toward the enemy, Vietnam put aside the history of its war, which caused about two million deaths, and started to normalize its relations with the United States twenty years after the end of the war.

It is noteworthy that Vietnam's normalization of relations with the United States occurred only after Vietnam experimented with a couple of different national strategies. Following the end of the Vietnam War and continuing for a decade, Vietnam maintained its longstanding tradition of economic dependence. During the last phase of the war, Vietnam's dependence on foreign aid—basically on Soviet and Chinese loans and grants—soared to account for more than half of the annual budget: for instance, 60.6 percent of the budget in 1974 and 54.9 percent the following year. In the postwar period, foreign aid

remained significant, despite a noticeable decline, and accounted for an average of 38.5 percent of the budget in the second half of the 1970s.¹ Although it made a strong commitment to national sovereignty and independence, Vietnam had to lean on the Soviet Union for both economic aid and security in the midst of increasing tensions in Indochina and the development of the Sino-American relationship. Vietnam's military invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was a climax of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. Later, given both the international pressure over the issue of Cambodia and the launch of *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, Vietnam undertook in 1986 a domestic renovation, the so-called *doi moi*, and made diplomatic efforts in the early 1990s to develop the US-Vietnam relationship by cooperating with the United States in relation to both a Cambodian peace settlement and the prisoners-of-war/missing-in-action (POW/MIA) issue.

The purpose of this article is to examine the onset and the nature of Vietnam's radical shift in the two decades between 1975 and 1995 by identifying the transformation of postwar Vietnam's national strategy. The article is not about the history of economic reform and opening up; it is about the ways in which different versions of postwar Vietnam's national strategy rose and fell and in which the national strategy has contextualized the country's external relations, particularly with the big powers (the Soviet Union, China, and the United States). In this article, the term national strategy means a composite of orientations and approaches that provides a country with contextual bases for its formulating of specific foreign policies. Vietnam, as a small and weak country, has had to rely on a great deal of external resources, and at the same time, it has had to cope with foreign powers. But it is a misconception that Vietnam's policies are

¹ Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy Since 1975* (Singapore: Institute of South-east Asian Studies, 1990), pp. 40 and 101.

direct, immediate responses to stimuli from outside. There has been a host of instilling processes of strategic deliberation in domestic politics: rise and fall of leaders, self-criticism, and ideological reflection.

A rigorous examination of both the transformation of Vietnam's national strategy and the transformation's effects involves basically an illustration of postwar Vietnam's adaptive processes. In this article, the term adaptive processes refer to the processes of isomorphism, with which a system is able to avoid an immense cost, whether moral or material, caused by discrepancy between the internal identity and the external situation. It is also notable that the transformation occurred at junctures whereby domestically accumulated contradictions and effects from outside encountered each other: that is, changes in the national strategy occurred in the dimension of domestic-international interactions. While taking into account this interactive point, my article responds to the following questions: First, what were major conjunctures that brought about a shift in the adaptive processes? Second, what was the international aspect under each stage of the national strategy? Third, what ideological justifications did the leaders use or where did the new pragmatic thinking originate from? Finally, what is the implication of the postwar Vietnamese case for the North Korean case?

National Strategy: Definition and Application

The concept of national strategy, in this article, derives from the notion of grand strategy, which has been extensively used in the study of international relations. I use national strategy to imply a passive connotation of grand strategy, emphasizing the survival of Vietnam besieged by big powers even after the socialist reunification in 1975. And I use national strategy to stress domestic political processes, as

well as the international situation; this is an attempt to overcome the limits of the realist tradition to which most studies on grand strategy affiliate.

But it is worthwhile to examine the notion of grand strategy, whose analytic utility I partly adopt in the Vietnamese case study. Grand strategy, as Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes note, represents a comprehensive conception that provides a framework for establishing “the relationship between means and ends” of a country and for contextualizing the ways “how a state’s full range of resources can be adapted to achieve national security.” Grand strategy, Cronin and Ludes continue, involves a political objective of the “identification of threat or enemies or friends.”² In the same vein, Avery Goldstein posits that grand strategy is the “central logic” that interlinks various foreign policies, the country’s vision and capabilities, and international constraints. But Goldstein points out that grand strategy is not expressed in an explicit fashion because of the conceptual inclusiveness; for instance, the United States NSC-68 in 1949, which was the basic document for the containment policy toward the Soviet Union, is not a grand strategy per se.³

Scholars who use the notion of grand strategy are divided in explaining dominant factors for emergence and changes of the strategy; the divisions are in line with different intellectual traditions. On the one hand, those in the hard-core realist tradition stress international factors. Lawrence Freedman states that grand strategy transforms with a shocking international event; according to him, American grand strategy prevented, for a decade after the end of the Cold War, any other nation from dominating a region whose resources might be adequate to generate international power, but the

² Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), pp. 75-76.

³ Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China’s Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 19.

9/11 terror incident brought a turning point in the grand strategy.⁴ In a similar context, Steven E. Lobell points out that external situations, whether conflictual or peaceful, predominate domestic political processes, for instance, whose positions be adopted in foreign policymaking. He posits that the conflicting situation empowers advocates of a risk-taking aggressive strategy, whereas peaceful environment reinforces those of a risk-averse defensive strategy.⁵ Colin Dueck also stresses the significance of the international factor, by noting that changes in international conditions are the chief cause of long-term adjustment in grand strategy, while domestic political-military cultures help specify the precise grand strategy chosen by state officials.⁶

On the other hand, there is a group of scholars who pay special attention to cultural backgrounds and domestic processes. Perhaps Alastair Iain Johnston is the forerunner of the study of strategic culture; he posits that strategic culture as an “ideational milieu” limits behavioral choices, and within the range of milieu, policymakers derive specific predictions about policy choices. For him, a country’s strategic culture consists of a “system of symbols” about adversaries, threats, and efficacious strategic options.⁷ Meanwhile, some scholars emphasize the domestic mechanism and leaders’ role. Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein advocate that the study of grand strategy should go beyond the realist understanding, noting that “grand strategy reflects a nation’s mechanism for arriving at social

⁴ Lawrence Freedman, “The Transformation of Grand Strategy,” *Adelphi Papers*, No. 379 (March 2006), pp. 27-48.

⁵ Steven E. Lobell, “The International Realm, Framing Effects, and Security Strategies: Britain in Peace and War,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January-March 2006), pp. 27-48.

⁶ Colin Dueck, “Realism, Culture, and Grand Strategy: Explaining America’s Peculiar Path to World Power,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (April-June 2005), pp. 195-231.

⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 36-37.

choices.”⁸ Etel Solingen has conducted an extensive study about grand strategy based on actors and their orientations; according to her, domestic actors in power, particularly whether an internationalist coalition or a nationalist coalition, constitute the centrality in efforts to direct grand strategy.⁹ Also, there are case studies on domestic factors of grand strategy. Eric Heginbotham emphasizes the relationship between leaders’ ideological orientation and military strategy,¹⁰ whereas Francis Herbert Marlo states that “grand strategy cannot be thought of as a given, but rather flows from the national leader’s underlying beliefs, central goals and preferred tools.”¹¹

A survey of the study on grand strategy sheds light on its applicability to the Vietnamese case. On the one hand, there are three interactive factors that eventually decide a country’s strategic direction: international environment, cultural or ideological milieu, and political leaders. This article, however, pays a particular attention not only to international situations but also to Vietnam’s domestic processes in which political leaders conceived changes in international relations and ways in which the leaders deliberated foreign policies. On the other hand, the notion of grand strategy concerns mostly with global powers, such as the United States, the former Soviet Union,

⁸ Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, “Beyond Realism: The Study of Grand Strategy,” in Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (eds.), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 12.

⁹ Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century’s Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 8-13 ; “Internationalization, Coalitions, and Regional Conflict and Cooperation,” in Edward D. Mansfield and Brian M. Pollins (eds.), *Economic Interdependence and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 60-69.

¹⁰ According the analysis, liberal leaders support naval interests, whereas nationalists frequently back army leaders. Eric Heginbotham, “The Fall and Rise of Navies in East Asia: Military Organizations, Domestic Politics, and Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 86-125.

¹¹ Francis Herbert Marlo, “The Intellectual Roots of Reagan’s Strategy,” *Dissertation Abstracts International (A): Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (October 2006), p. 1523.

Great Britain, and China; the word *grand* is unsuitable for a long foreign-dependent country like Vietnam.

In Vietnamese case, therefore, another notion, *national* strategy, underlies an effort to discern its transformation and the following effects on the significant changes in the country's external relations, especially with the Soviet Union and the United States (see Table 1. for the three-stage transformation of postwar Vietnam's national strategy). The role of Vietnamese leaders was the identification of two points: the situation in which Vietnam was steeped and the means by which the country strove to survive.

This study of Vietnam's national strategy shows why the background and the ideological orientation of leading figures—like war veterans in the politburo of the party, or the general secretary of the party in the Vietnamese case—are of special importance to observers who are concerned about the trajectory of external policies. Shifts of the national strategy have depended on up-and-down fate of political leaders and their orientations toward the unique postwar domestic situation (for example, triumphalism and self-criticism) and toward the international environment. In turn, the fate of political leaders has been related to gradual ideological transitions; for instance, new pragmatic views of Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Van Linh, and Nguyen Co Thach paralleled a strategic shift in Vietnam.

Table 1. National Strategy and International and Domestic Spectra

	Formalist strategy	Experimental stage of new pragmatic strategy	New pragmatic strategy
Period	1975-1985	1986-1990	1991-1995
Major Conuncture	Occupation of South Vietnam in 1975; the fourth congress of the VCP in 1976	Gorbachev's initiative for <i>glasnost</i> and <i>perestroika</i> ; the sixth congress of the VCP in 1986	Collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989; the seventh congress of the VCP in 1991
International Aspect	Pro-Soviet/anti-Chinese stance; invasion of Cambodia	Two tracks (maintenance of pro-Soviet stance; withdrawal from Cambodia)	Engagement with the US for normalization and the lifting of economic sanctions
Domestic Aspect	Socialist transformation; party dictatorship; socialist triumphalism	Renovation (<i>doi moi</i>); election of reformist leadership	Liberalization in the party; "market mechanism economy"
Ideological Backup	Marxism-Leninism; proletarian internationalism	Marxism-Leninism; independence and interdependence	Ho Chi Minh's thought as creative application of Marxism-Leninism (independence, peaceful coexistence)

Socialist Dependency, 1975-1985

Marxist-Leninist Formalist Strategy in Unified Vietnam

The military occupation of Saigon in April 1975 provided the northern leaders with socialist triumphalism.¹² Such a mood persisted for a decade, that is, during the period of socialist transformation. Under the name of voluntarism, this mood served the coercive and ruthless nationalization of industries and the similarly coercive and

¹²For a discussion on the postwar mood in Vietnam, see Robert K. Brigham, "Revolutionary Heroism and Politics in Postwar Vietnam," in Charles E. Neu (ed.), *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 85-104.

ruthless collectivization of agriculture. Socialist triumphalism was closely intertwined with a diverging fate of the two versions of the national strategy: the solidification of the *formalist* strategy based on Marxism-Leninism, on the one hand, and the decline of the *traditional pragmatic* strategy, on the other hand.¹³ The latter provided the Vietnamese people with a binary code of friend or enemy during the wars against France and the United States, whereas the former, by adopting the Soviet model, came to legitimize a rigid socialist transformation of the unified society.

Here, it is necessary to compare the two versions of the national strategy in detail. Traditional pragmatic strategy was a basis of practical diplomacy in times of national crises. It had developed in Vietnam's long history of being victimized by China's recurrent invasions and domination, by French colonialism, and by American military intervention. Vietnam's traditional pragmatic strategy had associated, by and large, with a practical war plan. It focused on a differentiation between enemy and friend in international affairs, while laying less emphasis on ideological tenets. Traditional pragmatic strategy assigned a supreme value to the independence and the sovereignty of Vietnam, because of the country's low security capacity. For this goal, traditional pragmatic strategy legitimized alliances with friends and wars against enemies, both of which were well explored and employed by a military man, General Vo Nguyen Giap.¹⁴ Because it upheld the value of independence and sovereignty, Vietnam's traditional pragmatic strategy may be in line with nationalism in modern history. Also, the traditional pragmatic strategy warned of the possibility of an unequal alliance between Vietnam and the more powerful partners. Even during wartime,

¹³ On the naming of two versions of the strategy, see Eero Palmujoki, *Vietnam and the World: Marxist-Leninist Doctrine and the Changes in International Relations, 1975-93* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 1-18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Vietnam carefully examined whether any alliance with a friend could evolve into Vietnam's subordination to that friend, particularly to China. In this regard, the traditional pragmatic strategy reflected a defensive mentality of the small and weak Vietnam.

In contrast, Vietnam's formalist strategy stressed proletarian internationalism, while partly fusing itself with an essential element of the traditional pragmatic strategy, that is, independence. The founding father of socialist Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, championed the formalist strategy. The reason that explains Ho's departure from the French Socialist Party and his move to Moscow in the early 1920s concerns his search for a way to end French colonial rule in his home country. At that time, while French socialists considered colonialism a peripheral issue, Lenin's thesis on "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" (1914) prompted Ho to come to the home of the October Revolution.¹⁵ In other words, Ho's journey to Moscow was originally a deliberate pilgrimage for his longheld desire for Vietnam's independence, as is evident in his famous statement that nothing is more precious than independence and liberty. However, it is also notable that his lifetime commitment to Leninism, particularly proletarian internationalism, should not be devaluated.¹⁶ After his stay in Moscow, he maintained that the ideal of proletarian internationalism not only had provided communist leaders with tactics for the mobilizing of domestic and international support but also solidified the communist camp upon which the viability of Vietnam depended. According to Ho, proletarian internationalism, which preserved the purity of Leninism, was compatible with both national independence and the sovereignty of Vietnam.¹⁷ In this respect, Ho believed that Marxism alone was insufficient and that it

¹⁵ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), p. 63.

¹⁶ Ton That Thien, *The Foreign Politics of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (New York: Crane Russak, 1989), p. 40

¹⁷ Yevgeny Kobelev, *Ho Chi Minh* (Hanoi: Gioi Publishers, 2000), pp. 73-93.

should be fused with Leninist self-determination.

The two versions of national strategy were not in conflict with each other during wartime, even though each had its own distinctive origin. The traditional pragmatic strategy could be a means by which Vietnam would discriminate between friend and foe at a certain situation, whereas the formalist strategy might be a means by which Vietnam would legitimate the Vietnamese Communist Party's leading role in the fierce struggle against colonialism. Insofar as the two versions shared the goal of achieving Vietnam's national independence under the party's leadership, they supplemented each other.

It is noteworthy that the seizure of Saigon by the northern forces in April 1975 brought about contrasting fates of the two versions of national strategy. For the party leaders, the scheme of discrimination between friend and foe, specifically provided by traditional pragmatic strategy, was no longer useful. The party leaders needed a strategy with which they could rationalize their domination over the society and could dismantle the legacies of capitalism in newly liberated South Vietnam. Because of this situation, the unitary formalist strategy acquired a privileged status. This change was reflected by not merely slogans but also the policies adopted at important meetings held right after unification. At the National Assembly meeting in June 1976, the general secretary of the party Le Duan noted two stages of development: transformation first to socialism and then to communism. He added that Vietnam would move into the utopian stage of communism in fifteen to twenty years. At the fourth national congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1976, party leaders declared that the immediate task now was to construct a model socialist system and to strengthen the proletarian dictatorship. Furthermore, they emphasized a steady and vigorous move toward a full-scale socialist and communist state, given that strategic tasks of the third national congress of the party—creation of a socialist economy in the North and the liberation of the South—had been

completed.¹⁸ All tasks and policy directions were in accordance with Marxist-Leninist doctrine, typically seen in countries that are in the process of socialist transformation.

Vietnam's formalist strategy, based on Marxism-Leninism, acknowledged the Soviet Union's leading role in proletarian internationalism. It upheld the Soviet Union as the locus of integration and solidarity, viewing Vietnam as an organic part of this alliance. What was the underlying reasoning of the formalist strategy that led Hanoi leaders to believe in the leading role of the Soviet Union, leaving China behind? In addition to Vietnam's anti-Chinese history, there were two reasons that explain why Vietnam solidified its organic partnership within the Soviet leadership.¹⁹ First, the history of the hostility between Vietnam and Cambodia led to an estrangement between Vietnam and China. Frequent border skirmishes between Vietnam and Cambodia were followed by Cambodia's tilting toward China, a situation that in turn further encouraged Vietnam's move toward the Soviet Union.²⁰ This change occurred before Vietnam's massive invasion of Cambodia in December 1978. Second, Beijing's resentment of Hanoi's treatment of Hoa, the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, in the process of socialist transformation brought about a serious schism between Vietnam and China. The Vietnamese government undertook both a radical crackdown on capitalism in the South and nationalization of commerce, two policies that dismantled

¹⁸ Douglas Pike, "Vietnam during 1976: Economics in Command," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1977), pp. 34-35.

¹⁹ Vietnam's departure from China was first signaled in June 1975, right after the end of the war. Hanoi authorities announced that the Soviet Union was the first nation to provide Vietnam with postwar aid, even though a Chinese ship loaded with relief supplies arrived a few days before the Soviet aid ship. This announcement angered China. Steven J. Hood, *Dragons Entangled: Indochina and the China-Vietnam War* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), p. 34.

²⁰ On Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia from the perspective of international relations, including a schism between China and the Soviet Union, see Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 229-240.

the Hoa population's source of wealth and that finally resulted in a massive exodus of the Hoa into China and other neighboring countries. In other words, the radical socialist transformation dissociated the commercial Hoa from the new Vietnam.²¹ Open Sino-Vietnamese hostility escalated when Pol Pot attended the Chinese national celebration on October 1, 1977, in Beijing and when China stopped its food aid to Vietnam in the same year.²²

The formalist strategy isolated Vietnam from the international scene and delayed adoption of a reform policy there. Vietnam's formalist strategy prolonged the power of old leaders and impeded an early debate about reform. Along with the formalist strategy, leaders in this war-torn country had immersed themselves in the mood of triumphalism and revolutionary heroism for a decade, without considering alternatives to the Soviet model. It was not until 1986 that Vietnamese leaders, witnessing Gorbachev's initiative for *perestroika*, began to critically review their national strategy. The prevalence of the pro-Soviet and formalist strategy was well reflected in the report by Le Duc Tho at the fifth national congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1982. In the report, he was quoted as saying that the "anti-Chinese struggle is one of the most urgent tasks of all Marxist-Leninists."²³ Considering his significant role in foreign affairs, in general, and in the US-Vietnam negotiations during the early 1970s, in particular, it is imaginable that Le Duc Tho's anti-Chinese view complemented the party's rigid formalist atmosphere.

²¹ William J. Duiker, *Vietnam: Revolution in Transition*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p. 147.

²² Hood, *Dragons Entangled*, p. 43.

²³ Recited from Edmund McWilliams, "Vietnam in 1982: Onward into the Quagmire," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 1983), p. 64.

Pro-Soviet Dependency

The formalist strategy was closely associated not simply with Vietnam's ruthless collectivization of agriculture and radical nationalization of major industries and commerce but also with Vietnam's pro-Soviet foreign policy. One notable point is that right after the end of the war, Vietnam attempted to keep a certain distance from the Soviet Union. Rather than immediately join the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), which was the economic block centered on the Soviet Union, Vietnam joined only the CMEA's auxiliary organizations, such as the International Investment Bank and the International Bank for Economic Cooperation, in order to get loans.²⁴ It was not until 1978 that Hanoi joined the CMEA, as the hostility between China and Vietnam intensified.

The CMEA was an important source of assistance to postwar Vietnam. The CMEA summit in June 1984 decided that it would accelerate an even development among member countries and would enhance the economic growth rates of Vietnam, Cuba, and Mongolia so that these rates would match those of East European countries. Accordingly, the CMEA provided Hanoi with long-term development loans of low interest and with various forms of grants for scientific and technical assistance. In particular, the interest rate was so low that it was one-fourth that of East European countries. It is noteworthy that the economic cooperation between Vietnam and the Soviet-led CMEA focused on heavy industry, which included machinery, chemical, and energy-related industries. Also, Vietnam's honeymoon with the Soviet Union, as seen in the Soviet naval advancement in Cam Ranh Bay, resulted in various forms of economic and technical assistance from Moscow in the 1980s. In October 1983, both countries signed the USSR-Vietnam Long-term Program for Economic,

²⁴ Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 200.

Scientific, and Technological Cooperation. In addition, during the Third Five-Year Economic Plan (1981-1985), the Soviet Union provided Vietnam with various types of aid: loans to offset Vietnam's trade deficit, low-interest credits, and grants for the projects that had stopped after the withdrawal of Chinese aid.²⁵

Under the formalist national strategy, the relationship between Vietnam and the United States remained hostile in spite of several diplomatic occasions. The two countries were concerned more about immediate needs than trust-building measures: Vietnam consistently requested economic assistance for rehabilitation, whereas the United States brought the POW/MIA issue to the forefront. Vietnam's objective during the initial stage of negotiations was to retain the past agreements between the United States and North Vietnam: the Paris Peace Accord in 1973 and a secret promise made by President Nixon. In particular, Vietnam was eager to obtain the secret promise that would ensure an aid package of \$3.25 billion from the United States.²⁶ For the United States, Vietnam's corresponding argument was no longer valid, because Vietnam—as North Vietnam—had already violated the 1973 accord by undertaking a military occupation of South Vietnam. This stance by the United States was consistent not only for the Ford administration but also for the Carter administration. Jimmy Carter on the campaign trail pledged “to heal the wounds of war,” a view similar to that of the previous president regarding the POW/MIA issue. After Carter's inauguration as president, his overriding concern was American opinion, and this concern can be evidenced by his composition of a commission for the first US-Vietnam dialogue, held in Hanoi in March 1977. Despite criticism even within the administration, Carter organized the commission, led

²⁵ Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy Since 1975*, pp. 153-154.

²⁶ Frederick Z. Brown, “US-Vietnam Normalization: Past, Present, Future,” in James W. Morley and Masashi Nishihara (eds.), *Vietnam Joins the World* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 204.

by Leonard Woodcock, to include a member of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, which had voiced a hard-line approach to Vietnam.²⁷ Without a doubt, the dialogue resulted in no positive outcome.

As US-Vietnam relations exhibited no substantial progress, Hanoi's tactical approach toward international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the ADB, remained in vain. During the period of the Second Five-Year Economic Plan (1976-1980), Vietnamese authorities made an effort to obtain economic assistance from Western countries and international financial institutions. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam took over the former South Vietnam's membership in the IMF and the World Bank in 1978, the same year of Hanoi's entry into the CMEA. But the United States, which was annoyed with the Vietnam War syndrome, wielded its influence to convince the international financial institutions not to provide financial assistance to Vietnam.

Postwar Vietnam, adhering to its formalist strategy, failed to benefit from its pro-Soviet diplomacy. On the diplomatic front, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was the gravest event, simply bringing about economic burden and diplomatic isolation. Vietnam's ambition on the eve of the invasion was to become a "patron for genuine Marxist-Leninist revolutions" in Southeast Asia, to use Stephen J. Morris's term.²⁸ But the ambition not only seemed dim but also strengthened a strategic tie between the United States and China, a tie that in turn posed a serious threat to Vietnam. The international pressure, imposed by the United States and its Southeast Asian allies,

²⁷ One of the most critical persons in the Carter administration was Michel Oksenberg, National Security Council staff specialist on China. In the memorandum to Brzezinski, he recommended against the inclusion of a member of the organization composed of war victims. See T. Christopher Jespersen, "The Politics and Culture of Non-recognition: The Carter Administration and Vietnam," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 1995), p. 403.

²⁸ Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, p. 97.

also brought about an unbearable loss for Vietnam. Under American pressure, Japan and some Western countries stopped their modest economic assistance to Vietnam.²⁹ On the domestic front, relying on the euphoric triumphalism and the slogan of voluntarism, Vietnamese authorities relentlessly implemented the socialist transformation. Furthermore, they were concerned about neither the effectiveness nor the efficiency of Vietnam's use of Soviet or CMEA economic aid. Aid donors also were indifferent to Vietnam's economic conditions and ignored the possibility of industrialization there. Consequently, despite receiving substantial loans and grants during the ten years following unification, Vietnam was becoming more reliant on the Soviet Union. Exemplifying the dependency is the Soviet Union's decision to supply essential resources, such as—in 1990—gasoline and diesel for 100% of Vietnam's import needs, cotton for 100% thereof, thin steel plates for 82% thereof, and fertilizer for 68% thereof.³⁰

Experiment of Peaceful Coexistence, 1986–1990

Emergence of New Pragmatism

In view of Vietnam's dependence on the Soviet Union, the twenty-seventh national congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1986 was one of the most striking events for Vietnamese leaders: Gorbachev's slogan of *glasnost* was meant to open public discussion of issues and public access to information, a situation that was necessarily followed by political liberalization. In theory, the more interconnected one system is with

²⁹ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (New York: Twayne, 1998), p. 149.

³⁰ Hanoi Domestic Service in Vietnamese, January 30, 1990, cited from FBIS-EAS-90-021, January 31, 1990.

another, the more vulnerable they will be to each other's fluctuations. This notion means that the more the systems interpenetrate into one another, the higher the "coupling effect" is between them.³¹ The coupling effect between the Soviet Union and Vietnam was so high that the transformation led by the CPSU under Gorbachev's leadership was immediately followed by the emergence of a new trend of interpretations of international relations in Hanoi.

The first sign of the coupling effect in Vietnam was the speech 1986 made by Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been the leading figure of traditional pragmatism, as well as a legendary military strategist. Welcoming Gorbachev's proposal, made on January 15, 1986, for the liquidation of nuclear weapons by the year 2000, Vo Nguyen Giap openly and boldly emphasized the notions of peace, friendship, and cooperation between nations.³²

Vo Nguyen Giap had long been checked by his rivals such as Le Duc Tho and Le Duan since the second half of the 1960s while Ho Chi Minh's health had been failing. Sophie Quinn-Judge details a related story by noting that the Anti-party Affair in 1967-68 reflected in part the power competition in the party. Through the Anti-party Affair, some 30 high-level figures were arrested and around 300 people including generals, theoreticians, professors, writers, and journalists trained in Moscow were purged. Many of them under interrogation were questioned if there was any relationship with Vo Nguyen Giap. Giap was a critic of radical classism of the land reform policy and the party rectification movement in the early 1950s, and his position was in line with Nikita Khrushchev's policies of détente and criticism of personality cult.³³ Under the postwar atmosphere of socialist

³¹ For the concept of the coupling effect in social sciences, see Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 200-202; David Easton, *The Analysis of Political Structure* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 248.

³² Cited from FBIS-APA-86-067, April 8, 1986.

³³ Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of

triumphalism, the check against the moderate Giap might have heightened. In this context, it is no surprise that Giap was deposed from power in the early 1980s amid the rising momentum of the formalist strategy based on Marxism-Leninism; he lost two significant positions, Defense Minister and Politburo member, in 1980 and 1982 respectively, and moved to the less powerful and the more administrative position of Deputy Premier.³⁴

Vo Nguyen Giap now revived himself in 1986 with a new theoretical wing in times of drastic changes in the Soviet Union and international relations. His new standpoint sharply differed from the existing formalism, which demanded Vietnam's commitment to proletarian internationalism. Vo Nguyen Giap's assertion was echoed in April by an editorial of the party organ, *Nhan Dan*, which accentuated peace, stability, security, and cooperation by praising the Soviet government's call for close economic and cultural links with the Asia-Pacific region.³⁵ Such an argument was soon elaborated by Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach's circle, which emphasized an international division of labor and regional cooperation. Nguyen Co Thach was appointed to a full member of the Politburo at the sixth congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986; then, he became one of the most influential figures on the course of foreign policy and one the most forceful advocates of *doi moi*, even though his independent style troubled with the Politburo's traditional consensus-building approach.³⁶

the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-1968," *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (November 2005), pp. 487-490.

³⁴ Insofar as the party leadership was centered on the pro-Soviet Marxist-Leninist Le Duan, Giap's removal was apparently the suppression of the pragmatic view. McWilliams, "Vietnam in 1982: Onward into the Quagmire," p. 63.

³⁵ The editorial of *Nhan Dan* on April 27, 1986 entitled "An Important Program for Peace, Security, and Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific," cited from FBIS-APA-86-082, April 29, 1986.

³⁶ Zachary Abuza, "Institutions and Actions in Vietnamese Foreign Policymaking: A Research Note," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (December 1997), p. 319.

With the passage of time, the emerging new viewpoint frequently employed new terms such as order, interdependence, technological revolution, and internationalization. These new terms contrasted with those of traditional pragmatism, which had heavily emphasized independence through struggle.³⁷ The new set of terms may be summarized as *new pragmatism*, which supports peace instead of struggle. Unlike traditional pragmatism, which had discriminated between friend and foe for Vietnam's independence, new pragmatism now underscored Vietnam's maintenance of independence and sovereignty through peaceful coexistence. New pragmatism treated Vietnamese development as dependent on world development.

The emergence of new pragmatism was accompanied by self-criticism in the party regarding domestic and foreign economic policy. This self-criticism recognized that the party not only suffered from the stigmas of corruption and bureaucratic centralism but also wasted foreign aid through ineffective implementation programs. The criticism of bureaucrats began in earnest on the eve of the sixth national congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986.³⁸ The leading theoretician in the party, Truong Chinh, ironically promoted the self-criticism among the party leaders regarding economic affairs. He regretted that Vietnam's inefficient management of state subsidies had wasted huge amounts of foreign aid. In the party congress, he became a strong advocate for reform by saying that "responsibility for these shortcomings and mistakes rests first of all with the party's Central Committee, the Politburo, the Secretariat, and with the Cabinet."³⁹

Following the theoretician Truong Chinh's seemingly pragmatic turn, the party congress declared itself in favor of economic reform

³⁷ Palmujoki, *Vietnam and the World*, pp. 189-195.

³⁸ Huynh Kim Khanh, "Vietnam's Reforms: Renewal or Death," *Indochina Issues*, Vol. 84 (September 1988), p. 5.

³⁹ *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 1986.

and selected Nguyen Van Linh, the reform-minded party secretary of Ho Chi Minh City, as the general secretary. The leadership shift to Nguyen Van Linh was significant owing to the longheld predominance in party politics by the previous general secretary, Le Duan. Le Duan's tenure as general secretary began in 1960 under the auspices of Ho Chi Minh and ended in 1986 with his death. Despite collective leadership, Le Duan prevailed in party affairs during his twenty-six-year tenure. Therefore, the power succession from Le Duan to Nguyen Van Linh was a blow to the Vietnamese formalism of Marxist-Leninist proletarian internationalism. Embracing Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach's arguments for interdependence, the party's politburo under the leadership of Nguyen Van Linh adopted Resolution 13 in 1988. The resolution reflected a significant change in Vietnam's strategic view on international relations: major powers were in détente; global economic competition was intensifying; Vietnam needed to participate in the global division of labor; China's major concern was economic development; and most important, Vietnam had to establish new relations with major powers.⁴⁰ The changes that were outlined in this resolution paralleled the emerging new pragmatism.

New pragmatism contributed to a policy shift in foreign affairs insofar as it stressed the notion of peaceful coexistence. In the midst of the unresolved tension centered on the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, the idea of peaceful coexistence had a significant meaning. What was the basis of this idea? For Vietnamese leaders, it was the scientific and technological developments of this period that brought about an expansion of productive forces and a change in political relations. Even though the old revolutionary struggle was not wrong, the transformation of the material base came to be conducive to the alteration of international relations.⁴¹ Those leaders who subscribed

⁴⁰ Porter, *Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, p. 208.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-187.

to new pragmatism saw that the emergence of new productive forces began to yield a particular form of class struggle in the international arena: the classical revolution by workers would not occur, on the one hand, and poor and rich countries became interdependent with each other through exchanges of resources and markets, on the other. In this regard, peaceful coexistence for Vietnam was a timely strategy to cope with the uncertainty of the transitional period.

However, the emergence of Vietnam's new pragmatism did not immediately lead to Vietnam's official revocation of Marxist-Leninist formalism. It seems that the country's top leaders, particularly politburo members, could clearly predict neither the direction of the changes taking place in the Soviet Union nor the worldwide trends in technological development and international interdependence. Lacking confidence in the uncertain situation, Vietnamese leaders had to wait and see while they prohibited any official judgment that might seriously erode party authority. This ambivalent position in the leadership can be seen in the stance of General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh. While he attempted to renovate the party by mobilizing non-party organizations and by promoting rectification campaigns in the party, he did not explicitly turn away from the tradition of Marxism-Leninism. It is worth noting that he became defensive in 1989 and 1990, as he witnessed the breakdown of socialist systems in Eastern Europe. At the seventh plenum of the sixth Central Committee of the party in August 1989, he made a stiff orthodox assertion that Marxism-Leninism was the "lodestar" guiding Vietnam's path.⁴² This particular expression reflected Vietnamese leaders' defensive mood in relation to the upheavals in Eastern Europe.

It seems that their defensive mood was reflective not of their strong attachment to the orthodox doctrine of Marxism-Leninism but

⁴² Lewis M. Stern, *Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 79-80.

of their refraining from proclaiming a turn of the official doctrine. While witnessing unprecedented developments in Eastern Europe, the leadership's chief concern hinged on the internal causes of the breakdown of socialism in Eastern Europe and on Western countries' "imperialist" infiltration tactics, the so-called peaceful evolution. For example, at a review meeting of the party committee of Ho Chi Minh City in January 1990, Nguyen Van Linh noted the deep-rooted causes of the collapse of Eastern Europe's socialist systems. According to him, those systems had violated the principle of democratic centralism, exercised arbitrary and autocratic power, alienated the masses, and prolonged the state-bureaucracy mechanism. Nguyen Van Linh pointed out two lessons from history. First, the Vietnamese Communist Party should consider the compatibility of relations of production with the development of productive forces. In other words, for him, the form of an economic system should change in accordance with the existing levels of scientific and technological development. Second, the party should consolidate its relationship with the masses. The party's estrangement from the masses would mean the end of the party's moral base. It was now certain that success of Vietnam's own socialist cause would depend on successful adaptation to changes in domestic and international environments.⁴³

Transition from Pro-Soviet Dependency

During the second half of the 1980s, when new pragmatism was emerging, Vietnam adopted a two-track policy in its foreign affairs. While Vietnam intended to preserve its existing ties, to a certain extent, with the Soviet Union and the CMEA, it embarked on a new path that resembled Gorbachev's initiative. Inasmuch as new

⁴³ Hanoi VNA in English, January 18, 1990, cited from FBIS-EAS-90-012, January 18, 1990; Hanoi VNA in English, January 26, 1990, cited from FBIS-EAS-90-018, January 26, 1990.

pragmatism had not matured enough to be recognized as an official ideological doctrine, Vietnamese foreign policy had ample room for the two-track policy, which turned out to be a gradual transition from the previous pro-Soviet dependency to an opening up.

The historic sixth national congress of the party, held in December 1986, concurred with changes in Vietnam's approach to the pending issues in external affairs. First of all, Vietnam made an attempt to alleviate Indochina-based tension that centered on the Cambodia issue. One notable measure took place at the eleventh Conference of Foreign Ministers of Indochina held in August 1985. At this gathering, Vietnam made a unilateral pledge to the international community regarding the Cambodia issue: the complete withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia before 1990.⁴⁴ For Vietnam, the Cambodia issue had been a troubling issue, particularly in Vietnam's relations with the United States. Indeed, Vietnam adopted a pragmatic posture in dealing with the Cambodia issue by announcing their complete withdrawal of forces from Cambodia in September 1989. (But the United States requested that the withdrawal accompany a political settlement in Cambodia. The Hun Sen government in Phnom Penh, for Washington, seemed to be an agent of Hanoi, and thus the participation of all political factions in the general election should be a precondition of the building of a peaceful regime in Cambodia.)⁴⁵ With its pragmatic posture, Vietnam also witnessed its relations with China change and, in 1991, normalized these relations, while regarding the United States as "a useful diplomatic counterweight to China."⁴⁶

Second, Vietnamese leaders stressed the need to extend the scope of their country's involvement in foreign economic relations and, simultaneously, to maintain their country's traditional alliance

⁴⁴ Seki Tomoda, "Detaching from Cambodia," in James W. Morley and Masashi Nishihara (eds.), *Vietnam Joins the World* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 139-140.

⁴⁵ Brown, "US-Vietnam Normalization: Past, Present, Future," p. 205.

⁴⁶ Porter, *Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism*, p. 209.

with the Soviet bloc. Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach advocated an opening up for Vietnam's economic development, insofar as both the international division of labor and international cooperation were widespread. But the party leaders gave more weight to interaction with the Soviet Union and the CMEA than to the rest of the world; for the leaders, Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet bloc was still a significant element in their foreign policy. What should be noted is that Vietnam and the Soviet bloc explored not only new state-level projects but also corporate-level cooperation. Hanoi and Moscow agreed on a framework for a direct link between enterprises in one country and those in the other. Vietsovet, established in 1987 for the exploitation of crude oil and gas along the continental shelf of southern Vietnam, reflected this corporate-level cooperation.⁴⁷

Third, Vietnam's new pragmatic strategy appeared also in a legal framework that promoted foreign direct investment (FDI). In December 1987, the National Assembly passed the Foreign Investment Law, which became effective in January 1988. Although this law featured many progressive elements including a favorable tax system, guarantees of protection, and a preferential code for Viet Kieu's (Vietnamese abroad) investments, it reflected Hanoi leaders' intention to maintain the socialist potential of the Vietnamese economy by fostering labor-intensive manufacturing industries. Unlike the recently revised version, the 1987 law was intended to strengthen Vietnam's role within the framework of the international division of labor centered on the CMEA.⁴⁸ This was so because the future of the FDI was uncertain at that time, as Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach admitted.⁴⁹ Indeed, investment from Western countries did not immediately follow in the wake of this legislation.

⁴⁷ Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy Since 1975*, pp. 209-211.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴⁹ "Vietnam's Quest for Foreign Investment: A Bold Move," *Indochina Issues*, Vol. 80 (March 1988), pp. 3-7.

Vietnam's transition from pro-Soviet dependency to opening up was distinctive in the adoption of a competitive export mechanism in the late 1980s. Previously, a few state-owned trading companies monopolized trade; however, in 1989, the authorities allowed several trading companies to compete with one another. The shift toward competition resulted in the rice export amounting to 300 million US dollars in 1989,⁵⁰ and in the early 2000s, made Vietnam the world's second largest rice exporter after Thailand.⁵¹ Vietnam's transformation into a large rice exporter was remarkable, in view of Vietnam's pre-liberalization reliance on food imports and on foreign aid. In sum, the emergence of new pragmatism was consistent with Vietnam's gradual distancing from pro-Soviet dependency. This transition was an adaptive process. The Vietnamese leaders perceived the world in a different way and considered the transition in foreign economic relations seriously.

Adaptive Engagement, 1991–1995

The Strengthening of New Pragmatic Strategy

The Vietnamese leaders' defensive posture toward the transformation of Eastern Europe eased off in 1991. With the opening of the seventh national congress of the party, new pragmatism, whose embryonic form had first appeared in 1986, became a stronghold of Vietnamese national strategy. The notions of independence and

⁵⁰ David Dollar, "The Transformation of Vietnam's Economy: Sustaining Growth in the 21st Century," in Jennie I. Litvack and Dennis A. Rondinelli (eds.), *Market Reform in Vietnam: Building Institutions for Development* (Westport, Connecticut: Quorum Books, 1999), p. 34.

⁵¹ Jehan Arulpragasam, Francesco Goletti, Tamar Manuelyan Atinc, and Vera Song We, "Trade in Sectors Important to the Poor: Rice in Cambodia and Vietnam and Cashmere in Mongolia," in Kathie Krumm and Homi Kharas (eds.), *East Asia Integrates: A Trade Policy Agenda for Shared Growth* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2004), p. 154.

sovereignty, which had originated from traditional pragmatism, revived along with an emphasis on new thinking and flexibility. It is remarkable that these notions became talking points in the military. Tu Nguyen's article in the military journal *Tap Chi Quoc Phong*, in April 1991, reflected this trend well. Emphasizing the position that the two tasks of the military are to build the nation and to defend the nation, the article pointed out that the spirit of independence, sovereignty, and self-reliance must be developed in the military during peacetime.⁵² This argument was in line with the theme of the newly published book *Renovate Military Thinking* by Le Duc Anh, defense minister and a politburo member in the party, who introduced the notion of an all-people national defense.⁵³ This notion had already emerged—during the late 1980s—amid Vietnam's arms-reduction efforts, which involved the discharge of 600,000 regular forces, including 100,000 officers. In other words, the unilateral withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia, arms reduction, and new military thinking were closely related each other and came to apparently disclaim the tradition of the previous formalist strategy.

The new pragmatic strategy in the early 1990s emphasized economic and technological competition, on the one hand, and peaceful settlement through negotiation in international relations, on the other. In September 1991, the party's theoretical journal *Tap Chi Cong San* published an article in which Phan Doan Nam, former assistant minister of foreign affairs and a senior advisor at the Institute for Foreign and International Relations in Hanoi, appraised the international situation as follows: the world order was changing, as observed in the radical transformation of the political landscape in the

⁵² Tu Nguyen, "Victory on the Front of National Defense and New Tasks for the Days Ahead," *Tap Chi Quoc Phong*, April 1991, cited from FBIS-EAS-91-110, June 7, 1991.

⁵³ Le Duc Anh was a pro-Soviet military leader who ascended to the top military position during Le Duan's rule. For this reason, he had been a hardliner on the Cambodia issue. However, he changed his position in the late 1980s to improve Vietnam's relations with China.

Soviet Union after the August Coup in 1991. The article noted also that the transformation was occurring not because of war or changes in the military balance but because of a change in the balance of general forces, that is, in the economy, science, and technology. Insofar as Vietnam had taken a defensive posture in 1989 and 1990, this strategic appraisal was a new departure, suggesting that the country would engage in the world economy by taking advantages of late starters. In the same vein, the article defined the current situation of international relations in terms of transition and détente. The definition disclaimed the traditional formalism, which had emphasized contradiction and struggle between socialism and capitalism, and summarized all these new understandings into the notion of “interdependence” in international relations.⁵⁴

The new pragmatic strategy, rather than openly reject all principles of Marxism-Leninism, introduced Ho Chi Minh’s thought as a source for the alteration of obsolete elements of Marxism-Leninism. An editorial staff member at *Tap Chi Cong San* noted in 1991 that Ho’s thought is a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam’s historical situation.⁵⁵ The adoption of Ho’s thought as the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the Vietnamese situation paralleled the case of North Korea during the 1960s. In the midst of Sino-Soviet conflicts, North Korea presented Kim Il Sung’s thought as a guideline for domestic and foreign policies. It depicted Kim’s thought as a creative application of Marxism-Leninism for self-reliant and independent sovereignty. Even if the backgrounds and the motivations of the Vietnamese differed significantly from those of the North Koreans, the two cases were in common in fusing the leader’s thought to Marxism-Leninism and thus promulgating a new

⁵⁴ Phan Doan Nam, “How to Perceive Features of the Current World Situation,” *Tap Chi Cong San*, September 1991, cited from FBIS-EAS-91-197, October 10, 1991.

⁵⁵ Editorial staff, “Some Issues That Need to Be Discussed Again,” in *Tap Chi Cong San*, April 1991, cited from FBIS-EAS-91-110, June 7, 1991.

age of national identity. With the proposition of creative application, Vietnam no longer had to abide by its old tradition of proletarian internationalism, which had served socialist solidarity.

The new pragmatic strategy was well summarized in both the political report of the seventh party congress in 1991, read by Nguyen Van Linh, and the newly revised constitution of 1992. The political report stated that Ho Chi Minh's thought is "the perfect embodiment of union of class and nation, national and international, and national independence and socialism."⁵⁶ Inserted in the new constitution were the expressions "a state of the people, from the people, for the people" and an "alliance between the working class, the peasantry, and the intelligentsia" (Article 2), the two expressions replacing the old constitution's expression "rule by proletarian dictatorship." With regard to foreign affairs, the political report and the 1992 constitution emphasized such notions as independence, sovereignty, peace, friendship, and cooperation. These notions contrasted with those of traditional pragmatism: the latter assumed independence through struggle during wartime, whereas the former valued independence with cooperation during peacetime. (The old pragmatism and the new pragmatism are similar to each other in that they privilege independence and sovereignty over international obligation among socialist systems.) In addition, Vietnam's new pragmatism stressed practical experience, a fact that reminds us of Deng Xiaoping's lifelong proposition that truth comes from practice.

Vietnam's new pragmatic strategy in the early 1990s operated alongside expanded domain of liberalization in the expression of ideas in political arena. In preparing the seventh national congress, the party for the first time decided to publicize draft documents for the accommodation of public opinion through conferences, seminars,

⁵⁶ "Political Report" read by Nguyen Van Linh at the opening session of the 7th National Party Congress on June 24, 1991, cited from FBIS-EAS-91-123-S, June 26, 1991.

statements in press and radio, letters, and direct meetings between responsible people. This policy change was significant in that the party congress was no more a ritual or secret event, even though the expression of ideas was limited. Liberalization could be seen also in the empowerment of the legislature and the cabinet. Even though the party-centered consensus impeded undeniably, the emergence of pluralism, the separation of power between the legislature and the cabinet, and these bodies' acquisition of decision-making power became an irreversible trend.⁵⁷

Road to Engagement

The new pragmatic strategy in the early 1990s was a more concrete expression of Vietnam's adaptation to the changing environment than had been the strategy of the second half of the 1980s. In foreign policy, Vietnam now considered the United States the *key* for resolving all diplomatic issues. Underlying this belief was Hanoi's recognition that the economic sanctions initiated by Washington constituted the main obstacle to the inducement of foreign capital. Not only the US trade embargo but also the veto power in international financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the ADB prevented American corporations from investing in Vietnam. The goal of America's economic sanctions was obviously to force Vietnam to follow conditions imposed by Washington.⁵⁸ For this reason, Vietnamese foreign policy under the new pragmatic strategy focused on the development of improved relations with the United States.

Vietnam's troop withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 was not the

⁵⁷ Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations and Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 91-94.

⁵⁸ Do Duc Dinh, *Vietnam-United States Economic Relations* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2000), pp. 105-106.

only factor to contribute to Washington's reevaluation of the Vietnam policy. Events on the rapidly changing international scene were significant in this regard, as well. At the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev restored friendly relations with China; in turn, China improved relations with Laos, to which Vietnam had lent support, and became supportive of a peaceful settlement in Cambodia. Viewing a peaceful resolution to the Cambodia issue, the United States began to reassess its policy toward Vietnam with regard to economic sanctions. As a consequence, US-Vietnam relations have progressed since April 1991, when the Bush (George H. W.) administration presented the so-called roadmap for a normalization process. The roadmap, composed of four phases, stated that Washington would postpone normalization until the general election in Cambodia. That is, the United States now pressed Vietnam to urge the existing Cambodian government to sign a peace agreement.⁵⁹ And the roadmap stated that the United States would begin to ease economic sanctions in accordance with Vietnamese cooperation over both the peace settlement in Cambodia and the POW/MIA issue.⁶⁰

The announcement of the roadmap was made two months before the seventh national congress of the party, and thus, the party leaders in Hanoi supposedly had to hurry to fine-tune the ways and means by which Vietnam could meet the United States' demand. The party leaders at the congress decided to address, further and peacefully, the outstanding issues that concerned the United States. Accordingly, Vietnam fulfilled one of the major components of the roadmap for normalization by inducing the Hun Sen government in Cambodia to accept Washington's proposal for a nationwide election. Also, Vietnam complied with American demands for sincere cooperation

⁵⁹ Michael C. Williams, *Vietnam at the Crossroads* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1992), p. 81.

⁶⁰ Robert G. Sutter, *Vietnam-US Relations: The Debate over Normalization* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 12, 1992), pp. 14-15.

on the POW/MIA issue. Hanoi allowed American officials to perform field searches and to access archives in the Vietnamese Defense Department. Appraising these accomplishments as a breakthrough for normalization, President George H. W. Bush, in December 1992, allowed American corporations to open their offices in preparation for doing business in Vietnam.⁶¹

The launch of the Clinton administration in January 1993 expedited Vietnam's engagement policy. The Vietnamese government delivered significant documents to the United States regarding the POW/MIA issue, and President Bill Clinton declared in July 1993 that the United States would not oppose Vietnam-bound aid from international financial institutions. Clinton finally announced in February 1994 that the United States would lift all economic sanctions that it had imposed on Vietnam for four decades. The lift was followed by an inflow of official development assistance (ODA). The scale of ODA increased from 410 million US dollars in 1993 to 730 million US dollars in 1995 and to 1,450 million US dollars in 1999, a doubling of the 1995 amount.⁶²

What should be noted here is that the Vietnamese government carefully calibrated itself in order, first, to fulfill the conditions of American corporations' business advancements and, in turn, to convince the corporations that they should call for their government's lifting of economic sanctions against Vietnam. Because American business group anticipated a chance to compete with their European and Asian counterparts, it seems that Vietnamese policy worked out effectively. The Vietnamese government permitted major US corporations—such as Motorola, Microsoft, Coca Cola, and Caterpillar—to open offices in Vietnam and to conduct field surveys there. For

⁶¹ Joseph P. Quinlan, *Vietnam: Business Opportunities and Risks* (Berkeley: Pacific View Press, 1995), pp. 30-31.

⁶² Do Duc Dinh, "Vietnam's Doi Moi Policy: Progress and Prospects," *Vietnam Economic Review* (June 2001), p. 14.

example, the government permitted Caterpillar to open an office in Hanoi, the company which was anxiously watching its Japanese competitor Komatsu's advance.⁶³ Also, Vietnam responded swiftly to a request from the American Chamber of Commerce to establish a production-sharing contract between American oil corporations including Mobil and the Vietnamese company Vietsovpetro for the exploitation of the Dai Hung area, the largest oilfield off the southern coast.⁶⁴ Apparently, Vietnam expected that the American oil corporations could persuade their government to lift the economic sanctions.

In sum, Vietnam adapted actively to the rapidly changing international environment after the breakdown of Eastern Europe's socialist systems and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The ruling circle of the party came to adopt the new pragmatic strategy, whose origin may be traced back to 1986, when the military strategist Vo Nguyen Giap advocated the notion of peaceful coexistence. Insofar as national sovereignty and national independence were not threatened, Vietnam could now apply the principle of peaceful coexistence to foreign relations and obtain international economic assistance. In fact, the introduction of loans from the World Bank and donor countries has contributed to the institutional development of Vietnam's banks and financial systems, to the reform of state-owned enterprises, and to the expansion of infrastructure such as highways, ports, and telecommunications. In turn, these changes encouraged FDI from American and Asian corporations in the fields of manufacturing industries.

⁶³ *Sales & Marketing Management*, Vol. 147 (April 1994), p. 15.

⁶⁴ *Hanoi VNA* in English, December 28, 1991, cited from FBIS-EAS-91-248, Dec. 28, 1991.

Conclusion

Because of a lack of resources and its vulnerability in national security, Vietnam has attempted to find compatible approaches to two often incompatible goals: one goal is to search for a reliable neighbor, and the other goal is to maintain sovereignty and national independence. The means by which Vietnam can maintain compatibility between the two goals and between the many paths to a realization of these goals have been contextualized by the varying forms of Vietnam's national strategy. These means have changed over time in accordance with changes in Vietnam's domestic politics and international situation.

It is true that Gorbachev's reform initiative in the Soviet Union and the "grand failure" of East European socialism significantly affected the changes in Vietnamese national strategy in 1986 and 1991, respectively. Nevertheless, it is an overstatement that the variable of Vietnam's national strategy was dependent simply on international forces: there existed an internal force that allowed for the relatively radical turn from a rigid formalist strategy to a new version of pragmatic strategy, which eventually led normalization with the Untied States.

The national strategy has evolved over time, depending on who governs and which leadership prevails. The death of Le Duan, the restored voice of Vo Nguyen Giap, and the rise of Nguyen Van Linh and Nguyen Co Thach contributed to the pragmatic turn of Vietnamese national strategy in 1986. Plagued with political and economic problems, Vietnamese leaders began to introduce new economic measures beginning in 1979. But it was not until 1986 that economic reforms started to consolidate and the party's antagonistic view against capitalism began to change.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Vietnam's Bumpy Road to Reform," *Current History*, Vol. 105, No. 692 (September 2006), pp. 284-289.

Also, the reasoning behind Vietnam's swift strategic change, that is, normalization with the United States hinged on North Vietnam's military victory against imperialism. Without triumphalism, it might have been difficult for the Vietnamese leaders, centered on the prominent theoretician Truong Chinh, to have had an opportunity to engage in self-criticism on the eve of and at the sixth congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986. If the Vietnamese people had held onto only a victim mentality in relation to the war, they would not have engaged in the self-criticism that concerned their faults, such as abuse of foreign aid and the relentless socialist transformation of the war-torn society. In this regard, it is fair to say that the transformation of Vietnam's national strategy was a complex response to both changes in the international environment and the leaders' active and receptive adaptation to the changes.

What is the implication of the Vietnamese case for the North Korean case? Is North Korea transforming from independence (or isolation) to engagement, especially with the United States? Just as postwar Vietnam needed the United States for recovery from war-torn economy, so North Korea has long desired direct relations with the United States. Just as Vietnam consequently attracted the United States attention through threatening regional security in Southeast Asia, that is, the occupation of Cambodia in 1978, North Korea succeeded in attracting direct attention of the United States through nuclear brinkmanship in 1993 and 2006.

However, North Korea differs from Vietnam in the context of national strategy. Unlike postwar Vietnam that heavily relied on the Soviet Union for ideology and economic assistance, North Korea has maintained a certain degree of independence in external relations since the Korean War. Unlike postwar Vietnam's triumphalism rendered self-criticism in the inner circle possible later, North Korea's demonizing of all things American has not permitted room for any deliberation on strategic changes. Furthermore, whereas the Vietnamese

collective leadership underwent a generational shift that contributed in part to the emergence of a new elite with pragmatic viewpoints, the North Korean leadership has based itself on monolithic power, centered on Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, that inhibited the rise of an elite with diverse views. In North Korea, as a consequence, there has been little evidence of any strategic deliberation with regard to interdependence, international division of labor, and peaceful coexistence— notions which characterized the transformation of the Vietnamese national strategy in the 1980s.

A notable point is that the military-first politics contextualizes the external relations, a situation that evinces absence of a detectable change in the national strategy of North Korea. The military-first politics emerged at a critical juncture in the mid 1990s, and it has replaced the anti-Japanese guerrilla tradition, which had been a significant reference of North Korean identity and legitimacy.⁶⁶ It was no coincidence that North Korea propagated the military-first politics in times of death of old guerrilla leaders, such as O Chin-u, Choe Kwang, and Kim Kwang-chin between 1995 and 1997, following the expiry of Kim Il Sung in 1994. In other words, the generational shift in the elite has not been followed by an adaptive strategic turn for economic recovery but instead by a military-oriented ideological backup. In comparison to the Vietnamese case, the absence of a Giap, a Linh, or a Thach in the public sphere in North Korea overshadows a strategic shift in the near future.

⁶⁶ Sung Chull Kim, *North Korea under Kim Jong Il: From Consolidation to Systemic Dissonance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 198-199.