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RETHINKING OLD POLICIES

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RETHINKING OLD POLICIES

More than three months have now elapsed since the premature retirement of President Nixon, and this issue of CNA examines the events inside Vietnam that followed his departure so as to determine what these reveal about the future of the Vietnam struggle.

The attitude of the Soviet Union and the communist states of Eastern Europe is a vitally important consideration since these together constitute the source of supply of more than half of North Vietnam's modern armaments, factory machinery, manufactured goods, and much of her imported foodstuffs. In the past, especially while the war was still in progress and American soldiers were directly involved in the fighting, North Vietnam had no reason to fear that the Soviet Union or the others would fail to deliver the goods on which she depended so very heavily. Ho Chi Minh had been the author of North Vietnam's policy of standing uncommitted in the Sino-Soviet dispute, of posing as the only communist state actively waging armed revolutionary struggle, and of demanding, as a right, aid from all members of the communist bloc. It had proved a marvellously successful line for years and, although there had been periods when deliveries of Soviet arms were delayed because the Chinese railways would not carry them to N. Vietnam, these had been the exception. North Vietnam had never felt impelled to carry out the threat which was implicit in her policy, namely to denounce either Russia or China for failing in its international proletarian duty to help North Vietnam. The threat itself, in the context of the Sino-Soviet dispute, was sufficient to ensure that both continued to supply the goods.

The earliest signs that the policy might be undergoing a change and losing its effectiveness became visible in 1970 following the

Cambodia : N. Vn, PRC, USSR

overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk's government in Cambodia. North Vietnamese soldiers were present there in large numbers and her diplomatic representatives in Phnom Penh, having tried and failed to reach any form of understanding with the successor government of Lon Nol, returned to Hanoi. China committed herself even more decisively against Lon Nol, for she not only withdrew her diplomatic personnel and closed her embassy, but offered the overthrown Sihanouk asylum in Peking. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, refused to be dragged along behind the North Vietnamese and Chinese. For reasons of her own, she extended her recognition to the Lon Nol government and maintained her embassy in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, though this ran directly counter to North Vietnamese requirements. Nor did she modify her position when American and South Vietnamese forces crossed the Cambodian frontier, at the invitation of the Lon Nol government, to fight against the Vietnamese communists. For all that, though, she continued to supply war material and economic aid to North Vietnam.

Further evidence of the progressive erosion of this North Vietnamese policy came to light in July 1971, when it was announced simultaneously in Peking and Washington that President Nixon had been invited to visit China and had accepted. The reaction from North Vietnam was one of fury, and it was perfectly plain that she regarded the Chinese communist leaders as having betrayed her by dealing in this fashion with the acknowledged leader of the capitalist world, a man whose soldiers were deployed against her own in South Vietnam. Appeal to the Soviet Union for support was almost at once shown to be impossible because the Russians had been very quick to follow the Chinese example, and North Vietnam was left helpless.

In March of the following year the North Vietnamese launched the most powerful attack of the whole war against the South in an undisguised invasion which made no attempt to preserve the fiction that the communist side in the South was indigenous to South Vietnam and received no aid from the North save in supplies of armaments. Despite the fact that he was due to visit Moscow shortly, President Nixon reacted strongly by mining the North Vietnamese ports and waterways, building up naval forces in the Gulf of Tonking, and renewing the bombing of North Vietnam, which rendered him vulnerable to a snub by the Soviet Union, for she could have cancelled his proposed visit. Though no evidence has ever come to light that North Vietnam exerted pressure on the Soviet leaders to do just that, there were plenty of instances of Soviet diplomats abroad complaining of North Vietnamese perfidy in attacking at just that time with the object of forcing the cancellation of the Nixon visit. The Soviet leaders were no less angry over the North Vietnamese action than were the North Vietnamese over the Soviet invitation to President Nixon, and the ultimate indignity occurred when the Chinese refused permission for Soviet ships filled with supplies to unload these in Chinese ports for overland transport to North Vietnam. Unable to enter the heavily mined North Vietnamese ports, the Soviet ships were obliged to turn back with their cargoes.

Immediately after the Paris cease-fire agreements had been signed, North Vietnam worked furiously to rebuild the shattered communist forces in and around South Vietnam, to construct a new supply highway running southwards over South Vietnamese territory accorded to them by the cease-fire agreement, and to amass a stockpile of modern weapons greater even than that made ready for the 1972 invasion. This placed North Vietnam in the position of being able to mount a devastating military attack against the South whenever she wished. For her part, South Vietnam found herself dependent for the replacement of her weapons—this was the most permitted to both sides under the terms of the cease-fire agreement—upon an American Congress which had grown disenchanted with South Vietnam, the war, and the expense of sustaining the South Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese can scarcely have believed that President Nixon could, or even that he would wish to, bring American ground troops back into Vietnam to assist the South in case of an attack, so that the most they could have feared by way of retaliation for any frontal attack they might launch was the bombing of North Vietnam and possibly the mining of her ports once more. Some North Vietnamese leaders indicated obliquely in their speeches and

writings that they favoured a quick military solution of the war, but two years have now elapsed since the signing of the cease-fire and the attack has not taken place.

When China and the Soviet Union invited President Nixon to visit them and hold talks, the Soviet and Chinese leaders were perfectly well aware that their actions would be disapproved of by leading communists in all parts of the world, yet they were not deterred. Each was seeking national benefits it believed would flow from the Nixon visit, and each had concluded that these benefits would be important enough to outweigh any damage that might ensue to their standing as leaders of the communist block. This being so, President Nixon was in a position to ask for some reciprocation from the Chinese and Russians, and he was never slow at making the fullest use of his political opportunities.

The United States had fared less well in the Vietnam war than even the most pessimistic Americans would have believed possible. Not only had she failed to defeat the communist enemy, but she considered herself furtunate to have recovered her prisoners of war and withdrawn from Vietnam leaving a government still standing in Saigon. Some face had been saved, but this could very easily be lost again were that Saigon government to be defeated and the country to be taken over by the Vietnamese communists. It would be impossible for the United States to go to the aid of President Thieu if he were heavily attacked, and the loss of South Vietnam would do irreparable damage to America's credibility as an ally. Consequently, it is very probable that President Nixon impressed upon both Soviet and Chinese leaders the importance he attached to the survival of an independent South Vietnam. While Chinese and Soviet leaders cannot insist that the North Vietnamese do what they demand, especially while the Sino-Soviet dispute makes concerted pressure by both on a common ally impossible, each is in a position to exert indirect pressure upon North Vietnam by reducing, or threats to reduce, the aid they deliver.

The failure of both major North Vietnamese military campaigns against the South, the first in 1968 and the second in 1972, impressed both the Chinese and the Russians most unfavourably, especially since these two countries had to pay almost the whole of the cost except that in human lives. Both countries are well aware of the North Vietnamese military build-up in the South and both know that certain of the Vietnamese leaders favour direct military attack. Neither is convinced that such an attack would prove any more successful than its two predecessors, and both have compelling reasons for not wishing to see a third attack mounted. Both have quite certainly counselled against it in the past and the Soviet Union, if her diplomatic representatives are to be believed in their protestations, has made it quite clear to the North Vietnamese that she is not prepared to replace weapons lost in such an attack. These factors, coupled with the persistent fear among the North Vietnamese leaders that President Nixon was capable of anything, whatever outward appearances and political analysts might suggest to the contrary, persuaded North Vietnam not to launch the attack for which she had prepared at such great cost but to adopt the policies she has followed for the past year and a half.

These policies involved a measured level of military activity in South Vietnam, most of it guerilla activity, with the main-force unit actions being both localised and short-lived. This was quite deliberately calculated to remain below the threshold at which President Nixon would feel impelled to take retaliatory action. It was accompanied by political activity and subversion and, as was described in the previous CNA issue on North Vietnam, was planned to continue on much the same level until the presidential elections due to be held in the United States in November 1976. When President Nixon was obliged to retire prematurely in August 1974, the North Vietnamese leaders no longer felt constrained to wait until 1976 and very quickly began to question the validity of the existing policy in the changed circumstances.

The domestic situation in North Vietnam, too, affects the options open to the leaders, and information about that subject is available from several different and independent sources. It is now abundantly clear that the interim economic reconstruction plan adopted after the signing of the Paris cease-fire agreement proved totally ineffectual and rendered the task of reconstruction almost impossible. The impressive claims of success-

es in this field put out periodically by the North Vietnamese authorities were misleading and, in several instances, downright dishonest. Both Soviet and Chinese sources are agreed about that. Where they differ is in the sphere of longer term planning, particularly over the five-year plan due to commence in 1976, and here the Russians accuse the Chinese of obstruction while the Chinese accuse the Russians of attempting to manipulate the plan so as to derive the maximum economic advantage for the Soviet Union.

The picture of economic failure under the interim plan is borne out by a very recent defector, a native of Hanoi city. He tells of the absence of goods in shops, rising prices on the 'free market' from which all are obliged to buy by the smallness of rations and the failure to honour these, and the consequent 'moonlighting' by government employees unable to support their families on their official salaries. The majority of these persons have taken on second jobs, which they perform in the afternoon or evening after leaving early from their official jobs. In consequence, the public services, transport, and other amenities have undergone a marked decline. Electricity, for example, is intermittent in most places and cuts sometimes last a whole day, yet it is expensive and consumes a disproportionately large part of people's income.

This man's disclosures about economic hardships are strikingly corroborated by the editorial in the Party theoretical journal HOC TAP for the month of September,[1] which writes of the *"famine during the pre-harvest period earlier this year"*, using the expression *"nan doi"*—this can only be rendered in English by *"famine"* or *"famine disaster"*—for the very first time in communist North Vietnam. Because of these very difficult economic conditions many North Vietnamese now entertain serious doubts about the ability of the communist side to win the struggle in South Vietnam. People discuss the 1968 and 1972 military failures in the South and criticise the authorities for not rotating soldiers serving in the South so that these may return to the North for leave and visits to their families. They believe that, once a soldier has been sent to the South, he will remain there until the end of the war unless he is fortunate enough to suffer some disabling wound. Indeed, there are instances of soldiers causing public disorders in Hanoi and getting themselves arrested in order to escape from being sent to the South. There are, as yet, no signs of public protest against the war, but the ordinary man in the street is, at best, apathetic. Most could wish for nothing more than to end the war, reunite soldiers with their families, and settle down to working for a reasonable standard of living for everyone.

The question of pessimism, despondency, or worse, is dealt with in unusually forthright fashion by the same Hoc Tap editorial, which appears to be advocating a far harsher and more stringent line now that President Nixon is no longer in power. Placing the task of completing the struggle in the South uncharacteristically before that of building socialism in the North, the editorial goes on to claim that *"our popular revolutionary forces are . . . very much stronger than those of the counter-revolutionary henchmen of the United States imperialists"*.[2] This claim contrasts with the more modest statement of Prime Minister PHAM VAN DONG, printed in the same edition of Hoc Tap, that the balance of forces is moving more and more in favour of the communists.[3] Only General VO NGUYEN GIAP has made so strong a claim when he said, in a speech made last May, that the forces of revolution were *"much stronger"* than those of South Vietnam, though he qualified this by adding *"as far as the whole country is concerned"*.[4] The most striking feature of the editorial is, however, the length and violence of its strictures against what it terms *"ta khi"*, an expression difficult to translate but which may be rendered in English by *"stream of evil thoughts"*. This, it alleges, *"is now being conveyed from mouth to mouth, has been published in the press, and appears in the literature and art of North Vietnam"*.

Those affected by this stream of evil thought are, it appears, numerous enough to pose a threat to North Vietnam. The writer accuses them of *"seeing only our unavoidable deficiencies. . . . because of their incorrect outlook they have become pessimistic and passive, and their revolutionary fighting spirit and confidence have been weakened. As a result, they have no courage to struggle against the negative phenomena in social life"*. Such people, one might conclude, have been worn down by the physical hardships of life in North Vietnam and are more to be pitied than

blamed, but the editorialist goes on to accuse them of something much more sinister than pessimism or cowardice. He condemns them for *"denying the truth that 'nothing is more precious than independence and freedom'. . ."* They are guilty of *"using the pretext of respecting 'democracy' and 'freedom' in order to oppose the state's close control and managerial measures against those who have stolen socialist property and transacted illegal business, and against speculators and conspirators, and so forth. . . ."* Still worse, the writer accuses such persons of *"Vaguely, ambiguously, or brazenly distorting the Party lines and policies, especially the policies regarding socialist reforms, and deliberately seeking to blacken the socialist regime, the cadres, and the Party members. . . ."* These, it would seem, are not mere innocents who have gone, or been led astray, but real dedicated opponents and enemies of the communist regime in North Vietnam: *"A number of people have manifested their discontent and performed vile deeds because they are dishonest opportunists, and many bad elements who are opposed to our regime have intensified their activities."*

Listing the political tendencies of these people, the writer says: *"They are opposed to our Party's line on fulfilment of the democratic national revolution in the entire country and on the achievement of peaceful national reunification. They are opposed to the line on the socialist revolution and socialist construction in the North. They are opposed to the proletarian dictatorship, close management, and the policy of achieving socialist reforms. They are opposed to the compulsory and dictatorial measures of the state aimed at protecting socialist property, at opposing illegal transactions, and maintaining and protecting public order and security and the healthy pattern of life in our society."*

Belatedly the editorialist concedes that there are two kinds of offender, the dupes and the real enemies. The former must be re-educated, but *"We must resolutely punish those who are genuinely ideologically opposed to our regime and who have publicly propagated their hostile thoughts for sinister purposes."*

It is difficult to be certain how this important editorial should be interpreted. Condemnation of erroneous thinking, pessimism, corruption, illegal trading, and so on, has been a feature of the North Vietnamese press for a number of years, but there has never been an article as bluntly outspoken as this, or one which states so specifically that dangerous groups opposed to the Party and its policies on ideological grounds were active in North Vietnam. Moreover, such elements are said to have published their incorrect views in the press and literary works, which would seem to imply that they were highly placed, for only such persons would enjoy access to the state controlled media. Scarcely less significant is the publication in which the article appeared, the Party theoretical monthly designed primarily for the discussion of important policy and ideological matters and for reading by middle and senior ranking Party members. Finally, there is the question of the article's timing, for it was published in the edition of Hoc Tap directly following the resignation of President Nixon.

Earlier precedents indicate that the polemical editorial reflects debate going on within the Party leadership over policy, and it shows that there is disagreement over the line which should be adopted at this juncture. In view of the profound change in the situation brought about by President Nixon's resignation, the discussion of policy is hardly surprising. What is unusual is the apparent seriousness of the differences between those leaders responsible for policy formulation. This is a very outspoken editorial unmistakably calling for the introduction of harsh disciplinary measures in North Vietnam, and it would seem to be arguing the case for one section of the leadership. That it should be considered necessary to state a case so strongly, using such very blunt language, suggests the existence of another section of the leadership advocating a different policy line, presumably one less harsh and one less authoritarian.

The Hoc Tap article advocates decisive military action in the South—its description of the great military superiority of the communist side can hardly be interpreted in any other way—which points to the conclusion that there is a faction in North Vietnam which does not believe in an early military solution. This faction presumably favours political struggle to take advantage of the current political unrest in the South, and military struggle at a level not greater than the present one. If this is the case, then it would not be surprising, for the question

has been the subject of debate for some considerable time, and a recent defector told of the address given by a North Vietnamese army general to a class of wounded South Vietnamese soldiers undergoing convalescence and further training in the North. The general admitted that he himself disagreed with the North Vietnamese policy towards the South, saying he would prefer to see much more responsibility devolving on the South Vietnamese themselves, and that he opposed the policy of national reunification, preferring to see two Vietnams existing side by side. Apparently the North Vietnamese leaders are free to discuss the various policy options in private, but the Hoc Tap editorial is the first instance of one side in the debate being argued publicly and vehemently.

Since the publication of this editorial in September, the North Vietnamese press has carried an unusually large number of articles advocating the tightening of labour discipline and the introduction of harsher measures against private traders and those offering services on a private profit basis. The Hanoi city paper, for example, published a resolution of the Hanoi Municipal Council aimed unmistakably at eliminating the free market both for goods and services. It not only called for the collectivisation of both handicraft production and the repair and service enterprises, but stated that citizens in normal good health who refused to accept the jobs allocated to them would be sentenced to hard labour for periods ranging from six months to two years.[5] All of this suggests that those leaders advocating a harsher line domestically are meeting with some success, but the line towards South Vietnam remains ambiguous, possibly because it has not been agreed by all leaders.

On October 8th the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG) issued an official government statement calling for the overthrow of President Thieu and his replacement by a government which is *"willing to comply with the Paris cease-fire agreement"*. Three days later, on October 11th, the North Vietnamese government issued an official statement giving full support to the PRG statement. The timing of these two events made it apparent that the original PRG statement was issued on the orders of Hanoi, as was the case last March, when the PRG issued its Six-Point Plan and Hanoi at once voiced support for this. Although the news media have long heaped abuse on President Thieu and his government, both the PRG and the North Vietnamese government have displayed much more caution in their utterances. This is, in fact, the first official pronouncement of the North Vietnamese government on the South since last March, and it cannot be dismissed lightly. The whole episode did not just happen; it was carefully discussed by the communist leadership in Hanoi beforehand and is a calculated political act. Certainly the foreign communist parties regard it very seriously, for all of them have since taken steps to stir up demonstrations against President Thieu personally in their own countries. Their relative lack of success is due to the dramatic decline in popular interest in Vietnam since the cease-fire agreement. But what is the significance of this North Vietnamese initiative?

The North Vietnamese statement could be viewed as a formal declaration of communist determination to destroy the government of President Thieu, almost as an old fashioned declaration of war, and a move to be followed very shortly by large-scale military action. It could equally be viewed as an indication to the communists and their supporters in the South that North Vietnam intends to lend its full support to the several political opposition movements currently active in South Vietnam and apparently enjoying some measure of success in their campaigns against the government, in other words to engage in political as distinct from military struggle. The North Vietnamese Party has also sought the help of foreign communist parties, a step it normally takes only when embarking on some major new campaign. The move is, as yet, ambiguous and leaves North Vietnam no more committed to either a military or a political struggle in the South than she was before it was made. In all probability that is exactly what the North Vietnamese leadership intended.

Sensitive to the need to adopt new policies in the wake of President Nixon's departure, and of the need to be seen by its subjects and supporters to have done so, yet prevented from so doing by deep disagreements at the highest level over the new policy, the leadership may well have opted for something in the interim which appears to be a new

policy initiative yet leaves North Vietnam free to go either way in the coming months. It may or may not be significant in the context of the somewhat embittered disagreement reflected in the Hoc Tap editorial, that a top level Conference on Local Military Tasks early in November disseminated a directive from the Party General Committee and a resolution from the Central Military Party Committee concerning local military tasks. The third of the four tasks given to local military commanders was *"guiding the regional forces and public security organisations in defeating counter-revolution, imperialist plots, etc."*[6]

Meanwhile, two pointers to possible future action by North Vietnam are just discernible.

The first of these concerns the signs of Chinese disenchantment with her policy of detente with the United States and her obvious lack of enthusiasm for the Brezhnev-Ford meeting in Vladivostok. There is no space to discuss this subject further here, but merely to note that the Chinese could now be more receptive to pressures from Hanoi to reconsider their opposition to a North Vietnamese military offensive than they were even a few weeks ago. If such an offensive were to materialize and China were to support it, then she would be most advantageously placed. If the offensive were to succeed, China could claim the credit, while failure could be credibly blamed on Soviet lack of support.

The second pointer concerns North Vietnam's increasing preoccupation with the Third World, receiving national leaders or senior officials from its member countries and sending her own delegations to visit those countries. One major success already achieved in this sphere was the admission of Norodom Sihanouk's Cambodian 'Government in exile' to membership of the non-aligned bloc, decided at its meeting in Algiers, and the bloc has also given considerable backing to the PRG in South Vietnam. It is still too early to reach any definite conclusions about North Vietnamese efforts in this sphere, but they could possibly herald the final abandonment of the old policy of total reliance upon Russia, China, and the communist bloc, and an attempt to find a broader, less demanding, and possibly more effective basis of support. The possibility should be borne in mind.

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[1] "HEIGHTEN OUR REVOLUTIONARY WILL, VIGILANCE, AND CONFIDENCE, AND STRIVE TO PUSH THE REVOLUTIONARY UNDERTAKING FORWARD." Editorial, Hoc Tap, September 9, 1974

[2] Ibid.

[3] Speech of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. Text reproduced in Hoc Tap, September 9, 1974

[4] Text of speech by General Vo Nguyen Giap reproduced in Quan Doi Nhan Dan, May 8, 1974

[5] Hanoi Moi, October 16, 1974

[6] Quan Doi Nhan Dan, November 6, 1974

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