

Vietnam's foreign minister discusses Asian politics

by Daniel Snider

This writer had the opportunity on Oct. 8 to talk at length at the United Nations with Vietnam's senior diplomat, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach. Thach is one of the new generation of Vietnamese leaders, a veteran of the Paris peace talks, where he served as deputy to Le Duc Tho. Although only recently named as minister, Thach is respected throughout Asia as a tough and competent negotiator.

We talked about a wide range of subjects, and Thach spoke without formality and with an obvious sense of confidence in the Vietnamese position. His style quickly created a sense of ease—the foreign minister spoke with few ideological formalisms, joking and laughing, particularly at the expense of the Chinese who were the major subject of our discussion.

Our conversation began with the subject that is the main purpose for his presence at the United Nations: the tension in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese minister had spoken before the U.N. General Assembly on this issue and met privately with the foreign minister of Thailand. Thach had presented to the U.N. and the Thai official new proposals aimed at establishing negotiations between Vietnam and the other Indochinese states of Laos and Kampuchea and the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN—Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore).

The new three-point proposals offer a two-phased potential withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea. The first point, as Thach told us, “is that we will withdraw all our forces once the Chinese danger to the security and peace of the Indochinese countries is over.” The second is the creation of a demilitarized zone between Thailand and Kampuchea. The third point is that when that is secured, a partial withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea can take place.

The new proposals are actually an elaboration of a proposal put forward in July by the three Indochinese foreign ministers' meeting in Vientiane, Laos. That Vientiane declaration—formally a Kampuchean proposal backed by all three governments—essentially called for the creation of a demilitarized zone, combined with Kampuchean-Thai talks aimed at settling issues like refugee problems and distribution of relief aid.

The Vientiane proposal was immediately rejected by the Thai government. As Thach pointed out, however, “ASEAN as a whole has not yet said no officially.” ASEAN instead, as he pointed out, issued a counterproposal. This proposal, the “Manila declaration,” has again been further elaborated in an ASEAN resolution before the General Assembly.

Behind all this diplomatic maneuvering is, Thach emphasized, differing views of the sources of tension in the region, and therefore their solution. The ASEAN countries—particularly Thailand and Singapore—contend that the source of tension lies in the presence of Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea, a contention that echoes the arguments of both the Peking regime and the Carter administration. This contention is utilized to justify support for the continued seating of the murderous, deposed Pol Pot regime as the “representatives” of Kampuchea at the U.N.

The Vietnamese approach is quite straightforward. For them, it is China and the Chinese efforts to dominate Southeast Asia that are the source of tension and instability in the region and the reason for the maintenance of a Vietnamese military presence in both Laos and Kampuchea. This view has many sympathizers within ASEAN, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, where the Chinese are historically viewed as the long-term threat to the region.

Many commentators have dismissed the Vietnamese proposals as “propaganda,” or even a diplomatic prelude to renewed fighting on the Thai-Kampuchean border. However, neither the evidence nor Thach's approach supports such a view. While Vietnam's readiness for war with China is constant, it is clear, even on the most pragmatic, strategic grounds, that they are not seeking confrontation with ASEAN—it is precisely such a “two-front” war that Vietnam wishes to avoid.

Thach is prepared to continue negotiations with Thailand and ASEAN as a whole and revealed that there will be another meeting with his Thai counterpart, outside the United Nations. Thach jokingly told me that since he had been to Bangkok three times already, he thought the meeting should be in Hanoi. “But,” he laughed, “I would not embarrass them to be in Hanoi, so

they can choose another place. They have proposed Rangoon [Burma] and I propose New Delhi.”

Thach’s overall assessment of the prospects for this situation was typically frank: “I am optimistic, but at the same time, I am prepared for the worst.”

China and Vietnamese nationalism

Our conversation moved from the intricacies of diplomacy to a discussion of China, Vietnamese relations with the U.S., and back to Kampuchea. The bulk of that talk—what was “on the record” follows—but one thing that emerged constantly as a theme throughout was the strong sense of Vietnamese pride and nationalism, and a sense of confidence that comes from that.

The spirit of Vietnamese nationalism is today aimed against China, a historic enemy of Vietnamese independence and culture for over a thousand years. The survival of Vietnam against the numerous invading armies from their massive neighbor to the north is an enduring theme of Vietnamese history, celebrated in their poetry and their songs. The socialist government in Hanoi today has no problem reminding the population of the heroes of the past who bear no ideological affinity to the present communist government.

Indeed perhaps the most striking aspect of our talk, contrary to many of the images, still set in American minds, of the men America fought so fruitlessly for 15 years, is the virtual absence of “communist” ideology in the approach of even a senior official on Thach’s level. While his commitment to socialism is undeniable, the references are not so much to the legacy of Marxism as to the historic role of Vietnam as a nation.

Vietnam’s tough, cohesive political leadership commands what is acknowledged to be the best army in Asia possessed by a country which occupies a strategic position in the region. But the real power of the Vietnamese nation will come when it has the conditions of peace to allow the full development of its tremendous human and economic potential. With perhaps the greatest reserve of skilled manpower in the region among its more than 50 millions, tremendous agricultural capacities, and its significant industrial and raw material base in the north, Vietnam promises to be an industrial and economic power of the future.

For the Vietnamese, peace now depends on stopping China, which itself sees a strong, and now, united Vietnam as the obstacle which stands between it and the historic Chinese goal of domination of Southeast Asia. It is on the question of the threat of renewed Chinese war against Vietnam that we pick up the thread of my talk with Vietnam’s foreign minister.

Thach: Our military presence in Cambodia is only for one year, and the trouble in Southeast Asia has been going on for forty years, since World War II.

Certainly now many troubled areas in Southeast Asia have nothing to do with the Cambodian question. For instance, there is the civil war in Burma, the Moro fighting in the Philippines, the Communist Party of Thailand in Thailand, or the fighting of Thai Muslims in the southern part of Thailand. Or the rebellion in Malaysia, and East Timor, occupied by Indonesia.

It is not the Vietnamese. It is very interesting. . . .

What is the biggest danger of war now? We think there are many places in Southeast Asia. The border between Cambodia and Thailand—that is an explosive situation. The border between Thailand and Laos; the border between Laos, Vietnam and China; the South China Sea because the South China Sea is disputed by many countries. . . .

But what is most dangerous? I think it is now the border between Thailand and Kampuchea and between Vietnam, Laos, and China. But I think there will be no war on the border between Kampuchea and Thailand. Why? Because Thailand would like to have a war inside Kampuchea, not in Thailand. And Vietnamese and Kampuchians, we don’t like to bring war into Thailand. So there will be small fighting, fighting on the border inside Kampuchea only. I don’t think it will last long or break out as a big war because Pol Pot has no support from the people.

The biggest weakness is Pol Pot.

Sneider: He only has support from the people of China. . . .

Thach: No. From Peking, not from the people of China [laughter].

Sneider: I stand corrected.

Thach: Secondly, now the most explosive [situation] is between China and the Indochinese states . . . the most explosive! Because now there are troop concentrations [of China] on the border and they are shouting every day that they will give Vietnam a “second lesson.” To invade Vietnam they must have two directions—from the north and from the southwest. But I don’t think that in the southwest they can do big things. Pol Pot cannot do big things and the Thais, they could not do big things. But if there is no military presence of Vietnam in Kampuchea they can do big things. If we withdraw our forces, China will have two fronts. But if we stay there we can check this direction. We can prevent that from happening.

We are ready. We are better prepared than before.

Sneider: You always say that you are “ready.” Do you expect that the Chinese might act on a large scale in this coming season?

Thach: Yes. Even before the dry season we are ready to welcome them, even in the rainy season. The rainy

season is much harder for them. Now the dry season will come, and we are much better prepared than before.

Sneider: There are lots of reports of factional tensions in China. How do you think the internal situation will affect the Chinese assessment of their own readiness to go to war again?

Thach: You know, if you use common sense, the first lesson was very stupid. The second lesson must be very, very, very stupid. But unfortunately you have to deal with the most stupid people in the world. If you look into the past thirty years of China policy, you see they have two faces, two masks. They have done unbelievable things, unbelievable things. Too much adventure: the Great Leap Forward was a big adventure, and the Cultural Revolution was a big adventure, and now the Four Modernizations is a big adventure.

And the war against Vietnam was an adventure. What is their strategy? Their strategy is to bring chaos to the world. So if they have internal problems, they can go ahead, but if they have peace and they have trouble at home it is very bad for them.

So their strategy is to oppose [to bring into opposition—D.S.] the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and to oppose NATO to the Warsaw Pact, and to oppose ASEAN countries to Indochinese countries. They have a saying that the “world is in great chaos,” and they would only like great peace for themselves. They cannot solve their internal disputes. They would like to create chaos in other countries. The war they would like against my country is within a plan to confront the ASEAN and Indochinese.

The U.S. double standard

Sneider: Secretary Muskie, in his statement on the U.S. decision to vote this year for Pol Pot in the U.N., linked that decision to what he said was Vietnamese policy in the region. Could you comment on that?

Thach: It is very stupid to bring the normalization [of relations] between Vietnam and the U.S.A. to other matters. Normally between two countries, it is bilateral relations. It has nothing to do with a third country. The U.S.A. has adopted a double-standard policy toward Vietnam. For instance, we had agreed on everything in September of 1978 to normalize relations. At that time we had agreed that there are no [pre]conditions for normalization because in 1977 we had two conditions. There was the contribution of the U.S.A. to heal the wounds of war. And the U.S. said, “only normalization, no conditions.” So we had accepted the position of the Americans in September of 1978. We had agreed on everything except the wording for the document to be signed. They said that we must wait and we had set up a working group for the wording of the document.

But in the meantime, they were negotiating with China for normalization too. They signed [the agreement] with China on the 15th of December. For us, they didn't go ahead with wording. Only the wording [remained] and they did not go ahead. If we could go ahead, we could have signed on the 1st of October because everything was ready.

Sneider: Do you think it was the Chinese insistence that blocked the normalization of relations?

Thach: That's the real problem. The real problem is the U.S.A. playing the China card. So when they signed with China, on the eve of the signatures, they told us that they could not normalize because there is the refugee problem and the situation in Kampuchea. They said that. Now it is the turn of the U.S.A. to put conditions.

When China invaded my country on the 17th of February—at that time there was the visit of Blumenthal, the treasury secretary. He was prepared to go to China on the 17th of February. Somebody had asked Carter: there is a war going on between Vietnam and China, so will this affect normalization between China and the U.S.A.? Carter said there is no connection between this war and normalization.

So it is a double-standard policy. And Blumenthal continued his trip to China. Now it is not the question of aggression by China against Vietnam; it is not the question of an occupation by China of the territory of India which could block the normalization of relations between China and the U.S.A. And you see the exodus of refugees from China to Hong Kong, and to Southeast Asia. So this has nothing to do with normalization between China and the U.S.A. This is the big difficulty in the way of normalization between U.S.A. and Vietnam. This is the truth.

Sneider: I want to ask you a historical question. This relates to what you were just talking about. I believe that you were a part of the Vietnamese negotiating team in Paris.

Thach: Yes.

Sneider: You know Mr. Kissinger and his associates very well.

Thach: Too well [laughter]!

Sneider: Do you have any knowledge that Mr. Kissinger was coordinating his negotiating policy at the Paris peace talks with Chou En-lai and the Chinese with a joint understanding that they would attempt to perpetuate the division of Vietnam in the interests of the Chinese and the United States?

Thach: It is very clear. There was a very clear under-

standing. . . . There was a visit of Kissinger to Peking in July 1971. Our position at that time was the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the disbanding of the Thieu government in South Vietnam, the puppet government, and the setting up of a coalition government of three components, and thirdly the reunification of Vietnam. Then there was the visit of Kissinger to Peking in July. After the visit, Mao Tse-tung had invited my prime minister to visit to China. It was in November of 1971. I was with my prime minister in Peking. I was in the talks between Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and Mao Tse-tung.

He told my prime minister the following: "There is a Chinese saying" (always there is a Chinese saying) "there is a Chinese saying, that a short broom cannot sweep out the cobwebs from the ceiling. So the Chinese broom is too short. We cannot sweep out Chiang Kai-shek from Formosa and Taiwan and your Vietnamese broom is too short. You cannot sweep out Thieu, the stooge government in South Vietnam. So you must accept Nguyen Van Thieu in South Vietnam."

That means the division of the country!

Sneider: But do you think there was a clear understanding between Kissinger and the Chinese that they should keep Vietnam divided and allow China to dominate Southeast Asia?

Thach: I have no intelligence on their meetings but it is not the first time. It is the second time. If you look into the past, at the Geneva conference in 1954 to end the French war, the same thing happened. This was only to repeat.

This is a dynamic in their policy of hegemony. What is it? In '54, they wanted to have the French in South Vietnam and Vietnamese in North Vietnam. They didn't want the Americans to come in at that time . . . to keep the Americans away. If they have the Vietnamese and the French they have two very weak enemies, two weak enemies they can control. If they had Americans at that time in South Vietnam, they would be faced with Americans who could take control of North Vietnam and all of Southeast Asia. It was trouble for China.

So to accept the domination of the French in South Vietnam, this was to keep the Americans away. They are very clever. In '71-'72 they saw that the Americans had become weaker. They would like to get out. To maintain the Americans in South Vietnam and Vietnamese Revolution in North Vietnam—to keep Vietnam divided. They would have two enemies—there is no one stronger because Americans wanted to get out and the stooge [Thieu] was in South Vietnam and [had to be] fed by the Americans. It could not be solved. So they can control the Indochinese—all the Indochinese.

They were too clever. It could not work, because we are not Chinese.

Sneider: There is a problem we devoted some attention to, which is the question of the involvement of the Chinese regime in Peking in the trafficking of narcotics, of opium; not only directly, but also through people like the Burmese Communist Party, through Vang Pao and the Meo, and their own people. To our knowledge, the Nixon administration had information, Kissinger had information about the Chinese involvement in drug trafficking, and they suppressed this information. . . .

Thach: This is very clear. We have information too. The Golden Triangle area—it is Yunan [in China], and Burma, and Thailand, and Laos. This triangle is controlled mostly by the Kuomintang forces of General Li and the Chinese and these tribes. In this area there is a great Chinese influence. In the past, in the Western press, they had a lot of information about this.

Sneider: But nobody ever talks about the Chinese role.

Thach: Yes, because you know it is Carter playing China card and Nixon, too. That's the point. There is now an exodus of refugees from China [to Hong Kong]—nobody talks about it. And nobody talks about the violation of human rights in China. Nobody talks about the aggression of China against Vietnam. Nobody talks about the occupation by China of Indian territory.

Sneider: I wanted to talk to you about India. As has been reported in *New Wave* and many other Indian papers, the Chinese have been very active in aiding separatist, subversive movements in northeast India. They're involved in supplying arms to the Zia dictatorship in Pakistan, which has been taking a hostile attitude toward India. They're backing the Afghan rebels. They're also even supplying arms to Bangladesh. Some people in India talk about a Chinese attempt to encircle India.

Thach.: It is very clear. You see Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Very clear. If you assess the policy of China toward the ASEAN countries first, then you can understand the policy of China vis-à-vis South Asia.

Now they have very good relations with the ASEAN countries, for instance Thailand, and Burma, and the Philippines. These countries have asked China to stop their support of the Maoist elements in these countries. They refused. They have always played two cards at the same time toward any country. Vietnam, we were their allies, their close allies, but they maintained good relations with pro-Chinese elements in our country. So if the situation turns against them, they can have this

card. But when it turns favorable for them, they can use this card against the other one. Every time—as they play NATO against the Warsaw Pact, playing Warsaw first against NATO. All the time, they play two cards at the same time.

Sneider: Do you think that, perhaps, in the minds of the Chinese, there are two countries in Asia that they must deal with as the obstacle to Chinese domination? And those two countries are Vietnam and India?

Thach: You are right.

Human rights not a 'technical' issue

Sneider: What do you think the significance was of Mrs. Gandhi's government's recognition of the Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh?

Thach: We think it has a very great significance, because first it is the biggest country in the nonaligned movement, it is a founding father of the nonaligned movement. This is very important.

Secondly, India always had close relations with Kampuchea, long-time ties. Especially Buddhism, Brahminism and Hinduism had a great influence in Cambodia. This shows that this is a country that knows Cambodia very well [which] has recognized the new regime. . . .

Thirdly, the recognition by India of Cambodia has ethical aspects. The main ethics of Buddhism is the human being; there is no caste; there is no killing of any living creature. So this ethical aspect, the moral aspect of the Indian people, the Indian culture, of Indian civilization, is very important. This shows who is really for human rights and not for human rights.

The people who had dropped 50 million tons of bombs on our heads, they say that they are protecting human rights. It is a bluff. The second bluff—they say that they condemn Pol Pot but they must support the seating of Pol Pot because of a technical issue. What is technical? There is the technique of bombing—bombing is technical too. What is technical? Very, very immoral.

All of humanity has the responsibility to do justice for the three million people who died in Cambodia. We must have this responsibility to do justice and to condemn the criminals. We must have this responsibility as human beings. Secondly, we have a responsibility to help the resurrection of four million people who come from death to life now in Kampuchea. We have this responsibility.

It is not a question of seating or not seating. This could not help. All human beings, all humanity has this responsibility. . . . The gas chambers of Hitler also were very "technical." What is this? I think that everyone with common sense must be revolted, cannot accept the so-called logic of these people. We must revolt against it.

SOVIETOLOGY

An amazing air of unreality

by Edith Hassman and Webster Tarpley

Some 1,300 Kremlinologists and scholars of East European affairs gathered in Garmisch, West Germany the last week of September for the "Second World Congress of Soviet and East European Studies." These are the people whose studies and theories about the U.S.S.R. are supposed to assist governments in formulating policies toward Moscow and the other Warsaw Pact countries.

An aura of unreality hung over the Bavarian mountain setting. Discussion panels that omitted major components of Soviet policy revolved instead around geopolitical scenarios for the future disintegration of the Soviet bloc. The conference was, in short, shocking—not for the novelty of the presentations, many of which could be read in only slightly different prose on the op-ed pages of the *Times of London* or the *Washington Post*, but for the incompetence that reigned.

If the danger of war by strategic miscalculation comes in part from failure to understand how Warsaw Pact leaders think, the vagaries of this assembly of advisers on policy toward the Soviet Union give cause for alarm!

Convened while the aftershocks of the American Presidential Directive 59, on "counterforce" strategic doctrine and the feasibility of fighting limited nuclear wars, were still rumbling in Europe and the U.S.S.R., the Garmisch congress nevertheless omitted to schedule a panel on Soviet military doctrine or capability.

A three-hour panel on Soviet policy in Asia managed to isolate this topic from the question of China, which was not mentioned at all.

The workshop on energy proceeded from the assumption that the U.S.S.R. would be squeezed by an energy shortage in the years ahead. Prof. Robert Campbell of the University of Indiana, a specialist in fossil fuel resources who usually refrains from rash claims that the Russians are running out of fuel, brought his presentation into line with this idea by way of a peculiar forecast: because the Soviet plan to quintuple nuclear power generation by 1990 mandates "too high a concentration" of reactors in the Western part of the U.S.S.R., he said, "There will *have to be* a nuclear catastrophe within the next 10 years!"

The primary topic in a panel on Soviet planning and economic policy was not the 1981-1985 Five Year Plan,