

The 'Vietnam Peace':

How priorities in Vietnam's internal
and external policies changed after
1987

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relative peace that has reigned in Vietnam since 1989, within the framework of a larger East Asian Peace. The background for the peace is sought in changes in Vietnam's foreign and domestic policies in the late 1980s, at the time when the Doi Moi reforms were introduced. Various aspects of 'the Vietnam Peace' are being discussed, first the external, and then the internal (civil) peace. In the end the paper discusses the sustainability of the Vietnam peace, under three alternative regional scenarios. The paper is based on recent literature, and on a number of interviews undertaken in 2005 and 2007.

Introduction¹

In the English language 'Vietnam' is often used as shorthand for 'The Vietnam War.' To give Vietnam the place it deserves in discussions about our contemporary world, this article proposes the concept "Vietnam Peace." In armed conflict statistics, the Vietnam War ranks as the worst of all since 1945 in terms of the number of people killed, and the end of the war in 1975 did not bring lasting peace in the region. Repeated Cambodian incursions into Vietnamese territory led Vietnam to invade Cambodia in 1978, drive the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime out of Phnom Penh, and pave the way for the establishment of a new Cambodian government. China reacted by undertaking a short but devastating invasion of the northern-most part of Vietnam from February to March 1979, and subsequently supported, along with Thailand and the USA, insurgent forces in Cambodia for almost a decade. Only with Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 did the Vietnamese really start to reap the fruits of peace. Since then the Vietnamese have not seen armed fighting either externally or internally. There have been incidents in the Vietnamese Central Highlands with the guerrilla movement FULRO (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*), but not sufficiently serious to prevent us from characterising the period since 1989 as peaceful. It is time to research the 'Vietnam Peace,' discuss its causes and limitations, its relationship to regional developments in Southeast and Northeast Asia (the 'East Asian Peace'), as well as its sustainability.²

The concept of 'peace' here is somewhat different from the concept of *hoa binh* in Vietnam's official discourse. From the perspective of the Vietnamese communists, they 'achieved peace' in northern Vietnam after having defeated the French in 1954, and in the whole of the country when defeating the Americans and their local lackeys in 1975. Peace was a prize won through thirty years of national resistance. On 30 April 2005, Vietnam could thus celebrate thirty years of peace. A peace researcher must see this differently. Whereas the 'East Asian Peace' may very well be said to have begun after the end of the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979, since there has been very little warfare in the larger region since then, the concept 'Vietnam Peace' must be reserved for the period after 1989, when Vietnam joined the policy of war avoidance that had already been successfully carried out for a long time by Japan,

¹ The paper is an updated version of a draft chapter that was not found suitable for publication in Ari Kokko, ed., *Viet Nam: 20 Years of Doi Moi*, Hanoi: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences/The Gioi, 2008. The author would like to thank David G. Marr, Nguyen Vu Tung, Pham Van Duc, Nguyen Xuan Thang and Ha Hoang Hop for their comments on earlier drafts. This paper

² See Stein Tønnesson, 'How Can We Best Explain the East Asian Peace?', *Asian Perspective*, forthcoming (article based on 'Explaining the "East Asian Peace" 1980–2005,' paper presented at the 49th International Studies Association Convention, San Francisco 27 March 2008).

China, the two Koreas, and the member countries of ASEAN (at least as far as interstate conflict is concerned).³

The history of peace in Vietnam and China is part of the larger story of the ‘East Asian Peace.’ In the first three decades after 1945, East Asia saw the world’s worst wars in terms of human death and suffering: the two Indochina Wars, the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and internal guerrilla wars in several Southeast Asian countries. In the same period, the Chinese suffered from the Great Leap Forward 1956–58 and the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution 1966–74. Indonesia went through a terrible massacre in 1965, and the last part of the ‘war period’ was marked by the Cambodian genocide. Since the 1980s, and particularly after the end of the Cold War, East Asia has been remarkably peaceful while enjoying a period of rapid economic growth.⁴ The association of economic growth and peace confirms the strongest of all statistical patterns established in peace research: the poorer a country is, the more likely it is to suffer from war – and vice versa. If it is mainly peace that leads to growth, or the other way round, is disputed.

Among peace researchers it may be somewhat controversial to speak of a ‘Vietnam Peace,’ a ‘China Peace’ or an ‘East Asian Peace’ since several governments in East Asia do not respect basic human rights, and do not tolerate opposition movements. Critics of the concept ‘East Asian Peace’ sometimes ask if we should also speak of a ‘North Korean Peace.’ This is counter-intuitive, and it is not so easy to make a principled argument on the basis of the difference between the harsh repression in North Korea and the lower degree of repression in China and Vietnam. If we define ‘peace’ not just as the absence of armed conflict, but widely as a ‘harmonious and just society’ or a ‘society with institutions and norms ensuring peaceful conflict management’, then the Vietnamese do not enjoy peace – if anybody does. The problem with a wide or deep definition of ‘peace’ is that it easily leads to a call for a new and better world instead of helping us understand real differences in the world as we know it. To live in a country that does not have armed fighting is so valuable in itself that it would be a pity to reserve the term ‘peace’ for a fully harmonious society. In the period since 1989, the quality of life in Vietnam has progressed tremendously. As Vietnam’s president Nguyen Minh Triet said in September 2006, Doi Moi has “recorded major historic achievements, changing the image of the country and improving the material and cultural lives of the people.”⁵ This could not have happened without peace. The absence of armed fighting since 1989 has no doubt played a significant role in allowing Vietnam to carry out the Doi Moi reforms and obtain an unprecedented level of economic growth. When we analyse the Doi Moi reform period in Vietnamese history, we must keep peace in mind, and incorporate in our analysis both the reorientation of Vietnam’s foreign policy and the efforts made by the Vietnamese government to reform its political system in ways that reduce the danger of internal conflict. And we must discuss if the ‘Vietnam Peace’ is sustainable.

³ The only armed fighting the People’s Republic of China has engaged in since 1979 was in the Spratlys in 1988, when a number of Vietnamese sailors were killed, and in some border incidents at the Sino-Vietnamese border.

⁴ For the number of casualties in the Indochina wars, see Micheal Clodfelter 1995. For trends in the number of armed conflicts and ‘battle deaths,’ see Micheal Clodfelter 2002, Gleditsch et al 2002, Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch 2005, and Bethany Lacina, Nils Petter Gleditsch and Bruce Russett 2006.

⁵ “In the interests of the people.” Nguyen Minh Triet in interview with *Vietnam Economic Times*, September 2006.

Since 1993, the Vietnam and East Asian Peace have constituted the main part of a global trend towards less warfare and fewer people killed in battle. This may be counter-intuitive for the average media consumer, but there is clear evidence that the world at large benefited from a 'peace dividend' after the end of the Cold War (Gleditsch et al 2002; Human Security Report 2005). In the beginning of the 1990s, with wars in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans, this was not apparent. It was tempting to think that the end of the Cold War had just removed the lid on a brewing kettle of ethnic and religious hatred. Research has since demonstrated that this was too pessimistic. Growth in the number of civil wars mainly happened *during* the Cold War, not after. While the Cold War raged, there were only few international hot wars, but the number of civil wars increased significantly from the beginning of the 1960s, when the great powers fought each other by proxy. Civil war was often fuelled by financial and military support from the USA, UK, France, Soviet Union, Cuba and China to insurgent groups within the rival powers' spheres of influence. In the first half of the Cold War, guerrilla movements with support from the socialist camp undermined the power and influence of the Western capitalist powers. In the second part of the Cold War, starting in 1979, the latter turned the guerrilla weapon around. Now low-intensity warfare was used by the US and its allies to undermine the socialist camp (Westad 2005). The Soviet Union was bogged down in Afghanistan, just as Vietnam was bogged down in Cambodia. This contributed to the eventual break-up of the socialist camp, and the demise of all other Marxist regimes than those in China, Cuba, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam.

The end of the Cold War left the world with only these five Marxist states, and with the US as the only remaining superpower. So far the unipolar, globalizing world has seen less warfare than the bipolar, divided world that preceded it, although contemporary developments in the Middle East may indicate that this is not a lasting trend. At any rate the 'Vietnam Peace' since 1989 has been part of a regional pattern, which makes it even more important to study and understand.⁶ We should then distinguish between its external and internal dimension, but consider both, and look at them both with Vietnamese and outsiders' eyes. This paper is written by a definite outsider, a Norwegian historian who has worked extensively on the history of war and revolution in Vietnam, but mainly on the basis of non-Vietnamese sources.

Vietnam's external peace

Globalization does not only challenge a state's capacity for maintaining peace and order internally, but also calls on governments to secure regional and global peace through active diplomacy. The diplomatic field is widened in ways that make it impossible for any Foreign Ministry to oversee or control the totality of a nation's international relations. The role of the Foreign Ministry in a globally oriented state is to co-ordinate and stimulate the interaction of its citizens, companies, organizations and other institutions with those of other countries. Nations basing their foreign policy on an ideal of self-reliance have weak capacity for achieving external peace. North Korea and Myanmar are cases in point. One tries to compensate for its weakness by acquiring nuclear weapons and repeatedly provoking incidents arousing the attention of the outside world. The other withdraws its capital city to an area where it will be less vulnerable to foreign influence and thus also less effective in furthering national interests globally, while violently repressing non-violent opposition from its own

⁶ Kivimäki 2001, Ross 2003, Solingen 2007 and Goldsmith 2007 are interesting, highly different attempts to explain the East Asian Peace.

population. Although North Korea and Myanmar are internationally recognized states, they are less capable of influencing their external environment than Taiwan, who compensates for its lack of formal diplomatic relations by maintaining a comprehensive network of economic, cultural and public relations throughout the globalized world. Vietnam, with its vast Diaspora, and its new foreign policy from 1986 of 'making friends with everyone' has boosted its external peace capacity. This was demonstrated when Vietnam gained membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995, when it joined the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998, and when, after many years of sustained efforts, it joined the World Trade Organization on 7 November 2006, and shortly afterwards hosted the APEC summit.

Vietnam's new standing as a cautious, but increasingly influential actor on the regional and global scene is a reversal of the situation from 1976–86, when Vietnam lost much of the prestige it had gained through its world-wide diplomacy in support of its struggle against the USA (Tønnesson 1992). At that time Hanoi decided to maintain a huge national army, align itself closely with the Soviet Union, dominate Laos, and resort to armed force with little backing from international diplomacy in its endeavour to overthrow the Khmer Rouge and replace it with a new regime. By 1978, with Pol Pot having established a reign of terror, with mass killings of genocidal proportions, Vietnam sent its troops into Cambodia and liberated the people from the Khmer Rouge. This might perhaps have been tolerated by influential members of the United Nations in the same way the 1979 Tanzanian intervention in Uganda was tolerated, if the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia had been followed by an offer to withdraw the Vietnamese troops again as soon as an internationally negotiated solution to the Cambodian crisis could be reached. Instead Vietnam supported the creation of a new Cambodian government in Phnom Penh and maintained its troops in the country for an indefinite period. This led China, Thailand and the USA to unite their forces in supporting a coalition of anti-Vietnamese groups who were able to sustain a ten-year insurgency against the new government in Phnom Penh and its Vietnamese supporters. The war in Cambodia took many Vietnamese lives, and represented a heavy burden on Vietnamese society. Vietnam was also forced to maintain a huge garrison army along its northern border. What eventually loosened up the diplomatic situation, and allowed (or forced) Vietnam to revise its foreign policy, was Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet reforms, the end of the Cold War, and the reduction and eventual cancellation of Soviet aid to Vietnam. This prompted Vietnam's military withdrawal from Cambodia, which was completed in 1989, and opened the gates for the UN-monitored peace process leading to the establishment of a Cambodian coalition government, and the gradual marginalization and eventual destruction of the Khmer Rouge. Only then could the Vietnamese start enjoying the peace.

It is essential to add that the changes in its external environment during the period 1985–91 do not fully, or even adequately, explain Vietnam's new peace and growth oriented policy. The government in Pyongyang also faced a changed international environment, but did not draw the same conclusions as the government in Hanoi. A crucial part of the explanation for Vietnam's successful peace is a decision reached in Hanoi during the second half of the 1980s to adopt a new foreign policy. The leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) recognized the growing interdependence of the world economies, the decreased likelihood of a world war, and that an 'economic race' was replacing the 'arms race' on the global scale. On this basis they concluded that Vietnam should concentrate its effort on economic development while expanding international co-operation in the spirit of 'making more

friends and reducing the enemies' (Bui Thanh Son 1999: 203). The CPV's 7th Congress in 1991 solemnly declared: "Vietnam wishes to befriend all countries in the world community" (Dosch 2006: 242).

The significant progress made by Vietnam in its foreign relations since 1989 will just be briefly summarized here. While maintaining a privileged fraternal relationship with Laos, Vietnam withdrew its military advisers from the country, and did not make an issue of the rapidly growing Chinese influence in northern Laos and Thai influence in southern Laos. After withdrawing its forces from Cambodia in 1989, and contributing to the Paris peace agreement on Cambodia in 1991, Vietnam refrained from directly interfering in Cambodia's internal affairs although Cambodian politics remained unstable, and the Viet minority in Cambodia was often badly treated. Vietnam also patiently waited for Cambodia to be ready for genuine negotiations concerning the unresolved disputes over their maritime borders. Vietnam normalized its relations with China already in 1991, and has since opened multiple means of communication across the border, increased its trade manifold, received a growing number of Chinese tourists, and negotiated border agreements, both on land and in the Gulf of Tonkin (Amer and Nguyen Hong Thao 2005). The dispute with China over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and maritime zones in the South China Sea, have become less hostile since Vietnam participated with the other ASEAN member states in developing a Declaration on a Code of Conduct that was adopted by China and the ASEAN countries in 2002 (For the background of the Code of Conduct, see Nguyen Hong Thao 2001, Kittichaisaree 2001, Odgaard 2002: 206–245).

ASEAN had been formed in 1967 by five countries aligning themselves with the United States during the period of the Vietnam War (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand). The association served as a vehicle for isolating Vietnam internationally after the 1978 invasion of Cambodia. It thus marked a highly significant change for the whole of Southeast Asia when Vietnam joined ASEAN as a full member in 1995. Afterwards, Vietnam played a leading role in further expanding the process of regional integration by including Laos and Myanmar (Burma) as members in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999. In the early 1990s it was thought that Vietnam was seeking ASEAN membership in order to counter-balance China, and Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea did provoke the ASEAN countries to co-operate among themselves in obliging China to enter into talks with ASEAN as a block rather than with each Southeast Asian state separately. China, however, did not seek to prevent Vietnam from joining ASEAN, and instead carried out a policy of improving its relations with all the Southeast Asian states. This may actually have impaired the usefulness of ASEAN for Vietnam. After the adoption of the Declaration of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea in 2002, China no longer sought to occupy new reefs in the Spratly area or to carry out unilateral action. Instead it sought to induce each interested state to engage in a bilateral co-operation agreement. The first to accept was the Philippines in September 2004, and when Manila had broken out of the ASEAN solidarity and signed an agreement to conduct joint seismic exploration with China in disputed maritime zones, Vietnam decided to swallow its pride and join the co-operation in March 2005. This has opened the risky prospect of possibly finding exploitable oil and gas in areas disputed among several states. Although ASEAN has agreed to create a Southeast Asian Free Trade Area (AFTA), its importance for Vietnam's access to important markets is limited if compared to its WTO membership, which was negotiated over a long time with the EU, USA, Japan and China. The last US obstacle was removed when the US Congress finally accepted to give Vietnam normal trading relations on a permanent basis in December 2006.

Jörn Dosch (2006: 246, 253) argues that whereas membership in ASEAN at first represented a golden opportunity for Vietnam, enabling it great freedom in the making of its 'omni-directional' foreign policy, it may later have turned into a 'golden cage.' The big problem is that the other members of ASEAN are competing with Vietnam for China's favour, while the original ASEAN 5 (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) also continue to enjoy privileged security relations with the USA. Vietnam is prevented by history, ideology and concern for its relationship to China from engaging in any similar security cooperation with the USA. This may mean that Vietnam will seek to promote regional peace through institutional frameworks that include China, Japan and the USA, such as APEC, rather than frameworks that exclude one or the other.

To take a step back, the greatest challenge for Vietnam's foreign policy in the 1990s was to normalize relations with the USA, achieve normal trade relations with the world's greatest market, and get US acceptance for membership in the World Trade Organization. Hanoi invested huge resources in its American diplomacy, and needed great patience to overcome the many obstacles. From Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia it took six years before the United States was ready to normalize diplomatic relations in 1995. In this period Vietnam had to swallow the pill of giving up all demands for war reparations, despite the promise that Vietnam claimed to have got from former President Richard Nixon. Vietnam also had to give priority to satisfying the American need to find and identify the remains of lost American soldiers, while downplaying its own efforts to establish responsibility for the many miscarriages and deformations caused by human exposure to the toxic Agent Orange. Vietnam's impressive ability to patiently overcome grievances against 'French colonialism,' 'US imperialism' and 'Chinese hegemonism' paid huge dividends economically by improving the investment climate in the country, and by opening markets to Vietnamese products. It was hard for the Vietnamese leaders to overcome their reluctance to sign such a comprehensive trade agreement as the one engaged with the USA in 2001, which seemed to infringe on Vietnam's internal sovereignty. The treaty, which paved the way for Vietnam's accession to the WTO, set tight limits for what the Vietnamese government could do in its own country, thus refuting the most sacred ideal of the past century's quest for national independence and sovereignty. A new generation of Vietnamese leaders accepted that the price of enjoying the fruits of globalization is to curtail one's national sovereignty in the economic domain and adopt legislation in conformity with the rules and regulations in the most highly developed countries. These national and ideological sacrifices brought enormous economic gain. The 2001 trade agreement allowed Vietnam to boost its US exports to such an extent that it provoked resistance among American producers, and frequent calls for US protectionist measures. When Vietnam gained WTO membership, five years after China – but before Russia, this made it more difficult for the USA and other developed countries to curtail Vietnamese imports. Vietnam's WTO accession thus marked a major diplomatic victory.

When *Doi Moi* started in 1986–87, the first of a long series of Vietnamese reform laws concerned foreign investment. Since then, Vietnam has developed a big foreign-invested sector, with the Asian countries Singapore and Taiwan as leading contributors, but also with significant investments from Europe, Japan and the United States. For a developing country, Vietnam has attained the enviable position of possessing a highly diversified export sector: Shoes, textiles, crude oil, rice, aquaculture, coffee, cashew nuts, etc. This means that even at a time of global economic crisis, Vietnam is probably less vulnerable than many other developing

countries. It has many legs to stand on. For the 'Vietnam Peace' it is also important that Vietnam has built close relations with a number of multilateral agencies and donor countries. Vietnam's poverty reduction policy made it so popular with the development cooperation community in the 1920s–2000s that the level of pledged aid tended to exceed its absorptive capacity. Vietnam received substantial aid from Japan, and also from France, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. In recent years, China has also offered substantial development aid. The level of aid, and Vietnam's degree of economic success had become so important by 2005–2006 that some donors started to downscale their contributions, simply because priority should be reserved for the poorest countries. In terms of development and poverty reduction, Vietnam was promoted as a model by several regional and UN agencies.

A sensitive issue in Vietnam's effort to secure a sustainable and lasting external peace is the triangular relationship between the great powers China, Japan and the USA. The rapidly increasing integration of these three massive economies, as well as the other members of APEC may be seen as the crucial factor behind the 'East Asian Peace' (Calder 2006). However, in the field of military security, the triangular power relationship continues to be dominated by the US-Japan alliance, and the biggest security issues in the region – the status of Taiwan, the division of Korea, and the maritime disputes in the East China Sea, remain dangerous. Despite talks in the ASEAN Regional Forum and in the framework of ASEAN+3, there has been no movement in the direction of a more comprehensive security community. The 'East Asian Peace' depends on the continued willingness of the regional nations to give priority to their economic interests in the global market place rather than their disputes over territories and histories. It remains to be seen if this willingness will be negatively affected by the current economic crisis.

Although the Vietnam Peace depends on the larger East Asian Peace, Vietnam is unlikely to assume a more activist peace role internationally. It has not used its opportunity to do so as a member of the United Nations Security Council during 2008–09. It remains too preoccupied with its own national security to accept the risks involved in engaging itself in a more assertive peace diplomacy. Vietnam has in many ways come to resemble Singapore in giving overriding priority to its own economic interests, being excessively aware of its vulnerability, and thus keeping a low profile internationally, while hoping to see a stable, counter-balancing relationship among the three great powers China, Japan and the United States. Hanoi has also been able to observe how South Korea has moved from a close security relationship with the United States to a more intermediate position between China and the USA. The difference between Vietnam on the one hand and Singapore and South Korea on the other is that Vietnam does not have a security agreement with the United States. The Vietnamese leaders are acutely aware that any US military presence on their territory, be it only for electronic intelligence, would be deeply resented in Beijing. Thus Vietnam has been careful not to involve itself too closely with the United States, and has maintained close consultations with China. From a power-balance perspective it may, as mentioned above, seem a weakness that Vietnam cannot today rely on any security alliance. Most of the other regional countries (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand) have a kind of bilateral security alliance with the USA. This has not prevented most of them from improving their relations with China. Vietnam does not have any security partner that can provide a counter-balance to China. In a more hostile international climate, this could put Vietnam's independence in jeopardy, but in today's peaceful environment the lack of an alliance partner could perhaps be turned to an advantage. Vietnam

might play on its neutral status and safeguard its peaceful environment in ways similar to those used by the neutral Sweden and Finland – or India – during the Cold War. Vietnam seeks to engage China on all levels, and pursues a range of efforts to enhance the role of ASEAN as well as other regional and global institutions. In this way Vietnam may perhaps find more soft allies around the world than if it had been more clearly aligned with either China or the USA.

Although Vietnam substantially reduced the number of armed troops in the early 1990s, it maintains a highly significant army. Vietnam has invested in modern aircraft, ships and missiles to deter other states – notably China – from carrying out offensive operations. These moves are related to the disputes over islands, reefs, and maritime zones in the South China Sea. Also in this field, however, soft power has tended to take over from military manoeuvres. Maritime tourism has become a preferred tool in demonstrating presence in disputed islets.

Although Vietnam still maintains a big army, and retains a reputation for military prowess, it would – with its long coast and lack of a hinterland – be vulnerable in a time of international confrontation. Vietnam has a strong interest in preventing any regional crisis, and might therefore consider developing a more explicit regional peace agenda, with emphasis on conflict management and conflict resolution, and active participation in United Nations peace keeping. In the statistics compiled at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) and the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at Uppsala University, Sweden, the Vietnam War 1959–75 features as the worst of all armed conflicts since 1945 in terms of the number of battle deaths, and the first Indochina War 1945–54 is registered as the sixth worst.⁷ As a nation painfully aware of what war entails, the Vietnamese might be particularly motivated to strive for regional and global peace. There is perhaps not so much public debate in Vietnam about the legacy of the country's long wars, but the mental effects of war weariness are soothing under the surface, for instance in the divergent reactions to Bao Ninh's tragic novel *The Sorrow of War*. A widely circulated anecdote may also be indicative of a reinterpretation of national history among Vietnamese intellectuals. When meeting his counterpart in Thailand, Vietnam's former prime minister Pham Van Dong is said to have talked about Vietnam's pride in having defeated three of the world's greatest powers in war. His Thai counterpart had then replied that Thailand was equally proud of having avoided to fight them. The popularity of this anecdote in Vietnam shows that the Vietnamese are having some thoughts about alternatives to war, and this could generate a stronger general dedication to peaceful foreign policies.

In Vietnam, the term *hoa binh* is the same as the Chinese *he ping*, which can be understood both in the narrow sense of 'absence of fighting' and more widely as 'living together in harmony.' *Hoa binh* is often used together with other positive terms such as social stability (*on dinh xa hoi*) and development (*phat trien*). Yet the Vietnamese institutions of higher learning, even the National Political Academy, have given no specific attention to peace studies, and the thinking of Mohandas Gandhi on non-violence is virtually unknown in Vietnamese intellectual circles (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005). Perhaps there might be scope for developing more peace

⁷ The war between France and the Viet Minh 1945–54 is estimated to have had 365,000 battle deaths, and the Vietnam War 1955–75 2,1 million. See 'Documentation of Coding Decisions' at: <http://www.prio.no/cscw/cross/battledeaths>. The worst wars in terms of battledeaths since 1945 are 1) The Vietnam War 1961–75, 2) The Korean War 1950–53, 3) The Chinese Civil War 1946–49, 4) The Iran-Iraq War 1980–88, 5) The civil wars in Afghanistan 1978–88, 6) The Indochina War 1946–54.

research and peace education in Vietnam, and link *hoa binh* to non-violent action and conflict management both in the external and the internal domain.

Civil peace

Just as peace researchers distinguish between international and internal wars, they also make a difference between external and internal – or civil – peace. ‘Civil peace’ is perhaps an even more demanding term than ‘international peace.’ This is partly because of the positive connotations of the term ‘civil,’ and partly because we intuitively tend to ask more of a peaceful society than of a peaceful relationship between states. If two states have not declared war against each other and are not engaged in armed fighting, then it seems reasonable to say that they are at peace with each other, particularly if they have recognized each other’s sovereignty and enjoy diplomatic relations. It is more difficult to say that a society enjoys civil peace merely by not having any armed fighting. In order to have ‘civil peace,’ a first requirement is absence of armed warfare between the government and various opposition groups, and among various non-state groups. But in order for such a peace to be ‘civil,’ it cannot be based on repression either of the Myanmar or the North Korean kind. It should include mechanisms of non-violent conflict management, mechanisms by which governments are held accountable, and also mechanisms allowing individual citizens as well as social groups to voice their opinions and seek to realize their interests and other aims. The term ‘civil peace’ is also closely associated with ‘civil society,’ and therefore demands certain societal qualities that cannot simply be provided by the state. State-society relations are essential in the shaping of civil peace, and in making it sustainable.

The Vietnam War was a war of national resistance against the USA. This puts it in the category of international war, but it was also an internal struggle between a northern and a southern regime, and between communists and anti-communists in the South. Many non-communist opponents of the Saigon regime were caught in the middle. In addition, the war was not confined to the Vietnamese territory, but involved the eastern parts of Laos and Cambodia through the Ho Chi Minh trail and US bombing. Strategists on both sides always considered the whole of former French Indochina as one battlefield. This also made the war international. Similarly, the Vietnam Peace since 1989 must be considered in both its international and domestic aspects.

The 1975–89 period is best understood as a continuation of the Vietnamese communists’ armed struggle for national security, and for the security of their socialist regime. Although the victorious communists did not engage in revenge killings or carry out any bloodbath on the approximately one million people who had actively served South Vietnam, they did set up a number of re-education camps, kept many of their former enemies in prison for many years, prevented independent organizations – even religious ones – from operating freely, and did not allow any organized political opposition. Communist cadre from the north took control of all important institutions in the south, and carried out reforms in the direction of a centrally planned economy with the effect of paralysing the southern economy. This led to a massive exodus of refugees (boat people), with the double effect of relieving Vietnam of pressure from its most dissatisfied groups and depriving the country of entrepreneurial talent. From 1976 to 1986, the economy was in a situation of constant crisis.

However, apart from the Central Highlands, where FULRO mounted armed attacks and sought to resist the influx of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Viet migrants, the Socialist Republic remained in full control of the country. After 1975,

the regime in Hanoi was never seriously threatened by internal revolt, not even when some 200,000 ethnic Chinese were made to flee the country into China. Still the Vietnamese Army claims even today that internal unrest instigated by outside forces is the country's most important security threat. In the view of the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence in 2005, the three main threats to Vietnam were: 1) anti-revolutionary forces inside the country that tried to destroy the revolution with outside support, 2) border disputes [mainly with China], 3) non-traditional threats such as drugs trafficking, trans-national crime, and terrorism (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005). In reality, the threat from China was probably considered the most serious anyway. The most expensive weapons purchases of the Vietnamese armed forces (aircraft, naval vessels) are clearly aimed to ward off external threats rather than internal.

Two problems in developing a durable Vietnam Peace are the privileged role that members of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) have in national policy-making and the government's penchant for seeing threats to its security as coming from within the nation itself. Since no other political parties are allowed, the ability of the CPV to carry out constructive debates internally, and to engage in dialogue with all important social groups, is crucial for the long term survival of the socialist regime. For non-party members (and probably many party members as well) it has been frustrating that so little information is available about the Party's internal political debates, although it helps that the People's Committees on the district and provincial levels, and the National Assembly on the national level, have come to play an increasingly independent role. The lack of transparency has no doubt hampered efforts to fight corruption within the party ranks (Kokko and Tingvall 2008). The other, related, problem is that the regime continues to see itself as insecure, and to occasionally rely on intense police surveillance, arbitrary arrests, harsh prison sentences, and the presence of military forces in ethnic minority areas. Basic mechanisms of peaceful conflict resolution such as impartial dispute mediation, regular negotiations between unions and employers, independent professional law firms serving customers for an affordable price, autonomous civil society organizations, independent courts, accountability of the executive power to active, self-conscious representative assemblies, ombudsmen, media allowing citizens to criticize the government openly, and democratic representation on the basis of free and fair elections, have all remained relatively weak.

Let us now look at some of the main potential conflicts within the Vietnamese society, and how these are being prevented from breaking the peace. The question is if this is done in ways making it possible to speak of a 'civil peace,' and – if not – if developments seem to point in that direction.

Regional differences

The main threat to Vietnam's national cohesion is not necessarily the traditional North-South conflict, but the relative backwardness of Central Vietnam, and of the ethnic minority highlands. Although the division between North and South Vietnam in the period 1954–75 is often said to have had deep historic roots, it only superficially resembled the division between the Trinh and Nguyen dynasties in the 17th–18th centuries. The Trinh-Nguyen division was between powers based in Hanoi and Hue. Hue became the imperial capital in the 19th century and retained that role until 1945, while the southern-most part of today's Vietnam developed into a modern and export-oriented colony called Cochinchina. In the colonial period, Cochinchina had much looser ties to the traditional Vietnamese society than the two French

protectorates Annam (Central Vietnam) and Tonkin (North Vietnam). The state of South Vietnam, as constructed from 1949 onward, had the modernised French colony at its core. Its capital Saigon had never before served as a political centre. Vietnam's most prominent revolutionary leaders were from north Central Vietnam, whereas the main conservative leaders had their background at the court in Hue. When the Geneva conference divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel in 1954, it was mainly Central Vietnam that suffered. The DMZ cut right through it. After the division of the national territory, Hue and Da Nang were cut off from the north, and received a marginal role in the Saigon-dominated South Vietnam. For the Vietnamese social elite, the worst tragedy of class warfare during the Vietnam War was the massacre of Hue's upper classes during Tet 1968. Hue was left with an even deeper scar than Saigon, who capitulated without a fight on 30 April 1975, and thus survived the war without any major destruction (although some of the villages north of Saigon, with a population dominated by Catholic refugees from the North) resisted fiercely and hence suffered serious damage.

Many people in Hue, Da Nang and Saigon suffered during the period of socialist austerity 1976–85, after Saigon had been renamed 'Ho Chi Minh-City,' but Vietnam's economic reforms from 1986 onward soon reinstated Saigon as the country's economic power house. Since then, the HCM-City region has grown far more rapidly than any other part of Vietnam, and southerners are now the main driving force in the nation's economic growth. The south has also been ably represented in the Communist Party leadership by the reformist leaders Nguyen Van Linh, Vo Van Kiet and Phan Van Khai, but many inhabitants of the highly developed Ho Chi Minh City area are likely to resent the fact that they are subsidizing the rest of the country with their taxes. The Hanoi-Haiphong region, benefiting from its proximity to the central government, has developed into the second most important growth zone. In Central Vietnam, Da Nang has formed a small third growth zone, but Hue has lagged notably behind. It enjoys much less contact with foreign donors, investors, international NGOs and academics than Saigon and Hanoi. People in Hue remain attached to the historical role of their city, and many are deeply engaged in religious activities. The French geographer Christian Taillard has written about the particular importance for Vietnam's national cohesion of developing the economic potential of Central Vietnam, a coastal region with very little hinterland (Taillard 2002: 244–247).

The leaders in Hanoi also see the importance of developing Central Vietnam. They have sought to channel more investments to the region and linked Hue closer to Da Nang by a new, long tunnel through the *Deo Hai Van* (Col des Nuages), and have insisted to build an expensive and little used Ho Chi Minh Road through the Central Vietnamese highlands as a supplement to the coastal highway. They also seek to link up Central Vietnam with Laos so as to strengthen Vietnam and reduce the dependence of Laos on trade and communications with Thailand. And, on the political side, they maintained for many years an informal arrangement whereby Vietnam's top three positions (Party Secretary, President, and Prime Minister) were held by one representative of the North, one of the South and one of the Central region. At the 10th Party Congress in April 2006, this tradition was broken when two of the positions went to southerners, Nguyen Tan Dung (Prime Minister) and Nguyen Minh Triet (President), while the third and most important remained in the hands of the northerner Nong Duc Manh (Party General Secretary). However, the practice of seeking consensus among top leaders from all three regions when important decisions are made continues. Among the population, provincial identities are even stronger

than the regional ones, and provincial administrations have substantial powers. They by no means just execute governmental instructions.

If Vietnam were to develop electoral politics with more than one competing list in elections to the National Assembly, or use a system of open competition between rival candidates for the leadership at the Party Congress, a basic challenge would be to find mechanisms for assuring the representation of the main provinces in all three regions. The religious factor might then also play a role. All of the major religions are stronger in South and South Central Vietnam than in the North. It is of course fully possible to obtain civil peace also in societies where political or religious groupings are confined to separate regions, but it is easier to maintain a vibrant civil society on the national level if the main political factions, groups or parties share a dedication to the nation as a whole, and see the National Assembly or another national body (such as the Party Congress) as their central political arena. The ongoing process towards a more self-conscious National Assembly has a potential for engaging new sections of the population in national policy-making. The Communist Party of Vietnam has also considered the possibility of reducing secrecy and being more transparent concerning the very serious debates that go on within the Party organizations in the run-up to each Party Congress.

Succession disputes

Many of history's armed conflicts have had their origin in leadership succession disputes. Sometimes, when a succession is contested, the losers resort to armed force in order to realise their right to the throne or the presidency. On other occasions, unfortunate succession procedures (such as inheritance) may put unsuitable persons in positions of great responsibility. A basic issue for all of history's political regimes has been to establish proper rules or procedures for leadership succession, either through inheritance or various kinds of election or vote-taking. History contains a pool of negative and positive experiences as far as succession procedures are concerned. Some thinkers have also argued that revolts may be legitimate when a king or leader fails to fulfil his duties towards his people, or to Heaven.

In principle, communist parties are not responsible to Heaven, but to the People, but the 'People' is not necessarily the sum of all individual citizens – or voters. The idea of the 'People' is often an abstraction. The best interest of the People as a whole is sometimes seen to be better understood by an enlightened Party or leader than by institutions elected through universal suffrage. In Vietnamese the term *nhan dan* denotes the 'People' in the abstract sense, as represented by the Communist Party, while other terms such as *dan toc* are closer to the liberal interpretation of a people as a sum of individuals. The Vietnamese constitution of 1992 acknowledges the Communist Party as 'the force leading the State and society' (*Constitutions of Vietnam* 2003: 135), and the reason why the Party deserves to lead is not just its historical role in the national resistance, but also its continued ability to define the overall national interest through a political process that precludes the short-sighted, populist tendencies of many multi-party states, such as the Philippines and Thailand. Yet the Vietnamese kind of one-party system has several flaws. First, it precludes the kind of checks-and-balances that prevent corruption and power abuse. Second, it makes it difficult to involve non-party members in the political process, and thus tends to marginalize them politically. And third, it makes the whole country's political future depend on one Party's ability to establish proper leadership succession procedures.

Communist parties do not have a good record as far as leadership succession is concerned. In the Soviet Union, successions were associated with power struggles involving arrests, denunciations and executions, and in the 1970s–80s the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union elected old and ineffective leaders, thus paving the way for the Party's demise under the well-intentioned, but increasingly powerless Mikhail Gorbachev. Leadership succession in North Korea has become a system of inheritance, almost in monarchic fashion, and when Fidel Castro finally gave up his leadership role in Cuba, he did it to his brother. The Chinese Communist Party is also in the habit of subordinating itself to one paramount leader. It has avoided the inheritance principle, but the succession process is more selective than elective. The top leader manages his own succession by informally selecting and grooming his successor, or a small number of possible successors, a long time before the actual succession takes place. This system has permitted rather smooth successions from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, who is already in the process of grooming his own successor, but it is doubtful that such a system can be sustained in the long run. If a leader picks a successor who is unable to build the necessary authority within the party and country, or is seen to represent particularistic interests, a serious succession dispute could emerge. And no mechanism for resolving the dispute would be in place.

The practice of the Communist Party of Vietnam is different. It does not have one paramount leader, but a collectively organized politburo led by a troika or triumvirate (secretary general, president, prime minister). This has made leadership succession difficult to manage, and also quite unpredictable, and the need for consensus among the three (and their elderly mentors) often prevents the country's leaders from taking quick, clear or bold decisions. It is difficult to replace one of the three without replacing the others at the same time, since this could change the balance at the top between factions and regions. Each leadership succession becomes a jigsaw puzzle and this makes it difficult to elect the best qualified or most popular candidates. At the Party Congress in 1956, Ho Chi Minh (from Central Vietnam) took over formally from Truong Chinh (a northerner) as General Secretary, while Le Duan (born in Central Vietnam, but with most of his career in the South) assumed the daily leadership of the party. Following the death of Ho Chi Minh in 1969, Le Duan, Le Duc Tho (a northerner), Truong Chinh, and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, the son of a prominent mandarin at the central court in Hue, formed a controlling quadrumvirate. In 1986, when Le Duan died, Truong Chinh was reinstated as General Secretary, but died himself soon thereafter. Then, at the Party's reform-oriented Congress in 1986, Nguyen Van Linh, who was born in the north, but served most of his career with Le Duan in the south, was elected new party leader with the task of carrying out reforms initiated by Truong Chinh. He was replaced by the Hanoi-born Do Muoi at the 1991 Party Congress, and a new troika took over with Le Duc Anh (from Central Vietnam) as President and Vo Van Kiet (a southerner) as Prime Minister. In 1997 the reformer Vo Van Kiet resigned after having been criticised by more conservative opponents, and this made it necessary to establish yet another troika, with Le Duc Anh's protégé Le Kha Phieu (a northerner) as Secretary General, Phan Van Khai (a southerner) as Prime Minister, and Tran Duc Luong (who was born in south Central Vietnam, but spent most of his career in the North) as president. Before the Party Congress in 2001, Le Kha Phieu came under criticism for having been too soft on China and for having abused of his powers to monitor the personal communications of fellow party leaders. This time another northerner, Nong Duc Manh, was elected in his place. This made it possible for Tran Duc Luong and Phan

Van Khai to stay on until mid-2006, when the National Assembly elected Nguyen Minh Triet and Nguyen Tan Dung to succeed them. These two new power holders are both southerners, and Central Vietnam is now for the first time not represented among the three top leaders. The system of selecting the top leaders through drawn-out negotiations among the party leaders does not seem ideal. It is in no way certain to lead to the election of the best qualified persons, and although consensus has been obtained so far, the system does entail a risk of party infighting, with the use of secret intelligence and accusations of corruption. On the other hand, the Vietnamese succession struggles have so far been civilized, with little risk of violence or even of people being expelled from the Party. Those who lose support and power generally accept their fate.

Still Party strategists have been looking for better ways of organizing the election of leaders, and the general view in Vietnam's highly influential National Political Academy has long been that elections of the Secretary General and politburo at the Party Congress should be made by secret ballot after a process where alternative candidates are nominated and allowed to conduct campaigns for their candidature.⁸ However, when time came for elections at the April 2006 Party Congress, the most likely alternative contender to the position as Secretary General, Nguyen Minh Triet, did not offer his candidacy, so the incumbent, Nong Duc Manh, was re-elected without any rival. Triet was instead elected President by the National Assembly.

Dissidents

A dissident is an individual who disagrees with the basic principles of the political system in his or her country, and seeks to express such disagreement in public. In strongly authoritarian states like North Korea, dissidence is impossible. Anyone trying will quickly end up dead, in a prison camp or exile. In liberal, inclusive societies it is also difficult to be a dissident because critical views and opposition are generally tolerated if not encouraged. This removes the aura of moral courage associated with a true dissident and sometimes leads would-be dissidents to resort to more extreme means of opposition. Vietnam has exactly the kind of political system that stimulates dissidence. It is sufficiently open to tolerate a certain degree of dissent, but dissidents do not lose their lives. At the same time, political opposition carries sufficient risk to provide the dissident with an aura of moral courage. Political opponents of the regime are closely monitored and sometimes harassed by the police, from time to time sentenced to prison terms, put under house arrest or forced to live in internal exile. Vietnamese dissidents are not allowed sufficient freedom to organise political parties or independent non-governmental organizations, and they do not seem to command any widespread following. There are relatively few of them. They mostly operate on an individual basis, and do not therefore seriously threaten the stability of the Vietnamese state.

The dissidents are of two main kinds, secular and religious. The two longest standing liberal critics of the regime have been Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que. After they benefited from an amnesty in 1998, Hoat went into US exile, while Que remained in Saigon. These liberals have little influence at home. In the reform period since 1986 other critics have also emerged such as Ha Si Phu and former Communist Party members Hoang Minh Chinh (who died in 2008) and General Tran Do (who died in 2002). Such dissidents might influence the policy of the Party leadership if they could get support and protection from someone in a position of real power.

⁸ Interview in Hanoi, December 2005.

Hence these dissidents often express their views through letters to the politburo, hoping to see their views being taken up by the leaders. Such letters are sometimes leaked to the clandestine media and reproduced in the Viet Diaspora. Many reform-minded Vietnamese are convinced that the war hero and former Defence Minister Vo Nguyen Giap (born 1911), who was one of Ho Chi Minh's closest confidants but lost his place in the politburo in 1982, shares some of the dissidents' democratic aspirations. Former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet (1991–97), who died in 2008, also held increasingly dissident views toward the end of his life. He wrote letters to the politburo from time to time, but like Giap, Kiet was a loyal insider, just urging the party to speed up reforms.

The religious dissidents do not have merely a religious agenda, but often fight for freedom of opinion and freedom of association more generally, but their prime aim is freedom to undertake their religious activities without any interference from the government. They do not accept the limits set by membership in the Vietnamese Fatherland Front. The most prominent religious dissidents in the last few decades have been the Catholic Father Nguyen Van Ly and the Buddhist monks (*Thich*) Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang (who died in 2008). Quang Do is now the leader of the illegal Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Church, and has been in serious trouble with the authorities. The dissident monks are believed to represent a greater challenge to the system of government than the other dissidents mentioned above because they have a religious following, and seek to establish religious networks around various kinds of social activities, thus independently undertaking tasks that the government wants to control or monitor. The Vietnamese dissidents are supported in several ways by Vietnamese communities overseas, and every year someone nominates them for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thich Quang Do was awarded the Norwegian Rafto prize in 2006.

Although the dissidents are unlikely to seriously threaten the cohesion of the Vietnamese state, or even to influence government policies, they are likely to become more and more active and visible the more interaction there is between Vietnam and the rest of the world, the more accessible the internet becomes for Vietnamese citizens, and the more the economic crisis exacerbates social tension in the Vietnamese society. The government has actively been seeking out ways to treat dissidents in ways that are not too harsh, while at the same time preventing them from organizing genuine opposition movements. Monitoring of the internet and various forms of soft repression have played a growing role in the repression of dissent, and the Ministry of Public Security has made a major effort towards refining its methods of social control.

Religious revival

Vietnam has very few Muslims, most of whom belong to the Cham minority. The country has thus not had to face any threat from political Islam. Overall, however, Vietnam has witnessed a strong religious revival in the last two decades, just as other parts of the world. Protestant churches have been actively proselytizing, primarily in the ethnic minority regions. The Catholic Church has defended its autonomy more actively than before. The syncretic Cao Dai and the Buddhist Hoa Hao sects, which were established in the 1920s–30s, have rebuilt the strength they enjoyed in southern Vietnam during the colonial period. Substantial private investment has gone into the renovation and building of Buddhist pagodas, also primarily in the South. In the areas where communism used to dominate, traditional beliefs and village customs have reasserted themselves.

This broad and multi-faceted religious revival represents a dilemma for the Party. On the one hand, the quest for religious faith and ritual may be interpreted as a spiritual counter-force to consumerism, materialism and the immoral aspects of globalization. Article 33 in the Vietnamese Constitution bans all culture and information activities that 'are destructive of the personality, morals, and fine lifestyle of the Vietnamese'. On the other hand, the religious revival may be seen as anti-modern. Article 30 in the Vietnamese Constitution defines Vietnamese culture as 'national, modern, and humanistic' and stipulates that the propagation of all 'reactionary and depraved thought and culture is forbidden; superstitions and harmful customs are to be eliminated' (*Constitutions of Vietnam* 2003).

Vietnam respects religious freedom in the sense of allowing anyone to worship any God or deity, and to practice his or her rituals. This is defined in Article 70 of the Constitution: 'The citizen shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion; he can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law.' On the other hand, the same article says that 'no one can misuse belief and religions to contravene the law and State policies'. To ensure that religious organisations do not contravene State policies, they have to register with the party-controlled Fatherland Front, whose Committee on religion regularly interferes in each religious group's choice of leaders. And if a religion is already registered, rival churches for the same religion cannot be set up outside the system. The Vatican has allowed the Catholic Church to operate within the system, and in practice has mostly managed to maintain the autonomy of the Catholic Church. Some protestant groups have for some time stayed outside of the system, and thus not been tolerated. The same is the case for the Unified Buddhist Church, which was founded in the 1960s as a religious opposition movement in the former South Vietnam, and has never accepted to merge with the registered Buddhist Church, which was formed in 1981.

If serious unrest should develop in Vietnam, for instance in effect of a social or economic crisis, then religious networks might serve as channels for disseminating critical information. The Vietnamese government is sensitive to this eventuality, and has spent considerable resources on monitoring, controlling and repressing independent tendencies among the monks and clergy. This has weakened Vietnam's human rights record internationally, and been used by critics of Vietnam abroad to argue against accommodating Vietnam's wish to upgrade its relations with industrialized countries, sign beneficial trade agreements, and gain membership in the WTO. It remains a challenge for the Vietnamese government to feel sufficiently secure in its power to allow religious groups more freedom, and perhaps even see them as allies in the development of a society with an advanced capacity for resolving conflicts peacefully. When Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dang met Pope Benedict XVI in Rome in January 2007, and the Vietnamese government shortly afterwards issued a white paper on religion, it was part of a deliberate strategy to meet this challenge.

Ethnicity

Since almost 85% of Vietnam's citizens belong to the same ethnic group (*Kinh* or *Viet*), the Vietnamese state can afford to pursue generous policies towards its many minorities, without running the risk of stimulating any vigorous political opposition or separatism. The numerical weakness of the ethnic minorities should be taken into account in any attempt to explain why Vietnam has enjoyed almost uninterrupted civil peace since the 1980s. During the Indochina wars, the ethnic minorities played a greater role than their numbers would indicate, since most of them lived in the strategically important highlands along and across Vietnam's borders with China,

Laos and Cambodia. During the French and American wars, these minorities were wooed by all sides. Some stayed out of the struggles, while other groups allied themselves either with the communists or the French, and later Americans. Few preferred to work with the South Vietnamese regime. The war experience made some groups national heroes (like those who fought at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and those who helped build and maintain the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and Cambodia), while others remained under suspicion because they had worked with French and American secret services. This was notably the case in the Central Highlands, where some of the heaviest fighting took place in the final phase of the Vietnam War, leading to the disruption of whole societies.

Some groups in the Central Highlands waged a small-scale armed struggle against the Socialist Republic until 1992. FULRO had been formed in 1964, through the unification of three movements fighting for the autonomy of the Central Highlands (often called *montagnards*), and also including Cham and Khmer representatives. FULRO carried out a revolt against the South Vietnamese regime in the year it was founded, but it was crushed, and the leaders were forced into Cambodian exile for the remainder of the Vietnam War. In spring of 1975, the ethnic minority fighters resisted the North Vietnamese Army, when it occupied the Central Highlands, and the ethnic minorities suffered heavy losses. FULRO continued to fight both against Vietnam and Kampuchea. Its leader was executed by the Khmer Rouge, but when Vietnam occupied Cambodia in 1978, FULRO formed a tactical alliance with the Khmer Rouge. By 1986, the year Vietnam started its *Doi Moi* reforms, many FULRO forces gave up the fight, crossed into Thailand, and were granted political asylum in the USA. Those who remained continued their fight until after the Paris agreement on Cambodia in 1991, but gave up the struggle in 1992 and then left for the USA. The next decade was calm, while heavy investments were made in the construction of new export-oriented plantations in the Central Highlands. But in 2001, unrest flared up once more, instigated by a successor group to FULRO based in Cambodia and led by Kok Ksor, an ethnic Jarai, living in US exile. He runs an 'Association of Montagnards' and calls his people *Degar*, a term including several ethnic groups.

Vietnam at one time adopted the Soviet and Chinese system of autonomous minority regions, but later abandoned it and has since mainly sought to promote minority representation in elected assemblies on all levels. The current Secretary-General of the Communist Party, Nong Duc Manh, is an ethnic Tay from the northern highlands. In the economic and social field, the Vietnamese state has sought to educate and modernise the ethnic minorities by encouraging them to cease the practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, settle down, learn the Vietnamese language, integrate in the national political system with People's Committees and Party cells, and learn Viet agricultural practices, while preserving their own ethnic customs (house style, clothing, rituals).

However, since the end of the Vietnam War, the highland minorities, regardless of the role they played in the war, have come under pressure from heavy Viet migration into the highlands.⁹ This migration is linked to the construction of coffee, tea and cashew nut plantations, new tertiary industries, roads, and dams. Forests have been destroyed, and the immigrants are intensely cultivating land that the minorities only used extensively. Frictions over the diminished availability of land and forest, and the influx of Viet migrants, were a major factor behind the unrest in

⁹ A superb book about successive waves of internal migration in Vietnam is Hardy 2003.

the Central Highlands in 2001, with tens of people killed in struggles between local groups and police. According to the Vietnamese government, the unrest was organized by agents of Kok Ksor's organization, entering Vietnam illegally through Cambodia. The Ministry of the Interior would later consider the 2001 incident as an external attack, and see it as different from the unrest in Thai Binh and Dong Nai provinces in 1997, which were internal disputes (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005). There is probably some truth to this distinction, but if it is made too strictly, it might prevent the Vietnamese government from seeing the root causes of unrest in the Central Highlands. It needs to seek remedies for the serious inter-ethnic cleavages that exist there, primarily between the traditional local groups and the more recent immigrants. The 'outside forces' would hardly be able to organize any local revolt if the local population did not feel dispossessed. In order to preserve peace in the future, the Vietnamese central government probably needs to develop a more generous ethnic minority policy, and make sure it is understood and respected by the local provincial authorities. A certain level of positive discrimination would be needed in order to protect the local groups' access to land, and allow them to gain access to education (also in their own language) and to other aspects of a modern society – on their own terms. Since many ethnic minority leaders in the Central Highlands are Protestants, the Protestant Churches could most likely play a positive role in representing their interests vis-à-vis the authorities.

While most of Vietnam's ethnic minority people live in the highlands, there are also three lowland minorities: the Cham, Khmer and Hoa (ethnic Chinese). The Cham are descendants of the Buddhist kingdom Champa that was defeated and destroyed by the Viet on their historic march southward. Most of them are now Muslims and have come under suspicion as a possible bridgehead for Islamist terrorism spreading to Vietnam through Cambodia, which also has a Cham minority. Vietnam's treatment of the Khmer often reflects the state of relations with Cambodia, and the resolution of Vietnam's border dispute with Cambodia may help provide the Khmer minority with a more secure place in Vietnam. The Hoa exodus in 1978–79 was a tragedy not only for the Hoa, but for Vietnam as well who lost many fishermen and much entrepreneurship. Under *Doi Moi*, the ethnic Chinese have once again acquired a prominent role in the private sector, in close association with companies in Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and mainland China.

Vietnam's policy towards the Khmer and the Hoa is closely linked to its relations with Cambodia, Laos, China and other regional countries, and also to its relations with the Vietnamese Diaspora of emigrants and refugees. So the quest for civil peace also has an international dimension.

The Diaspora

One of the most noticeable effects of *Doi Moi* has been the transformation of the Vietnamese refugees, the *Viet Kieu*, from a hostile anti-communist community, cut off from its homeland, into a Diaspora serving as a bridge between Vietnam and its foreign markets, a source of remittances and investment, and a pool of know-how. However, this transformation is not yet complete, since most of the Vietnamese living abroad have an uneasy relationship to Vietnam's political system. They have generally reconciled themselves with their relatives at home; many of the families that were split by the war re-established their ties already in the first *Doi Moi* years, but the Vietnamese government has only come part of the way to national reconciliation. It has recognized the value of the Diaspora, established relations with Vietnamese leaders in exile, changed its laws to allow double citizenship, and allowed some

prominent non-communist Vietnamese living abroad to carry out highly publicised visits to the country.

It is estimated that there are now some 2.7 million Vietnamese living abroad.¹⁰ Almost half, 1.3 million are in the USA. In France there are about 300,000, and Australia and Canada have 250,000 each. Cambodia, Germany, Korea and Thailand have approximately 100,000, and there are significant Vietnamese communities in Taiwan, the UK, Czech Republic, Poland, and Laos. Before 1975 there were only some 200,000 Vietnamese residing abroad (most of whom lived in neighbouring countries), so the widespread Viet Diaspora is a new historical phenomenon. Among the more recent migrants, the most important group are the 'boat people' who left during 1978–81, and the emigrants who departed on orderly departure programmes in the 1980s. They went mainly to America, Australia and Western Europe, but many had to stay for a long time in refugee camps before being permanently settled. The second group are those who went to work in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and stayed there after the fall of communism. And the third group are the ethnic Chinese who fled to China in the late 1970s. They have settled down and do not wish to come back, but the question of how to compensate lost property remains an issue in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Formerly the overseas Vietnamese were called *Viet Kieu*, a slightly derogative term, but they are referred to in official documents with the polite term 'Vietnamese living abroad' (*Nguoi Viet o nuoc ngoai*). Much of the reason for the government's interest in the overseas community is economic. The Vietnamese government reckoned that the remittances sent home in 2005 amounted to 3.8 billion USD, and in 2006 to 4.5 billion USD, i.e., almost 1700 USD per person. In addition, the *Viet Kieu* are thought to have invested 1 billion USD in their home country during 2005 (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005; information obtained in January 2007). The Vietnamese government is also interested in the *Viet Kieu's* know-how; 10–15% are estimated to have acquired higher education while living abroad. The desire to attract investments and know-how makes property rights important. On the several websites run by Vietnamese living abroad, these questions are often discussed, and groups hostile to the communist regime use corruption and lack of legal protection as arguments to warn against investing.¹¹ The economic interaction between the Vietnamese living in Vietnam and abroad also has a reverse aspect, although here we do not know the numbers. Money gained in Vietnam is often placed abroad by families who seek security by making investments in other countries, i.e., in fixed property. This is often done through family networks. So money moves both ways.

The Vietnamese government's Commission for Vietnamese living abroad was first established in 1954, directly under the Prime Minister. It mainly served propaganda and intelligence purposes. In 1995, the same year as Vietnam normalized its relations with the USA and achieved membership in ASEAN, the Commission was moved to the responsibility of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and changed into a far more important body, with the aim of re-establishing ties with a strong potential for benefiting Vietnam economically. In March 2004, the politburo of the CPV issued Resolution no. 36 on the Vietnamese living abroad, and this paved the way for new conciliatory measures. Former South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky came on a private visit in January 2004. 'The road of old warriors has ended,' he declared in Hanoi. 'I regret that the country was divided and that the Vietnamese

¹⁰ This paragraph is based mainly on Tran Quang Hoan interview.

¹¹ For a warning to Viet Kieu against investing in Vietnam, see

http://news.pacificnews.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=c73c8c325182172877e041429068018c

people had to fight and kill each other.’¹² In 2005, a conference in Vietnam assembled 60 *Viet Kieu* and 100 domestic intellectuals. The prominent Zen Buddhist monk and writer Thich Nhat Hanh, who runs a Buddhist centre in southern France, came to visit in March 2005, together with a huge delegation. Some of these measures were controversial among veteran communists at home as well as old warriors abroad, and also in the Vietnam Unified Buddhist Church, whose top leaders were not happy to see Nhat Hanh come to visit.

A new generation of *Viet Kieu* may prefer cultural influence to war. Vietnamese websites have been set up in many places, and receive contributions both from Vietnamese living abroad and at home. One example is www.talawas.org, which has served as a channel for interesting debates. The Vietnamese government is nervous about uncontrolled channels of influence, and has taken measures to block access for the Vietnamese to some websites. This may not be a successful strategy in the long run, since there are many ways of circumventing the government’s measures, and since new sites are likely to pop up all the time. It will be exciting to see if the Vietnamese leaders accept the need to liberalise and improve the quality of the domestic media in order to compete with web services based abroad.

Another related issue is culture and historical memory. Vietnamese universities and research institutes suffer from a lack of independent research and debate about the central aspects of Vietnam’s contemporary history. So far, the *Viet Kieu* have also stayed away from social science and humanities, and taken their degrees in medicine, engineering and science. This has allowed non-Vietnamese researchers to dominate the most innovative cultural and social science research. The question is if the coming renaissance of Vietnamese humanities and social science will be centred in Vietnam itself or among the Vietnamese living abroad. The level of funding and freedom will decide.

In 2005, Vietnam celebrated both the 60th anniversary of ‘the August Revolution’ and the 30th anniversary of the capture/fall of Saigon. On the latter occasion, former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet offered some conciliatory remarks in an interview with the Vietnamese newspaper *Quoc Te*. He noted how Le Duan had stated in 1975 that ‘this is a victory of the whole nation,’ but even thirty years later it was difficult to get all Vietnamese to comprehend this idea: ‘any war-related event can cause millions of people to feel happy, and at the same time, cause millions of others to feel sad when they remember the event,’ he remarked. Kiet wanted to make sure that no one in the future would have to grow up in a war the way he had. Like Ky he wanted the war to be a closed chapter.¹³ And then he chose to thank one particular individual for the fact that so little blood had been shed during the final capture of Saigon. This was South Vietnamese General Duong Van Minh, who died in 2001. He assumed power in South Vietnam on 28 April 1975 and ordered the surrender of the South Vietnamese troops two days later. Few others have recognized this wise and peaceful act as patriotic.

Kiet seemed to understand the role of culture and commemorative events in processes of reconciliation, and reconciliation is a significant element in the building of civil peace, along with economic and social development, human security, responsive and accountable governance. Kiet saw the need for a common view of history and that this requires historical *lieux de mémoire* that can be cherished by all. 30 April is celebrated as victory day in Vietnam, and at the same time as the day of

¹² *Los Angeles Times* 24 January 2004.

¹³ ‘Vietnam ex-PM urges country to keep up with world’, VietGATE, 19.4.2005:
<http://weblog.viet.net/article.php?story=20050419203050358&query=vo%2Bvan%2BKiet>

defeat in the Diaspora. It is a day of division. 2 September is more suitable since it marks the declaration of national independence from France, in the wake of the Japanese surrender in 1945. But although the 'August Revolution' was relatively bloodless, some prominent politicians were killed, and they have not been forgotten; the writings of one of the main losers in 1945, the nationalist statesman and intellectual Pham Quynh, are now again being published and read in Vietnam. The August Revolution led to the establishment of a Democratic Republic dominated by Communists. Vietnam is unlikely to change its national day, the date marking the genesis of the modern, revolutionary state. However, the celebration of 2 September, with its frozen ritual, has become a bleak affair. The real national festival, uniting all Vietnamese, is the lunar new year holiday Tet. The Vietnamese government has also started to celebrate a day of ancestral remembrance, in a conscious attempt to overcome past divisions. Even the cemeteries where the soldiers of the South Vietnamese army are buried now tend to be treated with respect, if they have not long since been destroyed. Conflicts within the Diaspora, and between Vietnam and its Diaspora, reflect internal conflicts within the resident Vietnamese population as well. There can be no doubt that the question of reconciling Vietnam's socialist regime with its Diaspora is a question of reconciliation *within* the Vietnamese nation, hence a question of civil peace.

Class and youth

The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945 and the transformation of society in the following decade was a class struggle against the propertied classes who had collaborated with the French, and at the same time a struggle of the young against the elderly. In order to compensate for the youthfulness of the revolution, Ho Chi Minh grew a beard to look even older than he was, and made sure to include a few elders with mandarin clothing in photographs of his government. It is indicative of how important the Vietnamese youth was in 1945 that one of the main actors at the time, the founder of the Vietnamese Army in 1944, General Vo Nguyen Giap, is still active 60 years later, and could be interviewed for this article, stating his desire for a lasting peace (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005).

One might think that when the young revolutionaries grew old and stubborn, they would face a youthful rebellion of the same kind they had themselves been instigating in their youth. This has not happened. A remarkable aspect of the *Doi Moi* period is the absence of any organized social opposition among workers, peasants and youth. They are generally content with their growing economic opportunities. Vietnam has not seen any upheaval similar to the demonstrations in 1989 on Beijing's Tian An Men square. Young intellectuals quietly utilise their new opportunities to educate themselves, and find work in new businesses. And they embrace a global consumer culture. Workers in some state-owned businesses have lost their jobs, but instead of revolting have found new ways to generate income. A substantial number of handicapped, sick and elderly who benefited from socialist public health services have seen their living standard deteriorate, but have not been able to organize any large scale protests. The workers in foreign-invested companies have sometimes gone on strike, but not as part of any broader opposition to the government-sponsored capitalist system. Vietnam's peasants have seen a dramatic increase in their livelihood. They have benefited from the land reforms that dissolved collectives and allowed long-term user rights to land, which may be sold and inherited. They have also benefited from the freedom to sell their produce at the price they want at any market of their choice. One aspect of *Doi Moi* is the integration of the Vietnamese

domestic market. Agricultural products from the north may be sold in the south, and vice versa. The peasants have also benefited from the government's policy of poverty alleviation, which has been strongly encouraged by international donors. However, economic growth has been extremely uneven among the country's regions, and the inequality between those who have had the greatest and the least chance to benefit from Vietnam's growth has increased. This may provoke new class struggles, albeit in different forms from the past. One form could be protest movements against alleged corruption.

The most serious unrest during *Doi Moi* has been in rural areas. Purchase and confiscation of land have fuelled widespread dissatisfaction with inept, abusive or corrupt officials. This was the case for the disturbances in the Central Highlands in 2001, and the same was the case for the unrest that happened in the northern Thai Binh and the southern Dong Nai province in 1997. The revolt against local officials in Thai Binh provoked some serious soul-searching since that province had always been considered a staunch supporter of the Party. The conclusion was drawn that although Party policies on the central level were flawless, local officials were often deficient, and needed to be closely monitored and trained.

Generally speaking, the Party and state may not be said to have been socially isolated. They are not facing a generally hostile population, and still enjoy the necessary leverage to carry out reforms – if they want to. Hence they may be able to build a capacity for meeting the many challenges that arise in societies undergoing a rapid social transformation.

Civil peace capacity

The capacity of the Vietnamese state to build civil peace is hampered by inherited structures (Tønnesson 2000), the fear of external interference, corruption, and the lack of a fully democratic system with free media, an independent judiciary, and open, competitive elections. Rapid economic growth leads to new conflicts that need to be managed either within the institutions of the state or by tolerating non-government organizations in an open civil society. Many realise the need, and some try to carry out political reforms. One important change on the central level is the growing importance of the National Assembly, with debates being shown on television, deputies using their right to question ministers, and with a Commission for People's Appeals (petitions) that was established in March 2003. Certain clauses in the Constitution of 1992 play a useful role as arguments for reform (*Constitutions of Vietnam* 2003), such as article 4 saying: 'All party organizations operate within the framework of the Constitution and the law.' Thus not even the leading force in the state can place itself above the law. Citizens may sue party organizations at the courts, or complain about them to the National Assembly. Article 99 of the Constitution gives every deputy the right to ask questions to the State President, the Chairman of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers and other members of the Government, and [more awkwardly] the President of the Supreme People's Court, and get answers within a time limit defined by law. The members of the National Assembly have started to realise their power.

Article 74 in the Constitution defines every citizen's right to 'lodge complaints and denunciations with the competent state authorities against the illegal doings of state organs, economic bodies, social organizations, units of the people's armed forces, or of any individual,' and strictly forbids to take revenge on persons making complaints. Responsibility for handling people's complaints does not rest with an ombudsman, but with the new Commission for People's Appeals, which is chaired by

Le Quang Binh. Every Vietnamese citizen can send petitions to the Commission, who is obliged to answer. The Commission cannot alter the decisions of any government authority, but can demand explanations. And the Commission must issue an annual report to the National Assembly on how it has handled the petitions. Already by December 2005, the Commission had, according to its deputy chair, received tens of thousands petitions. Most had to do with land or other property (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005). It should be noted that petitions must be individual. They are not allowed to involve group mobilization and organized lobbying.

Although the Vietnamese state remains a one-party state not fully respecting the freedoms of assembly, opinion etc., the state is run by a party with over two million members and a strong following, and the state and party have started to transform themselves in ways that may develop mechanisms for managing conflicts peacefully even in the absence of a fully democratic system. At the same time, however, Vietnam's economic growth has created a new class of wealthy people that encompasses a significant number of Party members. This has no doubt created new sources of popular resentment that may easily be directed against the Party itself.

Must peace be democratic?

The most well-known finding in statistical peace research is that democratic states have almost never been at war with each other. They have often gone to war against non-democratic states, but not against each other. Many have assumed that there is a similar correlation between democracy and civil peace, but this has not been confirmed by statistical studies. These indicate that well-established democracies and stable autocracies are both less likely to suffer from civil war than inter-mediate regime forms. States in transition from one regime to another are particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of civil war. States that are already fully democratic are clearly more likely to remain peaceful internally if they remain democratic. Peaceful non-democratic states, however, may lose their peace if they engage in a transition to democracy (Gleditsch and Hegre 1997; Hegre et al 2001). A key task for political thinkers and policy-makers is thus to identify the basic mechanisms by which authoritarian or semi-democratic states may transform themselves peacefully to democracies.

Professor Phan Xuan Son of Vietnam's National Political Academy confirmed in an interview in 2005 that his academy was strongly aware of the relationship between democracy and peace (Interview in Hanoi, December 2005). Its professors know the positive relationship between peace and democracy; these tend to mutually reinforce each other. Democracy provides ways of acquiring social consensus and resolving conflicts peacefully. And long-established democracies have a huge experience in handling social conflicts. In Vietnam, the prospect for a lasting peace, said Phan Xuan Son, depends on the building of a democratic society, and this is reflected in the goals of the Party.

Peaceful evolution

The Chinese and Vietnamese governments' intense warnings against so-called 'peaceful evolution' have a potential for preventing these states from pursuing a peaceful approach to conflict management. 'Peaceful evolution' is seen as a dangerous process by which the main gains of the revolution are lost, not in a counter-revolution, but in a gradual, non-violent process caused by excessive foreign influence. Agitation against 'peaceful evolution' is part of the training courses given to Chinese and Vietnamese party cadre, notably those working in the armed forces. It

is surprising that two such positive terms as ‘peaceful’ and ‘evolution’ should have come to denote something undesirable. Cadres are asked to vigilantly prevent exactly the kind of processes that could enhance the legitimacy and authority of the state.

The original culprit is US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who stated during the Cold War that the US would not need to liberate the victims of the Soviet system if this system could change by itself through peaceful evolution. Mao Zedong picked up on this, arguing that the policy of ‘peaceful coexistence’ had lured the Soviet leaders into the kind of peaceful evolution that the capitalist powers had been hoping for. Deng Xiaoping picked up the same idea after the demonstrations at Tian An Men square. ‘The Western countries are staging a third world war without gun smoke,’ he warned in November 1989, after the reform movement had been quelled. ‘They want to bring about the peaceful evolution of socialist countries towards capitalism.’ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Deng’s warnings against peaceful evolution became even more marked. The struggle against ‘bourgeois liberalization,’ he said in 1992, must continue for 20 years or longer: ‘...after we are dead and gone, who will ensure that there is no peaceful evolution?’ (Ching 2002). After the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations, the Vietnamese picked up the same idea, and introduced it to a number of training courses. It is difficult to develop constructive ideas for how society may evolve peacefully in a democratic direction if Party cadres are at the same time warned not to succumb to the temptation of ‘peaceful evolution.’

Is the Vietnam Peace sustainable?

Vietnam’s capacity for sustaining its external and civil peace will depend on larger regional developments. If we relate future possibilities to the democratic peace theory, there seem to be three main options in East Asia, one negative, one positive, and one that would challenge the whole notion of a ‘democratic peace’: The first possibility is that East Asia lapses into new cycles of war, perhaps resulting from an economic crisis, thus sadly confirming the democratic peace theory: A region with a mixture of democratic, authoritarian and transitional regimes may be particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of war (Gates et al 2006).

The second option is that the illiberal Asian peace develops into a democratic peace through reforms and transitions towards more fully democratic systems. In this way the basic tenet of democratic peace theory is confirmed: Democratic states do not wage war against one another. Another strong theory, however, that societies are particularly prone to internal armed conflict in periods when regimes are transforming themselves, will not be confirmed if Vietnam, China and other regional countries achieve a peaceful transition to democracy. These countries would then display a highly inspiring capacity for adopting democratic constitutions without any violent struggles.

The third possibility is that the illiberal peace simply continues, allowing Asian countries to grow rich and powerful without any democratic transformation of their institutions. This would tend to weaken if not disprove the democratic peace theory. An alternative peace is established in Asia, challenging Western notions, perhaps leading to a reassertion of the discourse on ‘Asian Values’ that dominated much of the region in the mid-nineties — before the Asian Crisis of 1997–98. It is perhaps not likely that Vietnam will lead the way to an electoral democracy. Hanoi is likely to watch carefully what Beijing does, while safeguarding as much as possible of its national independence through regional and global diplomacy. The main key to the East Asian Peace is kept in the Zhongnanhai. But a peaceful race might start at some

point among the non-democratic states in Asia to avoid being the last to make the democratic transition.

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