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Vietnam

Vietnam, 30 April 1975 - 50 years ago, a historic victory, but at what price?

- Features -

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Vietnam's independence was first proclaimed in August 1945, and we could soon be celebrating its 80th anniversary. De Gaulle decided otherwise, sending an expeditionary force to reconquer his lost colony. Indochina had to endure two devastating successive imperial wars, first French, then American. Washington mobilised all the means at its disposal to crush the Vietnamese revolution, certain that it would prevail - and was defeated. The image has gone down in history: the staff of the US embassy in Saigon exfiltrated by helicopter. On 30 April 1975.

When the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954 with the French government of Pierre Mendès-France, the Viet Minh was in a winning strategic position, the French forces having been decisively defeated. Nevertheless, these armistice agreements were particularly unfavourable to the Viet Minh. It was the 'big brothers', Russia and China, who forced the Vietminh to abandon many of its demands. It had to withdraw its troops to a 'temporary regroupment zone' in the north of the country, while the Saigon regime was free to redeploy its army in the south.

An election was to be held throughout the country, which would have seen the triumph of the Ho Chi Minh government. Of course, it did not take place. The United States and the Saigon regime had not even signed the agreements, ostensibly keeping their hands free. In their eyes, the division of the country had to become permanent, or even allow a military counter-offensive to overthrow the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). The Mendès-France government knowingly passed the baton to Washington.

The Geneva agreements are one of the classic examples of armistices that lead to a permanent territorial division fraught with festering tensions (see the case of the Korean peninsula, which has become a nuclear 'hot spot') or to a new war, even worse than the previous one (in the case of Vietnam, precisely).

In the immediate term, the Saigon regime took advantage of the retreat of the revolutionary armed forces to launch a campaign to eliminate the cadres of the liberation movement in the South and attack their mass base, particularly among the peasantry and hill tribes of the high lands.

Stopping the revolutionary momentum in South-East Asia

The stakes went beyond the Indochinese peninsula. Washington wanted to stop the revolutionary momentum in South-East Asia. It was targeting China from the west, which had already been threatened in the east during the Korean War (1950-1953), and was seeking to consolidate the global supremacy of US imperialism. The second Vietnam War was intended to exemplify US omnipotence. The confrontation in Vietnam thus became the nodal point in the world situation where the balance of power between revolution and counter-revolution on the one hand, and between the so-called Western bloc (United States, Western Europe, Japan, etc.) and the Eastern bloc (China-USSR) on the other, was being shaped.

Although it benefited from a social base provided in particular by Catholics from the North, the (corrupt and dictatorial) regime in Saigon disappointed Washington's expectations and it was forced to become ever more involved in the conflict, leading to an all-out war on all fronts, on an unprecedented scale: sending in hundreds of thousands of soldiers (the GIs, up to 550,000 men on the ground), carpet bombing of the Democratic Republic of

Vietnam, counter-agrarian reform in the South, massive spraying of defoliants (the toxic Agent Orange) on wooded areas, development of military technologies to flush out fighters hiding in tunnels or spot night-time troop movements...

During the Second Indochina War, all the economic and technological power of the United States was mobilised and poured into Vietnam, a medium-sized Third World country. However, Moscow and Beijing knew that the US had its sights set on them, and Vietnam received substantial military aid via the Chinese border, even during the Cultural Revolution. This aid, important though it was, was nonetheless measured in terms of quality. The most sophisticated weapons, which would have made it possible to secure the skies over North Vietnam, were not supplied. The 'big brothers' did not want the DRVN to be defeated, which would have threatened them, but did they want victory or did they believe it was possible?

From the Tet offensive in 1968 to the fall of Saigon

The conflict took on a major international dimension, both in the so-called Third World and in the imperialist citadels. In the case of the Russian and Chinese revolutions, solidarity became fully relevant after victory. For the Vietnamese (and Algerian) revolutions, it was a key element of a constantly adapting strategy that eventually led to victory.

The Vietnamese leadership understood the importance of this new field of action and the national liberation movement invested a great deal in it, both diplomatically and in terms of militant solidarity. With a great deal of expertise, it called on the entire spectrum of political solidarity. This was one of the hallmarks of its overall strategy.

Solidarity was important in every part of the world, but of course the US anti-war movement had a special role to play.

Some have concluded that it was the anti-war movement that defeated Washington, in order to defend 'pacifist' theses on the uselessness of armed struggle. A misleading anachronism. For a long time, the American bourgeoisie supported the war effort, as did the majority of the scientists, researchers and engineers called upon to supply the army with the technologies it needed. The arms factories were running at full capacity. Resistance to the war certainly grew considerably in the second half of the 1960s, particularly among young people. However, for the protest to change dimension decisively, the military losses had to become too heavy, the economic cost of the conflict had to become too great, the 'legitimacy' of US imperialism in the world had to be too damaged, the veterans' movements had to grow stronger and the political crisis erupted in 1972 with the Watergate scandal, forcing the resignation of Richard Nixon.

To force talks that would open up a political window of opportunity for victory, after the Tet offensive in 1968 (a military defeat but a political and diplomatic victory), the Vietnamese liberation movement imposed face-to-face negotiations: the RDVN (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and the GRP (Provisional Revolutionary Government) in the south on one side, the United States and the Saigon regime on the other, this time excluding the presence of the 'friendly' major powers (Moscow, Beijing). The Paris negotiations opened but stalled. However, eager to gradually disengage in response to the domestic crisis, Washington began its policy of 'Vietnamisation', gradually withdrawing its armed forces while trying to consolidate the Saigon regime. The hard-fought signing of the Paris Agreements on 27 January 1973 sanctioned the withdrawal of the GIs. Two years later, in 1975, the final offensive was launched, with the Saigon army collapsing. The war finally came to an end, almost without fighting. Like a statement of fact.

Three decades of war

A historic victory of immense significance, but one for which the Vietnamese people and the liberation forces paid a terrible price. Three decades of war exhausted society, crushed political pluralism, decimated the cadres based in the south and left deep scars on the organisations that survived the ordeal (starting with the CPV). Vietnam was liberated and the revolution prevailed, but under an authoritarian regime. Because it was not sufficiently supported in time in 1945, 1954, 1968... 'Soldier on the front line', the Vietnamese people waged a struggle from which popular struggles around the world - those of my generation - have benefited enormously. They have paid a heavy price. They still deserve our support today, even when they are repressed by their own government.

Severely defeated, Washington never stopped seeking revenge. It imposed the isolation of Vietnam for a decade, this time with Chinese support. At a time of great schism between the USSR and China, Moscow was becoming 'the main enemy' in Beijing's eyes. Even though Sino-Soviet aid had been of great importance to the Vietnamese war effort, Hanoi's independence was little appreciated by the Beijing regime. In a new geopolitical context, Vietnam drew closer to Russia, before becoming the direct victim of reversals of international alliances, when the USA and China jointly supported the Khmer Rouge (!) in a new Indochina war in 1979. At that point, realpolitik reached a peak.

Cambodia plunged into chaos

The 'Ho Chi Minh trail' that allowed arms to reach the fighters in the south passed partly through Laos and eastern Cambodia, which, under the aegis of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, had not been significantly involved in the first Indochina war. While asserting his neutrality, the prince tolerated the Vietnamese presence.

By bombing Cambodia on a massive scale and supporting Lon Nol's bloody coup d'état (1969-1970), the United States plunged the kingdom into war and chaos. It was then was neither socially nor politically prepared for a real 'people's war'; but its created a vacuum from which the Khmer Rouge benefited. On 17 April 1975, they conquered the capital. They immediately emptied the city of its entire population, in anticipation of US bombing raids, they said at the time. However, they sent hospitalised people who could not survive the ordeal into internal exile. The reality soon became clear. The deportees were scattered across the country, with no hope of returning. Phnom Penh became a Khmer Rouge city where a carefully administered torture centre operated, with every 'interrogation' being archived.

What was going on? It was at this point that we realised how little we knew about this composite movement. A wing of the Khmer Rouge had collaborated with the Vietnamese on both sides of the border during the war. It was the victim of secret purges that enabled the Pol Pot faction to consolidate its power. It was a violently ethno-nationalist, racist and particularly anti-Vietnamese movement. Its social base? Hill tribes in the north (Pol Pot's praetorian guard) and... the army, which he took control of. The Khmer Rouge were described as radical communists (?) and Maoists, but they acted the opposite. Back in the urban centres, the CCP hastened to reconstitute a workers' base (creating a special status for workers in state-owned enterprises). It carried out a genuine agrarian reform and took emblematic measures for the women from popular strata. All this, of course, while consolidating its monopoly of power and its political control over society.

A Cambodian revolution would obviously not have been a carbon copy of its Chinese or Vietnamese counterparts. But what kind of revolution are we talking about? A peasant revolution, when the Khmer Rouge put the peasantry to forced labour? A working class one, with no even semi-proletarian presence? Bourgeois, when they abolished all currency? And how to define this state? By default, it has been described in many left-wing circles as a workers' state. For my part, in 1985, I put forward the formula of a 'miscarriage' of a workers' state yet to be born. A very convoluted debate, to say the least.

And what kind of state were we talking about? To what extent did it exist? It was at best embryonic. Above all, it lacked the social base on which to build itself. An army of peasants had cut itself off from the peasantry. Faced with such a borderline case, it is best not to rush to brandish concepts. The 'unequal and combined' history of the Second Indochina War led to the emergence of a chronically unstable situation in Cambodia, where an army imposed forced labour on the population in order to restore the kingdom's former grandeur, even if it meant digging an immense network of canals... without any engineers to plan it (intellectuals being particularly targeted by the new government, headed by a handful of intellectuals).

The Khmer Rouge order simply collapsed with the Vietnamese military intervention of December 1978-January 1979. One of the reasons why Hanoi decided to act was the fate of the Vietnamese population of Cambodia, threatened with genocide, like other minorities. However, this intervention was seen by the majority of the population as a liberation. All the deportees began to return home spontaneously. Vietnam withdrew its troops (the last ones left the country in 1989), after installing a 'friendly' government (but not a client one, as history would later show).

Khmer Rouge power was irremediably unstable. Would it have been able to consolidate in the west and gain social content with the help of the Thai army, traffickers and gangs? If so, it would have become bourgeois. Political fiction.

The perspective that would have given a Cambodian revolution a progressive chance would have been to include it in Indochinese solidarity, with Laos and Vietnam. A section of the Khmer Rouge movement was perhaps in favour of this. The risk of being dominated by Hanoi was real, but nothing could have been as terrible as what happened - hundreds of thousands of victims - which caused a deep historical trauma whose imprint still insidiously marks Cambodia today.

The Socialist Federation of Indochinese States never came into being. There were many who did not want it: Pol Pot, Beijing, Washington, the UN and Sihanouk, who allowed himself to be manipulated by China and the United States by giving a veneer of international legality to the dirty war of 1979.

The Sino-Vietnamese war

The Polpotian Khmer Rouge claimed historical rights to the Mekong Delta and had made a series of murderous incursions into Vietnamese territory, before Hanoi decided to invade in 1978.

In response to Hanoi's overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime, China decided on a 'punitive expedition' in February-March 1979. It lasted a month. The border, 750 kilometres long, is mostly mountainous. The Chinese army carried out a frontal assault on the passes, supported by an artillery barrage and tanks. It managed to penetrate Vietnamese territory, but the operation ended in a double failure.

Firstly, a military failure. The disorganisation of the Chinese army and its shortcomings (in intelligence and command coordination) came as a surprise. It was counting on the fact that a large proportion of the regular Vietnamese forces were in Cambodia, but the local militias proved capable of countering the offensive launched by Beijing. The exposure of these shortcomings led to a crisis within the CCP leadership. The in-depth modernisation of its concepts and its military apparatus remained to be done.

It was also a strategic failure. Hanoi did not withdraw troops from Cambodia to reinforce its defences in North Vietnam. There was no truce for Beijing's Khmer Rouge protégés.

The Sino-Soviet conflict

The Sino-Khmero-Vietnamese crisis represented one of the high points of the Sino-Soviet conflict, and also sanctioned a spectacular reversal of international alliances.

Relations between Beijing and Moscow have always been fraught with suspicion and tension. The Chinese revolution (as in Vietnam) had imposed itself against the division of zones of influence negotiated between the United States and the USSR at the end of the Second World War. Stalin had urged Mao not to overthrow Chiang Kai-shek's regime. He wanted to preserve his undivided control over the international communist movement. Finally, on a particularly contentious issue, he refused to allow China to acquire nuclear weapons.

China paid the price for the policy of peaceful coexistence advocated by Nikita Khrushchev, who supported India during the Sino-Indian conflict in the Himalayas in 1962. He also abruptly put an end to the technical assistance provided to the Chinese economy. The rapprochement between Moscow and Washington was clearly at the expense of the Chinese. The break was definitively consummated in 1969, with the Sino-Soviet border wars.

The schism in the 'socialist camp' gave Washington a free hand to play one side against the other. In 1971, Henry Kissinger secretly travelled to China to prepare for Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, which was followed by another visit to Moscow.

The deleterious consequences of the Sino-Soviet inter-bureaucratic conflict were felt throughout the world. The Vietnamese victory in 1975 nevertheless opened up a window of opportunity, as Washington was no longer in a position to intervene militarily on a massive scale abroad. The Sino-Indochinese crisis of 1978-1979, for its part, heralded the change of period in the 1980s, which saw my militant generation defeated in the 'three sectors of the world revolution' (Third World, Eastern European countries, imperialist countries).

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Extraction PDF [Understanding the Implications of US Vice President JD Vance's Confrontational Speech at the Munich Security Conference](#)

War and revolution (brief additional notes)

At the end of the Second World War, the Japanese occupiers destroyed the French administration, before being themselves defeated in the Pacific theatre of operations. The Vietminh took advantage of this brief 'favourable moment', which it had anticipated, to declare independence. It acted very quickly and retained the political initiative, but in a fragile situation. Its military capabilities were weak and his authority contested, especially by religious sects and anti-communist nationalist movements.

Social revolution and land reform

With the agreement of Chiang Kai-shek's China, the French expeditionary corps bombed the port of Haiphong in northern Vietnam in 1946. Thus began the first Vietnam War. Ho Chi Minh's offers of negotiations were rejected. As a speech by Vo Nguyen Giap on his return from Paris shows, this possibility had been taken into account by the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Given the balance of military forces, this war took the form of a protracted revolutionary war. It mobilised the peasantry. Patriotism was not enough. The call for agrarian reform was essential. From then on, national liberation

and social revolution were intertwined. This would be the foundation on which resistance would be built over the long term.

There are strategic 'models'. However, a strategy must take into account the evolution of the situation, the reactions of the enemy force, the results of previous phases of the struggle... In reality, a concrete strategy evolves and often combines elements that belong to different 'models'. The Vietnamese never stopped adapting their strategy.

A strategy combines different forms of struggle. Strategic adaptability also means knowing how to stop armed struggle when it is no longer necessary.

A difficult decision

After 1954, the revival of armed resistance against the Saigon regime was delayed. The decision to resume the armed struggle, which was gradually implemented in the second half of the 1950s, could not have been an easy one to take, knowing that this time it would be the United States that would enter the fray. But what was the alternative? At the very least, accept the division of the country *ad vitam æternam*, as in Korea. To abandon without support the militant networks and social bases of the liberation movement in the South, in the face of an unscrupulous dictatorship. Leaving the initiative to Washington, should it decide to attack the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The prospect of social and democratic emancipation

When significant social sectors enter into armed resistance, it is because the violence of the established powers is unbearable. People's warfare (potentially) opens up a dynamic of social emancipation, which nevertheless runs the risk of running out of steam when it lasts for a long time. In Asia, where conflicts have never ceased, the question posed is not just a historical one. Concrete responses must constantly be found to a twofold problem: how to prevent armed groups from degenerating (it happens...)? How to defend, in practical terms, the democratic freedom of decision-making and the rights of the grassroots or mountain communities that the combatants are supposed to be protecting? We have a wealth of experience in this area, particularly with our comrades in Mindanao, in the south of the Philippine archipelago.

In Burma, when the military junta seized all the power four years ago, you could say that (almost) the whole country went into non-violent civic disobedience. The junta could have been overthrown, if only the 'international community' had lent its support in time. Once again, this was not the case. And the repression ended up forcing the resistance in the central plain to join the armed struggle, led in particular by ethnic minorities. Once again, this was not a matter of a priori choice, but of obligation.

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