
VIETNAM IN 1977: MORE OF THE SAME

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THE YEAR 1977 in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was neither uneventful nor marked by any particularly momentous development, and if it launched the country in some new historic direction it was not apparent at year's end. Chief developments or characteristics of the past twelve months were these: an extremely poor year on the farm as agricultural production dropped sharply leaving the granaries with at least 5% less rice than minimum consumption requires; officially economics remained "in command" meaning that the demands of socialist transformation take precedence over all non-economic objectives, but the ideologues continued to whittle away at this principle; internally the society continued to harden, especially in the South, as the state and Communist Party continued to perfect various newly developed social control devices; in external affairs there was extensive even frenetic activity as Vietnam joined the United Nations and increased its work in numerous international funding agencies, opened new diplomatic initiatives, visited and was visited.

Agriculture

The poor showing in agriculture officially was put down to two causes—bad weather and inadequate managerial performance by the agricultural cadres. There was a third contributing reason, confusion over the program to collectivize agriculture in the South.

Vietnam's weather was bad this year. The all-important fifth month rice crop was subjected, first, to bitter cold (northern Vietnam in February recorded the lowest temperatures in 20 years), then by several months of drought, and finally with devastating floods (particularly in Central Vietnam).

Natural disaster was exacerbated by error and bungling on the part of agricultural planners and commune managers, a fact admitted frankly in a Politburo resolution (late June) and again in Prime Minister Pham Van Dong's National Day address (September 1), in which

cadres were castigated for “confused management” and, more importantly said the premier, for ignoring the detailed plans sent down from Hanoi in the spring.

Minister of Agriculture Vo Thuc Dong was fired, replaced by that durable old southern bureaucrat, Vo Chi Cong, who is a skilled trouble-shooter but not a man with much experience in supervising the production of food. Total grain shortage at the end of the year was variously estimated by outsiders at from one to two million metric tons, which would be five to ten percent less than minimum needs.

Part of the food shortage that developed was due to China’s cut-back or complete curtailment (depending on which source is believed) of rice shipments to Vietnam. In the past fifteen years Vietnam has consistently been short of rice—five to twenty percent depending on the crop—but the difference was always made up by the Chinese. This year China was not as forthcoming, but exactly how much rice it sent Vietnam is the subject of conflicting reports. Some 500,000 tons of wheat and other grains arrived midyear from the USSR along with wheat purchased in Canada and, surprisingly, corn in South Africa, all of which helped the situation some. Even so the June 9th order cutting rice rations reduced the nationwide average to slightly more than half a pound per person per day, as low a ration as was reached in the North during the war, and far less than ever known by southerners.

Collectivization of southern agriculture also appears to have contributed to the disarray in food production although its exact effect was obscure. Apparently a Party plenum met in June and issued a resolution fixing a time-table: cadres were to spend the remainder of 1977 studying the details of the plan for collectivization, were to launch it officially in January 1978, and were to complete it by December 1979. Such a schedule was suggested by the Party’s chief official for agricultural affairs in the South, Vo Van Kiet, in a series of speeches in July. It was not clear at the time whether the resolution was adopted because of or despite the worsening food production situation in the South. Later in the year reports on collectivization became vague, indicating only that the program would start soon and would be completed in the early 1980s.

Collectivization, whenever it comes, will be accomplished in stages, moving progressively from marketing/production co-ops (much like those elsewhere) to true collectives, communes, and state farms, and then finally to the ultimate—creation of some 500 giant agro-farms each employing 100,000 or more farm workers. In the early stage there are an almost infinite number of elements, variously termed production solidarity teams, work-exchange teams, production cooperatives, joint farm machine brigades, harvest production units, etc. Each of these, when implemented and adjusted to local conditions, are overall designed to condition farmers to the essential changes brought by collectivization,

chiefly loss of ownership of land, a new system of allocating the fruits of the harvest, and the replacement of individual incentive with communal spirit. Being so complex an effort, therefore, no simple and universal timetable can ever be established.

What did seem clear at year's end was that no one in Hanoi knew for certain exactly where the collectivization program stood. This ambiguity, quite likely, was deliberate, reflecting both differences of opinion within the Politburo and the clear realization by all that the collectivization of agriculture in the South may prove to be the single most important decision the Politburo will make in the coming decade. It is not a question of *whether*, but of when, for collectivization seems inevitable. Whenever it comes, however, it will be at the price of reduced food production, at least temporarily. Thus for economic reasons (as opposed to ideological reasons) the Politburo may decide on temporary postponement. Certainly this would seem wise if another objective is to be achieved, that is to make Vietnam self-sufficient in rice production by 1980, only three growing seasons away.

The Economy

On the economic front—where the drive for national development is treated as the moral equivalent of war—the scene was bivalent, that is, good progress in some sectors and some retrogression (mainly in agriculture), and generally a good deal of flailing about. Textile production advanced, as did coal mining. Transportation and communication systems are now restored to pre-war levels. New air routes have been opened. Industrial production, Hanoi reported, is up ten percent. Exports increased, especially seafood, tea, and industrial crop products such as lacquer and kenaf.

On the negative side was the poor showing in agriculture, which of course counts for more in economic terms than the rest of the economy combined. Productivity remained low, the currency chaos (North vs. South) continued, and there were abundant raw material shortages and supply snarls. Unemployment in the South is still around ten percent. A mid-year Hanoi report said that the country's energy needs were not being met. It estimated that electric power would have to increase twelve fold in the next fifteen years if minimum developmental needs were to be met. The report also suggested that any petroleum produced in the next decade would be used at home rather than exported.¹

Economic aid continued to arrive at Haiphong in generous quantities, about all the economy could absorb. A Foreign Investment Code

¹ Vietnam signed an offshore oil exploration contract with a French firm, the second in the last two years, but beyond this there was little movement in this sector. Clearly the regime intends to proceed slowly.

was issued in April.² Vietnam increased its participation in the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank, and the socialist nations' Comecon International Investment Bank.

Within the country the focal point in the all-out economic drive was what is blandly called the "redistribution of the work force"—that is, the uprooting and relocating of individuals, families, and in some instances whole neighborhoods to remote parts of the country where they are settled as farmers even though many are urban middle-class with no experience in agriculture. Officially this is called the New Economic Zone (NEZ) plan. Its purposes are varied: economic; sociological (returning Vietnam to a more pastoral society); population control (facilitating the work of the internal security police); and strategic (peopling the underpopulated region along the border with currently unfriendly Cambodia).

The NEZ to date is economically unprofitable. These regions previously were uninhabited, one observer said dryly, because they were uninhabitable. Life there is exceedingly harsh, particularly for the urban professionals.

The idea of the NEZ is not new. It has been in effect in the North since 1961 and relocated more than a million persons. The pace in the South has been more rapid, about 1.3 million relocated since the end of the war. During 1977 the NEZ program slowed appreciably in the South, relocating a total of less than 120,000 people, only one-third of the target for the year. Prime Minister Pham Van Dong assessed the failure to meet the NEZ quotas as "ideological shortcoming,"³ that is, inadequate emulation and motivation campaigns to overcome lack of interest if not outright hostility on the part of those to be relocated. He also said the program was marked by failure to deliver seed grain on time, insufficient agricultural loans, a shortage of farm tools, and transportation shortages throughout the NEZ. The NEZ target for 1978 is 475,000 persons.

The NEZ represents an extraordinarily ambitious effort to restructure Vietnamese society, indeed to reshape the entire social face of Vietnam. Eventually, if pursued to completion, one out of every two Vietnamese will find himself living somewhere else and doing something new. A vastly changed set of social relationships will result. The NEZ program ultimately could have a more profound effect on Vietnam than any other event in the 20th century.⁴

² The code provides for three types of foreign enterprises: wholly foreign owned; joint ventures with Vietnam holding controlling interest; and shared-production ventures (chiefly in the extractive industries). Profits are to be taxed fairly heavily (30-50%) but exceptions can be made. Remission of profits is possible and assurances are given on expropriation.

³ Prime Minister Office Directive 275-CT, November 17, 1977, cited by Radio Hanoi, November 21, 1977.

⁴ For more detailed discussion of the NEZ see the author's article on Vietnam in 1976 in the *Asian Survey*, January 1976.

Internal Developments

Opposition to the regime in the South remained ubiquitous, disorganized, badly led, and generally ineffectual. Armed resistance by the estimated 12,000 active resistance fighters appears to have diminished somewhat during the year, although its exact strength could not be determined. Passive hostility or nonviolent forms of dissent were far more common. Japanese newsmen returning to Ho Chi Minh City (i.e., Saigon) reported encountering anti-regime sentiment from virtually all middle-class, Catholics, and many Buddhists. One Japanese journalist with long experience in Vietnam estimated that 40% of the adult population in the South is hostile.

There appears to be no national character to the armed resistance. Rather what exists is a series of some five regional groups⁵ loosely linked by the generic term *Phuc Quoc* meaning *national restoration* and traceable back to turn-of-the-century anti-French nationalism. Some 14 Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) divisions remain on garrison duty in the South along with 250,000 internal security police and Assault Youth Force troops (recently created teen-age village internal security units) which certainly constitutes a more than adequate force to prevent serious challenge to the regime. Public order slowly is becoming an agit-prop task rather than a military problem. Still, as one experienced French reporter wrote after returning from a visit, the South remains to be conquered.

Organization and command of the resistance is weak, say Vietnamese in the U.S., because the best leadership potential remains in re-education camps. About 2.5 million Vietnamese have undergone this indoctrination in the past two and a half years. Currently the regime admits to holding 50,000, although others estimate the camp population as high as 300,000. Not being released are so-called three-year and five-year sentence groups, that is, individuals who either remain recalcitrant or who are judged to be potential leaders of the resistance, hence too dangerous to release. These are told they will be held for three or five years. They must number at least 30,000 and are true political prisoners by Amnesty International definition.⁶ Reliable reports in December said all re-education camp inmates were being relocated to prisons in the North.

The illegal exodus from Vietnam continued during the year, at the rate of about 500 a week, many of them becoming pitiful "boat people"—refugees at sea often in unseaworthy boats with no place to land and

⁵ They are: 1) Hao Hiao villages along the Cambodian border; 2) Lam Dong province and west of Kontum among Montagnards; 3) The Ho Nai complex and the Phan Thiet region, among Catholics; 4) In Tay Ninh province among Cao Dai; and 5) In the Hue and Quang Nam region among the two old nationalist organizations, the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang and the Dai Viets.

⁶ Political prisoner is a person incarcerated not for what he has done but for what he believes.

ignored by passing ships. Nearly 90,000 Vietnamese have fled Vietnam since the fall of Saigon, including some 20,000 in 1977, most of whom are working class or professionals, rather than the rich or upper class.⁷

At the Politburo or national leadership level there was no significant change during the year. The rulers aged a year, the average age of the Politburo now standing at 66 and the Party Central Committee at 58. There was a shake-up in the construction sector when Do Muoi was relieved of his post as czar of construction and replaced by his deputy Dong Sy Nguyen. As noted above the Ministry of Agriculture got a new chief, and there were seven changes in the Council of Ministers. All of these changes appeared to be technical rather than political.

Probably the most significant governmental development of the year was the dispatch of government and Party cadres to the South. A full 50% of the cadre corps now is on duty there. Included in this southward flow were thousands of *to chung*, a special cadre assigned to live with every *phuong* or bloc of 10–15 families in the South.

In other state and Party activity during the year, “second round” Party congresses were held in March and April, People’s Council elections held in May, and drafting work went forward on the new Constitution (which is scheduled to be submitted to the National Assembly in late December or early next year).

External Affairs

Three characteristics of Vietnam’s foreign relations were discernible during the year. First, Vietnam came in from the cold by launching an intensive campaign to relate itself to the world diplomatically, financially, and psychologically. Second, despite the flurry of external activity actual relations with outsiders remained highly tentative, as if the leaders had not yet finished their review of Vietnam’s new geopolitical place in the world. Third, a long standing foreign policy or doctrinal issue moved to stage center—that is, the question of exactly how far Vietnam should go in subordinating ideology to economics in its external relations.

The most apparent external activity during the year was diplomatic busywork: opening new diplomatic relations, joining international organizations, launching new initiatives, and dispatching abroad and receiving in Hanoi a nearly endless parade of high ranking visitors. Pham Van Dong went to France and Scandinavia; General Vo Nguyen Giap went to Moscow, East Europe, and Peking. Le Duan made a similar journey. Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh toured India and Phan Hien again made a six-nation Southeast Asia visit. Every major

⁷ Of the total who have left Vietnam since April 1975—275,000—about 155,000 are in the U.S., 100,000 in Asia (including 80,000 in Thailand) and the rest in Europe and elsewhere.

capital in the world was visited at least once by an official Vietnamese delegation, including a first ever trip to Washington (to attend the annual meeting of the World Bank). Hanoi in the first ten months was averaging two official delegations per day.

Vietnamese diplomats may have been active but much of their work was only ritual. External ties, old and newly established alike, remained highly conditional. The Politburo continued to take measure of Vietnam's new place in the sun in terms both of national security and economic need. Probably the most significant move in this respect came in Laos. There was a great deal of diplomatic and Party traffic throughout the year, including the signing of six separate treaties. The most important visit came in mid-July when three of the Politburo's top four members flew to Vientiane and signed a mutual cooperation treaty. Many pronouncements on the relationship were made throughout the year. The sense of all this appears to be the understanding that the Laotians will make no major foreign policy decision without first clearing it with Hanoi. Some foreign observers go even further in their interpretation of this knot tying and state flatly that Laos has lost its sovereignty and now is little more than a province of Vietnam.

Relations with Cambodia, also viewed by the Politburo through this same prism of regional security interests, were the reverse of Laos. Ever more alarming reports of open hostility filtered out as the year progressed: division-sized military clashes along the border, major Cambodian forays into Vietnam, Cambodia funding Vietnamese Hoa Hao resistance fighters, Vietnamese tanks in action on the border, 2,000 Vietnamese casualties in a single battle, etc. These reports were verified by both Hanoi and Phnom Penh by late December and diplomatic relations between the two states were formally ruptured.

Sino-Vietnamese relations apparently improved somewhat from the previous year which probably saw an all-time low between the two countries. Hanoi's ties with the USSR remained close and if anything became closer during 1977. Moscow now supplies Vietnam with \$1.5 billion a year in economic aid, half the assistance Vietnam gets from all sources, a condition which neither Moscow nor Hanoi wants disturbed.

Southeast Asia relations were marked by a good deal of backing and filling. This erratic behavior is due in part to Hanoi's uncertainty on how to proceed in the region. Also it is traceable to events, such as political shifts in Thailand, which once again in December swung back toward accommodation with Vietnam.

Relations with the U.S., which seemed promising in early 1977, slowed by mid-year and then stalled. A Presidential commission visited Hanoi in March and representatives of the two governments met in Paris in May and again in June and December. But by year's end it was apparent that relations in effect were being held in abeyance by tacit

mutual agreement. The promise remained, however, that there would be movement toward normalization—defined as exchange of diplomatic representation—during 1978.

Conclusion

If there was a common thread running through the fabric of Vietnamese affairs in 1977 it was the doctrinal question of how far an ideology can be bent before it breaks. The thread colored both internal and external developments. Specifically it involved the relationship of dogma to economic need, asking whether political behavior should be (or can be) subordinated to economic ambition. There is no easy answer to this, as Mao Tse-tung noted in his *Thoughts of Chairman Mao*: "Politics is more important than economics, but not always."

The doctrinal problem is at the heart of the question of the pace used for the collectivization of agriculture in the South, and thus the entire problem of making Vietnam self-sufficient in food production. It is intimately bound up in dealing with multinational oil companies. It is germane to the search for aid and trade and technology transfer. It was behind the Foreign Investment Code. It affected moves in Southeast Asia, the meetings with the Americans, and behavior in the U.N. Virtually everything that happened or did not happen in Vietnam during the year can trace an influence to this great debate of the relationship of ideological imperative to economic necessity.

Officially economics remain "in command" as the official slogan dictates. But increasingly this guideline, so simple to express, becomes difficult if not impossible to execute. As is common in instances of collective leadership, the matter for the moment simply remains unresolved. The decision is not to decide. It will be carried over to the new year, to become a *leitmotif* for the unfolding events of 1978.

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