Vietnam, '63 and Now

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Two years have elapsed since the Vietnam agreement and protocols were signed and "peace" was announced.

More than ten years ago, I participated in various behind-the-scenes diplomatic negotiations. Now that emotions surrounding the conflict have flared up once more, it might be interesting to consider what the Western world could have achieved in Vietnam and compare that with the new reality following the war.

In the spring of 1963, I was secretly asked, by President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, the secret-police Ngo Dinh Nhu, through Roger Lalouette, the French Ambassador to Saigon, to approach the Government in Hanoi in order to explore the possibilities for a peaceful resolution of the struggle.

During the subsequent months, I had many wide-ranging discussions with the highest North Vietnamese officials, including President Ho Chi Minh and Premier Pham Van Dong. The basic question was this: In case of American withdrawal, what kind of real guarantees could be given by them that a united Vietnam would not merely become one more partner in the Communist bloc?

To resolve this problem, the North Vietnamese leaders were slowly developing plans, which I discussed with a group of Western ambassadors.

Under the plans, North and South Vietnam could slowly develop postal, economic and cultural relations. Northern industrial goods would be paid for by the South with its rice.

Also, the North would not press for a speedy reunification, but instead a coalition government would be set up in the South. I asked if such a government could be headed by Mr. Diem. In the summer of 1963 the answer was finally yes.

Hanoi had always sought neutralization of the South. As for the North, both Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong were reluctant to accept the label "neutralization," but were eager to accept the idea. North Vietnam would not become an aggressive outpost against other countries, and neither Soviet nor Chinese troops would under any conditions be allowed on Vietnamese soil.

I pursued the matter further: What guarantees could be offered to the West that Hanoi would keep its word? I stressed that the West would not be amused by a new game called "the international commission." The answer was that in case of a United States withdrawal the North would be prepared to give all kinds of substantial guarantees and American participation in the supervisory process was not excluded.

At the time, I knew about strained relations between Hanoi and both Moscow and Peking; further, Hanoi's leaders wanted to preserve and widen their small margin of independence from their powerful allies, whom they hated and feared.

They were willing to accept a negotiated agreement whose result would not have been worse for the West than the one in 1973; Vietnam would have been divided into two parts, with free commercial and cultural intercommunication between them.

This unstable situation would have been guaranteed by rivalry between the Soviet Union and China, and North Vietnamese animosity toward those countries, and Cambodian neutrality, with Prince Norodom Sihanouk's strong anti-Communist tendencies.

Further guarantees would have been the development of Titoist trends in the Eastern bloc, intensified by a new Vietnamese "Titoism"; new political and economic cooperation with Western powers, and last, but by no means least, the American economic and political power that was undiminished by the war.

Today, following ten years of war and two years of "peace," we face problems that existed potentially, or actually, in 1963:

Vietnam is divided into three parts; Hanoi is isolated, being reluctantly supported by its overprotective allies; the Vietcong is attacking; the regime in Saigon is unpopular, attacked anew by Buddhists, intellectuals and other non-Communist opponents. Saigon's generals fight their private enemies far more effectively than they do the Communists.

In Cambodia, the Government is weaker than it was in 1963; Prince Sihanouk, in exile in Peking, against his inclinations has been pusher further to the left. In Laos, the same tape is being replayed: new shaky coalitions and no hope for the future, while the people remain indifferent—so long as they are not robbed or bombed.

Hegel remarked that all important facts and personages in history occur twice; Marx added that the first occurrence was as tragedy, the second as farce; Sir Francis Bacon in such a situation could only have advised the hapless to pray.