

NYTimes
Signal to Hanoi NOV 19 1975

In tones so muted that they may scarcely be heard, the Ford Administration is nevertheless softening its rigid hostility toward the new Communist regimes of Southeast Asia.

At least one large voluntary organization, the American Friends Service Committee, learned last weekend that it would be permitted to resume small-scale shipments of relief supplies for war-shattered communities of North and South Vietnam. In lifting its ban on such aid, the State Department was merely correcting an unfortunate aspect of the postwar Vietnam policy.

At the same time, Secretary of State Kissinger let it be known through a group of Congressmen about to confer with North Vietnamese representatives in Paris that the United States was ready to respond to goodwill gestures from Hanoi, working toward a "normalization" of relations. He emphasized, however, that the Administration was not yet considering any economic aid proposals to North Vietnam; Hanoi officials have regularly insisted that reconstruction aid, as envisaged in the 1973 Paris agreements, would have to be an integral element in any resumption of working relations.

This is the commendable beginning of a new flexibility toward the Communist regimes in Indochina, but there is still a long way to go. The United States veto of North and South Vietnam's separate admission to the United Nations last August blocked any early political dialogue. Administration officials argue, however, that their position was based primarily on the Communist powers' refusal to permit simultaneous membership for North and South Korea; when Vietnam becomes unified and applies for single membership, the United States' objections of principle would not necessarily hold.

A flat trade embargo remains in effect against both Vietnams and Cambodia; earlier this month President Ford gave Congressional leaders clear signals of his opposition to pending legislation to lift this embargo. The volume of trade expectable between the United States and Indochina would not be large, but Asia-based American business interests and chambers of commerce are agitating for reopening of commercial relations, lest the boycott turn into a long-range problem such as has clouded United States relations with China and Cuba.

The Communist regimes of Vietnam and Cambodia remain engaged in their delicate balancing act between the rival attractions of China and the Soviet Union. After years of warfare, it is paradoxical that the United States is the one superpower to which these new regimes could now relate without inherent tensions. The sooner this country's policymakers overcome a lingering bitterness over defeat in Vietnam, the brighter will be the prospects for a constructive new American role in Southeast Asia's political and economic development.