

Victor Zorza

Hanoi's New Language

Hanoi has added a new twist to an old joke. At one time, the way to tell whether a person was an optimist or a pessimist, at least in eastern Europe, was to find out what language he was learning. If he was studying Russian, he was an optimist, but anyone learning Chinese was clearly a pessimist, preparing for the arrival of a new ruling race.

Hanoi Radio has instituted three new language courses for its listeners—Russian, Chinese, and English, each receiving an impartial half hour a day. The decision, taken no doubt after due deliberation, coincided with recent signals from North Vietnamese leaders that they wanted to be friends with the United States.

But the Hanoi speeches which offered new, equal and mutually beneficial relations to Washington were promptly rebuffed by the State Department. Hanoi was asking the United States to honor its commitment, under the Paris peace agreement negotiated by Dr. Kissinger, to give reconstruction aid to North Vietnam. The State Department spokesman retorted that Hanoi had broken the Paris agreement, but North Vietnamese newspapers kept repeating that it was still in force, and that the aid provisions were still relevant.

One Washington reaction was that Hanoi was trying to get something for nothing. But Dr. Kissinger evidently decided, after some thought, that perhaps there was something to be gained by playing Hanoi's game. The United States, he said, could not ignore the flouting of international agreements by the new regimes in Indochina, but he was prepared to look to the future. The U.S. response would depend, he said, on their conduct toward their neighbors and toward the United States.

Some signs from Hanoi had previously suggested that North Vietnam might welcome a new U.S. role in Southeast Asia to balance the power of the Soviet Union and China—or to play each of them off against the others. Dr. Kissinger made it clear that, now that the war was over, the United States would continue to oppose the efforts of other countries to impose their will on Asia.

He gave a graphic illustration of the strategic importance of Asia—an area in which, he said, the security interests of all the great powers intersect. China, he pointed out, comprised the heartland of Asia, while the Soviet Far

East spread across the top of the continent, and Japan's islands spanned 2,000 miles off the mainland. But he added that America's Pacific presence encompasses the entire region—and then explained the importance of the area to the United States in terms reminiscent of some of the arguments about the Vietnam war.

Some critics of the U.S. presence in Vietnam used to say that Washington wanted to hang on there for selfish, imperialistic reasons. Kissinger now explains that Asia's share of the world resources and population is immense, that the Asian-Pacific economy has experienced more rapid growth in the last two decades than any other region—and that it was the area in which the United States has its fastest-growing overseas commerce. The United States, he emphasizes, has as vital an interest in access to Asia's raw materials as Asia has to U.S. markets and technology.

Can this access be maintained in the face of a permanently hostile Vietnam, acting as the Kremlin's spearhead in Southeast Asia, seeking to dominate its closer neighbors and to extend Communist influence further afield? The Hanoi press, too, keeps reminding Washington of the strategic importance of Indochina. It recalls now that 10 years ago the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, explained that whoever controlled Vietnam would also be able to control the Philippines and Formosa to the east, the rice-surplus countries of Thailand and

Burma to the west, and Malaya and Indonesia, with their rubber, tin and oil, to the south.

Washington says the Hanoi army paper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, saw Indochina as the key to Asia. In proposing to establish new relations with the United States now, Hanoi can hardly be proferring that key to Washington—but it may be offering to keep it out of the hands of others, such as the Kremlin, if Dr. Kissinger is prepared to pay the right price.

The Kissinger tactics in extracting the Paris agreement from Hanoi relied heavily on the Sino-Soviet split, while at the same time exploiting the differences between the hawks and the doves in the North Vietnamese leadership. With the war over, the Hanoi doves may well favor a new relationship with the United States based on reconstruction aid, while the hawks may be responsible for some of the harsher talk about spreading the revolution to the rest of Asia.

The Sino-Soviet conflict plays an increasing role in the area. Both Moscow and Peking accuse each other of seeking to fill the vacuum created by the departure of the United States from Indochina. But Moscow wants to push the United States out of the rest of Asia, while Peking prefers the U.S. presence to continue in order to delay the arrival of the Russians until China is strong enough to handle them.

Where does Hanoi stand in all this? It is telling its citizens to learn Russian, Chinese—and English.

© 1975, Victor Zorza



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post