A Restrained U.S. Role In Tomorrow's Asia

By Stanley Karnow

The accord to end the war in Indochina, although a momentous historical event, is only another step among the vast changes that have been altering the shape of Asia within recent years—and will continue to transform the region in the future.

The reconciliation between the United States and Communist China, the bitter Sino-Soviet dispute and the phenomenal rise of Japan as a superstate are larger elements in this transformation. Viewed in perspective, then, the Vietnam settlement essentially reflects new power alignments in the Far East.

These new alignments, while still in flux, are already apparent. And they suggest, as Brookings Institution expert A. Doak Barnett puts it, a situation in Asia that will be "fluid but less explosive" than it has been until now.

The prospect of a U.S. retreat to the "beaches of Waikiki" after the Vietnam war ends is remote. American trade with Asia has grown this year to more than $20 billion, surpassing for the first time U.S. commerce with Western Europe. Thus, as Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green recently predicted, there will be a "steady increase in the relative weight of trade in the complex mix of interactions between Asia and the United States."

But as the economic factor grows in the U.S.-Asia equation, the American strategic presence in the region will diminish. In short, the U.S. role in the area is changing qualitatively.

In his foreign policy report to Congress last February, President Nixon forecast a "more restrained" role for the United States abroad, explaining that the country has "neither the prescriptions nor the resources for the solution of problems in which ours is not the prime national interest."

This formulation, as it applies to Asia and the Pacific, augurs the withdrawal of many U.S. bases from Japan, Thailand, Taiwan and other parts of the area. The Vietnam agreement is likely to accelerate this trend.

In the communique he and the Communist Chinese signed in China in 1972, President Nixon pledged that the United States "will progressively reduce its forces and military installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes."

Peking-Washington Ties

This signified, as White House sources disclosed at the time, that the United States would pull its troops out of Taiwan, over which Peking claims sovreignty.

Since the Communist Chinese have consistently held that a U.S. troop withdrawal from Taiwan is a key prerequisite for the establishment of Sino-American diplomatic relations, a logical if indirect consequence of a Vietnam settlement would be the exchange of ambassadors between Washington and Peking.

Spurred mainly by President Nixon's visit to China earlier last year, the Japanese moved rapidly to cement formal diplomatic links with Peking in September. In contrast to their past posture, which confronted Japan with difficult conditions, the Chinese displayed unusual suppleness as they dealt with Japanese Premier Kakuei Tanaka.

They raised no objections to a continuation of Japanese economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. Nor did they demand that Japan abrogate its mutual security treaty with the United States.

In the view of Asia specialists here, Chinese flexibility was calculated to achieve three objectives. It was aimed at rupturing Japan's official links with Taiwan. It was designed to impede an improvement in Soviet-Japanese relations. And, by lessening Sino-Japanese tensions, it had the long-term objective of inspiring public opinion in Japan to consider the military tie with the United States as unnecessary.

Some experts submit that future relations between Japan and China are bound to deteriorate as the Chinese perceive the extent to which the tremendous Japanese economic thrust and its inevitable political influence overtake Asia. According to projections, Japanese investment in Asia, Australia and the Pacific islands should total some $27 billion by 1980.

Soviet Threat

The Communist Chinese, most specialists believe, will be primarily concerned in the years ahead with their own domestic political and economic problems. They will also be preoccupied with the threat coming from the Soviet Union, which has been steadily building up its force along the Chinese border.

The Soviet threat was the main impulse behind the Chinese drive to improve their international image and, in particular, to seek a reconciliation with the United States.

In the spring of 1969, as the conflict between Moscow and Peking heightened, Soviet Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev sought to induce the nations of Asia to join in a "collective security" system under the guidance of the Kremlin.

Except in India, which needed support against Pakistan, the Soviet overture fell flat. Instead, the states of Southeast Asia have been searching for ways to come to terms with Peking. In the estimation of most experts, the Russians are not likely to make much headway in the Far East—although, it is speculated in some quarters, they may appear attractive to Chinese Nationalists feeling increasingly isolated on Taiwan.

Compared to the mid-1950s, when the United States began to strengthen its allies in Asia, the Far East has undergone an immense transformation.

At that time, alarmed by the Communist takeover of China, the Korean War and the French defeat in Indochina, American leaders accelerated a policy of "containment" aimed at preventing the spread of what they considered to be monolithic Communism. They chose Vietnam as the arena for their stand. Richard Nixon repeatedly expressed this concept in warnings that a U.S. retreat from Vietnam would encourage the Communists to "increase their aggressive action, not only in Asia but in Africa, Latin America and the Near East."

But the breakup of the Communist bloc gradually removed the rationale for holding the line in Vietnam. And the failure of the United States to win the war, coupled with its deleterious impact on American institutions at home, finally underlined the futility of the conflict. Sensitive to domestic political attitudes, the same Richard Nixon who had argued for U.S. involvement now initiated a policy of withdrawal.

The Nixon Doctrine, as the President's new approach was labeled, called for a lower U.S. profile in the Far East. Its enunciation in Guam in 1969 slowly set in motion efforts by both the big and small nations of Asia to readjust their relationships. The world was no longer divided into two armed camps but, as White House foreign affairs adviser Henry Kissinger had pointed out, it was edging in the direction of multipolarity.

Looking back, one of the tragic ironies of the U.S. commitment to Vietnam was that it was publicized as a policy aimed at deterring the menace of Communist Chinese expansion that, it is now known, never really existed. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, among others, stated this policy when he said that the Vietnam war was a testing ground on which to withstand the threat of "a billion Chinese . . . armed with nuclear weapons."

But interviews with Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-tung by the American writer Edgar Snow, recently published for the first time in full, reveal that Mao had no intention in early 1965 of intervening in Vietnam. As Mao explained to Snow, "the Chinese were very busy with their internal affairs" and were determined to avoid war unless attacked by the United States.

Mao's prime motive for avoiding intervention was his desire to keep his army inside China in order to deploy it against his political adversaries in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which he launched in late 1965. His enemies, like chief of state Liu Shao-chi, contrastingly strove to engage China in the conflict in order to deprive Mao of the army's support in his purges.

The debate between Mao and his foes, which raged through the spring and summer of 1965, finally ended in September with an article by Defense Minister Lin Piao stressing that China would stay out of Vietnam. A key passage in the article said:

"Revolution or people's war in any country is the business of the masses *in that country and should be carried out primarily by their own efforts . . .* If one does not operate by one's own efforts . . . no victory can be won, or consolidated even if it is won."

System of Superpowers

Despite the clarity of that statement, Washington spokesmen persisted in justifying the U.S. involvement in Vietnam as a bulwark against potential Chinese aggression. Conversely, President Nixon's detente with Peking was apparently designed, in part at least, to portray China as no threat and thereby make his withdrawal from Vietnam palatable to U.S. conservatives.

By constructing an international system of superpowers, moreover, the President and Kissinger have effectively worked to prevent peripheral regions such as Vietnam from igniting world conflagrations. If the settlement holds, Vietnam may soon be returned to "the obscurity it so richly deserves," to use J. Kenneth Galbraith's phrase.

Looking to the future, Harvard Prof. Stanley Hoffmann has predicted the kind of game that will be played by the superpowers "is going to be much more a competition for influence than the traditional game of expansion and conquest" because the "costs of conquest are too high in a nuclear world."

That game was really played throughout the Vietnam war, and it will probably continue. In large measure, then, the real tragedy of Vietnam was that the U.S. commitment there was based on a misperception. □