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Vietnam

1975: In check! – Looking back on the US war in Indochina

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Today there is nothing unusual in the United States losing a war. This was not the case in the previous century. Just 40 years ago, the US debacle in 1975 in Viet Nam was an event which was all the more significant in that Washington had for years mobilized its gigantic resources to prevail, while the Indochinese struggle had a major international scope. Between revolution and counter-revolution, the confrontation of east-west “blocs” and the Sino-Soviet conflict, Vietnam was the “focal point” of the world situation in a geopolitical configuration without equivalent since then.

On April 30, 1975, the People's Liberation Army entered Saigon unopposed as a result of a lightning offensive. The Saigon regime, supported to the end by Washington, collapsed like a house of cards. The US had to make an emergency evacuation, helicopters coming to retrieve their nationals from the roof of the U.S. embassy – in the full view of television cameras from around the world! A terrible humiliation for the imperialist superpower then deemed invincible.

It was a good twenty years since the US began fighting the liberation movement in Vietnam; indeed they had begun to intervene before the French defeat of 1954 and prepared to take on the relay of a colonial regime in full decline. It was not for Washington about defending special interests (access to markets, investment and so on). The issue at stake was always geostrategic: to deliver a definitive blow to any revolutionary dynamic in Asia.

Turning back the Asian revolutions

Asia very soon became the main focus of anti-imperialist struggle. It was in Europe that the consequences of the First World War and the Russian Revolution first made themselves felt. But after the ultimate defeat of the German revolution (1923), attention shifted to the Orient. Muslim Central Asia was at boiling point. Revolution and counter-revolution confronted each other in China from 1925. During the decades following the Second World War armed movements of liberation developed from Latin America to Africa or the Middle East with the lodestone countries being Cuba, Algeria, Palestine, Angola and Mozambique. Imperialism imposed its order through particularly bloody military coups (Chile, Argentina and so on) and with the aid of states such as Israel. All of the Third World was involved, but it was in the Far East, with the victory of the Chinese revolution (1949), that the struggle took on a special dimension. China is the most populous country in the world, followed by India, which, although capitalist, was backed by Moscow to win a certain independence. France was proving unable to break the battle of the Vietnamese. The revolutionary foci in the region were increasing. Washington wanted to “contain and push back” the wave of Asian liberation without skimping on the means.

China was not blockaded like Cuba. At the political, economic and military a huge cordon sanitaire was built which extended like the arc of circle from the Korean peninsula to the Indochinese peninsula. Washington locked up the east with the Korean War (1950-1953) which has left up to today a divided country. It locked in the south, making Taiwan a fortress - where the Chinese counter-revolutionaries fled to the great disgruntlement of the local populations; the Kuomintang regime then represented China on the UN Security Council. To stabilize its South Korean and Taiwanese allies, the US favoured the implementation of agrarian reforms and left much more of freedom than in other countries of the South to large wealthy families controlling dictatorial and dirigiste states. That is the origin of the unusual development of a relatively autonomous Korean or Taiwanese capital.

The United States helped Japan to rebuild (as in Western Europe with the Marshall plan), while maintaining it under

its strategic tutelage. Huge US military bases were built (in Okinawa), as well as in South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand. The 7th fleet and its aircraft carriers occupied the China Sea. Washington locked down again, in the islands of south-east Asia this time, with the Suharto coup in Indonesia (1965). The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), considered as the biggest CP of the capitalist world, was eradicated at the price of perhaps two million deaths and a state of general repression that endured for more than thirty years.

To complete the encirclement of China, there remained continental south-east Asia. Maoist guerrillas were active in Malaysia and Thailand. Above all the struggle resumed in Vietnam. The division of the country decided during the Geneva agreements was intended to be only temporary, pending the holding of elections that the Vietminh and Ho Chi Minh were sure to win. No question therefore, for Washington, which had not signed the agreements, of these elections taking place; on the contrary, the Saigon regime and the US advisors undertook the systematic murder of revolutionary cadres living in the South. At the turn of the 1960, the Vietnamese CP therefore decided to re-launch the battle, knowing that this time, it would be directly facing the United States and not France.

Bringing the “Soviet bloc” to its knees

Turning back the Asian revolutions was not the sole objective of the US intervention in Vietnam. Behind Beijing, Moscow was also targeted. Washington wanted to end the configuration of “Blocs” which had dominated the international scene since the Second World War. The issue at stake was sizeable: allowing imperialist capital to re-enter the vast territories of the “Eastern Bloc”.

Although centred on Indochina, the Vietnam conflict was not a local or even regional war. Its scope was truly global. All the contradictions of the international situation were refracted there, pervading the givens of the liberation struggle: the state of the workers’ and progressive movement in Europe and the United States, of solidarity; the opening (or not) of new revolutionary fronts in the third world; the ambivalence of Moscow or Peking’s diplomacy - because ambivalence, there was.

There was no simple equivalence between the “revolutionary camp” and the “Soviet camp”. Inasmuch as the “East-West” confrontation was real, inasmuch as imperialism could play on the specific interests of the Soviet bureaucracy (and later of the Chinese bureaucracy) to pressure the liberation movements at decisive moments. The Asian Communist Parties learned this to their cost very early. At the end of the Second World War, with the agreements of Yalta and Potsdam, Moscow agreed that China and Vietnam should remain within the sphere of Western domination. Neither the CCP nor the VCP respected this division of the world secretly negotiated behind their backs between the Allied powers.

In 1954, Moscow and Beijing acted together to force the VCP to accept, at the Geneva negotiations, an agreement which was very far from reflecting the reality of the relationship of forces on the ground and which carried the germ of a new war - the American war, the most terrible of all. The Vietnamese drew the lessons of this bitter experience: fifteen years later, they refused the participation of the Sino-Soviet “big brothers” in the Paris negotiations, reduced to a head-to-head with Washington from which the agreements of 1973 emerged - agreements which this time led to victory.

The geopolitical world became even more complex with the emergence of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the mid-1960s, Beijing not accepting that Moscow had negotiated, behind its back, a nuclear agreement with Washington. The schism that broke out inside the “Eastern Bloc” represented a real problem for the VCP - who needed the help of the two rival capitals of the misnamed “socialist camp”. On the other hand, it was a windfall for the United States, who would play on this new contradiction. This asset did not allow them to avoid the debacle of 1975, but it proved

decisive in the following years with the formation of a USA-China-Khmer alliance seeking to rein in Vietnam.

All this should, of course, not allow us to forget that the assistance provided by Moscow and Beijing to Hanoi during the war against the US was very important on both an economic and a military level. The USSR and China knew very well that they were targeted by the US intervention in Vietnam. Victorious, the US would have been in a position to push its advantage. Sino-Soviet aid was therefore one of the factors of Vietnamese resistance. While considerable, it remained nonetheless politically measured in order not to endanger the possibilities of dialogue with Washington: missiles capable of protecting the skies of North Vietnam from the B52 bombers were not provided, the offer of a (rotten) compromise was maintained – but the VCP simply did not accept it.

The Vietnamese factor

World geopolitics after 1949 (victory of the Chinese revolution) and 1954 (defeat of the French) made Vietnam the “focal point” of the international situation, the “advance trench” of the revolutionary struggle in the words of a long slogan chanted during demonstrations of solidarity: “greetings to you, Vietnamese brothers, soldiers of every front line”. Yet this liberation movement had to face a heavy burden; to be in the “front line” against the United States.

The anti-colonial struggles in Vietnam did not initially take on the spectacular scale of what happened in the 1920s in China. Yet, the national movement, and particularly the VCP, were contemporaries of the CCP. The initial leading nucleus of these two parties was formed in the wake of the Russian revolution, before the Stalinization of the USSR. Both nevertheless identified the “socialist camp”, although maintaining an autonomy of decision making contrasting with the direct subordination of other CPs. Both also accumulated a varied experience of struggle before engaging in prolonged people’s war - at the turn of the 1930s in China, a decade later in Vietnam.

Before the American war, the Vietminh acquired a deep national legitimacy with the proclamation of independence in August 1945, and then with the conduct of a “people’s war” which dealt the French expeditionary corps the defeat of Diã̃n Biã̃n Phu - a feat already unprecedented against a colonial metropolis. The US was then attacking a seasoned and rooted adversary, even if they did not doubt victory.

In its duration, the liberation struggle in Vietnam embodies a whole period, opened by the Russian revolution. The victory of 1975, in a sense, was the culmination, in the form of victory in a frontal conflict with US imperialism. It also announced, although it was not immediately obvious, the end of this period, given the violence of the inter-bureaucratic conflicts and crises which ate into the Soviet regimes and Chinese.

A total war

The United States intervention in Indochina was first of all a military escalation without equivalent outside of the world wars. The immense resources deployed in the region contributed, from the bases of Okinawa to those of a Thailand transformed into a “terrestrial aircraft carrier”. The 7th Fleet shelled the Vietnamese coasts while its planes could intervene in very short period of time. The giant B52 bombers operated from very high altitude, with devastating effect. For the first time, helicopters were engaged very heavily in the fighting (France had already used them in Algeria). Napalm, defoliants (Agent Orange which still poisons the country), cluster bombs and so on. Apart from atomic weapons and the destruction of the main dykes which would have flooded a part of North Vietnam (two measures whose international consequences were unpredictable), everything was implemented. The US expeditionary corps reached 550,000 men. Two times more tons of bombs were discharged on the small Indochinese

territory than by all the Allies on all fronts of the conflict in 1939-45. In all, almost nine million U.S. soldiers participated in the conflict.

The war was being conducted in multiple areas. An assassination plan targeted the cadres of the National Liberation Front in the South - Operation Phoenix which claimed several tens of thousands of victims. An agrarian reform was implemented to counter that inherited from the Vietminh and to try to build a social base for the Saigon regime (of capitalist farmers). The rural populations were grouped into strategic hamlets and a system of police control, home by home, was introduced into the cities to better identify any unknown persons. To reduce the number of human losses in the expeditionary corps, the "Vietnamization" of the counter-revolutionaries armed forces - it was about "changing the skin colour of the corpses".

In the United States, the economy contributed to the war effort as well as the scientific corps who were asked by the government request to broaden the palette of the machines of death, with penetrating bombs to destroy the tunnels, heat detectors to locate human presence, anti-personnel mines based in the natural environment and so on. The scientists, in their great majority, did as they were asked, until the time when the antiwar movement took off with the increase of US losses (60,000 GIs died - for some three million Vietnamese killed, five million injured and ten million displaced).

Despite considerable losses, which would have serious consequences after the victory (the militant infrastructure in revolutionary cadre originating from the South was much weakened), the Vietnamese resistance held good. The economic cost to the United States became exorbitant. The antiwar movement became a factor of internal political instability. 1968 shook the West, and Washington was forced to negotiate. Two years after the signing of the Paris agreements, the Saigon regime collapsed.

Check but not mate

In 1975, in the wake of the Vietnamese victory, Mozambique proclaimed its independence (in June), as well as Angola (in November) - both would be however be invaded by South Africa, but in the latter country, the apartheid regime met its end in 1994.

The United States failed in Vietnam, but the King was not mated for all that. The Paris agreements did not lead to a compromise like what happened with the Evian agreements between French imperialism and the new Algerian regime, quite the contrary. Washington had a policy of revenge and the conflict continued in other forms. In 1972, in a dramatic gesture, Richard Nixon visited Beijing as fighting was raging in the Indochinese peninsula. An alliance of circumstance was emerging which led, after 1975, to an anti-Vietnam front between American imperialism, China (where Deng Xiaoping returned to power) and the Khmer Rouge (behind the official veil of Sihanouk).

The war was not over. Washington maintained diplomatic pressure on the country and imposed an embargo (which lasted until February 1994 and locked out international investment). The Khmer Rouge multiplied its border attacks and claimed the Mekong delta. In December 1978, the Vietnamese army intervened massively and the Pol Pot regime collapsed, the deported populations returning home. In February-March 1979, some 120,000 men from the Chinese army attacked the northern border at several points where they fought with local militias and regional troops, the regular Vietnamese forces being engaged on the Cambodian theatre of operations. The CCP was indicating to Hanoi that the archipelagos of the Spratleys and the Paracels were Chinese; a pre-figuration of current maritime territorial conflicts.

The war after the war precipitated a crisis in Vietnam. As in Russia, China or Cuba, imperialism imposed a high price

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for its defeat, while Vietnamese society emerged exhausted from 30 years of conflict. The regime hardened again - it had already in the past effectively sidelined Ho Chi Minh (who died in 1969), while Giap was out of favour on more than one occasion and a secret purge was conducted within the leadership of the supposed "pro Soviets" being placed for many years under house arrest. It feared that the Chinese community in the south of the country would become a fifth column and also attacked the large capitalist merchants who were often Chinese. Beijing breathed on the embers, which contributed to the mass exodus of the "boat people".

The defeat of the US in 1975 has had lasting consequences. US imperialism experienced a relative decline, of which Europe was able to take advantage. For years, it was politically impossible to directly engage in a new war. A favourable window for struggles could have opened - if the consequences of the Sino Soviet conflict had not immediately closed it. The defeat in victory did not come from the external enemy, but the enemy within of any social revolution: the bureaucracy.

We should not forget the weakness of international solidarity - a question which was always very present. Some very beautiful internationalist pages were written during 1965-1975, notably, although not entirely, through the radicalization of youth in many countries. However, it was very late. The Vietnamese people would have been able to win its independence in 1936-37 at the time of the Popular Front in France; or in 1945, if Paris had not been able to send an expeditionary force to re-conquer its former colony; or in 1954 if Beijing and Moscow had not made a deal with Paris; or again in 1968, as a result of the TÃt offensive. It was necessary to wait until 1975, after decades of destruction and ordeals which could have been avoided for the forces of liberation and the entire population.