

WHAT HANOI MUST DO TO MERIT U.S. HELP

That the economy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is in a shambles has been known for years. This spring, however, a spate of American press reports have focused on alleged chronic food shortages in Vietnam. What makes this latest economic crisis noteworthy is that Hanoi has appealed directly to the United States for humanitarian aid and an overall improvement in U.S.-Vietnam relations. These appeals have been endorsed by some members of Congress, lending momentum to the call for "normalization" of U.S.-Vietnam relations. Yet, while Hanoi tries to appeal to America's humanitarian generosity, Vietnam has mobilized the world's fourth largest armed forces and with 190,000 of them continues to occupy Cambodia and Laos. The U.S. should not even begin reconsidering its relations to Hanoi until Vietnam significantly cuts the size of its armed forces and removes its troops from Cambodia and Laos.

Undercutting America's Friends. If Hanoi does not do this, improved U.S.-Vietnam relations are certain to benefit mainly Hanoi. It would undermine the international aid embargo imposed on Vietnam after its 1978 invasion of Cambodia, it would undercut America's friends in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and it would send the wrong signals to Vietnam, effectively rewarding it for invading Laos and Cambodia. Washington, moreover, should not assume that better ties with Hanoi somehow could "wean" Vietnam from Moscow. The USSR now gives Vietnam over \$2 billion annually in economic and military aid, assistance which Hanoi knows the West would be unprepared to replace in quality or quantity. In addition, Moscow has firmed its strategic hold in Vietnam — which includes exclusive Soviet control over Cam Ranh Bay, its largest naval base outside the Soviet Union — through thousands of Soviet advisors in Vietnam and over three decades of training Vietnamese cadre in the Soviet Union.

Instead of allowing alleged humanitarian issues to dictate the nature of Washington-Hanoi contact, the U.S. should focus on its own long-term strategic interests in Southeast Asia and set certain conditions that Vietnam must meet before improved relations are considered. These conditions should include:

1) **A massive reduction in the Vietnam Army.** With 1.26 million on active duty and 3 million reservists, the Vietnamese armed forces are the world's fourth largest, trailing only the USSR, China, and the U.S. By comparison, Thailand fields an army less than one-fifth the size of Vietnam's armed forces. And nearby Indonesia, which has almost three times Vietnam's population, has an army less than a third the size of Vietnam's. Hanoi today fields 65 infantry divisions — more than double the number of the early 1970s, when it was fighting South Viet-

nam, Laos, and the Khmer Republic. This gargantuan military machine drains Vietnam's economy enormously. Besides diverting domestic food production to feed the troops, Hanoi has to export laborers and large amounts of agricultural products to the Soviet Union to help pay for military supplies. Last September, for example, Hanoi sent 24,000 tons of fruits and vegetables to Moscow. This March, Vietnam reported sending over 40 percent of its yearly canned fruit output to the Soviet Union. These products, of course could be sold on the world market, bringing Hanoi the hard currency it says it must have for its domestic humanitarian needs. Vietnam claims that a huge military is needed to counter the Chinese threat. But for nine years, Beijing has said that a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia would remove the major point of contention in Sino-Vietnamese relations. The U.S. should insist that Vietnam withdraw from Cambodia and demobilize half of its army, reducing its active forces to 630,000 men. This still will be almost double that of any other Southeast Asian army and will leave Vietnam with sufficient forces for self defense.

2) A complete withdrawal of military forces from Cambodia. Vietnam invaded Cambodia in late 1978 and occupies that country with 140,000 troops. Hanoi promises to withdraw from Cambodia by 1990, but previous "withdrawals" actually have been troop rotations. This May, Vietnam pledged to reduce the number of its soldiers in Cambodia by 50,000 this year. A Vietnamese official stressed these proposed cutbacks in discussions with The Heritage Foundation on May 25; this indicates Hanoi's growing sensitivity to international criticism. The U.S. should hold Vietnam to its 1990 withdrawal date and, as a test of Vietnam's sincerity, should insist that all Vietnamese military forces be pulled east of the Mekong River by the first quarter of 1989; a full withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces should be accomplished by the first quarter of 1990. The U.S. also should support the call for free, internationally supervised elections in Cambodia to be held after a complete withdrawal of Vietnamese forces.

3) Withdrawal of all military forces from Laos. Vietnam stations 50,000 troops in Laos, effectively controlling the Laotian military and government. With few internal security problems and, aside from border skirmishes with Thailand, no serious external threats to the security of Laos, there is no justification for a continued large-scale presence of Vietnamese forces. The U.S. should insist on a withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Laos. This will lessen the possibility of Vietnamese expansion into the western Mekong Valley in Thailand.

In response to Hanoi's petitions for better relations with the U.S., Washington must not react hastily. The Reagan Administration and Congress should ask, for example, what justification there is for giving humanitarian help when Vietnam squanders so much of its own resources on maintaining the world's fourth largest military and on occupying Laos and Cambodia. What also must be asked is how U.S. moves toward Hanoi will affect America's steadfast Southeast Asian allies and whether this will further regional stability. It is the answers to these questions, not America's admirable impulse of humanitarian generosity, that should set the pace for changing U.S. relation with Vietnam.

Kenneth J. Conboy
Policy Analyst

For further information:

Kenneth J. Conboy, "Dealing with Hanoi: A Four-Point Strategy for Washington," Heritage Foundation Asian Studies Center *Backgrounders* No. 56, January 15, 1987.

Ambassador Vernon A. Walters, U.S. Representative to the 42nd Session of the U.N. General Assembly, Address to the General Assembly on the Situation in Kampuchea, October 13, 1987, U.S. Mission to the U.N. Press Release 52-(87).