

# In the crossfire: Vietnam's relations with China and Soviet Union during the Vietnam War (1965-1972)

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**Abstract.** Although most diplomatic history is written as an account of relations between two nations, in reality many interactions in international relations involve more than simple bilateral exchanges. This paper is intended to remedy this weakness in the literature by analyzing the strategic triangle created by Vietnam, Soviet Union, and the Peoples' Republic of China during the Vietnam War (1965-1972).

A triangular framework is appropriate for this purpose because each of the bilateral links - Vietnam - Soviet Union; Vietnam - China; China - Soviet Union was affected by the third member of the triangle. Although both the Soviet Union and China claimed to be "doing their international proletarian duty" by supporting Vietnam in the war against the United States, at the same time both countries followed their own policy and interests.

Based on Vietnamese sources, the paper tries to examine the complexity of this triangle relationship and argues that, although Vietnam achieved its aim, it was a pawn in a global ideological and power struggle among big powers.

## 1. Rationale

Although most diplomatic history is written as an account of relations between two nations, in reality many interactions in international relations involve more than simple bilateral exchanges. This proposal is intended to remedy this weakness in the literature by analyzing the strategic triangle created by Vietnam, Soviet Union, and the Peoples' Republic of China during the years of heavy U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (1965-1972).

A triangular framework is appropriate for this purpose because each of the bilateral links - Vietnam - Soviet Union; Vietnam - China; China - Soviet Union - was affected by the third member of the triangle.

China's policy in Vietnam must be understood in the context of its goals vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the United States. China hoped the war would weaken the United States, while simultaneously preventing expansion of Soviet-American rapprochement. China tried, at the same time, to avoid both an enlarged war and negotiations to end the war. In fact, China ultimately promoted a prolonged war of attrition for all involved participants. For Vietnam, China was an ally, a supplier of troops and supplies, and a deterrent against a U.S. invasion of the North, but also a much stronger neighbor who might ultimately begin

to take advantage of its great size to push Vietnam into a clearly subordinate status.

In comparison to China and the United States, the Soviet Union's position on Vietnam was more uncomfortable because it was influenced by two conflicting interests: a desire to reach a detente with the United States, and an interest to gain Vietnam's support in its struggle with China. In general, Soviet policy towards Vietnam during the war had several dimensions. *First*, Moscow did not want to sacrifice its strategy of detente in its relations with the US. *Second*, Moscow was ready to provide all the necessary military and economic aid needed for Hanoi to pursue its war. *Third*, Moscow preferred negotiating a settlement to the war rather than being drawn further into it[1]. In other words, the Soviet Union tried to have great influence in Vietnam in order to realize its foreign policy goals: to reach an appropriate settlement to the war and to make the DRV a reliable Soviet ally in the world communist movement.

In short, during the war, Vietnam was a pawn in a global ideological and power struggle among the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. While Chinese interests would only later become clear, both the Soviet Union and the United States clearly showed their interests in the Vietnam conflict for the first time in 1950. The United States feared a rapprochement between the two communist powers. China, in turn, was afraid of a Soviet-American detente, while the Soviet Union was concerned about any improvement of Sino-American relations.

## 2. The Emergence of the triangle

The Geneva Accords recognized the balance of these powers. Both the Soviet Union and China agreed to end the First Indochina

war, but for different reasons. While the Soviet Union preferred detente with the United States in order to keep a status quo in Europe, China followed its five principles of peaceful co-existence in Indochina, with two Vietnams and a protracted struggle in the country's south. However, both the Soviet Union and China continued to support North Vietnam in reconstructing its economy, in order to build up Vietnam as an "advance post" of socialism.

China was a main supporter as well as a beneficiary of the Geneva Accords of 1954[2]. On March 3, 1954, the Chinese News Agency announced that Chinese government accepted the invitation of Soviet Union to participate in the Geneva conference on Korea and Indochina[3]. Jean Chauvel called the Geneva Conference as the first meeting between the East and the West with participation of Beijing[4]. Realizing the importance of the conference China had prepared very carefully, and sent to Geneva a large delegation of 200 persons[5]. During the Geneva conference, Chou Enlai showed his skills as a diplomat and negotiator. Based on the fact of detente among powers, China tried to persuade Vietnam to sign the Geneva Accord by accepting a division of the country into two parts the North and the South along the 16th parallel. However, China suggested that if France will not accept this proposal, Vietnam would make Hai Phong a free port allowing France to settle a certain forces. In worst case, Vietnam could propose that the Highway No 5 and Hanoi and Hai Phong cities to become an area of common control and non-military purposes[3].

As a main figure in shaping the Geneva agreement, the Sino-Vietnam relationship was very close in the second half of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. About one year after the Geneva conference Ho Chi Minh led a high ranking governmental delegation from

Vietnam to pay an official visit to China from June 24 to July 7, 1955. During this visit two sides signed some agreements on economic, cultural and education exchanges. China also agreed to provide Vietnam with a grant of 800 millions Yuan (200 million USD)[3].

In this period, both China and Soviet Union were of the same opinion on Vietnamese revolution that DRV had to concentrate on construction of socialism in the North of Vietnam. The consensus of China and Soviet Union was explained by several factors. *First*, after years of confrontation the international relations entered in the period of détente between big powers. *Second*, both Soviet Union and China wanted to take this opportunity to consolidate their internal affairs. *Third*, the conflict between Soviet Union and China still did not appear serious.

The harmonized relations between Soviet Union and China were clear during the Geneva conference. In a speech delivered on May 12, 1954, Chou Enlai referred to Soviet Union as a guarantee for solving the conflict in Indochina: "It is also necessary to mention the peaceful policy of Soviet Union - Soviet Union is always patient to solve the conflict in Indochina in peaceful way, and to support the national self-determination of Indochinese people." [3]. In a telegram dated of May 30, and in a speech of June 8, 1954, Chou Enlai mentioned again and again about Soviet Union that shared the idea of China in the issue of international control in Indochina after Geneva conference. Without the agreement between Soviet Union and China, the Geneva conference would have taken more time. It was Soviet Union and China who played an important role in settlement of the conflict in Indochina. Not only in Vietnamese issues, but also in solving the questions of Laos and Cambodia, both China and Soviet Union shared the same ideas. The difference was in the way that China dealt with Laos and

Cambodia. According to China all parties, including Vietnam, had to withdraw their forces from Laos and Cambodia. While, in Laos, the revolutionary forces could move to the north of the country in the border area with China and Vietnam.[3] in Cambodia, there was no division of controlled area for revolution and national forces[3].

Until November 1956, the split between China and Soviet Union had not emerged. The relationship between two countries became worse as Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin at the Tenth Party congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in early 1956. During the visit of Chinese government and Communist Party of China delegation led by Chou Enlai to Vietnam on November 18-22, 1956, Chou Enlai had a long discussion with Vietnamese leaders on several important questions. *First*, according to Chou Enlai, the recent international situation, especially after events in Algeria and Hungary, became seriously complicated. The situation in Hungary and in other countries in Eastern Europe showed that, despite the fact that Soviet Union invested many resources in Eastern Europe, but the people there were still against Soviet Union. The reason for their protest was, according to China, Soviet hegemony. Chou Enlai said: "The principles of Marxism-Leninism are universal truth, but one cannot force a country to accept these principles - one has to combine with the practice of those countries." [3] According to Chou Enlai, China was especially displeased with hegemony in the relationship between countries. Although hegemony was not a major trend, Chou continued, it existed in some relations, and could influence badly on the masses. *Second*, on the question of Vietnam unification, Chou advised Vietnam to follow a protracted struggle. According to Chou, Vietnam should regard the principle of reunification through free election as a slogan



for political struggle, rather than as a guideline for daily action. Discussing the issue of economic policy, especially the land reform, Chou was of the opinion that the program was essentially successful, while mistakes and shortcomings were isolated and local. Using this opportunity Chou Enlai defended Stalin from the attack of Soviet leadership: "Comrade Stalin made serious mistakes, but it is to confirm that in the main his policies were the correct and victorious." [3].

In 1957, the split between Soviet Union and China became more open. While defending Stalin, China became criticize Soviet policy toward building Socialism through focusing on heavy industry. In April 1957, Premier Minister Pham Van Dong led a delegation to visit China to discuss on situation and plan of developing the North of Vietnam. During a meeting with Vietnamese colleagues on April 22, 1957, Mao Zedong advised: "Comrades, it will be dangerous if you go by the recent wrong way of brother countries in Eastern Europe. Hungary made mistake because it does not develop agriculture, because of too fast development of industry, developing without a market. Poland has paid much attention to industry, while the country did not have enough food, and even had to import to feed itself." [3]. (It should be noted that, like the other countries in Eastern Europe, China had also followed the direction from Soviet Union that means to focus on heavy industry without paying attention to resources and markets. The results were a waste of 4 billions USD[3].)

The other issue concerning both China and Soviet Union was how Vietnamese revolution in the South of Vietnam should be continued. In December 1955 there was a visit of a delegation from the Military Commission of the Party Central Committee (Quan uy Trung uong) to China. During the meeting between two sides

on December 8, 1955, Deng Xiaoping was the opinion that Vietnam had to prepare for a prolonged war of 10 or 20 years[3].

In general, in the period from 1954-1963, China wielded enormous influence on Vietnamese domestic issues. Following this strategy, Beijing tried to convince the North Vietnam to accept a definitive division of Vietnam by advising it to consolidate the revolutionary achievements in the North[6].

Unlike China, the Soviet Union recognized the role of Vietnamese revolution rather late in its global strategy. Even after 1954, Soviet aid to Vietnam was far behind that of China[7]. In order to help Vietnam to carry out the first five year plan (1961-1965) Soviet Union provided Vietnam a rent of 430 million rubles with favorable conditions and another 350 million rubles to cultivate tropical trees in agricultural, state-run farms. In addition, a grant of 20 million ruble was provided for combating malaria[8]. Until 1964, with assistance of Soviet Union about 90 important projects were renovated or new built up. Among these there were projects in the fields of hydroelectricity, mining, mechanics, chemistry, light industry, and education. According to Premier Minister Pham Van Dong, these projects played very important role in building up initial material and technical foundation of socialism in Vietnam[8].

Although Soviet Union continued helping Vietnam in building up the country and fighting against America, its assistance during this period characterized as at "an indifferent level". There were no Soviet high ranking delegations to visit Vietnam. The highest official who visited Vietnam was Moukhidinov, Politburo member and Secretary of the Central committee of CPSV who attend the Third Party congress of Vietnam's Workers Party in 1960. Nikita Khrushchev did not pay any visit to Vietnam,

but had done so in Indonesia, India, Myanmar and Afghanistan during February and March 1960, despite the fact that President Ho Chi Minh extended an invitation to him several times[8].

The attitude of Soviet Union toward Vietnam became worse in the mid-1963 after Vietnam publicly stated its opinion on international affairs and after the visit of Liu Shaoqi in May 1963. Although the Vietnam Workers Party recognized the conflict between the Soviet Union and China early on, it was too late in expressing its attitudes about the problem. On February 12, 1963, three years after the conflict had opened, the politburo of the Vietnam's Worker Party called the fraternal parties to stop attacks against each other in the mass media, and called for a meeting to solve the disunity within the world's communist and workers movement. The silence of the Vietnam's Workers Party can be explained by its wish to win the support from both sides for its own struggle against the US. However, silence was not always the best policy. The late reaction of the Vietnam's Worker Party made both sides unhappy, especially China, and was criticized by leaders of other socialist countries[9]. Moreover "the politics of neutrality exacted a high price on Hanoi's war effort." [10].

In May 1963, President Liu Shaoqi decided to pay an official visit to Vietnam. The main objective of this visit was to discuss with the Vietnam's Worker Party on the unity and solidarity among socialist countries as well as relationship between Vietnam-Soviet Union-China. Before going to Vietnam, Liu raised some question to Vietnamese leaders: why there is disagreement among socialist countries? What is the character of this conflict? Can this conflict be overcome? Is this dangerous if the conflict will be continued?[8]

Although he stated that "this visit is friendly visit because two countries are brothers and socialist comrades," but in fact China criticized Vietnamese attitude to the split between Soviet Union and China, and asked Vietnam to support China in this conflict. Liu Shaoqi stated:

"Let me talk about principle issue. The problems arise when there is discussion on the principles, there is no mid-way and compromise choice. This is not attitude of Marxism-Leninism - It is necessary to have a clear, stable opinion on problems, such as questions of principles... We have never heard that you are consistent in principle. The unity without principle is compromise. Unity must be based on principle of Marxism-Leninism, of the two Moscow statements. Continuing unity while refusing these principles would be not acceptable." [8].

According to Vietnamese sources, during the period between 1960 and 1964, the Central Committee of Vietnam's Worker Party received more than ten letters and announcements of Central Committee and Politburo of CPSV mentioning Soviet-China split, and calling for a Soviet-Vietnamese meeting regarding bad Vietnamese attitudes toward Soviet experts in Vietnam. More over, Central Committee of CPSV insisted that Vietnam "change viewpoints" (*thay doi lap truong*). In a meeting with Le Duan, First Secretary of Vietnam's Worker Party in February 1964, Khrushchev even threatened to cut off military assistance for Vietnam[8].

In December 1963, Vietnam's Central Committee decided to call its Ninth Plenum to discuss domestic and international policy[11]. In the context of deepened conflict between China and Soviet Union, Ho Chi Minh reminded the participants to pay special attention to the problem of unity between Vietnam and China, on the one side, and

between Vietnam and Soviet Union, on the other side, considering it to be the first priority of the Vietnam's Worker Party's foreign policy. He emphasized: "Our goal is unity. For unity we have to struggle. To struggle is to serve unity, not to speak badly about anyone. (We must some) how do so so that within our party and people there is love and gratitude to the fraternal brother countries." [12].

However, due to differences in strategies between the Vietnam's Worker Party and the Soviet Union, the relationship between Vietnam and the Soviet Union after the Ninth Plenum became worse. Vietnam called its students studying social sciences in the Soviet Union back to Vietnam<sup>7</sup>. After the Ninth Plenum, souring relationships not only existed between the two parties but also between the two states. The Soviet Union had threatened and forced Vietnam to follow its policy direction, interfering in the internal politics and sovereignty of Vietnam [13]. In a letter dated of July 6, 1964 the Central Committee of CPSV wrote:

"In recent time some activities of members of Central Committee of Vietnam's Worker Party made us worry and unhappy, because these actions have clearly gone in a contrary direction to the statement of Vietnamese

delegates on Soviet-Vietnam friendship. A recent unfriendly campaign against Soviet Union was carried out more and more widely and actively within Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In secret meetings of the Party and among population there was a wide dissemination of falsification to spread suspicions about the country of Lenin, to stir bad sentiment toward the country of Lenin." The letter concluded: "Rightly we believe that friendship must be reciprocated with friendship." [8].

In short, the triangle Vietnam-Soviet-Union relations were very complicated and covered by international, regional and internal factors. This relation also reflected the split in relationship between Soviet Union and China. Both of them tried to have more influences on Vietnam, and used this for their purposes.

### 3. The triangle in the period of 1964-1968

The year of 1964 was a turning point in the triangle relations between Vietnam-Soviet Union-China. There were some reasons to explain this change. *First*, in October 1964, Khrushchev was removed from the position of the First Secretary of the CPSV by Leonid Brezhnev. *Second*, the escalation of the Vietnam War forced Soviet Union and other socialist countries to provide more assistance for Vietnam. *Third*, the complexity and increase of conflict between Soviet Union and China influenced greatly on Vietnam--the third party. The Vietnam policy of Soviet Union was modified in the Brezhnev era.

Chinese aid to North Vietnam increased dramatically even after 1963. There were a number of reasons for this increase. *First*, the escalation of military conflicts in South Vietnam led to an expansion of the war to North Vietnam and deepened China's fear that

<sup>7</sup> There were about one thousand students were called back to Vietnam during 1963-1964. According the interview conducted by the author in August 2004, all students (most of them were second or third years students in the Soviet Union) had to leave the Soviet Union for Vietnam as soon as possible without knowing whether they could come back to Soviet Union. Therefore, they had to go back without taking anything with them. After arrival in Vietnam, they faced many difficulties. They did not know what to do, and what to study. In comparison to the students who came back from China, they were neglected and did not receive any support or attention. Until today these students still have an inferiority complex and dissatisfaction. Among them there were only three persons who could return to the Soviet Union, and finished their study there. Among these lucky persons, there was Dang Xuan Ky, the son of Truong Chinh.



the war could threaten its security. Therefore, China decided to offer additional forces, consisting of 230 battalions, to North Vietnam[2]. *Second*, Mao used the international situation and support to Vietnam to win the upper hand in an internal struggle for power among Chinese Communist Party leaders. *Third*, China's motivation for increasing support to Vietnam was related to the split between China and the Soviet Union that took place in 1956 after the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. Through its support to Vietnam, the Chinese leadership tried to show that China was the country that could provide Vietnam with sufficient support for its national liberation movement, and that China was a true communist country, in comparison to Soviet Union. *Fourth*, China's support to Vietnam can also be explained through its desire to play a leading role in helping revolutionary movements in the third world. In sum, through support to Vietnam, China's leadership tried to achieve both international and domestic goals.

As part of this process, during August 1964, China carried out changes to its military presence in the South of China, such as the redeployment of its air force and anti-craft artillery, as well as the construction of new airports[14]. In political and social life, there was a tremendous movement known as "Resist America and Assist Vietnam" which was organized throughout the country with the participation of more than 20 million people<sup>(2)</sup>. In late 1964 and early 1965, China even made clear that it was ready to send its army to fight together with the Vietnamese people, and that it would offer all manner of support to Vietnam<sup>(3)</sup>.

In the period 1964-1968, China's support to Vietnam was expressed in three main forms: the construction and maintenance of defense

infrastructure, air fields, roads and railways; the use of Chinese anti-aircraft artillery troops in the defense of important strategic areas of North Vietnam; and the supply of military equipment and civil materials. According to one statistic, over 320,000 Chinese engineering and anti-aircraft artillery forces were in Vietnam at the time[15]

In comparison to the previous period, during 1964-1968, Soviet Union had modified their policy toward Vietnam. The new leadership of Soviet Union has reconfirmed their role of co-chair for Geneva conference 1954 for Vietnam. The letter of Minister of Foreign Affairs Gromyko to Minister Xuan Thuy dated of December 12, 1964 stated: "The states participating in Geneva conference could not be outside, when security of nations and peace in Indochina was threatened."

The turning point in the relationship between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam was in 1965 when Soviet Premier Kosygin visited Hanoi in early February. The meaning of the visit was multidimensional. *First*, the Soviet Union wanted to make clear its efforts to defend Hanoi from American air attacks by equipping the DRV with anti-aircraft weapons. *Second*, the Soviet Union wanted to emphasize its position in Southeast Asia. *Third*, the Soviet Union intended to warn Vietnam not to underestimate the US plans regarding communism in Asia. *Last but not least*, the Soviet Union planned to come to an agreement with Chinese leadership on the Vietnam War, taking into account Kosygin's two visits to Beijing[16].

During this period, Soviet Union was intended for Vietnam a strong political support. On May 8, 1965, the First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev stated: "To support Vietnam in the struggle against aggression of American imperialism is an honorable cause, and vital

<sup>(2)</sup> Renmin ribao (1965), 7 and 12 August.

<sup>(3)</sup> Renmin ribao (1965), 25 March.

interest of all people defending freedom and independence.”[8]

Soviet Union also established official relations with National Liberation Front (NLF). On January 13, 1965, the representative office of NLF was founded in Moscow. In May of 1965 this office gained diplomatic status. On June 13, 1969 Soviet Union officially recognized Provisional Revolutionary Government of Republic of South Vietnam (PRG).

In term of economy, like during the previous period, Soviet support continued playing an important role. In February 1965, Soviet Union decided to defer Vietnamese debts.

After the visit of Kosygin, Soviet aid to Vietnam increased every year. However, Moscow did not want to risk its relations with the US and the West. As a result, Moscow's foreign policy was in a dilemma. On the one hand, the Soviet Union had to show its international proletarianism to its Vietnamese friends. On the other hand, it did not like to block its communication with the West. In addition, the meeting with China did not bring positive results. China refused to coordinate support to Vietnam. All these factors gave an impression that the Soviet Union, despite its statement to support Vietnam, still tried to avoid involvement in the Vietnam conflict and to cooperate with the US in making a political settlement.

From March 1965 on, due to the escalation of the war and the failure of a diplomatic settlement to the conflict, Moscow decided to strengthen cooperation with Vietnam in economic and military areas. Soviet aid was mostly in form of food and equipment, and was transported initially by sea, but after March 30, 1965 through Chinese territory. Soviet leaders made several strong public statements on

fraternal solidarity and socialist internationalism during March 1965[4].

The high point of the cooperation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam was the official visit of the Vietnam's Worker Party delegation, headed by Le Duan, to Moscow from April 10 to 17, 1965. In the joint communiqué drafted by the end of the visit, both sides stated: "If the US intensifies its aggression against the DRV, in a necessary case and if the DRV requires it, the Soviet Union government would permit the departure to Vietnam of those Soviet citizens who expressed their wish in accordance with the feelings of international proletarian spirit to struggle for the just cause of Vietnamese people, for defense of socialist achievements of the DRV." [17]

As a result, the Soviet Union agreed to provide Vietnam with surface-to-air missile batteries for the area around Hanoi, Hai Phong and other important cities, in addition to fighter aircraft, pilots, and technicians. The April 1965 visit also solved problems of the transportation of Soviet aid through Chinese territory. The first fifteen MIG 15/17s and one hundred armored personnel carriers were sent to Vietnam. Later some light IL-28 bombers arrived in Vietnam as well[[7].

During 1965 both Washington and Hanoi were in no hurry to negotiate, preferring to gain military victories, and then to negotiate from a position of strength. Therefore, during 1965 the war in Vietnam approached a new and dangerous phase, though there were several attempts to prevent it. The Soviet Union was the only mediator that could negotiate a settlement, but it failed to do so because such a settlement could isolate the Soviet Union from communist and national liberation movements.

Soviet aid to Vietnam grew steadily from 1965 to 1968. By 1967 total socialist-country aid to the DRV accounted for about 1.5 billion



rubles (more than 1.5 billion USD), among which Moscow's share was 36.8 percent (608 million USD). By the end of 1967, Soviet support grew to 50 percent of total socialist-country aid. Among this, military aid comprised two-thirds of all Soviet assistance, and accounted for 396.7 million USD in 1968. In addition in September 1965 there were between 1,500 to 2,500 Soviet military personnel serving in Vietnam. They were mostly technicians, pilots and SAM operators. In addition there was a special group responsible for obtaining samples of American weapons to learn about up-to-date US arms[7]. In 1968, the Soviet Union took over the top position in supporting Vietnam from China. However, it was a bitter moment for the Soviet Union, according to one report from the Soviet embassy in Hanoi, as the Soviet Union's influence in Vietnam did not grow accordingly with their support.

By 1965, faced with escalation of the war in Vietnam and similarly escalating commitments, the Soviet Union proposed a plan to unify activities among socialist countries to support Vietnam. This plan was twofold: to strengthen support for Vietnam, and at the same time to put China in on the defensive. During his visit to Vietnam in February 1965, President Kosygin suggested that three countries Vietnam, Soviet Union and China issue a common statement on a unified plan. Suggestions on a common statement of socialist countries regarding Vietnam made by Soviet Union on January 12, 1966 and in March 1967 were again rejected by China.

The split between Soviet Union and China has badly influenced on transportation of aid goods from Soviet Union and other socialist countries through Chinese territory. Using its position as a transit terminal, China tried to manipulate this aid to limit big military attacks

by the Vietnamese. Beginning in 1965, Soviet Union suggested a series of plans, such as the establishment of an air base for Soviet airplanes in Hainan province, or establishment of air-bridge through China, using Hoa Nan port to send Soviet goods to Vietnam, or organizing a specialist group in Binh Tuong. However, all these initiatives of Soviet Union were rejected by China[8].

In the context of the deep split between Soviet Union and China, the atmosphere of the triangle relationship was characterized by distrust. Both China and Soviet Union were worried about the position of Vietnam. Although Soviet Union provided Vietnam with heavy support during this period, it was still worried that Vietnam would move from the Soviet side to Chinese one. The Soviet Union was of the opinion that Vietnam was biased towards China. During high ranking negotiations in August 1966, the Soviet Union did not hesitate to raise questions regarding what China had advised Vietnam to do, and what Vietnam had agreed with China. Soviet Union also suspected that Vietnam was too dependent on Chinese International policy, and that Vietnam had separate talks with China to oppose the Soviet Union. More over, according to the Soviet Union, Vietnam had treated Soviet specialists coolly, prevented Vietnamese people from contacting the specialists, and limited their travel. Vietnam did not allow Soviet specialists, but rather Chinese ones to visit a missile base that had been built by the Soviet Union. Also, Vietnam, according to Soviet Union, was silent when China slandered the Soviet Union[8].

All these influenced badly on relations between the Soviet Union and Vietnam. The Soviet Union required Vietnam to make clear choice: total dependence on Soviet Union, or continued dependence on China. It was not surprise that Soviet Union did not confirm

additional aid for 1968 as well as military and economic aid for 1969, with the explanation that the request from Vietnam was so high that they needed time to consider[8].

In short, in the period of 1964-1968, both big brothers were competing to assist Vietnam in the war against the US. Soviet sources claimed that Vietnamese sympathies toward China were stronger than those toward the Soviet Union. The reason for this was that China remained an important supplier of economic and human resources for Vietnam. China was also closer to Vietnam than any other socialist country in geographical and ideological terms. The Soviet Union tried to use every channel to exploit disagreement between China and Vietnam for its own interests. Although both China and the Soviet Union were the supporters of Vietnam, neither of them was satisfied with their Vietnamese friends. In order to placate the Chinese as well as to deter the Soviets, Vietnam decided to arrest a group of high ranking officials supposed to be pro-Soviet in 1967. They were accused for treason, espionage and transmitting state secrets [10]. This campaign was known as the "Revisionist Anti-Party Affair." The arrests of these persons showed on the one hand that the Vietnam's Workers Party would not fall into the sphere of influence of Moscow, while on the other hand affirming Vietnam's continued policy of neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split.

#### **4. The Triangle in the last period of the war (1968-1973)**

The year of 1968 was turning point in the Vietnam War. Influenced by the Tet offensive in January 1968, on October 31, 1968 President Johnson ordered the cessation of bombing in North Vietnam[18].

During this period, Soviet Union continued assisting Vietnam to fight America on the one hand, and tried to play a role of mediator in Vietnam-USA negotiation. In doing so, Soviet Union from the beginning tried to persuade Vietnam to accept the "low conditions" raised by America. On January 28, 1967, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Duy Trinh made a statement saying: "Only after America stops bombing unconditionally and ceases any other warlike actions against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, can the DRV start talking with America about related problems." [19]. The Soviet Union responded that America would hardly accept to stop bombing unconditionally, thus preventing negotiations. According to Soviet Union, it was an unrealistic condition raised by Vietnam. The Soviet Union asked Vietnam to meet some requirements of USA. Negotiations must be based on the reciprocity principle, therefore North Vietnam should stop fighting in South Vietnam, and North Vietnamese forces should withdraw from South Vietnam. On April 25, 1968 Kosygin said to Premier Minister Pham Van Dong: "Of course, America cannot stop bombing North Vietnam 100% if they have achieved nothing. Surely they will require you to stop your support of troops and weapons for South Vietnam, if only on the surface...If you firmly required that the US stop bombing North Vietnam totally and unconditionally, and you will not compromise on anything, this is an ultimatum. But a real willingness to negotiate requires all parties to stop issuing ultimate." [8]

Regarding the place of negotiations, Soviet Union also tried to persuade Vietnam to accept Soviet proposal. At the beginning of 1968, Soviet Union proposed to meet in Moscow or in Warsaw. In April 1968, Soviet Union advised Premier Minister Pham Van Dong during his visit to Moscow that North Vietnam and America could meet on a Soviet military ship.

In May 1968 the Soviet Union proposed that North Vietnam and America to meet at the Soviet Embassy in Paris. On June 13, 1968 the Central Committee of CPSU sent to Central Committee of VWP a letter in which contained "package solutions." On October 19, 1968 Soviet Union again asked that Vietnam to inform the Soviet Union of Vietnamese opinion on the proposal. On October 25, 1968, Soviet Union even prepared a draft of statement between Vietnam and America on issue of stopping the bombing and starting negotiations[8].

Apart from these campaigns, Soviet Union, according to North Vietnam, still used aid as an instrument in relations between North Vietnam and Soviet Union. In 1968, the Soviet Union provided an amount of additional military support that was less than Vietnamese demands. Moreover, Soviet Union delayed military aid for two months, and delayed in signing the agreement on aid for the year of 1969. In 1972, Soviet Union had not only rejected Vietnamese demand to receive President Nixon, but also stopped military support for Vietnam.

The reasons that Soviet Union followed such kind of policy were very complicated. *First*, Soviet Union may have overevaluated American military strength of USA, while distrusting Vietnamese military capability. In the meeting with Premier Minister Pham Van Dong on June 3, 1966 Brezhnev said: "There are two ways to liberate the South: militarily and by negotiations. If we used the first way, we do not have enough forces. America can increase soldiers and easily provide assistance, while military forces of NLF are mostly from North"[8].

*Second*, Soviet Union wanted to avoid direct, face-to-face talks with America. On May 4, 1966, Ambassador Tscherbakov said to Pham Van Dong: "We do not like the situation

of having direct face-to-face negotiations with America."

*Third*, Soviet Union wanted to use Vietnam conflict to have *détente* with America to serve Soviet strategy. In the first official statement on November 6, 1964, Brezhnev said: "Soviet Union is ready to develop Soviet-US relations for the interest of the two peoples and for the interest of consolidated peace". From March to May 1965, Soviet security forces suppressed demonstrations against American aggression organized by Vietnamese students in Moscow and Leningrad[8].

*Fourth*, after the Tet offensive, President Nixon decided to follow the Vietnamization strategy, announced on July 25, 1969. According to this strategy, USA changed its strategy from confrontation to negotiation with both China and Soviet Union, with the hope of escaping from the Vietnam conflict. After Vietnam started negotiations with the USA, the Soviet Union ratified a consular note with the US on August 13, 1968. The NPT was signed by Soviet Union and the US on July 1, 1968. The peak of this *détente* was the visit of President Nixon to Moscow in May 1972, even while US torpedoes were arrayed along Vietnam's coasts.

*Last but not least*, the China factor played an important role in Vietnam conflict. In 1970, Soviet Union twice asked Chinese government to have a meeting on high level to discuss about world situation and expansion of the war in Indochina. Soviet Union stated that "the coordination of activities between Soviet Union and China, two big socialist countries, the voice of which will influence the American government, can contribute to the defeat American aggression in Indochina." [8] However, China refused to cooperate with Soviet Union. Responding to Soviet suggestion, Chou Enlai said: "The common action to



support people of Indochina and Vietnam depends on relations between Soviet Union and China, and on the [resolution of the] split between two countries.”[8]. In addition, on March 16, 1971 Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs stated: “Soviet Union and China have a principle disagreement about American attitudes; therefore China cannot act together with Soviet Union.”[8].

The turning point in the triangle happened in 1971, as China started looking for a rapprochement with the US through “ping pong diplomacy” in April, and Henry Kissinger paid a visit to China in July of the same year. Responding to this development, the People Newspaper – an organ of Vietnam’s Worker Party- published an article with the title “The Nixon doctrine will be certainly defeated”. Soviet Union revealed that there was also serious split between Vietnam and China. The Soviet press decided to republish the article from The People’s Newspaper. In a meeting with Premier Minister Pham Van Dong on May 9, 1971, for the first time, Brezhnev was of the opinion that Vietnam must be the core of leadership in Indochina and Southeast Asia.”[8]. This idea was repeated several times during 1971.

In 1972, when President Nixon was preparing to visit China, the Soviet Union tried to prevent the possibility that the US and China could make compromise on Vietnam. On February 12, 1972, Ambassador Tserbakov meet Pham Van Dong to inform Vietnamese Premier Minister of the Soviet opinion that the US wanted China play the role of mediator. However, the Soviets felt that only Vietnam could understand how to negotiate in Paris, and thus the Soviet Union would support Vietnam’s standpoint. The Soviet Union had also an idea that US would like, through Peking, to consolidate its position in Indochina. Therefore the visit of President Nixon to Beijing? was a

reaction of the Soviet Union’s protest of the rapprochement between US and China. The Chinese factor was in fact catalysis for Soviet-Vietnam, and Soviet-US relations during this period.

## 5. Conclusions

The development of the triangular relationship among Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union during the Vietnam War was a classic example of Cold War politics. In this game, all of them tried to win over the other with different means and methods to further their own interests.

In the context of the Cold War, where in this case the game was being played on Vietnamese territory, the VWP was in an uncomfortable situation. For the Party, the most important task was to gain national independence, freedom and the reunification of Vietnam. In order to do so, the VWP tried to carry out an independent foreign policy on the one hand, but also to gain as much support as possible from both “fraternal countries” on the other. These two tasks were closely related with each other. In reality, Vietnam could not have an independent policy because it needed the support from within the socialist camp. And the more support Vietnam received, the more it depended on its alliances. So one can say that the policy of the VWP was shaped and determined very much by the balance of powers and the bipolarity of international politics. Both China and the Soviet Union claimed to be showing international proletarianism through their support to Vietnam, but in fact they were trying to defend their own interests. The rapprochement between the US and China and between the US and the Soviet Union in 1972, and the Paris Agreement in 1973 were evidence of the continuation of their approach toward Vietnam.

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