

## Research Article

# FOREIGN POLICY OF GENERAL SECRETARY NGUYEN VAN LINH OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM DURING THE PERIOD (1986-1991)

<sup>1,\*</sup> MSc. Tran Van Thuyen and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Do Van Bien

<sup>1</sup>Graduate student at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup>Office of CPV Central Committee, Vietnam.

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### ABSTRACT

Nguyen Van Linh (1915-1998) was a staunch communist and a highly respected leader of the Vietnamese people. Throughout his revolutionary career, Nguyen Van Linh held many important positions, including: Secretary of the City Committee, Secretary of the Saigon-Gia Dinh Special Zone (1945); Acting Secretary, Secretary of the Southern Vietnam Regional Committee (1957-1960); Secretary of the Central Bureau of the South Vietnam and Deputy Secretary of the Central Bureau of the South Vietnam (1961-1975); Twice served as Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Committee (1976 and 1981); In December 1986, at the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Linh was elected General Secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. During his tenure as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (1986-1991) in the Vietnam's renovation period, Nguyen Van Linh, together with the Politburo and the Central Executive Committee of the Party, gradually concretized the renovation policy, demonstrating acuity, proactiveness, and creativity in steering the Vietnamese revolutionary boat through perilous stages and gradually bringing Vietnam into integration and development. Within the framework of this article, the author focuses on clarifying the contributions of General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh to foreign affairs during the period (1986-1991).

**Keywords:** Nguyen Van Linh; Vietnam's foreign policy; renovation; Vietnam's diplomacy; Communist Party of Vietnam.

### BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, the surge in scientific and technological advancements has profoundly impacted and influenced numerous nations globally. The advent of groundbreaking inventions in computing, genetic engineering, and new materials, etc. has markedly enhanced labor productivity. In this context, capitalist countries, after a long period of economic and political crises since the early 20th century, quickly adapted to and effectively utilized the achievements of modern science and technology, improved management methods, changed production structures, and revised social policies. Therefore, the economies of capitalist countries have achieved many important successes and developed rapidly.

Conversely, many socialist countries encountered severe economic crises. To escape these crises, reform, restructuring, and renovation became the objective trend in these countries. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several socialist countries in Eastern Europe embarked on reform efforts. However, these reforms were influenced by opportunist and revisionist ideologies, leading to serious mistakes that plunged Eastern European socialist countries into crisis. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the socialist regime modeled after the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries collapsed and disintegrated, and socialism and the international workers' movement entered a period of decline.

Besides, in the years 1975-1986, peace, national independence, cooperation, and development were the major global trends. However, localized wars, conflicts, arms races, ethnic and religious conflicts, interventionist activities, terrorism, territorial disputes, and economic competition, etc. occurred fiercely. The major powers, while cooperating and compromising, also engaged in fierce competition,

which dominated and further complicated international relations. On the other hand, globalization, especially the economic globalization and the scientific and technological revolution, has propelled the formation of an information society and knowledge-based economy, profoundly influencing the development of many countries worldwide. In the trend of globalization, competition and cooperation, openness and international economic integration have become the main factor and the basic requirement of bilateral or multilateral relations of each country. Western capitalist countries and multinational corporations, in addition to improving labor productivity and generating economic profits, also focus on improving management capacity and supporting social policies. Developed capitalist countries like the United States and Japan are the ones that maintain strong competitiveness in many fields such as technology, economy, and industry, etc. The bipolar world order, characterized by the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, underwent significant and profound transformations. The United States has ascended to the position of the preeminent economic superpower, while the economic development gap between the Soviet Union, other socialist countries, and developed capitalist countries widened considerably.

From 1976 onwards, the United States government and, followed by Western countries in 1979, implemented a policy of encirclement and embargo against Vietnam, leading to the stagnation of Vietnam's international economy. In that context, the Fourth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1976 defined the foreign policy task as "to strive to consolidate and strengthen the solidarity and cooperation between our country and all fraternal socialist countries... to make the noble ideals of Marxism-Leninism increasingly victorious" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1977, p.178). By the Fifth Congress of the Party in March 1982, the policy was "to tighten the bonds of friendship and expand cooperative relations with the socialist countries... is the foremost issue in the foreign policy of our Party and State" (Communist Party of Vietnam, Documents of the Fifth National Congress of Delegates, 1982, p.144). Thus, Vietnam's

\*Corresponding Author: MSc. Tran Van Thuyen,

1Graduate student at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

foreign relations activities during this period were primarily with Eastern European countries, the Soviet Union, and other socialist countries. However, these countries themselves were in a state of economic and social crisis, which posed significant challenges to our economic and foreign relations activities.

Economically, Vietnam faced a severe economic crisis. "Economic growth was low, with some years of negative growth. On average, during the period from 1977 to 1980, GDP grew only by 0.4% per year (with a decrease of 2% in 1979 and 1.4% in 1980). The GDP per capita saw a decline (by 1.87% per year), reaching only USD 86 in 1986. Inflation soared at an extraordinary rate, with the retail price index for the entire year of 1986 rising to 774.7%. The living conditions of the people were extremely difficult. Vietnam was among the poorest countries in the world" (Economic Times).

Politically, the United States government intensified its embargo measures and exerted pressure on other countries in their relations with Vietnam. Meanwhile, in late 1978 and early 1979, Vietnam fought two consecutive wars to protect the homeland on the Southwestern and Northern borders, which left the Cambodian issue unresolved and created further difficulties in normalizing relations between Vietnam and China.

The urgent mission of Vietnam at this time was to promptly end the state of confrontation, break the encirclement and embargo, create a favorable international environment, focus on economic development, and lead the country out of crisis. The requirement was to promote normalization and expand cooperation with other countries. Faced with this urgent requirement, the Sixth National Congress of Delegates of the Communist Party of Vietnam, in December 1986, with the spirit of facing the truth and correctly assessing the truth, reached a consensus on adopting a policy of comprehensive renovation of the country. In terms of foreign affairs, the Sixth Congress affirmed: "In the coming years, the mission of our Party and State in the field of foreign affairs is to strive to combine the strength of the nation with the strength of the era" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2005, p.104).

To concretize the policy of the Sixth Congress (December 1986), in his capacity as the top leader of the Communist Party of Vietnam, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, together with the Politburo, initiated an adjustment in foreign policy aimed at breaking the encirclement and embargo, resisting international isolation, reducing tensions with countries in the region and neighboring countries, and fostering a peaceful and friendly international environment to create favorable conditions for the renovation process in Vietnam.

## RESOLVING THE CAMBODIAN ISSUE

In accordance with the Resolution No. 13-NQ/TW dated May 20, 1988 of the Politburo, regarding foreign policy tasks and strategies in the new context, which identified three top foreign policy priorities: withdrawing troops from Cambodia, normalizing relations with China, and improving and normalizing relations with the United States. General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh directly oversaw the implementation of measures to promote political solutions to the Cambodian issue. On May 26, 1988, the Ministry of Defense of Vietnam announced the withdrawal of 50,000 troops and the return of the Vietnamese Volunteer Army Command from Cambodia to Vietnam. Subsequently, on January 6, 1989, at the 10th anniversary celebration of the National Day of the People's Republic of Cambodia, when Cambodian forces had grown strong enough, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Linh, declared that Vietnam would withdraw all troops from Cambodia

by September 1989, one year ahead of schedule, if a political solution could be found. In that spirit, on September 26, 1989, Vietnam completed the withdrawal of its volunteer troops ahead of the committed deadline.

The Vietnamese government's unexpected early withdrawal of all troops created momentum for rapid promotion of a dialogue with relevant countries, including ASEAN countries, which broke away from the stance of countries supporting the Democratic Kampuchea to engage in dialogue with Vietnam. In addition, the rapid development of the Cambodian issue resolution also contributed to the normalization of Vietnam-China relations and at the same time influenced US policy in Indochina. The United States ended its support for the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea and began moves for the two sides to negotiate the normalization of Vietnam-US relations. Western countries and ASEAN overcame the United States embargo and began to cooperate economically with Vietnam.

On July 30, 1989, the Paris Conference on Cambodia was convened with the participation of 17 countries, including the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, the two Indochinese countries (Vietnam, Laos), the six ASEAN countries, and Australia, Japan, India, and Canada, along with the four Cambodian factions (Hun Sen, Ranariddh, Khieu Samphan, Son Soubert) under the chairmanship of the two co-chairs, the French Foreign Minister and the Indonesian Foreign Minister. In addition, the Conference was also attended by United Nations Secretary-General De Guellar and the President of the Non-Aligned Movement (Zimbabwean Foreign Minister). After more than six sessions from January to September 1990, a framework political solution for Cambodia was agreed upon, resulting in the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on October 23, 1991, with the following main documents: "(1) Final Act of the Paris Conference on Cambodia; (2) Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, with annexes on the functions and mandates of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), military issues, elections, repatriation of Cambodian refugees and displaced persons, and principles for a new Cambodian Constitution; (3) Agreement on the Sovereignty, Independence, Territorial Integrity and Inviolability, Neutrality and National Unity of Cambodia; (4) Declaration on the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Cambodia" (Nguyen Dinh Bin (editor-in-chief), 2015, p.339). The Agreement Documents were a concretization of the "Framework for a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict" adopted by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council on August 28, 1990.

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreements marked the official end of the Cambodian crisis, putting an end to the tensions between Vietnam and those countries that had exploited the Cambodian issue to pursue policies of encirclement, embargo, and destructive war against Vietnam, causing significant damage to Vietnam's socio-economic development. It ushered in a new era of cooperation and co-development. The relationship between Vietnam, Cambodia, and other countries involved in the Cambodian issue was resolved, creating numerous opportunities for cooperation and development under new conditions. Simultaneously, it paved the way for the normalization of Vietnam's international relations.

The resolution of the Cambodian issue also reflected the flexible and open diplomatic approach, the expansion and promotion of economic and political foreign relations, and the establishment of friendly and cooperative relations, transforming from confrontation to dialogue, of the Communist Party of Vietnam, led by General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, who directly led and directed the implementation of Vietnam's foreign policy during this period.

## NORMALIZING RELATIONS WITH CHINA

Following the events of China's exploitation of the Cambodian issue to create difficulties for Vietnam, the Vietnamese-Chinese Border War in 1979, and the East Sea (or South China Sea) issue in 1988, which were basically resolved and recognized by the world, both Vietnam and China expressed a desire to normalize their ties and put aside past conflicts in favor of a more cooperative future. In addressing the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh and the Politburo carefully analyzed the prevailing situation and assessed the Vietnam-China relationship within the broader context of international relations. This led to the formulation of policies and measures aimed at the swift normalization of relations with China.

In December 1988, Vietnam requested China to hold a meeting of foreign ministers to discuss the normalization of relations between the two countries. Subsequently, both parties agreed to hold the first round of negotiations in January 1989 in Beijing, China.

On November 6, 1989, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Linh, sent a message to the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, affirming Vietnam's willingness to engage in discussions with China regarding the normalization of bilateral relations. On December 12, 1989, Deng Xiaoping responded to General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh's message, expressing China's sincere desire to normalize relations between the two countries.

In 1990, deputy-level diplomatic negotiations between Vietnam and China took place over two rounds in Beijing and one round in Hanoi. During these negotiations, both parties engaged in dialogue regarding the normalization of Vietnam-China relations. Alongside diplomatic measures, Vietnam proposed that both parties cease military activities at the land and maritime borders. Vietnam opened its border gates to allow the people from both sides to visit relatives and engage in trade.

On August 12, 1990, Chinese Premier Li Peng declared: "China hopes to eventually normalize relations with Vietnam and discuss issues such as the dispute over the Spratly Islands." Following this declaration, Vietnam affirmed "its readiness to normalize relations with China and resolve issues between the two countries through peaceful negotiations" (Nguyen Dinh Bin (editor-in-chief), Vietnam's Diplomacy 1945-2000, 2015, p.344). Vietnam suggested that China organize a high-level meeting between the two countries to discuss the normalization of relations and other related issues.

Over two days, from September 3 to 4, 1990, at the Jinniu Hotel in Chengdu, Sichuan, China, leaders from Vietnam and China met informally. The Vietnamese delegation was led by Nguyen Van Linh, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, accompanied by Do Muoi, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and advisor Pham Van Dong. The Chinese delegation included General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng. During the conference, leaders from both nations engaged in cordial discussions about normalizing relations between Vietnam and China. Both sides expressed their goodwill and shared aspirations for the restoration of the close ties between the two Parties and Nations, a relationship initially established by President Ho Chi Minh and President Mao Zedong, along with other revolutionary predecessors. The high-level talks in Chengdu marked a developmental milestone in diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China, effectively normalizing the relationship between the two countries. In March 1991, Chinese Premier Li Peng declared that "Vietnam-China relations have thawed." On November 5, 1991, Do Muoi, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, and Vo Van Kiet, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, visited China and

signed an official declaration normalizing bilateral relations. The normalization of Vietnam-China relations not only served the interests of both nations but also contributed to enhancing peace, stability, and regional cooperation, paving the way for Vietnam's foreign policy in relations with major countries like the United States, China, the Soviet Union, ASEAN member countries, and others.

## IMPROVING RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES, JAPAN, AND ASEAN

In parallel with the above process, Vietnam-US relations began to restart with a message from General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh: "Vietnam has always wanted to have good relations with the people and government of the United States. It has been 15 years since the end of the Vietnam War without normalization, which is too long. Vietnam is ready to resolve any obstacles on the path to normalization; the remaining obstacle is on the US side" (Nguyen Van Linh, 1991, p.134). In July 1990, US Secretary of State Baker announced that the US acknowledged Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia, that the Phnom Penh government was the main force capable of preventing the Khmer Rouge from returning to power, and that the US therefore decided to withdraw its recognition of the Democratic Kampuchea government and was ready to discuss with Vietnam and the Cambodian state to promote a solution to the Cambodian issue. In August 1990, Vietnamese and US representatives held talks in New York, and in April 1991, they outlined a roadmap for normalizing relations between the two countries. In July 1990, U.S. Secretary of State Baker declared that the United States recognized Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia, and the Phnom Penh government as the main force capable of preventing the Khmer Rouge from returning to power, hence the United States decided to withdraw recognition of the Democratic Kampuchea government, ready to discuss with Vietnam and the State of Cambodia to promote a resolution to the Cambodian issue. In August 1990, Vietnamese and U.S. representatives conducted negotiations in New York, and by April 1991, they had outlined a roadmap for normalizing relations between the two countries. In April 1992, the United States eased its embargo against Vietnam, paving the way for President Bill Clinton to fully lift the United States' complete embargo in February 1995. Over the past 25 years since normalization, the mutual benefits between the two countries have grown steadily, forming a foundation and momentum for the development of Vietnam-US relations. Vietnam and the United States have effectively cooperated in a wide range of fields at bilateral, regional, and global levels. This development aligns with the trends of the era, benefiting the people of both countries and contributing to the peace, friendship, and cooperative development of the region and the world.

Regarding Japan, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh analyzed and directed the need to further promote relations with Japan. He stated, "Japan is an economic powerhouse with the capability to develop cooperation not only with Vietnam but also with many other countries, at least in terms of economy, science and technology. If Japan has been successful with many Asian countries, then a good relationship with Vietnam will not only improve our economy but also lay the groundwork for building this region into a zone of peace, cooperation, and friendship. Japan has the ability to do this" (Nguyen Van Linh, Responses to Foreign Journalists, 1991, p.136). To date, Japan has become a strategic partner of Vietnam and is in a phase of robust, comprehensive development, with political trust being increasingly strengthened. Japan remains one of Vietnam's leading economic partners, the largest provider of ODA assistance, the second largest investor, and the fourth largest trading partner.

The relationship between Vietnam and ASEAN underwent a significant transformation following the resolution of the Cambodian issue in 1989. "On January 9, 1989, Vietnam withdrew all remaining volunteer troops from Cambodia, declaring that regardless of the situation, Vietnamese volunteer troops will not return" (Tran Nam Tien (editor-in-chief), 2008, p.401). Subsequently, in January 1989, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh stated that "the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is ready for friendly relations with ASEAN countries and others in the region" (Tran Thi Vinh (editor-in-chief), 2011, p.351). In October 1990, Indonesian President made an official visit to Vietnam, becoming the first ASEAN head of state to do so. In the following years, heads of state from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Brunei Darussalam also visited Vietnam. Reciprocally, Vietnam organized high-level delegations to visit these countries. The period from 1991 to 1992 witnessed a remarkable progression in Vietnam-ASEAN relations, as dialogue and cooperation replaced tension and confrontation. The support and consensus of the ASEAN countries further promoted the Vietnam-ASEAN relationship, laying the foundation and creating conditions for Vietnam to officially become the seventh member of ASEAN in July 1995.

## RENOVATING RELATIONS WITH THE SOVIET UNION AND TRADITIONAL FRIENDLY COUNTRIES

From the mid-1980s onwards, "the Soviet Union redirected its foreign policy strategy, promoting détente with the United States, seeking to improve relations with China, and reducing its external commitments. This impacted the Soviet Union's policy direction towards Indochina" (Nguyen Dinh Binh (editor-in-chief), Vietnam's Diplomacy 1945 – 2000, 2015, p.354). During this period, the Communist Party of Vietnam's policy towards the Soviet Union was reflected in the Resolution of the Politburo of the 6th Congress in May 1988, which stated that Vietnam "must swiftly renovate its cooperative relations with the Soviet Union and fraternal countries, and enhance the effectiveness of cooperation on the basis of mutual benefit and shared responsibility for peace and world revolution." Since 1987, Vietnam and the Soviet Union have implemented various forms of joint ventures and direct cooperation between the production facilities of the two countries. Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed numerous significant agreements on economic cooperation, light industry, machinery, electronics, mining, agro-industry, and labor cooperation. In 1987, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh visited the Soviet Union twice, once as the head of the Party and the State of Vietnam for an official friendship visit in May 1987, and another time leading a delegation of our Party to attend the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution in November 1987, also attending a meeting with representatives of 178 delegates of Communist Parties and workers' movements and the international communist and workers' movement. At the solemn rally marking the 70th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh was invited to speak on behalf of the international delegations, expressing the gratitude of the Vietnamese people for the great sacrifices and contributions of the Soviet people to peace and the world revolution.

Beyond the Soviet Union, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh also led a delegation of the Communist Party of Vietnam to attend the Second Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba. There, they engaged in meetings and exchanges with Cuban leader Fidel Castro and numerous party and state leaders from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Angola. At the end of 1987, Nguyen Van Linh headed the Vietnamese delegation to the Sixth Congress of the Lao People's

Revolutionary Party. In 1989, he led a delegation from the Party and the State of Vietnam to visit India and Cuba. In 1990, commemorating the 40th anniversary of its establishment, he visited the German Democratic Republic, where he held talks with socialist parties, contributing to the consolidation of the socialist system.

## CONCLUSION

These international visits and meetings were opportune moments for General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh to articulate the perspectives of the Communist Party of Vietnam regarding the state's expansive foreign policy. He emphasized Vietnam's stance and perspective on resolving the Cambodian issue, normalizing relations between Vietnam and China, fostering a peaceful, friendly, and stable environment in the region, and laying the groundwork for Vietnam to become an official member of ASEAN. These efforts also facilitated the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the United States, breaking the encirclement and embargo, and maintaining our independence and sovereignty. The foreign activities of General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh achieved significant results, contributing to the gradual dismantling of the encirclement and embargo against Vietnam, reducing political and diplomatic pressure on Vietnam in the context of an increasingly crisis-ridden socialist system at risk of disintegration. Simultaneously, these efforts marked a new transition, implementing an open foreign policy and expanding cooperation to "close the past and look towards the future." From a nation once besieged and embargoed, Vietnam now has diplomatic relations with 193 countries, including 6 comprehensive strategic partners, 12 strategic partners, and 12 comprehensive partners, and engages in economic and trade relations with over 230 countries and territories. Vietnam is an active member of more than 70 international and regional organizations, with over 100 representative agencies across continents.

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