

muffled antagonism between Beijing and Hanoi, which became more severe after the Paris Agreements of 1973, took a new turn at the end of 1977, and again in May 1978, when China recalled more than a thousand engineers and specialists from Vietnam bringing a hundred aid projects to an abrupt end. By joining Comecon in June 1978, Vietnam — like Mongolia or Cuba — has allowed itself to come under the tutelage of an economic system which will replace the Chinese on all the projects the latter has abandoned and will tie the Vietnamese economy to that of the Eastern Bloc by means of a dozen agreements.

Did Vietnam have any choice? There is reason to believe that economic considerations were not the determining factor in Vietnam's decision to place itself under Soviet protection. The Vietnamese leaders must certainly have calculated that Soviet support would help Vietnam win recognition from China, ASEAN and the United States for its new status. By creating a *fait accompli* Vietnam to some extent set a trap for itself — a trap it was aware of but sure it could avoid. Exasperated by Chinese intransigence, Vietnam wanted to have its newly acquired regional importance recognised as quickly as possible and it believed that by allying itself with Moscow it would be accorded the respect it deserved in the wider context of East-West relations. In making this subtle calculation Hanoi may not have been sufficiently aware that this manoeuvre had been foreseen by the Soviet Union which, without ever restraining the Vietnamese leaders, nonetheless intended gradually to persuade them to adopt policies conducive to the long-term interests and objectives of Moscow.

As Thai Quang Trung pointed out:

Moscow has only been interested in Vietnam since 1965 when Leonid Brezhnev realized all the advantages the Soviet Union would reap if the United States, after their failure in China and their traumatic experience in Korea, were to become embroiled in Asia once again. Because of this the Soviet Union supported North Vietnam in its attempt to conquer the South while managing to keep the dispute localized so that it did not adversely affect Soviet-US detente. The right hand was happy not to know what the left hand was doing. Vietnam became, in effect, the focal point of the confrontation between the two blocs. Its role was supposed to