

When the Walls Come Down: Indonesian-Sino-Vietnamese Normalization and the End of the Asian Cold War

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Abstract

How did the Cold War conclude in the Asia Pacific? The European Cold War ended via a groundswell of social, political, and cultural movements concurrent with high-level U.S.-Soviet summits during the 1980s and early 1990s. By comparison, Asia terminated its Cold War in a more muted fashion. The Asian Cold War ended primarily through monumental maneuvers in the international political arena by surmounting ideological schisms, security dilemmas, and incongruous economic systems. Sino-Indonesian normalization came to fruition in August 1990, ending a 23 year-long freeze in relations. China and Vietnam fully restored bilateral relations in November 1991. The restoration of relations between Indonesia, Vietnam, and China pivoted the Asia Pacific away from Cold War-era confrontation toward progressively cooperative multilateralism at the dawn of the post-Cold War. Shifting structural mechanisms and power politics reshaped Indonesian-Sino-Vietnamese relations as the triumvirate addressed long-standing hostilities to reach meaningful economic, political, and security cooperation to anticipate the post-Cold War international order. The trio's myriad diplomatic interactions during the late 1980s and early 1990s fused national interests with a mutual aspiration toward heightened regional autonomy, as regional actors asserted themselves more boldly amid a rapid recomposition of the Asia Pacific chessboard. The impact of the trilateral rapprochement reverberates into the present security and political configuration of the region.

Keywords: Indonesia; China; Vietnam; Normalization; Foreign Relations; Cold War

¹ Dan McCoy earned his Ph.D. in History from Northern Illinois University, USA, in August 2025.



Introduction

Decisive turning points captured on television marked the end of the European Cold War during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Besides the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and crackdown and the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia, Asia emerged from its Cold War in a comparatively subtle fashion. The restoration of relations between Indonesia, Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) pivoted the Asia Pacific away from Cold War-era confrontation toward progressively cooperative multilateralism at the dawn of the post-Cold War. How did these three distinct nations, with each evidencing multifaceted soft and hard power, normalize? What consequences did it spell for them and the broader region?

This article examines the renovated structural mechanisms and power politics that promoted Indonesian-Sino-Vietnamese triangular rapprochement during the late stages of the Cold War. The triangular dynamics culminated in 1991 when the triumvirate mitigated long-standing hostilities to reach meaningful economic, political, and security cooperation to anticipate the post-Cold War world. It magnifies the tactful exchanges and constructive resonance of Vietnamese and Chinese state visits to Indonesia in 1991, with particular emphasis on how the Indonesian press publicized and interpreted those visits. While editorials from Indonesian media predominately reflected foreign policy viewpoints of the New Order under President Suharto, outlets such as *Merdeka* occasionally invited divergent perspectives from outside experts to analyze the 1991 state visits, including former foreign minister Prof. Dr. Roeslan Abdulgani. The Vietnamese and Chinese missions to Indonesia strove to establish common goals and approaches toward a shared regional outlook. Indonesian-Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic interchanges during this period fused national interests with a mutual aspiration toward heightened regional autonomy. This period evinces myriad state actors taking up the mantle of regional-centric normalization and

accommodation to accelerate the Asia Pacific's collective ascent from Cold War hostility to post-Cold War regionalism.

Shifting Global Power Structures

Many seminal events marked 1991, refashioning the concept and potential of a global community. Cold War-era geopolitical, geoeconomic, and ideological bifurcation became obsolete. In its wake sprung globalization underscored by multilateralism, shifting alliances, and free markets. Frenetic social, cultural, and technological innovations and sea changes swept the globe from Nirvana to Michael Jordan to the advent of the world wide web. The international political arena also fundamentally transformed in 1991. The Soviet-led Warsaw Pact dissolved in February before the Soviet Union collapsed in December. However, new military conflicts threatened the fragile "new world order," including the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) and the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), alongside drawn-out tragedies like the Cambodian Conflict (1978-1991). The Asia Pacific was not immune to the mutating international global order, particularly affecting Indonesia, Vietnam, and China. The three exhibited multidimensional stature via their geographic locations, natural resource wealth, membership to various blocs, and military capabilities. The region owed its transition from Cold War to post-Cold War to breakthrough reconciliation among the troika, spelling consequences for their respective trajectories and the Asia Pacific collectively.

Sino-Vietnamese-Indonesian rapprochement from 1989-1991 was a symptom of shifting global power structures during the late 1980s, the final catalyst for the end of the Asian Cold War in 1991, and an indicator of the new Asia Pacific order. The significance of the interplay between international and regional political dynamics during this period cannot be understated. Triangular normalization hastened the end of the Cambodian conflict and subsequently the Asian Cold War, rather than being just a response to the Cambodian Peace Accords or the Malta

Summit. The diplomatic and economic reverberations of Sino-Indonesian normalization in August 1990 accelerated Cambodian actors' acceptance of the UN comprehensive political settlement in September 1990, thus re-energizing a regional effort to finally end the conflict. Meanwhile, it was only after the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) of October 1991 that Sino-Vietnamese relations fully resumed in November 1991. The cross-pollination of geopolitics between regional and international spheres begot one another to extinguish the Asian Cold War altogether.

Dexterous interactions between Indonesian, Chinese, and Vietnamese leaders throughout 1991 heightened triangular reconciliation. Jakarta became a nexus of normalization.² The sequence of deliberate statecraft definitively ended Cold War-era struggles that had stymied bilateral and trilateral relations. A Chinese delegation headed by President Yang Shangkun visited Indonesia in June, and a Vietnamese mission led by Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet came in October. A linkage between the Chinese and Vietnamese missions involved each nation soliciting access and expertise from Indonesia on structural economic modernization to advance the Asia Pacific, including opening the Indonesian market for more Chinese commodities exports and increasing Vietnamese-Indonesian investment in Vietnamese raw materials.

To undergird their burgeoning cooperation and amiability, the trio espoused time and again the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the 10 Principles of the 1955 Bandung Conference called the *Dasa Sila Bandung* in Indonesian. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, originally conceptualized by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1954, became the bedrock of Chinese foreign relations stretching into today. They are guided by mutual respect for others' territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, cooperation, and peaceful

² One example of Indonesia viewing itself as a leading ASEAN member in steering regional affairs during the Cambodian conflict was Suharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Hussein Onn's joint Kuantan Declaration in March 1980 intended to not isolate Vietnam due to its occupation of Cambodia. The initiative failed.

coexistence. The landmark 29-nation Asian-African Conference of 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, the first large-scale Global South summit featuring many newly independent states, grafted Chinese representative Zhou's principles onto its communique titled the "Declaration on the Promotion of World Peace and Cooperation." "The friendship and cooperation that we have developed are also based on sound foundations, namely the principles of peaceful coexistence," Suharto expressed.³ "Our development experience thus far demonstrates the great benefits of mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries, regardless of political and social systems. Therefore, differences between nations are not an obstacle to efforts to increase cooperation."

Historian Ang Cheng Guan claims that one searching for an "official" end date to the Cold War would arrive at the Malta Summit on 3 December 1989, between U.S. President George H.W. Bush and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev.⁴ Ang concludes the Cold War in Southeast Asia ended "without much of an announcement," arguing the October 1991 PPA that terminated the multi-decade Third Indochina War bookended the region's Cold War. "The Cold War in Southeast Asia had a rhythm of its own," Ang notes.⁵ "If one had to choose a date or event that identified the end of the old and the beginning of the new....it would be the signing of the [PPA]." Ang reasons that there would have been no resolution to the Cambodian conflict without international reconciliation between the United States, China, and Soviet Union. Vietnamese diplomat and scholar Nguyen Vu Tung similarly contends the PPA removed "the last obstacle of normalization of relations" between Vietnam and members of

³ "Presiden: RI-RRC Punya Tautan Sejarah," *Kompas*, June 6, 1991.

⁴ Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia After the Cold War: A Contemporary History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), thereby transitioning Southeast Asia into the post-Cold War period.⁶

Political scientist Robert Scalapino observes that China's foreign policy calculus underwent a "major alteration" in the early 1980s, shifting to a "proclamation of nonalignment" per its economic modernization under Deng Xiaoping.⁷ Scalapino clarifies that Beijing's nonalignment policy was "distinctly tilted...toward Japan and the West, especially the United States."⁸ How did Beijing voice its shift? Endi Rukmo, a regional analyst at the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), highlights Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang's opening speech at the 13th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in October 1987. Zhao stated that China would "maintain an independent policy and develop friendly relations with all countries" per its "national development."⁹ How might Beijing's revised policies affect Southeast Asia? CSIS Executive Director Jusuf Wanandi argued in 1987 that ASEAN members would have to continue to "enhance their national and regional resilience and...ZOPFAN [Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality]" to instill "greater confidence in their own capabilities...to establish healthier relations with...China."¹⁰ "By maintaining the momentum of its development, China will recognize the high stakes in its open attitude," Wanandi reasons. "It is not impossible that China will return to its former ambitions. But they will soon find that this is inconsistent with their new place in the modern world. Even if they fail to acknowledge this, it seems likely that Southeast Asian countries will be better prepared [for possible developments] in the future."

⁶ Nguyen Vu Tung, *Flying Blind: Vietnam's Decision to Join ASEAN* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Institute, 2021), 67.

⁷ Robert A. Scalapino, "Asia's Future," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 1 (1987): 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹ Endi Rukmo, "Arti Kongres Nasional PKC XIII," *Analisa* 16, no. 11 (November 1987): 975.

¹⁰ Jusuf Wanandi, "Peranan Cina di Asia Tenggara," *Analisa* 16, no. 11 (November 1987): 988.

While China welcomed Sino-Indonesian normalization, particularly after the reestablishment of direct trade relations via the July 1985 Memorandum of Understanding, Jakarta remained reluctant. The New Order under Suharto severed Sino-Indonesian relations in 1967. “China has clearly demonstrated its willingness to reopen diplomatic relations,” CSIS economist Hadi Soesastro remarked in late 1987, yet Indonesia “maintains that it is in no hurry to reopen diplomatic relations.”¹¹ Jakarta’s China policy from the mid-to-late 1980s was “deliberately informal and...cautious,” reinforcing the New Order’s official position that China should not mistake the resumption of direct trade relations as a “concrete step” towards “full” normalization.¹² Suharto reiterated Indonesia’s persistent apprehension over lingering Chinese patronage of subversive communist movements across Southeast Asia in a speech before the *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat* (People’s Consultative Assembly) in March 1988.¹³ Soesastro recalled political scientist Justus M. van der Kroef’s contention that settling the Cambodian conflict remained Indonesia’s foremost regional concern, the resolution of which would subsequently advance bilateral reconciliation.¹⁴ What stumped China observers, including Soesastro, was why budding Sino-Indonesian relations still needed to “pass through Cambodia.”¹⁵

Sino-Indonesian Normalization

The funeral of Japanese Emperor Hirohito in February 1989 occasioned a turning point in the trajectory of Sino-Indonesian

¹¹ Hadi Soesastro, “Hubungan Indonesia-Cina: Tenang di Semua Front,” *Analisa* 16, no. 11 (November 1987): 991.

¹² *Ibid.*, 993.

¹³ Endi Rukmo, “Menuju Normalisasi Hubungan Indonesia-Cina,” *Analisa* 18, no. 1 (Januari-Februari 1989): 61-62; *Pidato Pertanggungjawaban Presiden/Mandataris MPR-RI*, March 1, 1988, 23.

¹⁴ Soesastro, “Hubungan,” 1009; Justus M. van der Kroef, “Normalizing Relations with China-Indonesia’s Policies and Perceptions,” *Asian Survey* 26 no. 8 (Agustus 1986): 934.

¹⁵ Soesastro, “Hubungan,” 1009.

normalization. The Japanese daily, *Asahi Shimbun*, broke the news of a meeting scheduled between Suharto and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen to broach reconciliation of the 22-year-long freeze in relations.¹⁶ Before Suharto's departure for Tokyo, Indonesian State Secretary Moerdiono announced Suharto's Japan itinerary and the roster of foreign leaders wanting to meet him. Rukmo argued Suharto's "new breakthrough" was the "right action," seemingly pivoting international relations away from ideological contestation towards mutual national interests.¹⁷ An opportunity arose for Jakarta to flex its burgeoning regional influence so as to "no longer [maintain] a 'low profile'" connected to its long-touted independent and active foreign policy credo (*politik bebas aktif*).¹⁸ Ignoring China's rise was no longer feasible, incentivizing Indonesia to cooperate on key political and security issues. The Cambodian issue signified the central regional quandary and affected the strategic positions of Indonesia, China, and Vietnam. The intraregional conflict stoked deep-seated animus between China and Vietnam. Vietnamese forces fully withdrew from Cambodia by September 1989. Rukmo asserted that Sino-Indonesian normalization would elevate Jakarta's role as a mediator between Hanoi and Beijing toward conflict resolution and regional reconciliation. Territorial disputes in the South China Sea proved another regional flashpoint, urging reconciliation between Indonesia, Vietnam, and China to enhance regional stability and security cooperation in the post-Cold War period.¹⁹

In a December 1990 interview with *Beijing Review*, Qian discussed the state of Chinese diplomacy as the world faced emergent issues amidst a rapidly approaching post-Cold War order: "New power [centers] are emerging and the world's strategic pattern is following a path of

¹⁶ Kornelius Purba, "1989: When Soeharto Totally Changed His Mind on China," *Jakarta Post*, November 2, 2020.

¹⁷ Rukmo, "Menuju," 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

multipolarization. Currently the world situation is in a transitional period in which the old order has collapsed, yet a new one has not taken shape...The international situation is volatile and the world does not enjoy peace.”²⁰ Qian underscored the positive impact of Sino-Indonesian normalization of August 1990, ending the 23-year bilateral freeze, alongside China’s growing amiability with other ASEAN members:

The past year has witnessed considerable development and improvement in the friendly co-operative relations between China and its [neighbors]... Premier Li visited Indonesia... The resumption of diplomatic relations between China and Indonesia and the establishment of diplomatic ties with Singapore [in October 1990] ushered in a new phase of all-out expansion in the friendly and co-operative relationship between China and [ASEAN].²¹

Suharto described PRC Premier Li Peng’s August 1990 visit to Indonesia as a “new milestone” in bilateral relations.²² Suharto’s reciprocal visit to China in November 1990 produced an agreement bestowing “most preferential trade status” between the pair.²³ Committing China to the “road to socialism” that underscored economic viability alongside political and social stability, Li proclaimed that China would “enter the 21st century with full confidence.”²⁴

Despite Qian touting the West’s impracticality to economically sanction and politically isolate China following the “4 June Incident” related to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, arguing that sanctions also “hurt” Western nations, the Tiananmen tragedy had cast a pall over

²⁰ “Foreign Minister Qian on World Issues,” *Beijing Review* 34, no. 1 (1991): 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Zhou Qingchang, “China’s Ties with Its Neighbours Strengthened,” *Beijing Review* 34, no. 1 (1991): 11-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

China's foreign policy calculus and reshuffled the CCP hierarchy.²⁵ East Asia scholar Samuel Kim observed in 1990 that following the Tiananmen Square suppression, Chinese foreign policy was "challenged—and haunted—by the return of *neiluan* and *waihuan* (internal disorder and external calamity) [and that] Never before...with the exception of the high-tide phase of the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1968...has Beijing so isolated itself from its own people [and] the world."²⁶ Only one year following Sino-Soviet rapprochement in May 1989 had China sacrificed its international credibility and earnest efforts of domestic reform by dispersing "the widely shared perception (or misperception) that a stronger China is a safer China for the world at large [and] Deng's cynical confidence that China can get away with murder at home without paying an international price."²⁷ When the National People's Congress Standing Committee met on 30 June 1989, Chairman of the Central Military Commission Deng Xiaoping asserted a "confluence of macro (external) and micro (internal) factors" had provoked the Tiananmen "counterrevolution."²⁸ Despite the CCP's ensuing political crackdown, indicative of Deng's reactionary "political fundamentalism," "even the most hardline fundamentalists" remained committed to combining Deng's Open Door Policy and Four Cardinal Principles to shape China's "post-Tiananmen" foreign policy.²⁹

The fallout from the Tiananmen Square democracy protests also shook the ranks of the CCP elite. The most vocal reformists had either died or vacated their posts in 1989. Former CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang's death in April galvanized the democracy movement, while successor, General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, and close allies were purged in

²⁵ "Foreign Minister," 10.

²⁶ Samuel S. Kim, "Chinese Foreign Policy After Tiananmen," *Current History* 89, no. 548 (September 1990): 245.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 246-247.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

June.³⁰ Tightening his succession plan, Deng installed Jiang Zemin, a relative unknown in the CCP rank and file and former mayor of Shanghai, as General Secretary. China analysts like David Bachman noted four policy trends in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre that left an estimated 1,300 dead and possibly 10,000 injured: state repression, economic contraction, the resurgent role of the party and socialism, and a scaled-back approach to development.³¹ Opposite to growing optimism surrounding the demise of the global Cold War, Bachman judged China's "short-and medium-term prospects [as] poor."³² Beijing needed a regional breakthrough with its estranged peers to repair its post-Tiananmen image. Indonesia was critical in this context as it was the largest ASEAN member commanding a strong diplomatic voice in ongoing regional negotiations concerning the Cambodian conflict. Moreover, Singapore and Brunei would only normalize relations with China after Indonesia had done so.

Intensive Triangular Diplomacy

Intensive triangular diplomacy among Indonesia, Vietnam, and China marked 1990. A comprehensive political settlement framework to resolve the Cambodian conflict coursed through UN and ASEAN diplomatic channels parallel recurrent meetings between Vietnamese and Chinese officials aimed at rapprochement. Jakarta and Beijing restored relations in August 1990 when Li Peng visited Jakarta. Entrusting Moerdiono rather than Indonesia Foreign Minister Ali Alatas to helm negotiations, Suharto accepted the One China Policy apropos Taiwan before China consented to non-interference in Indonesia's internal affairs

³⁰ David Bachman, "Retgression in Chinese Politics," *Current History* 89, no. 548 (September 1990): 249.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

³² *Ibid.*, 273.

and sovereignty.³³ Hanoi hailed the reestablishment of Sino-Indonesian bilateral relations. Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Vietnam Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap declared that Hanoi would strive towards a similar outcome with Beijing.³⁴ “Vietnam and China will restore our traditional friendly relations,” Giap said from Jakarta in July 1990. One of many Vietnamese delegations to Indonesia during the final years of the Cold War indicative of Hanoi’s investment in its friendship with Jakarta, Giap reiterated Vietnam’s admiration of Indonesia’s modernization and ability to keep its national reputation. “We believe that Indonesia has an important role to play in transforming Southeast Asia into a region of peace, stability, and cooperation,” Vietnam Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet later stated in Jakarta.³⁵

CSIS regional analyst Rizal Sukma observed that with its “walking on two legs” diplomatic offensive, Beijing attempted “to control the direction of development in Southeast Asia...with the principle that no problem...can be resolved without China’s presence and participation.”³⁶ Within this realignment of regional power brokers, Indonesia faced two challenges. Jakarta needed to formulate a regional policy that spelled “optimal benefits without diminishing China’s regional intentions.” Secondly, the new policy had to balance “unilateral freedom of action without giving the impression of ignoring ASEAN’s existence.”³⁷ Sukma recommended two approaches to buttress Indonesian foreign policy: design a “model” of triangular relations that could minimize Vietnam’s security threat vis-à-vis China and support a Bangkok-conceived

³³ Purba, “1989”; “Pagi Ini, Soeharto-Li Peng Adakan Pembicaraan Empat,” *Kompas*, November 15, 1990.

³⁴ “Vietnam Hails Normalization of RI-China Ties,” *Jakarta Post*, July 5, 1990.

³⁵ “Vietnam Mencanangkan Pembaruan Menyeluruh,” *Merdeka*, October 25, 1991.

³⁶ Rizal Sukma, “Cina dan Asia Tenggara Pasca Kamboja,” *Analisis* 19, no. 6 (November-Desember 1990): 514.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 514-515.

“Thailand-Indochina relations model” to economically modernize mainland Southeast Asia.³⁸

In November 1990, Suharto embarked on a watershed goodwill tour. His delegation visited Japan, China, and Vietnam. Suharto became the first ASEAN head of state to visit communist Vietnam since 1975 when the Vietnam War ended. Not since former Indonesia President Sukarno 26 years earlier had an Indonesian head of state visited China.³⁹ Suharto’s East Asia diplomacy tour proved strategically significant “for Vietnam’s own international image [indicating] the beginning of Vietnam’s broader involvement in the international system after a long period of isolation.”⁴⁰

Chinese foreign relations were frenetic during November 1990. Suharto was one of five foreign dignitaries to visit Beijing in one week. The Chinese press attributed the PRC’s “busy season for diplomacy” to its revived engagement with the international community to mend its national image and exude its “independent and peaceful foreign policy” following the Tiananmen Square spectacle.⁴¹ CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin valued Suharto’s decision to reconcile Indonesia-China relations toward greater cooperation and amiability. China and Indonesia’s political systems contrasted sharply. However, both refrained from allowing their divergent political belief systems to corrode their budding normalization. Jiang’s pledge to Suharto that Beijing harbored “no intention of forcing other countries” to practice socialism mirrored official Indonesian rhetoric vis-à-vis communism from 1977 when the *Indonesia Times* expressed that the New Order “never condemned communism outright [and] surely respect[ed] communism...practiced by other people in their own country.”⁴² Chinese President Yang Shangkun stated to Suharto that

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 515.

³⁹ “Busy Season for Chinese Diplomacy,” *Beijing Review* 33, no. 48 (1990): 5.

⁴⁰ Rizal Sukma, “Establishing New Quadrilateral Relations,” *Indonesian Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1991): 10.

⁴¹ “Busy Season,” 5.

⁴² “A New Era,” *Indonesia Times*, December 28, 1977.

Sino-Indonesian normalization served bilateral interests and enhanced the security and stability of the entire Asia Pacific. “I hope our two countries will develop a friendly, co-operative relationship in a long-term and comprehensive manner based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the 10 Principles of the Bandung Conference,” Yang declared.⁴³ The most immediate impact of Suharto’s mission to China was Li Peng’s promise to withdraw support from the Khmer Rouge to accelerate the Cambodian peace process.⁴⁴ “President Suharto’s visit was of historic significance because it opened a new chapter in relations between the two countries,” China Ambassador to Indonesia Qian Yongnian said.⁴⁵

Suharto’s entourage continued to Vietnam after China. He became the first Indonesian president to visit in 33 years.⁴⁶ Vietnamese officials excitedly anticipated positive optics and downstream effects of Suharto’s visit, including the chance to broaden cooperative relations with other ASEAN members. Vietnamese Prime Minister Do Muoi expressed to an Indonesian delegation visiting Hanoi in October 1990 that Suharto’s scheduled visit possessed “a strategic significance.”⁴⁷ “The visit will open a new page in the history of relations between Vietnam and Indonesia,” Do Muoi declared. “It is not only important to our country but surely will be of importance in the context of our regional development.” Hanoi characterized Suharto’s visit as historic and an opportunity to underpin bilateral relations and spread regional peace and stability. As the dominant power in communist mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam sought a robust economic and security coalescence between the region’s communist and non-communist spheres with the help of Indonesia as interlocuter. Jakarta had mediated on the collective behalf of ASEAN

⁴³ “Busy Season,” 5.

⁴⁴ Purba, “1989.”

⁴⁵ “RI-RRC Perlu Mendorong Maju Saling Pengertian dan Pengenalan,” *Kompas*, June 5, 1991.

⁴⁶ “Presiden Soeharto Tinggalkan Cina dan Bertolak ke Vietnam,” *Pelita*, November 19, 1990.

⁴⁷ Sabam Siagian, “Soeharto’s Hanoi Trip to Open New Page in Relations,” *Jakarta Post*, October 22, 1990.

members through multi-track, regional-centric diplomacy toward Vietnam vis-à-vis Cambodian conflict resolution throughout the 1980s. “Vietnam hopes Indonesia will be able to persuade other ASEAN countries to forge better relations with Hanoi,” a Western diplomat remarked.⁴⁸ “[C]ountries in this region should cooperate with each other in order to jointly develop this region,” Do Muoi said.⁴⁹ Established in 1955, Indonesia-Vietnam relations were the closest of any of the ASEAN states, which Vietnam leaned on to expand its peaceful footprint into non-communist Southeast Asia. Despite their economic, cultural, and ideological contrasts, the pair shared a deeply symbolic bond exalted time and again. They saw themselves as blood brothers, being the only two Southeast Asian nations who had supplanted colonialism through revolution. “We both gained independence through war and revolution,” Suharto extolled.⁵⁰ “Therefore, we share the same views on various fundamental issues.”

“The old world structure is falling apart and a new international order is yet to emerge,” the *Beijing Review* professed in early 1991.⁵¹ As the U.S.-Soviet superpower rivalry dissolved and the global order realigned, China sought to shore up a positive image of an upbeat nation eager to engage the world. In his 1991 New Year’s address over *Radio Beijing*, President Yang expressed confidence over China’s “New Long March.”⁵² The CCP used the term to describe Chinese modernization embodying “Chinese characteristics.” Beijing’s prioritization of its economic output took root at the CCP’s Third Session of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978. Yang reaffirmed China’s independent and peace-seeking foreign policy to forge “new international and political economic orders.” “China’s door is open to the whole world. We sincerely welcome our

⁴⁸ “Presiden Soeharto.”

⁴⁹ Siagian, “Soeharto’s.”

⁵⁰ “Vietnam Mencanangkan.”

⁵¹ Zhou, “China’s Ties,” 11.

⁵² “Confidence Marks Yang’s Message,” *Beijing Review* 34, no. 1 (1991): 7.

foreign friends to come and have a look. Wherever you go, the hospitable Chinese people will greet you with [a] smile on their faces,” Yang reassured.

Yang’s June 1991 visit to Indonesia reciprocated Suharto’s November 1990 visit to China. Though it resulted in no bilateral agreements, Yang’s mission symbolized the culmination of frequent high-level contacts between Indonesian and Chinese government officials and private sector elites since the August 1990 normalization.⁵³ “The changing balance of power will be a focus of these talks,” Moerdiono stated.⁵⁴ Yang’s mission came amid a reorientation of the global power structure when forging regional cohesion between emerging regional powers like Indonesia and China added extra impetus. “The international situation is very complicated and unstable as the world structure is undergoing a transition from the old to the new,” Yang stressed in Jakarta. “The effort to build the new world and economic order constitutes a long and difficult process. Good cooperation between China and Indonesia will have a positive impact for peace and stability in the region,” former Indonesia Foreign Minister Abdulgani reflected.⁵⁵

Not since President Liu Shaoqui in 1963 had a Chinese head of state visited Indonesia, and Yang made the trip aged 84.⁵⁶ Yang’s delegation included Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Deputy Foreign Minister Xu Dunxin, Deputy Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army Gen. Xu Xin, and Deputy Minister of Trade and Foreign Economic Relations Wang Wendong.⁵⁷ “I am confident that President Yang Shangkun’s visit will

⁵³ “Tamu Negara Hari Ini, Presiden Yang Shangkun Dari RRC,” *Suara Karya*, June 5, 1991; “Kunjungan Presiden Yang Shankun,” *Suara Pembaruan*, June 5, 1991.

⁵⁴ “Soeharto-Yang Shangkun Bicarakan Perubahan Perimbangan Kekuatan,” *Suara Pembaruan*, June 6, 1991.

⁵⁵ Roeslan Abdulgani, “Perlu Kejelasan Politik RRC Terhadap Asia Tenggara,” *Merdeka*, June 14, 1991.

⁵⁶ “RI-RRC”; “Kunjungan Presiden Yang Shangkun Mengeratkan Hubungan RI-RRC,” *Kompas*, June 5, 1991.

⁵⁷ “Kunjungan Presiden RRC Paripurnakan Normalisasi,” *Suara Karya*, June 6, 1991.

strengthen the friendship between the two countries, deepen mutual understanding, and foster camaraderie between the leaders and people of both countries,” said Ambassador Qian.⁵⁸ Qian anticipated Yang’s mission to not only deepen state relations but also enlighten antiquated misunderstandings on both sides. “It could be said that [the views of some Indonesians] are still stuck in the 1960s. Many people who have visited [China] have different perceptions,” Qian explained.⁵⁹ “The same is true of people from [China]. They all say what they see in Indonesia is very different from their perceptions before coming here.”⁶⁰ One prevailing thread of cooperation capable of substantive growth that distinguished China from other nations was its willingness to deploy its economic and technological resources and skills to assist Indonesia’s national development.

Leading Indonesian news outlets interviewed Yang during his Indonesia trip where he discussed a range of urgent issues. On the predominance of the overseas Chinese business community in ASEAN countries, Yang stated: “We do not recognize dual nationality and we strictly abide by the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.”⁶¹ On political systems and national sovereignty pertaining to Communism, Yang explained: “It is our view that each and every country has the right to choose its own social system, ideology, economic model and the road of development in light of its own national conditions...We respect the choice of the Indonesian people of their social system and road of development.” On China’s position related to Cambodian conflict resolution and Indonesia’s associated role, Yang emphasized: “China wishes to see an early, comprehensive, fair and reasonable settlement...within the framework of the Paris Conference and the...draft agreement of the [UN] Perm-Five. We appreciate and support

⁵⁸ “RI-RRC.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Overseas Chinese Won’t Be Exploited,” *Jakarta Post*, June 5, 1991.

the positive role that Indonesia plays in the process of the political settlement of the Cambodia question as a Co-chairman of the Paris Conference.” On the long-standing issue of foreign bases in Southeast Asia and ASEAN members’ efforts to realize ZOPFAN, Yang stressed: “...we do not endorse setting up military bases or stationing troops by any country or territories other than their own [and] endorse and support ASEAN’s effort to turn Southeast Asia into a zone of freedom, peace and neutrality.”

Regarding swirling tensions in the South China Sea, Yang used his Jakarta visit to urge “friendly consultations” for cooperative economic development of the area to prevent a row among littoral states over the Paracel and Spratly Islands becoming a regionwide conflagration.⁶² Nonetheless, Yang and Foreign Minister Qian doubled down on China’s “undisputable sovereignty” over the islands. Through Yang, Beijing attempted a rhetorical balance between jingoism and strategic cooperation. Yang added that countries surrounding the South China Sea should “take concrete actions to promote mutual trust and reduce tensions and the potential for clashes.” “We also ask that those countries [claiming the islands also] conduct joint exploitation (of the South China Sea). This would be in the interests of all the parties concerned,” Yang said.

1991 also accelerated Sino-Indonesian trade cooperation. A large delegation from the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (*Kadin*), alongside Indonesian Ambassador to China Abdurrahman Gunadirdja, met high-ranking officials in Beijing in April to examine and stimulate bilateral trade growth.⁶³ Wary of low-priced Chinese products flooding the international market, against which Indonesian commodities could not compete, *Kadin* officials sought cooperation with Beijing in marketing strategies to avoid price-gouging and steady the wave of economic globalization. The Chinese sought to alleviate Indonesian

⁶² Pitand M. Akal, “Yang Calls for Cooperation in S. China Sea,” *Jakarta Post*, June 8, 1991.

⁶³ “RRC Bisa Merupakan Ancaman Bagi Dunia Usaha Indonesia,” *Kompas*, April 11, 1991.

concerns by remaining committed to supporting industrial and technological development in Global South nations, including Indonesia.

Indonesian-Vietnamese Ties

The windfall of Suharto's November 1990 goodwill visit to Vietnam echoed into 1991, consequently raising Indonesian-Vietnamese ties. When he visited Jakarta in January, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran Duc Luong carried Hanoi's intention to enhance bilateral cooperation in economics, trade, and science. "My visit follows President Soeharto's historic visit to Vietnam and also aims to enhance economic cooperation between the two countries," Tran said.⁶⁴ An 11-member delegation accompanying Tran represented state-owned enterprises, including Deputy Minister of Trade Lee Huu Duyen, Deputy Director of the Foreign Trade Bank Ha Huy Sung, and General Director Tuyn of the state-owned Vietnam National Petroleum Group (*Petrolimex*). Tran's delegation aimed to concretize an Indonesia-Vietnam economic cooperation framework originally signed in Hanoi on 1 November 1990. Tran's visit preceded a seven-member Vietnamese parliamentary delegation led by Le Quang Dao, chairman of the National Assembly of Vietnam, to the Indonesian House of Representatives (*DPR*) in late January.⁶⁵

Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet's 24 October - 1 November 1991, mission to Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand marked the first time a Vietnamese prime minister had visited an ASEAN member state since Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in 1978 mere months before Vietnam invaded Democratic Kampuchea.⁶⁶ A reformist in the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) concerned with pivoting Vietnam towards a market economy, the three-nation tour was Kiet's first since succeeding Du Muoi as prime minister in August 1991. Kiet's four-day visit

⁶⁴ "Vietnam Berupaya Tingkatkan Kerja Sama Dengan Indonesia," *Kompas*, January 10, 1991.

⁶⁵ "Pimpinan DPR Terima Delegasi Parlemen Vietnam," *Suara Karya*, January 28, 1991.

⁶⁶ "RI-Vietnam Akan Tandatangani Dua Perjanjian Kerja Sama," *Suara Pembaruan*, October 22, 1991; Kristanto Hartadi, "PM Kiet Berusaha Bangun Citra Baru Vietnam," *Suara Pembaruan*, October 24, 1991.

to Indonesia resulted in the ratification of three cooperation agreements between Indonesia and Vietnam including the Air Relations Agreement, the Merchant Shipping Agreement, and the Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement.⁶⁷ The agreements expanded Indonesia's footprint in Vietnam's textile, forestry, and tourism industries.⁶⁸ Other bilateral sessions explored defense issues, a Vietnamese national family planning program, and extending a Garuda Airlines route between Jakarta-Singapore-Ho Chi Minh City-Hanoi-and southern China to connect the region logistically and commercially.

During Suharto's 1990 visit to Vietnam, Hanoi's political elite, including the president, prime minister, and CPV secretary general, scrutinized Indonesia's experiences with national development.⁶⁹ Kiet's visit prioritized acutely observing Indonesia's dilemmas and paths forward regarding its expansion. "We are very happy to be able to share our development experiences with them [in state financial management, state-owned enterprises, natural resource management, and agriculture]," Moerdiono said.⁷⁰ "They can learn not only from the successes we have achieved, but also from the problems and difficulties faced by developing nations."⁷¹ Moerdiono hoped that Kiet's visit would allow Indonesia and Vietnam to reconcile their dispute over the oil-rich continental shelf boundary in the North Natuna Sea.⁷² Suharto stated in Vietnam in 1990 that peacefully resolving the troublesome issue would benefit both parties' long-term strategic objectives.

"Vietnam is determined to become an integral part of the Southeast Asian community," Kiet expressed before departing for

⁶⁷ "Vietnam Ingin Mempelajari Cara Pengelolaan BUMN," *Merdeka*, October 26, 1991.

⁶⁸ "RI-Vietnam Akan."

⁶⁹ "PM Vietnam Kamis Ke Jakarta Tuntaskan Soal Batas Landas," *Suara Karya*, October 22, 1991.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; "RI-Vietnam Tanda Tangan Tiga Persetujuan Ekonomi," *Media Indonesia*, October 26, 1991.

⁷¹ "PM Vietnam."

⁷² "RI-Vietnam Akan."

Jakarta.⁷³ Hanoi strove to renovate its regional political profile, primarily through economic reform, as the Asian Cold War receded. “We cannot achieve political stability without social stability and a stable standard of living,” Kiet stressed.⁷⁴ “Under the new regional situation, it is imperative for all neighboring countries in Southeast Asia to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation,” Kiet added.⁷⁵ “Close cooperation in economics, politics, and other fields will contribute to [regional] peace and stability...indeed our country’s new policy.” Witnessing the Chinese economic miracle, coupled with the evaporation of aid it used to receive from Warsaw Pact countries, Hanoi hastened to assimilate into a regional economic framework. Kiet’s Southeast Asia swing energized senior Vietnamese officials as it represented the first by a senior political official in the “post-Cambodia” era. The PPA that ended the Cambodian conflict were signed in Paris on 23 October. “To carry out economic reconstruction, Vietnam must gain goodwill from as many countries as possible, including the PRC and Indonesia,” Juwono Sudarsono argued. “A close neighbor is better than a distant relative,” expressed Kiet, citing a Vietnamese proverb. “If there are unresolved issues or a lack of mutual understanding (between Vietnam and ASEAN countries), this is a good opportunity to resolve them through frank discussions among regional leaders.”

Segments of the Indonesian press stressed the onus on Vietnam to normalize ties with China during Kiet’s visit to Jakarta. The Indonesian press, one of the New Order’s power centers projecting the viewpoints of elite Indonesian policymakers, wanted Hanoi to finally reconcile with Beijing post-PPA. Kiet’s swing through Southeast Asia coincided with CPV Chairman Do Muoi’s visit with CCP Chairman Jiang Zemin in Beijing.⁷⁶

⁷³ Taufiqulhadi, “Vietnam-RI Saling Percaya,” *Media Indonesia*, October 24, 1991.

⁷⁴ Rene L. Pattiradjawane, “Tetangga Lebih Baik Dibandingkan Saudara,” *Kompas*, October 24, 1991.

⁷⁵ Taufiqulhadi, “Vietnam-RI.”

⁷⁶ Hartadi, “PM Kiet.”

Suara Karya wrote on 24 October: “Vietnam needs to normalize relations with China because there is no reason for tension between Vietnam and China. Similarly, Indonesia has already normalized relations with China because there is no reason to continue being hostile.”⁷⁷ However, Kiet’s trip also provided an opportunity for Vietnam “to show the world that it is not oriented towards China and has an independent foreign policy” as one Asian diplomat described the potential of Kiet’s mission.⁷⁸ Politically and geographically, Vietnam stood in the crosshairs of shifting interstate relations sweeping the region. “A new level of mutual trust is needed between neighboring China and Vietnam,” Kiet stressed by highlighting Vietnam’s desire to cultivate friendship and progress with all its neighbors, including China.⁷⁹

The CPV overhauled its domestic and foreign policy priorities known as *Doi Moi* (Renovation) at its sixth national congress in December 1986 pivoting from, as Vietnam specialist Carlyle A. Thayer wrote, “a foreign policy structured by ideological considerations to a foreign policy framework that placed greater emphasis on national interest and pragmatic diplomacy.”⁸⁰ On 20 May 1988, Vietnam implemented Politburo Resolution No. 13, “On the Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation,” seen as “a major landmark in the transformation of [its] external relations under *Doi Moi*.”⁸¹ A “comprehensive change in [Vietnam’s] overall foreign policy,” Resolution No. 13 underscored Vietnam having “more friends, fewer enemies” by repairing relations with China and the U.S., building regional cohesion with ASEAN states, and

⁷⁷ “PM Vietnam: RI Sahabat Lama Yang Sangat Penting,” *Suara Karya*, October 24, 1991.

⁷⁸ Hartadi, “PM Kiet.”

⁷⁹ “PM Vietnam.”

⁸⁰ Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Evolution of Vietnamese Diplomacy, 1986–2016,” in *Vietnam’s Foreign Policy Under Doi Moi*, eds. Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), 24.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 25, 26.

resolving the Cambodian conflict.⁸² Representing “a fundamental change in foreign policy thinking relating to matters of security and development, national interests and international obligations, as well as alliances and the alignment of international forces,” Tung calls Resolution No. 13 “a new concept of comprehensive security that no longer gave priority to [a] purely military aspect,” making Vietnam no longer view ASEAN as an adversary.⁸³ 1991 was another significant year in the reformulation of Vietnamese foreign policy. The Political Report produced from the CPV’s seventh national party congress in June 1991 proclaimed, “We stand for equal and mutually beneficial co-operation with all countries regardless of different socio-political systems and on the basis of the principle of peaceful co-existence.”⁸⁴ In 1989, Hanoi held diplomatic relations with just 23 non-communist nations.⁸⁵ By 1995, that figure rose to 163.

China and Vietnam Diplomatic Relations

China and Vietnam never officially broke diplomatic relations between 1979 and 1991 as both maintained embassies in Hanoi and Beijing, respectively. Tung notes that Vietnam made 18 official and covert overtures to engage China on rapprochement between 1980 and 1987, but Beijing rebuffed every attempt.⁸⁶ Both reopened informal dialogue at the deputy foreign ministerial level in 1989, with four rounds of

⁸² Ibid., 26; Chuc Chu Van, “Qua trinh doi moi tu duy doi ngoai va hinh thanh duong loi doi ngoai doi moi,” *Nghien Cuu Quoc Te* 3 (2004): 4-7; Huynh Luu Doan, “Vietnam–ASEAN Relations in Retrospect: A Few Thoughts,” *Dialogue + Cooperation* 1 (2004): 23–31; Nam Phan Doan, “Ngoai giao Viet Nam sau 20 nam doi moi” [Vietnam’s Diplomacy after 20 Years of Renovation], *Tap chi Cong san* [Communist Review] 14 (2006): 27; Nien Nguyen Dy, “Chinh sach va hoat dong doi ngoai trong thoi ky Doi Moi,” *Tap Chi Cong San* 17, no. 740 (2005): 30; Nguyen, *Flying*, 78; Text of the Thirteenth Politburo Resolution, May 1988, 17.

⁸³ Nguyen, *Flying*, 78, 79; Text of the Thirteenth Politburo Resolution, May 1988, 17.

⁸⁴ Thayer, “The Evolution,” 26, 27; Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), *7th National Congress Documents* (Hanoi: Vietnam Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 134.

⁸⁵ Thayer, “The Evolution,” 27.

⁸⁶ Nguyen, *Flying*, 87.

discussions held in January and May 1989 and May and June 1990.⁸⁷ Advocating for restoring Sino-Vietnamese ties, PRC Vice Premier Wu Xueqian channeled Ho Chi Minh's principle for enhancing relations based on ideological considerations: "comrade plus brother."⁸⁸ The CCP invited Vu Oanh, a member of the CPV Secretariat, to China in January 1991 "to gain experience in political and economic reforms" and discuss prospective cooperation.⁸⁹

The Chengdu secret summit between senior-level Chinese and Vietnamese officials from 3-7 September 1990, downshifted the Cambodian issue and enhanced bilateral relations. Longtime Vietnam Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach's "rude" behavior toward China vice foreign minister, Xu Duxin, during the fourth round of informal talks in June 1990 in Hanoi excluded Thach from the conclave.⁹⁰ Chinese elder statesman, Deng Xiaoping, was also excluded at Vietnam's request. CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin, China Premier Li Peng, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh and Do Muoi, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, attended. The summit reached five points of agreement albeit unspecified.⁹¹ After the meeting, Linh said, "there has been misunderstanding between the two countries, on the Cambodian issue as well as on bilateral relations. This misunderstanding is being removed gradually." China and Vietnam each made important concessions at the summit related to Cambodia. China abandoned its "bleed Vietnam white" policy. Vietnam agreed to resolve the Cambodian conflict through a UN comprehensive political settlement.⁹² Following the June 1991 CPV seventh congress, the CCP greeted incoming CPV leader, Do Muoi,

⁸⁷ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Comrade Plus Brother: The New Sino-Vietnamese Relations," *Pacific Review* 5, no. 4 (1992): 402.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; *Kyodo News Service*, May 3, 1990.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 403; *Kyodo News Service*, May 3, 1990.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*; Vietnam News Agency, November 11, 1990.

⁹² *Ibid.*; *Bangkok Post*, September 19, 1990.

marking “the first such party-to-party communication in over a decade.”⁹³

From the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China and Vietnam fully restored bilateral relations in November 1991. The top political brass from both sides attended the ceremony including Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, CPV General Secretary Do Muoi, and Vietnam Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet.⁹⁴ Vietnam labeled its five-day, 29-member visit as a “government-to-government affair” centered on exploring economic and trade collaboration rather than a Communist interparty assembly, corroborating Beijing’s forewarning to Hanoi that normalization would be “state-to-state and not party-to-party.”⁹⁵ The assembly marked Hanoi officials’ first formal state visit to Beijing since 1977. Vietnam and China’s joint insistence on “state-to-state” rapprochement sought to soothe some ASEAN nations’ apprehensions over the specter of a post-Cold War “Sino-Vietnamese alliance” to replace Vietnam’s defunct Soviet patronage.⁹⁶ The summit produced two agreements. One pact pledged a “long-term, sustained and steady” expansion of trade relations.⁹⁷ The second compact required both to cooperatively defend the China-Vietnam border while containing stipulations to bolster and facilitate cross-border and regional trade.

Jiang celebrated the summit ending a “torturous” period in bilateral relations which were never formally frozen unlike Sino-

⁹³ Ibid., 403.

⁹⁴ David Holley, “China and Vietnam Normalize Relations,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-11-06-mn-954-story.html>.

⁹⁵ “China, Vietnam End 20-Year Rift,” *Straits Times*, November 6, 1991, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/page/straitstimes19911106-1.1.1>; “Hanoi and Beijing Seek More Pragmatic Ties,” *Straits Times*, November 5, 1991, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/page/straitstimes19911105-1.1.4>.

⁹⁶ “Hanoi and Beijing.”

⁹⁷ “China and Vietnam Agree on Economic Co-operation,” *Straits Times*, November 8, 1991, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/page/straitstimes19911108-1.1.5>.

Indonesian relations.⁹⁸ “This is a meeting which concludes the past and opens up the future. The talks mark the normalization of bilateral relations and will have a profound impact on the development of such relations,” Jiang said. The PPA signed in late October 1991 concluded the Cambodian conflict and offered an opening to full normalization. Jiang admitted that bilateral relations had suffered “difficulties and setbacks” over the previous 12 years “contrary to our wishes.” Bilateral relations deteriorated in early 1979 when a brief border war erupted in response to Vietnam’s invasion of Democratic Kampuchea in December 1978. To Muoi’s agreement, Jiang argued that it was “abnormal for China and Vietnam to be in a state of confrontation, but...also unrealistic” for relations to resemble those during the height of the Cold War.

However, the summit did not alleviate some long-standing schisms between the two communist states. Despite years of booming legal and illegal border trade mixed with growing Chinese investment in port facilities in Guangxi province bordering Vietnam, the pair did not agree to re-establish rail and air connections and telecommunications.⁹⁹ Border disputes and the logistical quandary of regulating cross-border trade and transport remained.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, normalization failed to remedy diplomatic and security tensions between Hanoi and Beijing regarding sovereignty claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Competing territorial and jurisdictional assertions among littoral states over disputed islands in the South China Sea continue today. Despite deep-seated differences, full Sino-Vietnamese normalization resulted.

The Cold War succumbed to the “ash heap of history” when the Soviet Union dissolved on 26 December 1991.¹⁰¹ At the Fourth ASEAN

⁹⁸ Holley, “China.”

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; “China and Vietnam.”

¹⁰⁰ “China and Vietnam.”

¹⁰¹ Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” transcript of speech delivered at the British House of Commons, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 1982, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-members-british-parliament>.

Summit in Singapore on 27 January 1992, Suharto addressed the rapidly changing international political and economic landscapes. Despite the postwar order disintegrating and tensions dissipating, a “new world order” remained amorphous.¹⁰² East-West détente had triumphed over ideological anachronisms and bipolar geopolitical antagonisms. “Human thought, efforts, and resources have been freed from the shackles of ideological competition and strategic military conflict between the world’s two major power blocs,” Suharto stated. “The easing of tensions at the international level has brought about the end of various tensions and conflicts in various parts of the world through...peaceful resolution.” Suharto alluded to “encouraging developments” across the Asia Pacific while suggesting the prospect of a widening ASEAN umbrella, regionally and extra-regionally. “Constructive approaches between countries in the region, both bilaterally and regionally, will support efforts to maintain peace and security,” Suharto continued. “This development is marked...by approaches between [Vietnam] and [China]. This agreement also provides an opportunity for countries outside the region to become parties to [ASEAN].”¹⁰³ Suharto’s speech at the first ASEAN summit since the end of the Cold War crystalized attitudes surrounding the ambitious upward mobility of the Asia Pacific at the dawn of the post-Cold War period.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to underscore the significance of Indonesian-Sino-Vietnamese normalization of foreign relations in delivering finality to the Asian Cold War. It elevates and contextualizes numerous diplomatic maneuvers and exchanges between the three rising regional powers from the late 1980s into the early 1990s when the Asia Pacific straddled the

¹⁰² Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia, “Sambutan Presiden Pada Pembukaan Konperensi Tingkat Tinggi ASEAN IV Pada Tanggal 27 Januari 1992 di Singapura,” 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

Cold War and post-Cold War worlds. The wave of normalization allowed Vietnam to fully divorce itself from its Cold War economic, political, and defense affiliations with the Soviet Union. Hanoi's amenability to engage its non-communist Southeast Asian peers politically and economically, particularly Indonesia, shed its portrayal as the longtime bogeyman of Southeast Asia connected to its perpetual pugnaciousness and rigid state ideology. The period of triangular détente from the standpoint of China emboldened its distinction as an ascendant hegemon by allowing it to expand into Southeast Asian markets after unfreezing relations with Indonesia, the largest nation in Southeast Asia, after more than two decades.

The triumvirate reached normalization among one another despite some irreconcilable differences. China-Vietnam normalization substantively alleviated deep historical rancor despite no compromise over the pair's contentious claims over the Spratly and Paracel islands. The 1992 Law on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone clashed with competing Chinese and Vietnamese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, the Johnson Reef Skirmish between Vietnam and China on 14 March 1988, over the Spratly Islands stands as the last interstate battle between China and Vietnam to date. Likewise, Indonesian-Vietnamese bilateralism became ironclad despite no resolution being reached on delimiting the continental shelf boundary.

For Indonesia, the triangular normalization allowed Jakarta to realize the full utility and potentiality of its *bebas aktif* foreign policy blueprint as a regional peacemaker capable of bridging the communist and non-communist spheres in the Asia Pacific. Suharto's November 1990 trip to Japan, China, and Vietnam, along with his reception of Chinese and Vietnamese heads of state in 1991, stands as one of the New Order's finest foreign policy achievements. The sweeping symbolism of Indonesian-Sino-Vietnamese normalization eroded barriers and manifested genuine regional cooperation that segued the Asia Pacific from Cold War to post-Cold War. The positive actions from Jakarta, Beijing, and Hanoi in tandem

sowed the seeds of the Asia Pacific's technological, political, economic, and social advancement that resonates today.

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