

ORAL HISTORY

Representing India during the Vietnam Conundrum

Prem Kumar Budhwar

Prem Kumar Budhwar was a young Indian Foreign Service officer posted to Hanoi (North Vietnam) in the early 1970s. He manned the small Indian diplomatic mission almost all alone and saw through many things at the height of war in Vietnam and India's relations with that country. Here, he narrates and shares his experiences and insights into the everyday happenings during those tumultuous years including importantly his contribution in shaping India's Vietnam policy during a critical period in India's diplomatic history.

Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ): Thank you Ambassador Budhwar for agreeing to talk on the subject that has become a referring point of Cold War history. Could you please share your experience of being an Indian on the ground in Vietnam when the country was in deep crisis? First of all, how did you start your diplomatic association with East Asia?

Prem K. Budhwar (PKB): Before joining at Hanoi in October 1969 I was in Hong Kong for two years. After finishing my tenure of duty in Hanoi, in June 1972 I joined at Headquarters (Ministry of External Affairs) immediately, without any break or leave etc. With Vietnam so much in the news, a new desk was created in the East Asia Division of the Ministry to specifically handle Indo-China and I was appointed Deputy Secretary (IC).

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war and the upcoming Simla Conference between India and Pakistan, a few major structural changes were underway in the MEA. The East Asia Division had two Deputy Secretaries, DS (EA) and myself to the newly created post of DS(IC). My colleague, late A.K. Das, who was DS (EA) was, at short notice, transferred to the newly created Branch Secretariat of the MEA in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

The then Secretary (East), V.C. Trivedi, sent for me and asked, "Budhwar can you look after East Asia also, purely on a temporary basis"? I agreed and thus my designation became Deputy Secretary, Indo-China and East Asia or DS (IC&EA). But what was supposed to be a temporary arrangement remained like that for three years till I left Headquarters for my next posting abroad. However, I enjoyed this double charge, even though it meant a very

heavy workload. In July 1983, when I returned to Headquarters on a posting this time as Joint Secretary, I was given the charge of the East Asia Division. It was probably the first time that someone who had never served in China or knew a word of the Chinese language was made JS (EA).

IFAJ: As is known to all, your posting in Hanoi was at a time of some very momentous developments: the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the parallel process of the Paris Peace Talks and so on. Could you please throw some light on all this and India's responses to the rapidly unfolding events in that country?

PKB: The period of my posting in Hanoi, 1969 to 1972, was indeed very momentous, even exciting. The American war effort was constantly increasing and so was the Vietnamese resistance. The Paris Peace talks (the principal negotiators being Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam and Henry Kissinger of the USA) offered some hope but there was no let up in the fighting on the ground or in the air.

As a matter of fact, from March-April 1972 the Americans extended their aerial bombings well beyond the 17th Parallel (the dividing line between North and South Vietnam) so as to subsequently include even Haiphong (the main North Vietnamese port) and Hanoi, the Capital, including the notorious carpet bombings by the dreaded B-52 bombers. In fact, at one stage we were formally told by the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry to be ready, at short notice, to move all diplomatic missions in Hanoi to nearby mountain caves. In consultation with Headquarters, I was all set to evacuate all Indian personnel of our mission except for myself and one India based staff member, and keep flying the Indian flag at some mountain cave. Fortunately, this eventuality never arose.

As regards India and this changing Vietnamese scene, I think we did well. India made it quite obvious that its sympathy lay with North Vietnam and the NLF (National Liberation Front or the Vietcong, as the West chose to call it). The latter's Foreign Minister, Mme. Binh, was even hosted to an official visit to India by our then Minister of External Affairs, Sardar Swaran Singh. The severe strains in Indo-US relations during this period only propelled us further into adopting this attitude, which enjoyed broad national consensus.

The actual unification of Vietnam happened only in 1975, much after my departure. By then the Americans had lost all hope and there was not much resistance left in South Vietnam. How the Americans finally departed is well known and the North Vietnamese forces just rolled in and they already had a

kind of a base through the NLF. Of course, there must have been some pockets of resistance when developments of such magnitude take place. Some resistance was reportedly there from some senior officials of the Saigon regime and the business community. Elements who had made huge profits and had, over the years, acquired a vested interest in the continuation of the discredited South Vietnamese regime. But they all ran away, including President Thieu of South Vietnam.

The general public and ordinary people welcomed as heroes the North Vietnamese forces as they marched into Saigon. They were all jubilant as it marked the end of war, the end of their long suffering, and the beginning of a new phase in their history. Saigon was even renamed Ho Chi Minh City. As I recall, I do not think reunification as such posed any major problem. Yes, initially there must have been some pockets of resentment. Vietnam is a big and a long country. There was a mixture of population in the South. A whole new generation had come up used to a different life style, compared to the austere pattern of life in the North. Suddenly from a country of some forty million the population of a reunited Vietnam almost doubled.

There were cultural and climatic differences between the North and the South. However, because of years of division and different political systems some teething troubles in the initial years were natural, even inevitable. As the North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong himself once told me, “While we are facing the problems and difficulties of war, we are fully conscious of the complications that peace and reunification will bring. But we are determined to overcome those too.”

IFAJ: How familiar were the Vietnamese with India? How did they view religion?

PKB: I think in the North at least (where I was and could perceive) there was general appreciation, even admiration, for India. We were viewed as a friendly country. The socialist leanings in our broad policies were favourably commented upon, so were our close relations with the Soviet Union. In the overall North Vietnamese context at the time, India fitted well. We were also viewed as a country with a rich culture, an ancient civilisation and as the land of the birth of Buddhism, the religion widely prevalent in Vietnam. I can recall an interesting instance of their interest in India and Indian culture. Those days we used to occasionally get Indian movies from our Ministry for our own entertainment. One such movie was “Badhban”, in black and white. We watched it with our Vietnamese staff. Through them the Foreign Ministry learnt about

this film. After a few days we received a request from the Foreign Ministry if they could borrow this movie from us for some days as entertainment material for their troops. While readily agreeing to this request we were naturally curious to know as to what was of specific interest to them in this film. The movie was about the son of a rich man sent to study medicine in England. Upon his return to India as a qualified doctor, instead of opting for a life of comfort and riches he insisted on going to a village and serve the poor and the needy there. Obviously, the Vietnamese saw in this the right message for their soldiers; to put service above self. The entertainment aspects like romance with an ordinary village belle, songs and dances etc were to be a bonus for their troops.

Coming to the second part of your question, namely their attitude towards religion, it showed their pragmatism. With a devastating war on, religion was a secondary topic. I did not perceive any anti religious attitude nor did they go about destroying their beautiful pagodas. Reconstruction was what occupied their minds. Even Hanoi's largest hospital (where our first son was born) continued to be named St. Paul's Hospital. Soon after his birth we took him to a fully functioning pagoda to get him blessed by the head monk. My mother was staying with us in Hanoi. In the absence of a Hindu temple, she regularly started visiting a pagoda very close to where we lived maintaining that: "God is everywhere". The overall ambience obviously made her happy. One day the Head of the Asia Department in their Foreign Ministry mentioned to me about my mother going to the pagoda. I asked him how he knew about this. He replied that his mother also went there. Apparently, the two mothers had developed some unspoken bonding, the language barrier notwithstanding.

IFAJ: How would you assess the Vietnam War and the role played by guerrilla warfare?

PKB: For the military historians and strategists, the Vietnam War should make a fascinating study. In terms of raw military might the Vietnamese resistance was no match to the Americans. At the height of this war, the US had almost half a million troops on the ground in Vietnam. Its entire Sixth Fleet was deployed off the Vietnamese coast in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Tonkin. A sizeable portion of the US Air Force was deployed in the area operating from air bases all over, including in Thailand. The Americans had thrown in virtually everything in their armoury; latest weapons, front line military aircraft, the B-52 heavy bombers, cluster bombs, napalm bombs and booby traps. In short, everything except nuclear weapons was used. And yet, things did not work out for them.

As regards the Vietnamese, virtually for the entire range of military hardware they depended heavily on the Communist Bloc, notably the Soviet Union, with the Chinese facilitating the smooth and rapid flow of these supplies overland by train via Mongolia and then China. The sea route was less dependable, though used, because of its vulnerability to US attacks. But, it goes to the credit of the Vietnamese that the actual fighting throughout was done by them and them alone. Knowing their disadvantages vis-à-vis the Americans, they seldom took them head on, except for occasional air combats. Against conventional weaponry they mostly kept it to defensive tactics, bleeding the Americans as much as they could. They did shoot down a large number of US aircraft, mostly with ground fire and Surface to Air Missiles. As a matter of fact, the metal recovered from these shot down American planes was converted by the enterprising Vietnamese into a sizeable cottage industry producing combs, hair clips, cuff links and a wide range of decoration items. The War History Museum in Hanoi had piles of wreckage of these aircraft which the Vietnamese proudly called: "The graveyard of American planes". When I left Hanoi on transfer, my farewell gift from the Foreign Ministry was a beautiful vase with the engraving: "Made from the metal of the 3000th US plane shot down on 25.6.1968." I still preserve it as a unique memento.

Where the Vietnamese scored over the Americans was their superb guerrilla warfare tactics. Their network of underground tunnels confused the Americans no end. The US was often fighting an invisible enemy. The supply route from the North to the South, the famous Ho Chi Minh trail, kept flowing despite repeated US attacks. There were hardly any pitched battles or frontal attacks, no famous tank battles, the enemy just appeared from nowhere and disappeared equally fast after wreaking havoc on the Americans. The Vietnamese had mastered these tactics over the years. This is how they had defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Their legendary General Giap was the master of this strategy. I had the privilege of being introduced to him on one occasion. This round faced podgy little General with piercing bright eyes was indeed a master of guerrilla warfare.

But the Vietnamese also had a huge psychological advantage over the Americans. Their discipline and utter dedication was inspired by total

commitment to their cause. They were fighting to liberate their country so that they could shape their destiny themselves. Theirs was a do or die struggle. This is where the Americans suffered from a major disadvantage. When they sent out their troops to fight in Vietnam they tried to impress upon them that they would be fighting to defend freedom, human dignity, democracy and liberty. But what the US troops saw on the ground in South Vietnam was quite the opposite. Corruption, nepotism and a political system that was rotten to the core. A soldier is trained to fight and, if need be, even lay down his life, provided it is for a cause in which he believes and which is inspiring. This is what the American troops in Vietnam missed. The growing opposition back home in America to the US war effort in Vietnam, the draft dodgers, the anti-Vietnam War protests and demonstrations – all this could not have helped the morale of the US troops battling on the front. No wonder, one even heard of defections from time to time.

On one occasion, I personally had a unique experience in this regard. One day I got a message from the Foreign Ministry in Hanoi requesting if I could come over early. When I reached there, this is what the senior Vietnamese official receiving me had to convey: they had captured an American soldier who had expressed a keen desire to defect and seek asylum in India. This is how I came into the picture. I asked if I could meet this US soldier and have a one to one talk with him. This was promptly arranged. Here was this young American, barely in his early twenties, with tears in his eyes and he virtually broke down on seeing me. He then expressed how utterly disillusioned he was with what his country was doing in Vietnam and how the system in South Vietnam stood totally discredited in his eyes. Certainly, it was not something worth the colossal American war effort. After examining his ID card and satisfying myself as to his authenticity, I gave him a patient hearing. However, I gave him no assurance or promise that his request for asylum in India would be granted, despite his expressed admiration and praise for India and what it stood for. I added that this was normally not our policy. But I did tell him that I would promptly refer his request to my Government. This I did and, as expected, the reply from New Delhi was a NO. I suitably conveyed this to the Foreign Ministry and never heard about this American GI again.

IFAJ: What impression did you form of the North Vietnamese leadership? Did you see or meet Ho Chi Minh?

PKB: I reached Hanoi in the third week of October 1969 to take up my assignment. Much to my regret, Ho Chi Minh had expired about six weeks earlier. The whole nation still seemed to be in a state of mourning over the passing away of this legendary figure who had done so much for his country.

However, North Vietnam carried on even if Ho Chi Minh was no more. One never heard of any struggle for leadership or of any internal differences. The top leadership carried on Ho Chi Minh's task and mission with dedication. Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, a close companion and confidant of Ho Chi Minh, became the most visible face of the new leadership. But the top political body, the Politburo of the Party, had a number of experienced and highly regarded figures who functioned as a closely knit team. At least that is the impression one always got.

Given the difficult times that the country was passing through, the top leadership and also the officials in government led very simple, indeed austere lives. This was a matter of conscious policy. As they often even explained, with their people going through such hardships they could ill afford to be enjoying any luxuries in life. Except for National Day receptions or if there was a senior foreign delegation visiting, they never attended any parties or banquets. Even when they put in an appearance at such functions to show respect to their hosts, they hardly ate or drank, just interacted with the dignitaries and left quietly after a while. There was no question of their coming to your normal or routine diplomatic dinners or lunches. They led simple lives, dressed modestly and stayed away completely from any ostentatious life style. Only the top leadership used cars and that too the lacklustre Soviet Volga made. Use of bicycles was very common even when it came to their senior officials. Indeed, bicycles were the most common mode of transport in Hanoi and cars were a rare sight. In short, one was most impressed by their very simple life style. They projected an image of total dedication to their cause and in the process earned considerable respect and admiration.

IFAJ: How would you trace the development of India-Vietnam relations in recent times? What was the main highlight while you were in charge of our mission in Hanoi?

PKB: With the fall of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, it marked the beginning of a new era in Vietnam's history. But it was a divided Vietnam to emerge with the 17th Parallel separating the North from the South. The long hard journey towards reunification was to last for another two decades till 1975.

Following the Geneva Conference on Indo-China, three International Control Commissions (ICC) were established for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Canada represented the West on these Commissions as a member, Poland the Socialist Bloc, while India was a non-aligned country as the third member and also the Chairman. By way of establishing a diplomatic presence in Vietnam, India opened Consulates General in Hanoi and Saigon.

In hindsight, it appears that we saw greater promise in the North (DRVN) that had the benefit of being led by a leader of the stature and experience of Ho Chi Minh. State level visits were exchanged with President Ho Chi Minh paying a State visit to India in the late 1950s and our first President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad paying a return one. The two countries were thus engaging positively, even if somewhat slowly.

In the meanwhile, from the 1960s the US military involvement on the side of South Vietnam (RVN) started. One should remember that those were the days of the Cold War at its height with the USA actively pursuing its policy of containment of Communism, establishing military bases wherever possible in South-East Asia, including South Vietnam. What followed for years to come by way of the Vietnam War is now history, just as how it ended is well known. Ho Chi Minh's dream of a reunited Vietnam was finally to be realised in 1975, six years after his demise with Saigon being renamed as Ho Chi Minh City as a tribute to his memory

Coming to how India viewed all this, I think it is very essential to see things in the context of the world scene then. India's policy of non-alignment had never gone down well with the USA. Its refusal to join the US crusade against Communism was never appreciated. Pakistan, by contrast, happily came on board and was to become a darling of the US for years to come. Simultaneously, India's relations with the Soviet Union were fast picking up in virtually all fields. The Nixon-Kissinger team in Washington was increasingly tilting towards Pakistan. The turning point was possibly reached by 1971 during the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) crisis. Even Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Washington did not help. The leaders of the two sides just did not click. Then came the Indo-Soviet Treaty of August 1971 which further upset the Americans. What followed by way of the Indo-Pak war in December 1971 and the break-up of Pakistan with the emergence of an independent Bangladesh (American threatening postures towards India notwithstanding) is something too well known to merit any recalling.

The fall out of these trends, over the past few years, definitely had a positive effect on our relations with North Vietnam. It also reflected itself in our growing sympathy and support for the NLF (Vietcong) in South Vietnam and their continuing stout resistance there. Viewed against this overall scenario, I think by the late 1960s India had already decided to move closer to North Vietnam. What was till then a routine posting as Consul General in Hanoi obviously underwent a review. A senior journalist with known Leftist leanings (K.S. Shelvankar) was hand-picked by Mrs. Indira Gandhi to man our mission in Hanoi. The new incumbent's proximity to Mrs. Gandhi and her influential Principal Secretary P.N. Haksar were well known and I think there was in all this a message for Hanoi which already had one of its very senior diplomats, a former Vice Foreign Minister, as its Consul General in New Delhi. Even when I was prematurely transferred from Hong Kong to Hanoi, I was told by the then Foreign Secretary, T.N. Kaul, that this was part of their strengthening the mission in Hanoi. I did then take this with a pinch of salt since it was not uncommon for the Ministry to sugar coat it as a challenging assignment for you while moving you to a known tough spot. But subsequent events were to show that there was indeed some serious rethinking going on in New Delhi as regards our ties with Hanoi.

With Shelvankar's departure, for a better part of 1971 I was the Acting Consul General in Hanoi. It was towards the end of the year that I was informed by the Ministry of External Affairs that upgrading India's relations with North Vietnam was being seriously considered and what would be my input. I promptly and strongly supported this move with a number of arguments and reasons. To sum up, my views as conveyed to Headquarters were:

- (1) The way things were going the future lay with North Vietnam.
- (2) Our giving Hanoi full diplomatic recognition at this crucial stage of the Vietnam War would make a very special positive impact on our bilateral relations.
- (3) It will considerably enhance our international standing, notably in the Socialist and the Third World.
- (4) It will lay the foundation for a comprehensive and significant relationship between India and Vietnam, once the latter was reunited, which increasingly looked to be a matter of time only.

At this stage it might look like a calculated risk but I would very much recommend our taking it. I also cautioned that we should certainly avoid similarly upgrading our diplomatic relations with Saigon or South Vietnam as that would render this special gesture towards the North quite meaningless. (5) It was not the time anymore for us to play the balancing

game. Instead, we should go in for a bold, timely and courageous decision in favour of Hanoi only.

And, what was the Ministry's response? I still remember that date, 7 January 1972 when I received a Secret telegram to the effect that on the AIR news that evening it will be formally announced that India had decided, with immediate effect, to extend full diplomatic recognition to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) with its mission in Hanoi being designated the Embassy of India instead of the Consulate General of India. There was no such move to upgrade our mission in Saigon, South Vietnam. My designation was also to change from Acting Consul General to *Chargé d'affaires*.

Once again, things should be seen in their overall context. With a stunning military victory over Pakistan and the emergence in December 1971 of an independent Bangladesh, American threatening noises and moves notwithstanding, our morale was exceptionally high. We had done it and dismembered Pakistan. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's stock and popularity had soared. Even her critics, notably in the West, had to grudgingly accept that she had proved to be a strong and a decisive leader in the face of serious odds and adversity. Our relations with Washington were at a new low. Now was the time, therefore, when we could afford to take what was undeniably a very bold foreign policy decision in respect of Vietnam. And, this is precisely what happened.

This development, without doubt, was the highlight, indeed the crowning glory of my posting in Hanoi. All the hardships of life in Hanoi were forgotten. It was the peak of one's professional satisfaction and sense of achievement. As the man on the spot I was the immediate beneficiary of the enormous goodwill that this act of ours instantly generated in Hanoi. While it was brickbats (literally) for my colleague in Saigon, it was bouquets all the way for me in Hanoi. In hindsight, these are the kind of moments in ones career worthy of recalling even years later

In April 1972, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi convened in New Delhi a Conference of all Heads of Mission of India in Asia. As *chargé d'affaires* in Hanoi I was also required to attend. Before proceeding to India, I requested the Foreign Ministry in Hanoi for the latest briefing on the situation in Vietnam. This was promptly arranged and without my asking the level of briefing kept moving up first, the Head of the Asia Department, the next day the Vice Foreign Minister and the day following the Foreign Minister himself. Finally, a couple of days before my departure for India, to my total but pleasant surprise, Prime

Minister Pham Van Dong invited me and my wife to a breakfast meeting at the Presidential Palace. As we alighted from our flag car, Pham Van Dong received us at the bottom of the steps and walked us, arm in arm, all the way to the room where the meeting was to be held. It was not just a sumptuous Vietnamese breakfast, but a highly meaningful conversation and briefing. While asking me to convey his warm greetings to Mrs. Indira Gandhi he also divulged that something big was shortly going to happen in Vietnam. True enough, a few weeks later a major offensive was launched in South Vietnam. It was in retaliation for this that President Nixon ordered the extension of the American bombings well beyond the 20th Parallel, Haiphong and Hanoi included, besides mining all the North Vietnamese ports.

I was naturally keeping my Ministry regularly informed about all these briefings and meetings. Our practice of internal circulation of classified telegrams ensures that they are seen by all concerned, Prime Minister included. Consequently, when I reached New Delhi for this Conference I was much noticed and complimented for access to the highest levels in Hanoi. Attending this Conference were many of the stalwarts of the Service, colleagues very much senior to me from Capitals like Dhaka, Islamabad, Beijing, Tokyo and Colombo, etc. I was easily the junior most at this meet.

After welcoming us all, breaking with Protocol, Mrs. Indira Gandhi remarked: "Every morning these days when I look at the newspapers, Vietnam invariably is the front page story. Who is presently our man in Hanoi? I would first of all like to have his latest assessment of the scene there." This was totally unexpected but I made my presentation which in normal course should have come up at the fag end of the Conference, going by the order of seniority. My seniors were gracious enough to compliment me at the end of the forenoon session. Professionally, I was in the proverbial seventh heaven, and with not yet even ten years completed in the Service.

IFAJ: How did you see the functioning of the ICC in Vietnam? Did it complicate our relations with Canada?

PKB: In the initial stages I think this international body did a good job and functioned reasonably well. However, it gradually got caught up in the Cold War syndrome, as indeed was the case with the UN itself. Whenever the ICC investigated something and if there was a difference of opinion between Poland and Canada, not quite uncommon, India as Chairman resolved the deadlock through its casting vote. Quite often the Canadians felt that India showed bias

towards the Communist side. Some Canadian diplomats, their Asia experts, serving on the ICC even went away with not too happy feelings towards their Indian counterparts. This unfortunately injected certain bitterness in our bilateral relations. But with the passage of time both sides, I think, gradually put this chapter behind them. These Commissions were in any case slowly losing their value till in 1972 it was decided to wind them up.

IFAJ: How would you assess Vietnam-China relations?

PKB: Historically these relations have seen their ups and downs as is to be perhaps expected between a big neighbour and a relatively small one. Initially, during the Vietnam War China appeared to be firmly supporting and helping North Vietnam, along with the rest of the Communist Bloc, notably the Soviet Union. It was common those days in Hanoi for the China-Vietnam relationship to be described as close as the lips and the teeth. Though, some did remark even then that the teeth can also bite the lips. Again the overall context comes in. China had started questioning and even challenging Moscow's leadership of the Communist World. Cracks were beginning to appear in the monolith structure of the Communist World. The charge of revisionism was being leveled by China against the Soviet Union. The problem of the long unsettled border between the two countries was frequently being mentioned. In 1969 there occurred even an armed clash between the two sides at the Ussuri river.

Taking advantage of all this, there was growing talk of Washington playing the China card in its dealings with Moscow and likewise Beijing playing the US card in its dealings with Moscow. Possibly some behind the scene wheeling dealing was already afoot. North Vietnam could not have felt comfortable over these trends and developments since it needed both the Soviet Union and China to support it in its war effort. Against this background came the stunning news of the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's visit to China in 1971. Whether China took North Vietnam into confidence over this dramatic development will remain a matter of conjecture. But this turn of events could not have possibly pleased Hanoi. Though understandably restrained in their public comment, the North Vietnamese very much gave the impression that they felt stabbed in the back by China. The Chinese could ill-afford to disrupt Hanoi's war effort, but there were occasional reports to suggest the vital supply route to Vietnam through China was slowing down at times. Historically, the Vietnamese have been wary of the Chinese.

This development in 1971 must have revived this feeling on their part. And, let us not forget that just four years after the reunification of Vietnam, in

1979 there took place a border clash between Vietnam and China, the latter trying to teach a lesson to the former. Thanks to the stout resistance put up by the Vietnamese, who in the end learnt a lesson is well known. Either by design or otherwise, the timing of this Chinese incursion into Vietnam was particularly unfortunate. It coincided with the ongoing official visit to China of our then Minister of External Affairs, Mr. Vajpayee. By way of strong disapproval of this Chinese action Mr. Vajpayee cut short his visit and returned home thereby also expressing strong support for Vietnam.

This brief foray into Vietnam-China relations would lead one to conclude that as neighbours the two countries could have problems from time to time, no matter how hard the two sides try to remain friendly and cooperative. There is still potential for trouble and tension over the exploitation of natural resources in the South China Sea and as yet unresolved dispute over the Spratley islands. Hanoi cannot ignore China's growing military and economic muscle and its global ambitions. The three countries in Asia with valid reasons to be concerned about China and also possessed of the will and capacity to contain China are India, Vietnam, and Japan. Without any formal alliance, this psychological axis of common interest nevertheless remains a very relevant factor in relations between New Delhi, Hanoi and Tokyo. At least, that is how I feel and I do not think China is unaware of it. This would also be another reason to welcome the growing ties, in various fields, between India and Vietnam.

IFAJ: How was life in Hanoi while you were there?

PKB: Extremely tough, not to forget the constant fear of losing one's limb or life, particularly towards the last few months of my stay in Hanoi when the US bombings of the North Vietnamese Capital became virtually a daily feature and with resultant heavy damage and loss of life. Even otherwise, life was difficult. Essential supplies were short and erratic. One depended heavily for them from sources like Saigon or Vientiane through the weekly ICC chartered flight. Diplomatic supply orders placed with Hong Kong could take ages to arrive. Even the diplomatic bag from India was not too regular.

Communication links with the outside world were poor. The weekly ICC flight apart, the only other way out of Hanoi was via China which was on the boil with its so called Cultural Revolution. With a war on, there was no question of a road or a rail link. For official communications we had a wireless link with New Delhi. But telephones were as good as non-existent. Both in the office and at

home we had the old style field telephone. You had to rotate the handle hard and several times. If you were lucky to get connected you had to almost shout your lungs out to be heard at the other end. Medical facilities were poor.

Running ones kitchen was a constant struggle. Shopping was no attraction with the shelves in the few shops that were there half empty. There were no restaurants in the town, no clubs, no cinemas or theatres. The impressive looking National Theatre was as good as closed, except for a rare performance by some visiting artists. Television had not yet reached Hanoi. The low electric current voltage and frequent fluctuations ruined your electric gadgets and with no local repair or service facilities. A battery run powerful transistor was the only way to listen to the latest news from around the world and remain in touch with the scene outside.

Socially, life was quiet. There was no social interaction possible with the Vietnamese. The diplomatic corps was small, only twenty one resident missions, most of them being from the Socialist Bloc countries. Hanoi was a non-family station for them. As Indians ourselves, a very small number in the mission and with no local Indian community, the only social life outside was with the equally small resident diplomatic missions of France, Britain, Indonesia, Egypt, Algeria and a couple of Canadians on the ICC. We saw a lot of each other, for lack of anything better to do, exchanged notes and had informal get-togethers quite often. There was utter informality within this small group, for we had no other choice.

Travelling within North Vietnam was restricted and prior clearance of the Foreign Ministry was required. My wife and I did travel to some places, but it was not easy. The nearby hill resort of Tam Dao (3,500 ft) had a few small cottages for the diplomatic corps. If one was lucky to get a booking, one welcomed a visit there away from the summer heat and humidity of Hanoi. In Hanoi itself long walks were the best pastime suggested even in our Ministry's Note on Living Conditions in Hanoi. But even there one had to be careful. Several parts of the city were closed to foreigners, apparently because of some military installations there including anti-aircraft guns and missile sites.

Otherwise, basically Hanoi was a well planned and pretty city with two lakes, wide open roads with tree lined sidewalks and old French style villas. At one time it was called "Paris of the Orient". But, due to the war and extreme paucity of funds and materials, the city looked quite run down. That was the

Hanoi of those days and yet we somehow managed and were even happy in our own way.

IFAJ: Do you desire to return to Vietnam some day?

PKB: Most certainly yes. Both for me and my wife Hanoi remains something special. We started our married life there. For my wife it was the beginning of life in the Foreign Service. Our first child was born there, with his birth certificate being signed by the Mayor of Hanoi. As already mentioned, professionally for me the days in Hanoi were most satisfying and fulfilling. Seeing things from such close quarters and that too during such a difficult period, we developed a unique respect and admiration for the brave Vietnamese, as also for their grit and determination.

Over the years our bilateral relations have expanded manifold and I am confident that they have a bright future. From what I gather, Hanoi itself is a very different, changed and expanded city now with many modern features. I may not even recognise it easily compared to what it was during my time there, nearly four decades ago. But that in itself should make a visit there more exciting and interesting. Also, I would be happy to visit Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon those days) and the old imperial Capital of Hue, places I could not visit when I was posted in North Vietnam. My wife and I might very well undertake this trip one day on our own – a journey down the memory lane.

IFAJ: Thank you very much Sir for sharing these insightful experiences with us that will remain as an important chapter in the diplomatic history of India and the world at large.
