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Teaching international relations in Vietnam: chances and challenges

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the teaching of international relations (IR) in Vietnam, from the establishment of the first Institute of International Relations in 1959 to the proliferation of departments of IR or international studies from the 1990s. It notes the limitations facing teachers of IR and efforts to develop and standardize the curriculum in recent years. It also examines the way national history is portrayed in the teaching of Vietnam's foreign policy and regional relations in Southeast Asia, with increasing attention paid to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations from the 1990s.

On July 27, 1995 the ceremony to admit Vietnam into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) took place in Bandar Seri Begawan,

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Brunei. This event had multiple meanings for both Vietnam and ASEAN. It marked a new page in the history of Vietnam–ASEAN relations, transforming suspicion and distrust to cooperation (Vu, 2007, p. 316). For Vietnam, this ended a long confrontation with ASEAN that had started in 1978, as Vietnam was involved in the Cambodian conflict. Looking back to these years, a senior Vietnamese diplomat asked whether Vietnam had been vigilant enough during that time, and he continued his survey of Vietnam's regional relations through the lens of its three decades-long struggle and the Cold war between two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the US (Trinh, 2007, p. 19). For ASEAN, this ended an obsession about the 'Vietnamese threat'. In this context of regional and international relations (IR) of Vietnam, the teaching of IR, in general, and the IR of Southeast Asia, in particular, was much influenced by the environment of the Cold war.

1 International relations education in Vietnam

The first institution in Vietnam teaching IR was the Institute of International Relations (IIR) that was established in 1959 in accordance with a decision of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Initially it served as a think-tank and training institution of MOFA. However, 10 years later, in 1970, a first BA program in IR was introduced. For more than 20 years following this date, IIR was the sole institution training students of IR in the country. During this time, studying at the IIR in Vietnam, like in the Soviet Union, was a privilege that was provided only for children of diplomats and high-ranking officials, because after graduation they were guaranteed a place at MOFA.[1] Therefore, studying at the IIR was a dream of many ordinary students. The general impression was that IR was a subject of a small group of both teachers and students, and IIR was an isolated institution within the higher education system of Vietnam.

This situation ended when Vietnam National University-Hanoi opened the Faculty of International Studies in 1995. Following this year, a series of faculties of IR/studies were established at several other universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Hue, Da Lat, and other locations.

1 In Soviet Union the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs was opened only for students coming from the families of high-ranking officials.

Table 1 Vietnamese Universities hosting international relations/studies programs

No.	University	Year of introduction of IR program	Total no. of faculty	Average no. of enrolled students/year
1	Institute of International Relations	1970	60	200–250
2	College of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-Hanoi	1995	18	100
3	Academy of Journalism and Communication	1997	10	80
4	College of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-Ho Chi Minh City	2003	15	180–200
5	Dong Do University	2000	10	100
6	Hong Bang University of Ho Chi Minh City	2000	5	100
7	Hanoi University	2002	5	60–70
8	Hue University	2006	10	60–70
9	Da Nang University	2006	7	60–70
10	Da Lat University	2006	7	50
11	Education University of Ho Chi Minh City	2006	10	50

Information current as of 2008, based on interviews with faculty by the author.

Table 1 shows the dramatic recent expansion of universities offering programs in IR/studies. IR, or international studies, has now become one of most popular disciplines in Vietnam.

The teaching of IR, however, faces some challenges. The first challenge of this discipline is its very name. Actually, in Vietnam, there are two terms: IR and international studies. Among the 11 universities offering these programs, only three universities have IR per se.[2] The common element of both IR and international studies programs in Vietnam is that they are social science and humanities based, and incorporate a set of disciplines like political science, economics, law, history, culture, and foreign languages. In short, both types of programs are multidisciplinary. Both of them address historical and current global issues, and focus on interstate cooperation and conflict, international

2 They are Institute of International Relations, Dong Do University and College of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City.

organizations and problems, international economics and law, development and environment, among other issues.

The difference between the terms 'international relations' and 'international studies' is the mode and type of action that they cover. The term 'international relations' is traditionally used to refer to interstate relations, in concordance with the dominant role of the state in international politics. On the other hand, the term 'international studies' has become more popular nowadays, and often refers to a broader set of issues, from interstate relations to international economics, international law, and transnational concerns such as nontraditional security issues, environment, migration, ethnicity, terrorism, public health, and social movements. In Vietnam, the international studies programs, in contrast to IR programs, still pay more attention to area studies such as European and American studies, in addition to looking at interstate relations.

The second challenge of IR/studies programs is the lack of qualified faculty. For many reasons, all universities do not have enough qualified faculty teaching IR/studies. In general, most of them were trained in world history, economics, law, English, or something else. However, the situation is different from one institution to another. For example, at the IIR, many of the faculty members have got their education abroad. In 2004, 22 of the 61 regular faculty of IIR were abroad for either a study program or diplomatic mission (The Ford Foundation, 2004, p. 14). In fact, the MOFA assignments abroad have created valuable opportunities for the faculty of IIR to earn MA or PhD degrees in countries such as Malaysia, Australia, France, Ukraine, England, or China. At the Department of International Studies of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, the second largest institution offering both a BA and MA in international studies, there are 18 core faculty members. One-third of them were trained in history, while the others were trained in law, economics, and linguistics, in Vietnam or abroad. However, none of the faculty has a postgraduate degree in IR. With support from the Ford Foundation, the department has currently sent six young faculty members to get MA degrees in IR in the United States, England, Japan, and Australia.

These two factors influenced much the curriculum designed by universities. It seems to be that the multidisciplinary approach is still a problem for IR education in Vietnam. There is little integration across the courses, and they do not cohere to provide a solid IR program. Courses typical of IR abroad, like policy analysis, peace and conflict studies, IR

theory, and international political economy, are insufficiently offered or not offered at all. The students note the lack of sub-field courses like research methods and skills, or foreign languages. Therefore, there is a very common awareness that IR education in Vietnam is still in search of its identification as a discipline. Many employers also complain that IR graduates know everything, but are specialized in nothing. Frequently asked questions are what courses are offered, and what the students can do after graduation.

Since 1995, after 10 years of renovation (*Doi Moi*), Vietnam has become more and more integrated into the regional and world system. As a result of this process, the country needs more people trained in IR. The demand for IR graduates is increasing, because not only the public sector but also the private sector needs them. Although finding a job is still a problem for many graduates, including those trained in IR, the latter have comparatively more chances and choices. Unlike earlier years, they can work in a much broader range of institutions than MOFA, from the IR departments of different ministries or provinces through to intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, the communications and services sector, and transnational corporations, and mass media enterprises. This situation serves as both a chance and challenge for IR education in Vietnam.

2 The curriculum of IR

To answer the higher demands resulting from the fact that Vietnam expanded its IR, the Ministry of Education and Training decided to introduce a new and standard curriculum for IR (The Ford Foundation, 2004, pp. 8–10). This task was given to a commission of professors and experts who had to discuss what has been taught and what they should be teaching. The result was a so-called Framework Program of International Relations (FPIR) that serves as a standard, and as the basis for universities to use in designing their own programs.

The introduction of the new FPIR played an important role for the development of IR teaching in Vietnam. For the first time, all universities have a common, standard national-wide program that provides basic knowledge for all IR students at the same level. During the first three semesters, students have to learn general common courses required for all social sciences and humanities students, including Marxism–Leninism,

introduction to linguistics, ethnography, sociology, psychology, geography, environment, statistics, history of world civilizations, and basic foreign languages. In the three following semesters, students take common, basic required courses of IR/studies, such as the history of IR, introduction to area studies, introduction to IR, international public and private law, international economics, Vietnam's legal system, Vietnam's foreign economy, Vietnam's external relations and foreign policy, and English for special purposes. In the last two semesters, students can chose a specialized field focusing more on international politics, international economic issues, international law, or European and Americas studies, depending on the offerings of different universities. Beside required courses, elective courses like the history of ASEAN and Vietnam–ASEAN relations are also offered. In addition, the program provides students with basic skills such as the conduct of external affairs, consular practices, communication and foreign relations office management.

The new FPIR does not prevent universities from designing specific courses, which will draw on the strengths of each university. For example, while IIR and universities in Ho Chi Minh City prefer focusing either on International Politics and Vietnam's Foreign Policy, International Law or International Economics, the other universities including Vietnam National University-Hanoi, University of Hue, Da Nang and Da Lat would design programs that specialize in IR, European Studies, and Americas Studies. This division reflects the diversity of the program, and the regional differences within the country. Located in the most advanced economic center in Vietnam, the IR/studies programs in Ho Chi Minh City are planning to develop courses that focus and could provide students with more economic and legal knowledge, hoping that this knowledge will help students meet the demands of the labor market. Different from this picture, IR/studies programs in Hanoi are much more influenced by it being in the political and cultural center of the country, and thus these programs are aiming more at training students to work for academic and research institutions. In addition, the FPIR allows universities to cooperate easily with each other in sharing materials, information, faculty exchange, students transfer, and carrying out research and academic projects.

However, there is still a gap between the new FPIR in Vietnam and the foreign ones. The evidence of this is that IR graduates from Vietnam have to study some additional courses before entering an MA program abroad.

For example, one former student who is studying now at Johns Hopkins University reported that she was required to take some additional courses that were prerequisites for a core course in her program. Further, employers also claim that the graduates do not have enough specialized knowledge of the field and do not have systematic understanding of Vietnamese development. What the students usually claim is that they have to learn a lot, but the more they learn the less they know. They would prefer to have more practical knowledge, such as practical skills, methods, and foreign languages. On this issue, the education system of Vietnam must be reformed both in content and method of teaching.

Last but not least, for IR/IS in Vietnam, the biggest problem is the lack of standard textbooks. No required standard textbooks and materials for teaching and learning the subject were introduced. Therefore, a common situation is that the faculty at different institutions use what they actually have on their own bookshelves for designing the curriculum and selecting reading material. These books may be in English, Russian, Chinese, or French, depending on the owners.[3] Even when there are some good textbooks in English, not all students can read and understand them due to limited English proficiency. Therefore, to improve the quality of teaching and studying IR in Vietnam, it is strongly to recommend to provide a list of standard textbooks and materials on IR, and to translate them into Vietnamese as soon as possible.

3 Teaching of IR of Southeast Asia

It is clear from above description of the new FPIR that the teaching of the IR of Southeast Asia has a very 'modest position' in comparison with other courses, occupying only a small amount of the total IR curriculum. A course on the IR of Southeast Asia is usually worth between two and three credits, depending on the university. At some IR/studies programs, the IR of Southeast Asia is included in a broader course like IR of the Asia-Pacific. Other programs offered their courses on issues

3 Such texts include authors such as Hall (1981), Steinberg (1987), Goldstein (1994), Sardesai (1997), Tarling (1999), Ikenberry and Mastanduno (2003), Connors *et al.* (2004), Gromyko (1975), Duroselle (1990), Brocheux and Hemery (1994), Tertrais (1996), Xie (1988), and Ma *et al.* (1989).

that are more particular to ASEAN. Looking at the syllabus of courses on the IR of Southeast Asia at the above-mentioned universities, one can see many similarities.

3.1 First, the influence of the West

Being located on the route connecting two oceans, having rich natural resources, and cheap labor resources, all Southeast Asian countries except Thailand experienced Western colonial occupation starting in the sixteenth century and lasting until the twentieth century. Many modern Western ideas, practices, and institutions were actually transferred from Europe to Southeast Asia during the colonial period. However, they were adapted to the Southeast Asian context, and became localized. Southeast Asian leaders like Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, Mohammad Hatta of Indonesia, Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore went to Europe in the beginning or middle of the twentieth century, worked and learned very hard about the countries where they stayed, with the hope, as Ho Chi Minh stated, to find out the way to liberate their people and their homeland. It was Ho Chi Minh who could unite different political groups of Vietnam in 1930 to establish the Vietnam Communist Party. He was also the person who quoted the Declaration of Independence of the United States – 'all men are created equal' – and the Declaration of the French Revolution – 'all men are born free' – in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence to establish Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on September 2, 1945 (Ho, 1962a, b, pp. 17–21).

Like the other nation-states in Southeast Asia, the DRV was a new entity that included three different parts of French Indochina, including Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. It reflected new institutions and practices that had not previously existed in Vietnam but were created under western colonial influence. For example, the first Vietnamese Constitution of 1946 was deeply 'Rousseauist' (Tonnesson, 1998, p. 5). The first constitution of Vietnam consisted of seven chapters. The first chapter defined Vietnam as a democratic republic (the DRV). The second chapter confirmed the obligations, including defending the fatherland, obeying laws, respecting the constitution, and participating in military service. Among the rights, the constitution guaranteed the rights of equality before the law, property rights, the rights to education, and

the right to vote. The third chapter dealt with the National Assembly, which had only one chamber. The fourth chapter defined the central government. The local governments were mentioned in Chapter V. Chapter VI defined the judiciary states. The final chapter mentioned conditions of modification in the constitution. The weakness in the constitutional text is the fact that it does not have provisions for a division of power between the legislative, the executive, and the judicial branches, except for stating that the other powers cannot put pressure on the courts. Second, the constitution also did not have provisions for a parliamentary system. Third, due to the tense situation between the young democratic republic and the old colonialists, the first ever Vietnamese National Assembly elected in January 1946 decided to implement the new constitution, yet without much promulgation. Although the first Constitution of Vietnam was very weak in fact, it became more important in historical memory, because it served as a means to achieve national unity.

3.2 Second, the role of history

History plays a very specific important role not only because history can represent 'self', but also because it can oppose the 'other'. Through learning the history of a nation we can learn the history of other nations and the interaction between them. For Southeast Asian nation-states, due to their diversity and the obsession with Western European colonization, to achieve national unity was the most important thing. In Southeast Asia, there were different ways to achieve this. It could be religion, symbols, or ideas. For Vietnam, a country that consists of thousands of villages, where agriculture, rural areas, and peasants predominated throughout its history, the country identified itself with common house (*dinh*) – the ritual place of each village. Even the literature temple in Hanoi – the first university in Vietnam – that was built in 1075, looked like the *dinh* that stood in every Vietnamese village. The similarities can be found in other Southeast Asian countries. Malaysia is represented with the palace of the rulers (*istana*), whereas Thailand defines itself by reference to the monarchy, and Indonesia symbolizes itself with *Garuda* (Houben, 2006). These common characteristics of Southeast Asian countries serve the so-called 'unity in diversity' characteristic of today's ASEAN. With the admission of Cambodia into ASEAN in 1999, for the first time ASEAN became an organization with

full participation of all regional countries. This created the true colors of the region on the one side, but provoked a theoretical debate on the other side: ‘In the 1990s, Southeast Asia generated more theoretical interest as the realist orthodoxy was confronted with a twofold challenge: liberal institutionalism and institutional constructivism’ (Rueland, 2000, pp. 421–422).

More than four decades ago ASEAN was founded in the turbulence of the Cold War and intense East–West rivalries. Looking back at this period one could say that ASEAN has successfully played the big powers against each other. Therefore, ASEAN’s foundation and its success were used as strong arguments for realism and its supporters. They saw ASEAN as the product of a ‘balance-of-power’. With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and of the Cold War in 1989, Southeast Asia seemed to fall into a power vacuum that constituted the overriding interests of states. By arguing that ASEAN still faces similar external threats, like it did during the Cold War years, neo-realism perceives the need for ASEAN to balance these threats. In 1997, as Southeast Asia faced the financial crisis, Acharya realized how great powers outside of Southeast Asia still continued their dominance of ASEAN: ‘In the economic sphere, the region’s ability to ride out the crisis has depended on China’s pledge not to devalue its currency, the ability of Japan in getting its own economy back on track as well as its willingness to provide substantial aid to the crisis-stricken economies, and the rescue missions undertaken by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), an institution widely seen as a tool of the West, especially the United States’ (Acharya, 1999, p. 6).

It is true that Southeast Asia cannot ‘escape’ from the influence of outside great powers, as neo-realists have argued. However, how can one explain the undoubted success that ASEAN has achieved during its 40 long years of existence? Liberal institutionalism is right when it is argued that ASEAN was a single force that could act as a regional conflict-mediator. Regarding the political question, ASEAN was successful in dealing with the outside world with a single voice. A series of ASEAN-led initiatives, including the establishment of a dialogue with the European Community in 1972, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989, and the ASEAN Region Forum in 1994, and the ASEAN-plus three meeting after 1997, was recognized by the world community. In security issues, the Paris Agreement on the Cambodian conflict in the 1980s and the peaceful settlement of the Spratly Islands are

examples of the significant contributions of ASEAN. In the economic sector, ASEAN signed the agreement to establish an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992. Overall, liberal institutionalists argued that ASEAN is on the phase of institutional building, and is actually doing it in its own special way – the 'ASEAN way' (Haacke, 2003, p. 1).

Differently from both realism and liberalism, which focused more on material forces, constructivism has sought to explain state behavior by 'inter-subjective factors', including both material components like power and wealth, and spiritual elements such as culture, tradition, and value (Acharya, 1999, p. 3; Peou, 2002, p. 136). Over its 40 years of existence, despite of many challenges, ASEAN was able to develop and sustain its own identity. This identity was reflected in ASEAN symbol, 'ASEAN way', and the ASEAN Charter. Thanks to this common identity, ASEAN was able to act as a unique group like other international forums such as the UN, ASEM, ARF, or APEC. At this moment one can share the view of Acharya that ASEAN is an 'imagined community' (Acharya, 2000, p. 2). On the whole, from a theoretical perspective, ASEAN serves as an interesting case for different schools to interpret.

3.3 Third, the role of theory

As mentioned earlier, due to historical circumstances, independence and unity were most important for Vietnam. Therefore, doing research on Vietnamese foreign policy, an American professor came to the conclusion: 'Vietnam has traditionally viewed its national security in very conventional terms of protection of territory from encroaching powers (China, France, the US) . . . Vietnam's rulers have traditionally viewed IR in starkly realist terms; a world of power and contestation, in which the "strong did what they will" and the weak did what they must' (Elliott, 2007a, b, p. 4). Interestingly, however, this perception is not reflected in any predominance of realist-oriented approaches in the curriculum of IR. In fact, until today, the curriculum and textbooks of IR in Vietnam are still dominated by Marxist approaches. According to research done by the Ho Chi Minh National Political Administrative Academy, Marxism–Leninism continues to provide meaningful guidance and plays a decisive role in the teaching and learning of IR (Nguyen, B.T. 2002). According to this research, all Western international relations theories, from realism, liberalism to cosmopolitanism, rationalism, and feminism,

democratic socialism and so on, cannot explain the reality of IR because reality strongly opposes the arguments of these theories. For example, making war is the nature of imperialism. The democracy that Western countries are talking about is to fool people, and to serve the interests of capitalism. Western countries mention democracy a lot, but in fact, they were the countries which violated civil rights mostly. These observations brought the research report to the conclusion that 'Marxism–Leninism is still the only scientific and revolutionary truth of the contemporary era' (Nguyen, B.T. 2002, p. 35).

3.4 Fourth, problem of periodization

Until today, all textbooks on Vietnam's foreign policy and relations are still written in the old way (Nguyen, D.B. 2001; Luu, 2006). According to these books, Vietnam's contemporary diplomacy and foreign relations are divided into the following four main periods: first, Vietnam's foreign relations during its early years as a democratic republic (1945–1946); second, Vietnam's foreign relations in the war of resistance against French colonialists (1947–1954);[4] third, Vietnam's foreign relations in the war of resistance for national salvation against the US aggression (1954–1975);[5] fourth, Vietnam's foreign relations in the time of peace, national construction, and renovation (1975–2000). It is clear from this periodization that the event of the end of the Cold War in 1991 did not receive special attention but is almost neglected, in a surprising contrast to the treatment the end of the Cold War receives abroad.[6]

4 National Historical Memory and the Teaching Curriculum

The teaching of IR in Vietnam includes the study of Vietnam's emergence as an independent state, its foreign policy, and regional relations.

4 This is the official name of the period of 1946–54 in Vietnam, while abroad this is called the First Indochina War period.

5 It is interesting to note that until today scholars cannot agree with each other how to call the conflict in Vietnam. While in Vietnam this is called 'the Resistance of Vietnamese people against American Imperialists', most common name abroad is 'the Vietnam War' or 'the Second Indochina War'. Some say 'The American War in Vietnam', or even 'the Vietnamese War'.

6 Many researches have done on this topic. See Hogan (1992), Bender and Leone (1991), and Foreign Affairs Agenda (1997).

The national memory of these historical events is to some extent reflected and elaborated through the university IR curriculum and the range of teaching materials used, although there are points where different streams diverge in their emphasis or interpretation of events. The principal elements are summarized in this section.

Because of the long colonial occupation, the birth of independent states in Southeast Asia at the end of and after the Second World War (WWII), the country's existence and development during the Cold War became a central theme in the presentation of Vietnamese history in IR courses. A glance at Vietnamese history from 1945 until recently leaves no doubt about the influence of the Cold War and the big powers on the country. It was the big powers that determined the political development of Vietnam and Southeast Asia after WWII. Realizing that the major powers would play an important role in the fate of his nation, in his declaration of Vietnam's independence, Ho Chi Minh called on them to recognize the independence of Vietnam and defend its sovereignty: 'We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Teheran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam' (Ho, 1962a, b, p. 21).

In comparison with the other parts of Southeast Asia and Europe, Vietnam was influenced very early by the Cold war and Yalta's bipolarity system. In September and October 1945, when the British arrived in Saigon and the Chinese Nationalist troops came to Hanoi, pursuant to the agreement at Potsdam to disarm the defeated Japanese forces, but in fact to assist the French in resuming control over Indochina, the independence that Vietnamese just declared became threatened. Faced with this complicated situation, the Provisional Government of the DRV made public the Communiqué on Foreign policy on October 3, 1945. In the first official statement on its foreign policy, the Provisional Government emphasized 'the main object of (Vietnam's) foreign policy is to ensure the victory of the nation by peaceable or forcible means, according to the attitude evinced by the foreign powers, but always in accordance with the Atlantic Charter' (Nguyen, B.T. 2002, pp. 49–50).

Following this fundamental orientation, during 1946–47, with the approval of the government of Thailand and the support of Vietnamese there, an office of representation with a diplomatic status of the DRV was set up in Bangkok on April 14, 1947. Beside this, the Government of

Thailand headed by Premier Minister Pridi Panomyon also provided Vietnam with money and weapons, and allowed the establishment of a war base at the frontier for training troops to be sent to Vietnam (Luu, 2006, p. 98). In February 1948, another office of information with diplomatic status was also established in Rangoon. The Burmese government helped with all expenses of the office, and offered some weapons for the struggle of Vietnam against French colonialists. Although these offices existed for a very short time between 1947 and 1948, they played an important role in bridging Vietnam with the outside world. It was all the more important in the context of Vietnam not being recognized by other countries, when it had to fight alone under siege. Nowadays, in the context of renovation, some Vietnamese scholars have admitted the mistakes made by the Communist party of Vietnam during the 1950s, when it did not pay enough attention to keeping and strengthening relations with Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Myanmar.

Influenced by the ideological confrontation of the Cold War in the next decades, Vietnam became a battlefield between the major powers, with France supported by the United States, on the one hand, and China and Soviet Union, on the other hand. The year 1950 was a turning point in the history of Vietnam's foreign relations. After four years of fighting under siege, the DRV was recognized by the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and other socialist countries in the spring of 1950. Since then, Vietnam became more connected with the communist block than with Southeast Asian countries, except Laos and Cambodia. The Second National Congress of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP), held on 15–19 February 1951, stated that the DRV strongly affirmed its 'advanced post' in the struggle against colonialism for peace, independence, and national unification, and stood in the Socialist camp led by Soviet Union. Although the ICP changed its name to the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP), it continued to consider supporting Laos and Cambodia as its duty: 'Vietnam has the responsibility to coordinate with the revolution of Laos and Cambodia; we must now actively help the resistance in these countries by developing guerrilla warfare, building armed forces, and forming resistance bases' (Dang Cong san Viet Nam, 2002).

From this point, the Vietnam conflict became a war with a very complicated international character. Reflecting the international balance of power, the Geneva accords of 1954 ended the First Indochina War, but

set the stage for renewed conflict (Zhai, 2000, p. 63). First, the Soviet Union and China approved of the cessation of conflict in Indochina by persuading the DRV to accept the delineation of the military provisional demarcation line at the 17th parallel, and to accept that the timing for a general election would be in two years. Second, the Vietnamese forces had to withdraw from Laos and Cambodia to their country, although the Pathet Lao had moved to two provinces of Northern Laos – Sam Neua and Phong Saly – while in Cambodia, Khmer Issarak had no regroupment zone. Third, to prevent communism from going beyond the 17th parallel to the rest of Southeast Asia, on September 8, 1954, the United States founded the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), including two Southeast Asian countries, Thailand and the Philippines.

Therefore, the following Second Indochina War was a logical continuation of the conflict started by the end of the First Indochina War. During this period, Vietnam accepted the 'two camp theses': a world divided into two camps, a socialist camp led by Soviet Union and imperialism camp headed by the United States, and even adopted a framework known as the 'three revolutionary currents' (Thayer and Amer, 1999), which included the communist countries, the workers' movement from capitalist countries, and national liberation movement in the third world countries. On February 15, 1958, Truong Chinh – a politburo member of VWP – once more reconfirmed: 'I should like to repeat, that the international position of the DRV is to firmly stand in the socialist camp headed by the USSR' (Truong, 1958, p. 35). Relating to Southeast Asia, Vietnam carried out a policy of differential treatment. First, Vietnam tried to develop and improve good-neighbor relations with Cambodia and Laos, considering them part of a common battlefield. In order to do so, on 24–25 October 1970, the leaders of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos held a summit conference of Indochinese peoples to oppose the US plan to expand the war to the whole of Indochina, with the aim 'strengthening solidarity and tightening the ranks of the Cambodian, Laos, and Vietnamese peoples to persevere in pushing forward the gallant and fierce struggle until eventual complete victory' (Dang Cong San Viet Nam, 1995, pp. 460–461). Second, Vietnam welcomed the 'third way' and the five principle of peaceful co-existence promulgated by Chou Enlai, Nehru, and U Nu by sending a delegation led by Premier Minister Pham Van Dong to participate in the Asian and

African Conference taken place in May 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia. Third, Vietnam criticized other Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, the Philippines for sending its combat troops to Vietnam and providing the United States with military bases from which to attack Vietnam. In the eyes of Vietnam these countries were no more than a clique of 'puppets' for American imperialism.

During the Second Indochina War period, one of the central themes of Vietnam's international policy, among the others, was how Vietnam should deal with its alliance with the Soviet Union and China. In their studies, most foreign researchers and experts claimed that within the VWP there were two opposite groups, pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese, competing with each other (Gaidyk, 2003; Zhai, 2000). Some other represented the point of view that the DRV did not have a stable line in its foreign policy (Vu, 1998; Bui, 1995).

To explain these phenomena, a Chinese study claims that, although the Chinese wanted to show their support for Vietnam as a great example of proletarian internationalism, 'efforts to put such principles into practice, however, were often thwarted by Vietnamese authorities' (Jian, 1995, p. 380). Their explanation was that ties between Hanoi and Moscow increased as the Vietnam War progressed. According to this argument, Hanoi moved from China's side in the struggle against the 'Soviet revisionism' to becoming silent in its criticism of 'revisionism' in February 1965, as China rejected Kosygin's suggestion that China and the Soviet Union could take joint steps to support the struggle of the Vietnamese people. China, however, helped deliver Soviet materials to Vietnam, but with the condition that the operation should be directly under Chinese control and understood as a favor from Beijing to Hanoi (Jian, 1995, p. 382).

Soviet studies on the Vietnam War, in turn, also voice their disappointment of Vietnamese attitudes toward the Soviet Union. According to Ilya Gaidyk, Vietnamese leaders were reluctant to share information on the political situation in Vietnam and Indochina with their Soviet counterparts. Vietnam was also unwilling to inform Soviet leadership about the internal affairs of the Lao Dong Party and developments in its relations with Beijing. Vietnam did not even want to share information on its war plans and settlement with Moscow. In short, Vietnam acted exclusively in its own interest (Gaidyk, 1996, pp. 70–72).

The difficulty for Vietnam consisted in maintaining the support from both Soviet Union and China for its construction of a socialist system in

the North and its struggle for the national reunification in the South on the one hand, and not becoming involved in the Sino–Soviet conflict on the other hand. Although both Soviet Union and China claimed to be 'doing their international proletarian duty' by supporting Vietnam in the war against the United States, at the same time both countries followed their own policy and interests. In fact, the Vietnamese communists followed an independent foreign policy. The evidence of this was the Tet offensive in 1968, when the Vietnamese communists did not inform their allies or consult Soviet and Chinese 'comrades'. According to new Vietnamese research: 'The reason for neutrality within the highest strata of the Vietnam Workers Party were two-fold: The Hanoi politburo needed to steer an independent course not only for fear of alienating or displeasing one ally over the other but also to instill a sense of patriotism and Vietnamese identity within the party and the people. However, neutrality in foreign policy did not prevent the use of ideological divisions within the international proletarian movement to control domestic at home' (Nguyen, T.L.H. 2006, pp. 32–33).

If Vietnam was relatively independent in foreign policy, it was more dependent in terms of its internal economic policy. Vietnam adopted an economic model that depended on outside economic assistance, mainly from China and the Soviet Union. Relating to this question, a topic that was not mentioned much in the curriculum was the land reform of 1953–56. In fact, Vietnam had implemented Chinese experiences in a blind way so that it created the so-called 'bloodbath thesis' in foreign researches.[7]

Of course, during the Vietnam War, there was little chance for Vietnam to develop its economy, especially when the United States

7 Hoang (1964), Honey (1965), Porter (1972), White (1981), Moise (1983). There is still no agreement among scholars on the question of how many people were killed during the land reform of the 1950s in North Vietnam. Numbers vary between 2,000 and 15,000 persons. An extreme opinion came from Hoang Van Chi, who believed that about 5% of the North Vietnamese population (i.e. 675,000 persons) was executed. See Hoang (1964, p. 212). In a new released complex Party documents, there was an interesting document named 'Political Bureau's Decree on special Issues in mobilizing the masses' that wrote: 'In this campaign we will have to execute a number of reactionary or evil landlords. In our recent situation, the ratio of executions of these landlords to the total population in the free areas is fixed at the rate of 1/1,000 in principle'. See Dang Cong san Viet Nam (2001, p. 201). In an unpublished document of Central Committee of CPV, the number of punished landlords during the land reform of 1953–1956 was 80,000 persons. See Cuc Luu tru Van phong Trung uong Dang (1979, p. 23).

escalated the war by expanding it to the North. According to one research, the 'trend toward import dependency was increased by the onset of US bombing, after which high levels of foreign aid helped maintain output and consumption . . . this helped create a particular type of dependency, in which the modern sector could almost detach itself from the rest of the economy and float upon levels of commodity aid . . . this syndrome was reinforced in the late 1980s by increased Soviet aid program at that time' (Fforde and de Vylde, 1996, p. 63).

A common point of all textbooks as well as the IR curriculum in Vietnam is the focus on the event of 1975. For Vietnam, the end of the war and unification of the country were a historical turning point. The victory in the war made the leaders of the VWP believe in its legitimacy in Vietnamese politics and ability to accomplish everything on their way toward socialism. The misinterpretation of the victory in the Vietnam War as 'a demonstration of the superiority of Marxist–Leninist doctrine over value and institution of the capitalist world led by the United States' (Duiker, 1998, p. 51) played a decisive role in the perceptions of Vietnamese leaders regarding the external setting in the post-Vietnam era. It is not extravagant to say that the misperception of the situation in 1975 was the reason for the mistakes that Vietnam committed in the following decade. In September 1975, i.e., four months after the fall of Saigon, the 24th Plenum of the Party Central Committee, after debating the situation of Vietnam, pronounced that: 'The revolution in Vietnam has shifted to a new phase, from war to peace, from half of the country being separated and dominated by neo-colonialism to all the country being independent and unified' (Dang Cong san Viet Nam, 1975).

On the basis of this assessment, from November 15 to November 21, 1975, the 25-member delegation of the DRV headed by Truong Chinh, member of the Politburo of the VWP and President of the Permanent Committee of the DRV, and the 25-member delegation of South Vietnam headed by Pham Hung, member of the Politburo of the VWP, Secretary of the South Vietnam Party Committee and Nguyen Huu Tho, Chairman of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the NLF, met in Saigon to discuss the unification of Vietnam. Both sides unanimously agreed on all questions and came to the conclusion 'to complete national unification, to bring all the country rapidly, steadily, and firmly to socialism' (Dang Cong san Viet Nam, 1976). On April 25, 1976, national-wide general election was held to elect the unified National Assembly.

Sixty days later, the first unified National Assembly was convened in Hanoi. The National Assembly decided to change the name of the country into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam with Hanoi as its capital. The Republic of Vietnam as well as the NLF was removed from political agenda. With reunification of the country, like Germany in 1990, Vietnam in 1976 became a unified and stronger power in Southeast Asia.

However, a new conflict in the region appeared right at the end of the Vietnam War. In the new conflict there was involvement of two groups: China and Cambodia on the one side, and Vietnam and Soviet Union on the other side. Once more, the peace and security of the region were threatened by a new conflict, this time between 'brother enemies'. Starting in 1969 with the decision of President Nixon to withdraw American troops from South Vietnam and especially after signing of Paris Agreement in 1973, there was a power vacuum in Southeast Asia. According to Qiang Zhai, from this time 'Chinese leaders began to promote a cease-fire and a political settlement in Cambodia, which would remove North Vietnamese forces from that country and prevent what they suspected to be Soviet plans to fill the vacuum' (Zhai, 2000, p. 211). It was clear that the relations between Vietnam and China had worsened by the end of the Vietnam War. The first sources of contention between China and Vietnam were, among the other things, the rapprochement of Sino–American relations in 1972, and the controversy over the Paracels and the Spratlys in the South China Sea, or Bien Dong (Eastern Sea) in Vietnamese.[8] The other source of the confrontation between China and Vietnam was the Cambodian problem. All this originated with the event of April 17, 1975, as the Khmer Rouge seized power in Phnom Penh. Shortly after occupying the capital, stimulated by the spirit of nationalism, the Khmer Rouge launched a campaign to encroach on many parts of Vietnam from Ha Tien to Tay Ninh provinces, and killed many innocent Vietnamese. Such kinds of activities were welcomed by China (Zhai, 2000, pp. 212–213). Last but not least, there was controversy between China and Vietnam over the so-called 'anti-Chinese incidents', when Vietnam carried out the campaign to transform its economy in 1976–77 in South Vietnam. By the time of mid-1970s, as the Americans gone away, the rivalry between China and

8 In Vietnam, the name 'South China Sea' is still considered taboo in descriptions of the disputed area where the Spratlys and the Paracels are located.

Vietnam became open and was intensified by the Soviet and Cambodia factors. By the end, Vietnam had to pay very high price for its decision to be involved in the Cambodia problem, which lasted until 1991.

The turning point came about in 1991, as the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union – the main ally of Vietnam – collapsed. Despite the fact that Vietnam had already launched renovation (*Doi Moi*) in 1986, and achieved remarkable progress, the impact of the bipolarity system and decades of warfare are still evident in some ways. For example, in official documents, the Communist Party of Vietnam pointed out that there are four challenges that Vietnam is facing now: being left behind, corruption, peaceful evolution, and deviation from Socialist orientation (Dang Cong san Viet Nam, 2006). However, the society at large is not really influenced by this perception. For example, the young generation – people who were born after the Vietnam War, who make up two thirds of the total Vietnamese population – will see the world through different lenses, more open and friendly. For them, the main track of the world is cooperation and competition, not war. In this new world, there is no win–lose situation, but a win–win one.

Since 1991, most courses on the IR of Southeast Asia in Vietnamese universities have focused on ASEAN and its relations with Vietnam. The content of these courses typically covers, first, issues relating to the establishment and development of ASEAN, its achievement and challenges, structure and mode of organization. Second, the courses cover Vietnam's participation and contribution. Vietnam's ASEAN membership is a topic of particular interest, around which a series of questions are raised. Did Vietnam miss an opportunity to become a member of ASEAN after the Vietnam War? Why did Vietnam decide to join ASEAN? Why did it take so long for Vietnam to join ASEAN? What benefit does the ASEAN membership bring to Vietnam? Had the financial crises any influences on Vietnam? How can Vietnam contribute to ASEAN? Which difficulties does Vietnam face as member of ASEAN? The general view is that, whatever the problems are, the decision Vietnam made to join ASEAN was right despite difficulties. Among other reasons, one explanation is interesting in that it highlights the way ASEAN membership helped Vietnam to overcome an identity crisis (Nguyen, V.T. 2006). Among IR theories on ASEAN, constructivism seems to be most appropriate to the case of Vietnam. In the context of collapse of Soviet Union and socialist countries in Europe, Vietnam lost its most important allies.

The trust of people in the socialist model was at its lowest level. Through membership of ASEAN, Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Cold War found itself a place within a community. Since 1995, in international affairs, Vietnam acts as an ASEAN member rather than as a socialist country. Although Marxism–Leninism has not completely gone away from educational programs in Vietnam, its meaning is no longer seen as important as it was before.[9] Instead of promoting ideological emphasis, Vietnam now pays more attention to the national interest, the role of the revolution in science and technology, and globalization by analyzing IR. However, as a communist state, Vietnam still cannot to make a definite break with Marxism–Leninism as its fundamental social–political ideology. This controversial situation continues to exist at least in the official documents produced by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Thayer observes: ‘Ideology and national interest are not dichotomous terms: they can and do overlap and co-exist’ (Thayer and Amer, 1999, p. 1).

5 Conclusion

In general, IR as a field is a new discipline in Vietnam. Except for the IIR, this subject only began to be taught in Vietnam from the 1990s. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are still many things to do, from designing the syllabus to training faculty, enriching resources, building up networks, and catching up with trends in scholarship. However, IR and international studies became a focus of the whole education system thanks to the renovation policy of the Vietnamese government and the end of the Cold War. Faced with both demand within the country and changes in the world political system, the teaching of IR of Southeast Asia has attracted more and more attention of faculty and students.

There are certain changes taking place in the teaching of the IR of Southeast Asia in Vietnam; however, the overall trend is one of continuity. One indication is that the program emphasizes the benefits of

9 According to a latest decision made by the Ministry of Education and Training in the first half of 2008, five courses on Marxism–Leninism (including Marxist–Leninist Philosophy, Marxist–Leninist Political Economy, Scientific Socialism, History of the Communist Party of Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh Thought) were redesigned into three courses, namely the Principles of Marxism–Leninism, The Vietnamese Revolutionary Path, and Ho Chi Minh Thought.

multilateralism on the one hand, yet it does not forget its disadvantages on the other. For a more comprehensive development of the teaching of the IR of Southeast Asia in Vietnam, the best way is to promote exchange of information, faculty, and students among countries.

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