

PHILIPPINE-VIETNAM RELATIONS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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A Historical Overview

Relations between the Philippines and Vietnam started many centuries ago. Evidences show that inhabitants of both countries had already engaged in maritime trade prior to the coming of the Europeans.¹ The great trading port of Vietnam then was Vandan in the Gulf of Tonkin and ships from the Philippine island of Luzon were among those which regularly visited the port. These maritime trading relations were interrupted by the Europeans' conquest of the Philippines and Vietnam in the 16th and 19th centuries, respectively.

Philippine-South Vietnam relations were resumed only in 1964.² In South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem took the helm of government in October 1955 after Bao Dai abdicated, and after a year, Diem was finally nominated as first President by the New Legislative Assembly.³ In the meantime, Ramon Magsaysay had become President of the Philippines in December 1953. Interestingly, the state of South Vietnam, which came into existence in 1950 and was supported by France, the United States and Great Britain, was not recognized immediately by the Philippines. It was only in 1954 that official contact was established between the two countries.

From 1956-1960, President Diem embarked on a diplomatic campaign to gain wider acceptance in Asia. The information connection linking Saigon to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) offered opportunities for contacts with some members of the Western camp, such as the Philippines and Thailand. President Diem made state visits to various countries such as Thailand, India, Korea, China, Malaysia and the Philippines, which in turn were reciprocated by the Heads of State or Prime Ministers of these countries.⁴

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In light of President Magsaysay's foreign policy to improve and strengthen "the existing friendship between the Philippines and other nations of the free world particularly that of Asia and the United States, and to contribute to the cause of world freedom and peace through the United Nations,"⁵ it was only a matter of time before the Philippines would extend diplomatic recognition to South Vietnam. In one of the breakfast conferences in Malacañang, President Magsaysay presented the issue to his congressional leaders.⁶ Senator Claro M. Recto argued against recognition, claiming that the Philippines was merely being used by the United States to further its interests in Asia, and that Philippine recognition of Vietnam would prove most embarrassing because the communists would topple the South Vietnamese government in a matter of months. Recto's objection, however, was to no avail. On July 14, 1955, President Magsaysay decided to grant recognition to South Vietnam, a move which needed no Senate sanction.

In the meantime, without waiting for the debate concerning recognition to end, some Filipino Jaycees, with the strong support and blessings of President Magsaysay, flocked to Saigon to help in all kinds of humanitarian endeavors: refugee work, relief, sanitation and medical care. Their work crystallized into what was then known as "Operation Brotherhood" which later broadened into a worldwide movement as other nations joined hands with the Philippines in organizing relief and mobilizing support for the Vietnamese refugees. Though Operation Brotherhood was a humanitarian undertaking, it carried political overtones. The name itself alluded to the Armed Forces of the Philippines' doctrine of bringing about a "brotherhood" between soldiers and civilians during the Huk rebellion. According to then US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Operation Brotherhood was a "dramatic" response by the "free world" to Vietnamese problems.⁷

Following official recognition of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1955, the Philippine Congress appropriated funds for the establishment of embassies in the three states, with residence in Saigon. The Philippine government opened its temporary office in October 1955 with Delfin Garcia as *charge d'affaires*. On December 1 of the same year, a suitable site for the chancery was located at No. 1 rue aux Fleura where the Philippine flag was first unfurled from a public building in Vietnam. The first ministers exchanged were Cao Thai Bao and Mariano Espeleta for Vietnam and the Philippines, respectively.

During the term of President Carlos P. Garcia, the Philippines signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Republic of Vietnam in 1959.⁸ President Garcia also made a state visit to South Vietnam on April 22-26, 1959 to show official support to the latter.

Under the Macapagal administration, the Philippines sent technical aid to South Vietnam. President Macapagal even hinted to American leaders that the Philippines would join the United States in the fight against communism, if requested.⁹

South Vietnam's request for assistance from the Philippines in its fight against communist forces from the North dates back to July 1964, when Major General Nguyen Kanh, then Chair of the Military Revolutionary Council of South Vietnam, addressed a note to then President Macapagal, indicating his hope for such assistance. On April 14, 1965, Phan Huey Quat, Prime Minister of South Vietnam, likewise sent a letter to the Philippine President, stating that South Vietnam was in "dire need for (*sic*) engineering troops, transportation companies and many types of military specialists."¹⁰ In his letter, Prime Minister Quat expressed hope "to see about two thousand Filipino soldiers here as soon as possible."¹¹ President Macapagal asked Congress to appropriate the amount needed for the request.

On February 2, 1966, under the first term of Ferdinand E. Marcos, the South Vietnamese government reiterated its request for aid in terms of army engineers with security support. President Marcos asked Congress to deliberate on this request, upon which Congress approved a second Philippine aid to South Vietnam. The bill became known as Republic Act No. 4664 and was signed by President Marcos on July 14, 1966.¹²

There were several reasons why the Philippines extended support to the Republic of Vietnam. The Philippines participated in the Manila Summit in October 1966 where seven member countries committed to help South Vietnam in its fight against the North and to support its efforts to achieve economic stability and progress.¹³ The Philippines also signed the SEATO Treaty whereby it agreed that any attack on any of the signatories would be considered a threat to the security and peace of the others.¹⁴ Another justification given for Philippine support to South Vietnam was its membership in the United Nations (UN). The UN Charter provides for the creation of

mechanisms to ensure international peace and security. It empowers members of the organization to form regional security arrangements for their own defense. Hence, on the bases of UN provisions for the maintenance of security and peace, as well as its membership in SEATO, the Philippine government strongly supported South Vietnam's fight against the North. It can be said that the bilateral relations between the two countries were primarily political. The Philippine government, at the time, followed the United States' policy of containing communism in Southeast Asia, hence, its involvement in the Vietnam War.

In the cultural sphere, there was no significant effort from both governments to develop cultural ties, as they were more engrossed in seeking international support for the war efforts in Vietnam. In the case of the Philippines, the government met strong opposition from the people, specially among intellectuals, workers and students, on the issue of sending PHILCAG to South Vietnam. During the Manila Summit in October 1966, a massive demonstration was held by students, professionals, labor unions and other citizens groups to protest Philippine involvement in the Vietnam War. Even in the halls of Congress, there was a significant minority who consistently opposed the proposed Vietnam Aid Bill.¹⁵

In the economic sphere, however, many members of the Filipino business community as well as workers went to South Vietnam to establish businesses on their own or in partnership with Vietnamese nationals to cater to the wartime needs of the economy. Thousands of Filipino laborers worked for American construction firms not only in South Vietnam but also in Cambodia and Laos.¹⁶ Others found work in bars, night clubs and other service centers which catered to the needs of American soldiers during the war. These Filipinos were among the thousands of refugees who fled upon the seizure of Saigon by North Vietnamese forces in 1975.

The Philippine Embassy in Saigon was closed on April 29, 1975 as Ambassador Agustin Mangila left the country, along with two embassy staff, who had stayed on to supervise the evacuation of Filipinos stranded in the beleaguered city.¹⁷

Philippine-SRV Relations Under Marcos

Even before the defeat of the Saigon government, the Philippine government had begun to open communication lines with North Vietnam preparatory to the establishment of diplomatic relations. President Marcos had reportedly authorized Mrs. Imelda R. Marcos to make direct contacts while she was in the Middle East for state visits in early 1975.¹⁸ The Marcos government stressed that developments in Indochina, such as the fall of Cambodia and encirclement of Saigon and its impending fall to the communist forces, made it urgent for the Philippines to establish direct communication lines with Hanoi.¹⁹

This political move should not be surprising in light of the new directions that President Marcos had begun to set for Philippine foreign policy. Faced with a growing need to make foreign policy serve the nation's interests, the Marcos government sought to establish political relations with socialist countries in order to broaden opportunities for economic and trade relations. This new pragmatism was clearly reflected in a speech before the Manila Overseas Press Club, where President Marcos said that Asia must come to terms with China, a large continent with a teeming population that was bound to influence regional politics. The same theme was articulated in his 1969 State of the Nation address where he expressed the need to have an open mind concerning relations with socialist countries.²⁰

Seen in this light, the Philippine overtures toward Hanoi even before the collapse of the Thieu government in the South were clearly made in anticipation of the changing realities in Indochina. President Marcos must have realized that the United States could no longer guarantee against communist expansion in Asia. The fall of Vietnam was thus a signal for the Philippine government to review its foreign policy orientation. Regional cooperation among Asians, whether communist or not, was the dictate of the times. Thus, the Philippine government sought to normalize relations with the new communist states in Indochina.

On July 9, 1976, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien arrived in Manila to discuss the formal opening of diplomatic relations with the Philippines. This visit by a ranking Vietnamese official was part of a diplomatic offensive by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) to forge friendly ties

with all of its Southeast Asian neighbors. On July 12, 1976, the Philippines and Vietnam formally began diplomatic relations, making the Philippines the fourth country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to do so.²¹ Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore had earlier simultaneously normalized ties with SRV.

Representatives of the Philippine and Vietnamese governments signed a joint communique articulating the following principles as bases for their relationship:

- (1) Respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-aggression and non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality, mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence;
- (2) Not to allow any foreign country to use one's territory as a base for direct or indirect aggression and intervention against the other country or other countries in the region;
- (3) Establishment of friendly and good neighborly relations, economic cooperation and cultural exchanges on the bases of equality and mutual benefit.
- (4) Promotion of cooperation among countries in the region for the benefit of genuine independence, peace, prosperity and neutrality in Southeast Asia, thereby contributing to peace in the world.²²

Vietnam and the Philippines set up their respective embassies in 1978. The first problem faced by the newly opened Philippine Embassy in Hanoi was the repatriation of 14 Filipinos and ten Vietnamese families who were still in Ho Chi Minh City. There were also attempts by Vietnamese nationals to enter the Philippines illegally by passing themselves off as members of Filipino families.²³ Reports of Filipinos being involved in illegal trading and black market activities were also received by the Philippine Embassy.²⁴ These were some of the irritants that plagued Philippine-Vietnam relations up to the early 1980s.

On January 9, 1978, the two countries signed an agreement on economic, scientific and technical cooperation covering various fields such as trade,

transport, communications, agriculture and natural resource-based industries.²⁵ They likewise signed a trade agreement which provided for a “most-favored-nation” treatment in all matters relating to: (1) customs duties and charges of any kind, including the method of levying such duties and charges, imposed in connection with imports and exports; (2) rules and formalities connected with customs clearance; (3) all internal taxes or other internal charges of any kind imposed on or in connection with imported and exported goods; and (4) issuance of import and export licenses.²⁶

A top Philippine official summed up the bilateral relations between the Philippines and Vietnam under the Marcos administration as “warm” and “friendly,” with both governments seeking to develop more cultural and economic contacts for their mutual benefit. The same official observed that the Philippine government supported private efforts to develop cultural as well as trade relations even if it was critical of Vietnamese presence in Cambodia.²⁷

In terms of socio-cultural activities, both countries promoted exchange visits among scholars, scientists, government officials and members of their respective business communities. In 1981, about 118 Vietnamese nationals were received as guests by the Philippine government.²⁸ On the whole, however, more Filipinos have visited Vietnam since the opening of diplomatic relations.²⁹ Both governments have also shown documentary films on culture, history and national progress.

During the early 1980s, the Philippines enjoyed a positive balance of trade vis-a-vis Vietnam as shown below:³⁰

PHILIPPINE-VIETNAM TRADE
1980-1983
(in US \$ million)

YEAR	EXPORTS	IMPORTS	TOTAL TRADE	BALANCE OF TRADE
1980	5,872	-	5,872	5,872+
1981	3,069	9,000	3,078	3,060+
1982	2,259	-	-	2,259+
1983	698	-	698	698+

Philippine exports to Vietnam consisted mainly of food, construction materials, chemicals and related products. According to a top official of the Philippine International Trading Cooperation which oversees trading activities with socialist countries, trade with Vietnam during this period was *non-productive* (underscoring supplied) in the sense that it did not serve Philippine economic development thrusts.³¹ A major obstacle to better trade between the two countries was the difference in their trading mechanisms. Vietnam had informally proposed barter as a means of economic exchange, but the Philippines did not welcome this idea since barter was deemed inefficient in modern international economic transactions. In addition, the low trading with Vietnam could be interpreted as the Philippines' tacit expression of support to US economic sanctions on Vietnam for its military occupation of Cambodia.

RP-Vietnam Relations Today

Bilateral relations between the Philippines and Vietnam levelled off during the Aquino administration due to the following: ASEAN's policy of isolating Vietnam in Southeast Asia because of its occupation of Cambodia, the instability of the Aquino administration, and Vietnam's own problems concerning its internal reconstruction. Nonetheless, it was during the Aquino administration that the two countries began to hold annual bilateral consultations to discuss economic and political matters of mutual interest.³² As a result of these consultations, as well as the visit of H.E. Von Van Kiet, Chair of the Council of Ministers of SRV who came to the Philippines on February 26-28, 1992, three agreements were signed, all aimed at developing trade and investments between the two countries.³³

Aside from visits to Vietnam between 1988 to 1991 by key government officials, no outstanding event concerning Philippine-Vietnam relations took place during the time of President Aquino. Despite the open door policy of the Vietnamese government, the Aquino administration did not seize the opportunity to vigorously pursue investment initiatives. This was in contrast to its ASEAN neighbors, specially Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia, who, despite ASEAN's policy of confrontation against Vietnam, nonetheless increased their investments in the latter. Furthermore, little effort was taken to enhance people-to-people contacts in order to improve knowledge of each

other's tradition and historical experiences. Cultural contacts are important in bringing about mutual understanding of each nation's problems and aspirations and for encouraging greater cooperation.

In recent years and specially during the Ramos administration, economic and trade relations between the two countries have undergone remarkable improvements, specially after the visits of President Fidel V. Ramos to Vietnam in March 1994, and President Le Due Anh to the Philippines in November 1995.³⁴ Such visits have been the driving force in deepening the friendly relations and economic cooperation between Vietnam and the Philippines. Indeed, it was during this period that Philippine business ventures in Vietnam increased.³⁵ But compared to other countries, the amount of Philippine investments in Vietnam is still ranked the lowest. Likewise, trade between the two countries is limited to a few types of products. In December 1995, however, the Philippine government imported about 200,000 tons of rice from Vietnam to avert a possible shortage.³⁶ Though they too had a difficult rice harvest, the Vietnamese agreed to the sale as "a gesture of friendship."

Vietnam is now the world's third largest rice exporter, a significant feat for a country that was totally devastated by war. In fact, it has overtaken the Philippines in terms of rice production. The Philippines, though, still has the upperhand in terms of trade and investments: in 1995, Philippine exports to Vietnam reached a total of \$66 million while imports amounted to only \$11 million.³⁷

The Philippines and Vietnam will have to re-assess their economic cooperation in light of the economic conditions of both countries. Since both countries generally produce the same types of goods, it may be necessary to focus their trade on certain products or services in order to maximize specific advantages.

Politically, while the two countries are rival claimants to the Spratly Islands, both have recognized the importance of joint cooperation in the development of the South China Sea without prejudice to existing sovereignty claims. In April 1996, a joint RP-Vietnam marine research team undertook a cooperative effort to explore "the physical and biological processes in the

South China Sea.”³⁸ Such activity was significant in that it demonstrated the symbolic role both countries could play in reducing international tensions over the Spratlys.

On the whole, RP-Vietnam relations has developed favorably in recent years. There is a growing interest among Philippine business groups to invest or undertake joint ventures in Vietnam. In terms of cultural exchange, Filipinos are beginning to appreciate the dynamism of the Vietnamese people as they struggle with the challenges of national reconstruction and economic development. More and more Filipinos wish to visit Vietnam to witness the heroic effort of its people to rebuild their country. Hopefully, this will be a telling lesson for many Filipinos.

NOTES

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2. *The Republic of Vietnam*, Embassy of the Republic of Vietnam, Manila, October 1962, p. 31.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
5. Jesus V. Merritt, *Magsaysay, Man of the People* (Manila: Far Eastern Publishing Co., 1953), p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*
7. J.L. Vellut, *The Asian Policy of the Philippines, 1954-1961* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1965), p. 28.
8. Signed in Saigon, April 26, 1959, *Republic of the Philippines, Treaty Series* (R.P.T.S.), Vol. III, No. 3, pp. 10-16.

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10. "Communique of the SEATO 11th Council Meeting," *Selected Documents on International Affairs* (Canberra, Australia: Department of External Affairs, December 1966), pp. 51-52.
11. Diosdado Macapagal, *The Philippines Turns East* (Quezon City: MacPublishing House, 1966), p. 87.
12. Ferdinand E. Marcos, "Address on the State of the Nation," *Congressional Record*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1966, p. 19.
13. Ferdinand E. Marcos, *A Battle for Peace*. Speeches and Statements of President Marcos on PHILCAG and Vietnam and Documents of the Seven-Nation Summit Meeting in Manila. Manila, 1968.
14. SEATO Treaty, Article 3.
15. Among the prominent legislators who opposed any form of aid to South Vietnam were Senators Lorenzo M. Tanada, Jose W. Diokno, Ambrosio Padilla and Congressmen Ramon V. Mitra, Juan R. Liwag, Sagun and Agbayani. Among the prominent ones who favored were Speakers Villareal, Pendatun, Raul Manglapus, Lorenzo Sumulong and Jose J. Roy.
16. Jeanne L. Arquiza, "Filipino Businessman Makes Good in South Vietnam," *Republic Weekly* (March 13, 1970):9.
17. Louie Perez, "Filipino Nationals in Saigon Evacuated," *Bulletin Today*, 29 April 1975, p. 1.
18. Government to Set up Ties with North Vietnam, *Bulletin Today*, 21 April 1975, p. 1.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Ferdinand E. Marcos, "The Filipinism: The Turning Point," State of the Nation Message to the Congress of the Philippines, 27 January 1969.
21. "Vietnamese Delegation Arrives in Manila 9 July," *United States Foreign Broadcast Information Services: Asia and Pacific IV* (July 12, 1976): p. 1.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
23. Interview with a top government official, Manila, Philippines, 22 July 1986.

24. *Ibid.*
25. Benjamin B. Domingo, *Philippines Trade and Economic Agreements* (Manila: Foreign Service Institute, 1983), 89-90.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
27. Interview with a top government official, Manila, Philippines, 22 July 1986.
28. *MFA Document*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 July 1986.
29. Interview with Mr. Phan Trong Thai, Embassy of the Socialist First Republic of Vietnam, Manila, Philippines, 29 July 1986.
30. *Foreign Trade Statistics of the Philippines*, National Census and Statistics Office, 1985.
31. Interview with Mrs. Minerva Fajardo, Philippine International Trading Corporation, Makati, Metro Manila. 24 July 1986.
32. DFA, "Chronology of Philippines-Vietnam Relations."
33. The agreements were: Agreements on the Establishment of the Joint Communique on Economic Cooperation (JCEC) and the Joint Communique on Trade (JCT); Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Investments; and Agreement on Maritime Shipping.
34. *World Affairs Weekly. Special Supplement*, 1996, p. 21.
35. Among the prominent Philippine investors are: San Miguel Brewery, Victorias Milling Co., San Miguel Glass, UNILAB, Liwayway Industrial Food Company, Jollibee, JSN Laboratories, Ligo Marine Products, Philippine Animation, et al.
36. "RP to get rice from Vietnam...DFA", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2 December 1995, p. 2.
37. "RP-Vietnam in new trade pact," *Manila Chronicle*, 4 December 1995, p. 11.
38. "RP-Vietnam team sets out to Spratlys for research." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 26 April 1996, p. 3.