The issues raised by the Viet Nam-China conflict are complex and difficult, and will be long-lasting.

Our starting point has been:

We support Viet Nam, though we may criticise it; we oppose and criticise China.

Ours has not been an even-handed approach, despite the influence of media treatment and even some labor movement and spontaneous mass reactions.

Nor is any one principle, or even a shopping list of principles, a substitute for analysis which relates principles to each other and to the concrete situation.

The key question in the China-Viet Nam conflict is that China refuses to recognise Viet Nam’s right to follow a policy decided by Viet Nam itself.

This was a basic factor in the Chinese-backed Kampuchean conflict with Viet Nam as well as with the problems with ethnic Chinese in Viet Nam, and the Viet Nam-China border conflict.

All were designed to weaken and punish Viet Nam for refusing to toe a line agreeable to China.

Marxists have approvingly quoted the German theoretician of war, Clausewitz, who said that war is the continuation of politics by other — that is, forcible — means. China’s politics are to make Viet Nam subservient, and the “punishment” by war is aimed to achieve that aim.

But the opposite is also often true — politics may be the continuation of war by other means. Even in retreating to the border, it seems that China may hold on to some territory it now says is in dispute, as a point of continued leverage and threat to Viet Nam. It is also utilising national minorities in the border areas of Laos, and no doubt still wants to try to achieve a regime in Kampuchea which follows its line and harasses Viet Nam.

These particular politics of China are supported by the US and Australian governments, fishing in the troubled waters of the Sino-Soviet conflict, angling for Chinese trade, and still smarting over the defeat Viet Nam inflicted on them.
Viet Nam and Independence

China calls Viet Nam a catspaw of the Soviet Union.

But Viet Nam’s credentials in upholding its independence are second to none in the world. It has no history of being a stooge of any other country. Even in the blackest days of the war with the US, offers of troops from other countries were refused, and an even-handed policy followed towards China and the Soviet Union.

That Viet Nam today may see China as the greatest threat to its independence is in part historical, and in part a result of China’s attitude towards it, especially since the final victory in 1975.

So, if Viet Nam has gravitated towards the Soviet Union in this period, the causes must be sought in sources other than Vietnamese “subservience”.

Viet Nam’s dedication to the independence of other countries in the region, specifically that of Laos and Kampuchea, is no doubt less than to its own. But even so, this attitude should not be equated with that of China. Rather, Viet Nam considers that the independent survival of all, via-a-vis their giant neighbour, requires some measure of mutual co-operation.

Viet Nam does not pursue an Indo-Chinese Federation, I believe. In 1951 the CP of Indo-China was divided into its main national components, with mutual promises of co-operation. It is this co-operation it desires, or at the very least settlement of issues through negotiation.

Conflict between Viet Nam and China goes far back into history, including 1,000 years of Chinese occupation, and continued after both countries won liberation. But for the sake of brevity we can begin from direct US involvement.

When the liberation struggle stepped up in 1963, both China and the Soviet Union sought to influence the conduct of the war in a way consistent with their own perceived interests. Much aid was given, but attempts were made to use it as a lever to influence Viet Nam’s strategy.

I had the experience of this in Moscow at the end of 1965, when an official of the CPSU’s international department, detailing the aid given, clearly hinted that Viet Nam should not allow its conflict with the US to go beyond a certain point where US “face” might be lost, with possible major repercussions for US-Soviet relations.

Nor should we forget that both China and the Soviet Union hosted Nixon at the height of the war.

After the decisive Tet offensive in 1968 — in which Soviet rockets and other weapons played an important role — the Chinese made a strong criticism of Viet Nam’s strategy, declaring that it should wage a protracted guerrilla war for 30 years, as China had done.

This was not, I suspect, disinterested advice, nor was it sound as subsequent events showed. It indicated China’s concern over a strong Viet Nam emerging at the end of a relatively short war.

If further evidence is necessary, it is contained in Deng’s statement in the US in February that the US is a force for peace, the only trouble being that it is not a strong enough force!

We know how much Viet Nam weakened that force, changing the whole international climate and balance of forces in the world, for which we should all be eternally grateful. Yet we find the Chinese reproaching Viet Nam for not being sufficiently grateful for all the aid they gave and for not showing that gratitude in the required manner.

As the victory came, Viet Nam was a bit more cocky than China relished, and Chinese attitudes were indicated by their occupation of the Paracel Islands (then still held by Thieu forces) in January 1974, and claims to the Spratlys.

There was increasing coolness in relations and a progressive reduction in, and finally elimination of, Chinese aid.

Kampuchea

In Kampuchea the course of events was as follows:

In 1970 Sihanouk was deposed and Lon Nol installed by US and South Vietnamese troops, with the aim, in particular, of closing the Ho Chi Minh trail which ran through the eastern forests of the country.

This trail was critical for Vietnamese
conduct of the war. The fact that its construction and use may have been a violation of Kampuchean territory and independence didn’t worry the progressive forces at that time, and rightly so.

The Lon Nol attempt failed, and the small Khmer Rouge progressively established its control in most of the countryside with Vietnamese aid and protection.

After taking Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge set out to expel all Vietnamese from the country, and unsuccessfully tried to seize several islands in the Gulf of Siam.

High level delegations were exchanged later that year, with the two governments saying they would sign a treaty of friendship and co-operation concretising the “special relationship” between them.

From 1976 when Mao died and when more moderate elements in the Khmer Rouge regime seemed to lean to the Vietnamese side, that section led by Pol Pot and Ieng Sary fell in with China’s unease over Viet Nam’s growing strength through reunification and its continuing ties with the Soviet Union.

Old cadres who had largely been trained in Viet Nam were violently purged. Several military uprisings took place but were put down. One of them was led by Heng Samrin, head of the present Kampuchean regime.

At about the same time, early 1977, utilising Chinese-supplied equipment and up to 20,000 Chinese “technicians”, large-scale assaults were launched along the Vietnamese border.

The Pol Pot government refused all offers of negotiation, including a proposal for a demilitarised zone on the border, and was able to defeat middle-sized Vietnamese efforts to dislodge them from, or defeat them on, the border. Important rice-growing areas of Viet Nam were devastated in the fighting.

At the same time, people of Chinese origin in both North and South Viet Nam were encouraged to oppose Viet Nam’s anti-capitalist economic measures, to claim discrimination, and to become refugees.

Some anti-Chinese sentiments or attitudes may have come from the Vietnamese, but all the information we have, including from our comrades who were on the spot, establishes China as being the main instigator.

These savage pressures, along with economic difficulties due to flood and drought, bureaucracy, inexperience in management, and lowered morale, led the Vietnamese to make the fateful decision to “lance the Kampuchean boil”.

Probably this decision was taken about the middle of last year when Viet Nam joined Comecon, signing the friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in November.

Viet Nam had no easy options. A continued large-scale border war in the west, and the prospect of an even bigger one from the north would have faced her with a situation never experienced even at the height of the war with the United States.

But whatever the strategic and military reasoning, the political decision to go into Kampuchea was a step with fateful consequences.

There was certainly a potential revolt in existence inside Kampuchea, and among the refugees in Viet Nam, numbered, according to some reports, at up to 350,000. But that revolt could not succeed without the prior destruction of the main Pol Pot forces, and a massive assault was launched along the border and through the country.

The Vietnamese speak of two wars — a border war and a revolutionary war of liberation in which they gave “that level of aid which was necessary”. There is probably some substance in the “two wars” theory, though I do not know how much. In practice the two wars merged.

In any case, in giving support to the Vietnamese in the struggle with China we should do so on a principled basis, taking them with whatever warts they may have, not hiding as some do behind the fiction that there are no Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea.

China’s Motives

What are China’s motivations?

History and culture, and especially nationalism do not explain everything, but they are ever-present forces far more
powerful than most marxists have recognised.

The sense of national identity and pride of the Chinese people, in my opinion and observation, the strongest of any country in the world — and that is saying something.

China has been, to one degree or another, a politically unified country for more than two thousand years, with a common culture as advanced, till the last 200 years or so, as any in the world, including Greece, Rome and the Arab world in its hey-day.

The very name "central kingdom" indicates self-centredness and a certain attitude to others.

The overseas Chinese, over hundreds of years, have proved almost unassimilable. (I am not here urging a policy of assimilation, only pointing out that other nationalities have often been absorbed while the Chinese have not).

Although China has often been oppressed or penetrated by conquering nations, it has absorbed or overcome them all, and, when strong, has habitually demanded allegiance and obeisance from its neighbours.

Notwithstanding statements that China and Viet Nam fit together like lips and teeth, full Vietnamese independence has never been really accepted. Successive Chinese leaderships have been unable to come to grips with the fact that times have changed. Perhaps China's recent re-emergence into the world, and reactions to its aggression may help it eventually to face that fact.

Into this past, and into these attitudes, has been injected the felt menace of the Soviet Union.

Why, then, virtually push Viet Nam towards the Soviet Union by hostile acts?

It does not make sense unless China's basic attitude is that Viet Nam cannot be permitted "independence" to do anything that China does not want. Or, that China feels it must act now rather than later, to stop "encirclement from the south" by a Soviet ally (though how Viet Nam could "encircle" China or seriously menace China's independence I do not know).

Probably both factors operated to bring on the Chinese invasion. But if so, China has made a political miscalculation far greater than any Viet Nam may have made in relation to Kampuchea.

Chinese aims to make Viet Nam subservient cannot be realised; Viet Nam will not accept Chinese hegemony. Nor is it, I believe, ignorant of the striving of the Soviet Union for hegemony, or desirous of being overly dependent.

But for the time being Viet Nam has few options. Force cannot compel her to abandon any alliance or make her less dependent. A quite different policy from China, and the rest of the world, would be needed to achieve this.

Chinese perception of the whole situation filters through the prism of their obsession with the Russian "social-imperialist" threat, and this lies at the bottom of their progression — backwards — in foreign policy.

They first accused the Soviet Union of not standing up to US imperialism; then moved to regarding the Soviet Union and the US as equal enemies; they now say the Soviet Union is the main threat to the world and that the US is a "force for peace".

I have no doubt that the Chinese action in Viet Nam was in some sense "cleared" with the US during Deng's visit. In the same sense, I believe, the United States accepted the Soviet Union's march into Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Soviet motives

What are the aims of the Soviet Union in this region?

There is no doubt about Russian fears of China. It has its historical roots in two and a half centuries of Tartar occupation. It is not so much an immediate fear (though that exists now that China is a nuclear power), but a fear of what 1,000 million Chinese, backed by a modern economy, could do. If there is one thing that President Brezhnev and dissident author Solzhenytsin agree upon it is the "Chinese threat".

In the modern era, the Soviet Union has been more the initiator in Sino-Soviet relations, in that their revolution occurred first. Tensions developed in the Comintern period, with Stalin, and after the second world war.
Further conflict developed over who was to inherit Stalin’s “mantle” as world communist leader; hegemony over the world communist movement; differences about the way to build socialism (as the protagonists conceived that system); and, of course and especially, over regional hegemony and conceived national interests which each arbitrarily equated with the future of the “world revolution”.

It is hard, in general terms, to hold that one is better than the other. For example, China was right to reject the Soviet Union’s hegemony over and manipulation of the world communist movement. But instead of a principled struggle, what China tried to do (and failed), was to establish another “world communist movement” over which it had hegemony and which it manipulated.

What both want, primarily, is a presence in each country through a political formation whose prime function is to unquestioningly advocate what its mentor from time to time demands, in the process also serving to “prove” for home consumption that their “leadership” is recognised throughout the world.

Fortunately — and this is a tribute to Soviet caution among other things — it seems that we do not now have to face the issue of direct Soviet entry into the conflict, with all the dangers that would have had for unlimited escalation towards a world and even nuclear conflict.

But we cannot leave the subject without probing Soviet intentions in aiding Viet Nam. Although that aid is to be applauded, I believe it is not disinterested, but basically relates to the Soviet fears already mentioned, which lead them to want China to be weak and to have, if possible, a government friendly to them.

But the Soviet Union has even less chance of realising such political aims in relation to China, than China has in relation to Viet Nam.

We had to think about how to react if the Soviet Union had intervened. The lines along which our thoughts were running were that we would have supported such intervention against the Chinese invasion insofar as it helped Viet Nam and was a response to Vietnamese requests. But it would be conditional support — conditioned by the degree to which we judged Soviet actions were also in pursuit of other aims, unnecessarily escalated the conflict, etc.

In supporting Viet Nam and present Soviet assistance to it, are we “switching back to the Russians” in allegiance?

Not at all. We maintain our independent position.

Such an independent position does not preclude, but presupposes, support of, as well as opposition to, particular measures taken by various governments and parties, in accordance with our own assessment of those measures.

In recent times there have been some Soviet actions which we have supported, though virtually none that I can recall in the case of China.

But, for all that, this is not necessarily a permanent state of affairs and we will not be joining in the sort of anti-China chorus being raised by Gus Hall of the Communist Party of the United States which talks about China taking the capitalist road and so on.

It is one of the ironies of the situation, which one hopes will not have escaped the notice of the Vietnamese, that some of the most vociferous and “110 per cent supporters” of Vietnam take this stand not because it is the foundation of their position, but because it is for the time being the best lever available for whipping up the anti-China campaign so long promoted by the Soviet Union. If Soviet policy in relation to Viet Nam changes, so will some of today’s most effusive friends.

Nor will we compete with anyone for Viet Nam’s favors by abandoning criticism when we feel it is justified, or by accepting all their statements and positions, specifically the use of outside military force to help change the government in Kampuchea — to the extent that occurred — and indefinite maintenance of troops in that country.

But our criticism should be measured. It is sometimes said that one should call a spade a spade. But a spade can also be called a bloody shovel; or an implement for digging. The latter description may be more appropriate — especially if the implement is really a trowel. The Chinese digging implement is a
mechanical excavator.

Socialism and war

The extra difficulties the situation creates for us in projecting our vision of socialism and the world's future will not be lost on anybody; and they will not quickly disappear. One of my Tribune customers said in sorrow, "It's getting more like 1984 every day". Another said, "How dreadful to watch communists from different countries seeing how many of each other they can kill". Yet another, with a shake of the head, said: "Politics is hard to follow these days".

Even when the internal practices of post-capitalist regimes showed how much was left to be desired, one thing still seemed to stand — that the causes of war between such countries would be done away with.

To their credit, and no doubt flowing from their experience with the Soviet Union, the Yugoslavs faced this problem both practically and theoretically more realistically than anybody else.

In his book Socialism and War, Edward Kardelj (who died in February, sad to say) argued with Chinese theorists who repudiated peaceful coexistence and preached the inevitability of war. (It is another irony of the situation that in those days China completely repudiated in words any coexistence with the US and viciously denounced Yugoslavia for upholding that possibility. Today, Yugoslavia has good relations with China — seeing that country as a counterweight to the Soviet Union — while China goes far beyond coexistence, almost to an alliance with, the US.)

Kardelj said:

In circumstances when the socialist system has become a world force, but still possessing vestiges of the old views and egoistic and other such tendencies, the phenomenon is not excluded of some country on the socialist road — because of certain specific inner conditions — yielding to the temptation to make use of the strength of socialism, not only for its own defence but also for an attempt to achieve certain aims which have no connection whatsoever with socialism. (Socialism and War, page 60. Methuen and Co, 1961.)

Nobody can foresee with precision what actual groupings in the relationship of world social forces will appear in the course of further development. Nor can anybody foresee all the numerous instruments or all the multifarious forms in which and through which the future struggle for the final establishment of socialist relationships will unfold, any more than one can foresee the future forms of mutual aid of the socialist forces. But one thing remains, as a sacred principle: the imposition of socialism or of any of its forms by aggression from without will always be alien to socialism, an unacceptable and reactionary instrument. The elimination of that instrument is indeed the long-term purpose of the policy of coexistence. (Page 67.)

It is in complete opposition to the spirit of marxism to take the fact that a war is waged by a socialist country as the sole criterion of the justness of that war. (Page 105.)

And in listing one of a number of contradictions in the internal development of social relationships after the overthrow of capitalism while the state still exists:

...the necessity for relationships between one socialist country and another to be founded on interstate relationships, which makes possible tendencies towards a desire to dominate others, to national egoism and like phenomena. (Page 189.)

Alienation

Later I will return to some of the questions raised in these passages, but want to point out that what is happening is bad for socialism also because it will reinforce the alienation many people feel. For example, many could conclude that there is nothing they can do to stop social disasters. Especially if even those who have proclaimed they can stop them not only don't, but actually cause some of the worst kind of social disasters — war — themselves. Many could wrongly conclude that this "proves" that "human nature", not the social system, is the cause of war and other conflicts — a "human nature" that cannot be changed.
The events will also stimulate regrowth of the anti-Asian sentiments never far below the surface in many Australians, and anti-Russian sentiment as well — the latter being deliberately promoted by Fraser and his government.

There is hardly need to point to the new divisions on the left, or exacerbation of the old ones, that the conflict generates.

**Detente and non-alignment**

The events we witness are also defeats for the policies of detente and non-alignment. "The end of this decade of detente" was proclaimed by Peacock in his foreign policy statement, as he lined up with China and with US threats of intervention to save "the west's" oil in the Middle East.

But we should not take these defeats as being irreversible.

In one sense, the events show that detente must be extended to involve all major powers, and deepened to embrace real disarmament.

Out of their experience of the deadly dangerous situation that could have arisen, both China and the Soviet Union may in time be induced to see for themselves what many others have said and wish for — that they have to find some way of living together with each other, as well as with the United States, without resorting to war which could so easily escalate to a world nuclear war.

This could be the first step in a long march to developing once again a common front against imperialism.

Such a step will not stop sallies by one or another power when conditions look suitable, or prevent mass movements for change occurring in various countries — for example, Iran.

But such an extension and deepening of detente would push back the danger of world war, and restrict the power of the big nations, especially the Soviet Union, China and the United States, allowing the movement for non-alignment to grow as a counterweight and an alternative to having to line up with one or another great power.

This will not occur easily, of course, because the big powers (including China, despite its relative economic backwardness) have the clout, the supplies, the money, while the non-aligned lack these and have all sorts of regimes and allegiances.

Nevertheless, it is clear that lining up with one or another great power makes both peace and independence progressively more difficult to maintain. African countries, for example, which required aid to win their national liberation struggles and independence are finding that they later have to take counter-measures if they are not to fall into a new dependence, even if it is a lighter and less exploitative one than when imperialism ruled.

The broad struggle for peace, non-alignment and disarmament, for a new world political and economic order which respects the independence of all countries, opposes multinational domination and foreign military presences and bases, should receive more attention and support than we have given it.

No easy victories in this struggle are to be expected, any more than in the internal struggles projected in our draft program. But the alternative is the kind of dangerous situation we have seen. As said earlier, it is not just a matter of persuasion of people whose ears are closed. The events themselves may educate. What we need is mass awareness, to bring the lesson home more quickly and deeply, however difficult that may be. The alternative is to do nothing and let events take their course.

China talks of "teaching Viet Nam a lesson". China herself should be taught a lesson. Not a military lesson, such as the Soviet Union may have had in mind, but a political lesson through mass criticism: the lesson that she must not use her size and strength to dominate, browbeat or attempt to establish hegemony over others.

The Soviet Union should be taught the same lesson, for it has not yet learned it, and both should unite to teach it (again) to the United States.

This will not be easy. The Commonwealth Bank struck a chord when they made their slogan "Get with the Strength", because many powerless people, and small nations, feel that this is the only way. But really it is they who must exercise their own potential power by uniting with each other for the
Problems for Study

We should continue, and deepen, our study of the nature of the social systems in what we have inadequately called the “socialist-based” countries, remembering however that they display considerable variety and that over-generalisation may be a pitfall.

This study should include examination of the compulsions and restraints, and the goals of industrialisation and modernisation and how this influences social relations, progress towards equality internally in each country and internationally, and what it may do in the decades ahead to world resources, environment and ecological balance.

It should include consideration of the problems of nationalism and internationalism.

We should continue to develop and more forcefully project the kind of vision contained in our draft Party Program, and the principles upon which it is based.

But we should not do it in a utopian and self-defeating way.

Politics is conducted by real people; by real political and social forces; by real nations. All are subject to the weight of their traditions, culture and history, and all sorts of contradictory strivings.

For example, the simple, naive answer to nationalism as a cause of conflicts and wars is to preach internationalism. But this ignores the facts that nationalism is a universal and powerful force in the world, that without that force Viet Nam (for example) could not have defeated imperialism, and that preaching by the enlightened has never of itself brought into existence that which was preached for.

There is no way in which a few internationalists can, any more than King Canute, roll back the waves, in this case of nationalism. All that will happen with that stance is that those who identify, or claim to identify with national sentiment will win the political battle and succeed in turning national sentiment in a reactionary direction.

History, including not least recent history, is full of examples of this.

The dialectic of development is that, to proceed towards internationalism, one must defend and develop that which is positive in national tradition and sentiment, linked with the particular struggles of the day. These include, especially, struggles against the multinational corporations, about which already a widespread feeling exists, and struggle against those who, in the name of the “national interest”, play on racism, greed and exploitation.

Australia will continue to exist as a nation for a very long time yet. The real question is what the character and outlook of that nation should be so as to best serve the interests of Australia’s working people by overcoming racism, chauvinism and narrowness, by striving for equality in relations between nations, especially those close to us, by developing joint action by national working classes against common enemies, and the like.

Among the difficulties we face is that we bear the name “communist”; our paper carries the line “Australia’s Communist Weekly”. But what is “a communist”? It is not so clear to people — including communists! — these days. The name has been besmirched, as the designation “social-democrat” was in a previous period. I do not know what the solution to this problem is.

But despite the extra difficulties socialists now face, and the comfort and succour that imperialism derives from conflicts such as those we have witnessed, and from internal defects of post-capitalist states, we should not forget that capitalism’s problems are mounting all over the world. Along with those problems, desires are mounting for a new way of life which really expands democracy, liberates from oppression, and lives in harmony and balance with the natural world.

Jack Mundey put it well in a recent letter to the press: we stand for socialism with a human face, an egalitarian body and an ecological heart.

— Eric Aarons, 4.3.79.