



Vietnam War: an alternative scenario

By **John J. Metzler**

Forty-two years ago, on April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks smashed through the gates of Saigon's Presidential Palace, thus dramatically ending what was known as the Vietnam War. South Vietnam had fallen, the US was politically stunned, and the narrative would switch to Vietnamese reunification.

Indeed in the spring of 1975, American troops had been out of Vietnam for over two years, the brunt of the fighting falling to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). But a string of North Vietnamese probing attacks in the Central Highlands in February led to the deluge with ARVN units soon falling like dominoes. The speed of North Vietnam's invasion led to an unprecedented military rout in South Vietnam. Even Hanoi's commanders were surprised by the speed of their victory.

We know what happened. Forcible reunification. Massive re-education. The Boat People refugees. And a dour united Socialist Republic of Vietnam under the tender charms of Hanoi's hardline communists.

But what if it had played out differently – a historic scenario that took a different turn leading to a free and prosperous South Vietnam along the same lines as South Korea? Vietnam, after all, is a country, not a war.

In this contrarian scenario, North Vietnam abided by, not militarily violated, the Paris Peace Accords of 1973. Vietnam remained divided at the 17th parallel and both governments, North and South, retained their separate political and socioeconomic structures.

If we look at South Korea in 1975, we see the Seoul government faced the same if not even more daunting security challenges from the North. Nonetheless, Seoul could rely solidly on the US/ROK Mutual Security Treaty. South Korea's political landscape was decidedly authoritarian under Park Chung-hee, but the system paled in comparison to the neo-Stalinist regime in the North under Kim Il-sung.

Roughly the same parallel existed in Saigon, where a tough but reforming government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, long under direct military assault by the North, faced a hardline Soviet-backed regime in Hanoi.

Economically South Korea in the 1970s was prospering despite the threat from North Korea. South Korea's per capita income stood at US\$591 in 1975, while the North was at near parity with \$579. Within a few years, Seoul's growth rates would skyrocket ahead of the faltering North. ROK's GNP growth reached 7 % in 1972.

During Park's rule, South Korea's economy between 1961 and 1979 saw the per capita income rise eight-fold and economic growth skyrocket. Trade, an elixir of South Korea's economy, jumped from \$477 million in 1962 to \$1.7 billion in 1972 and \$153 billion by 1991. Even a decade prior to 1975, South Vietnam's relatively open market economy was severely constrained by the ongoing conflict. The GDP in both North and South Vietnam was just over \$10 billion a year. But export and trade prospects languished.

With opening global markets in the 1980s, South Vietnam, like South Korea, would have had the chance to enjoy robust economic development.

Though the socioeconomic situation for South Vietnam's population of 20 million was on the verge of improvement if the ceasefire held, any future prosperity for the divided nation depended on peace, not the permanent state of conflict it endured.

While North Vietnam, like North Korea, was known for its heavy industry, South Vietnam, like South Korea, was an agricultural rice bowl. Nonetheless, let's say that export-oriented development in textiles, apparel, and light electronics would take root as they did in South Korea. With opening global markets in the 1980s, South Vietnam, like South Korea, would have had the chance to enjoy robust economic development.

In 1978, three years after the invasion of the South, Socialist Vietnam's per capita income stood at a piddling \$170 while South Korea's was \$1,200.

Alas, fate intervened with the North Vietnamese invasion and communization of the South. It would take years before Hanoi's hardliners adopted the more flexible economic policies of *doi moi*, which have transformed united Vietnam into a reasonably prosperous place.

Today, Vietnam boasts 6.6 percent GDP growth and per capita income stands at \$2,245.

Though South Korea has slower GDP growth at 2.6 percent, its per capita income of \$28,000 represents one of East Asia's Tiger economies. In 2015, Vietnam's exports reached \$162 billion (\$45 billion to the US); South Korea soared to \$537 billion.

Yet while South Korea's political system is tenaciously democratic, Vietnam's remains in lockstep with the Communist party diktat. Press freedom is highly restricted. And according to Amnesty International, the country ranks as one of the world's leaders in capital punishment, with 429 prisoners executed between 2013 and 2016.

We can't change the path of history. But we can reflect upon it. What if?