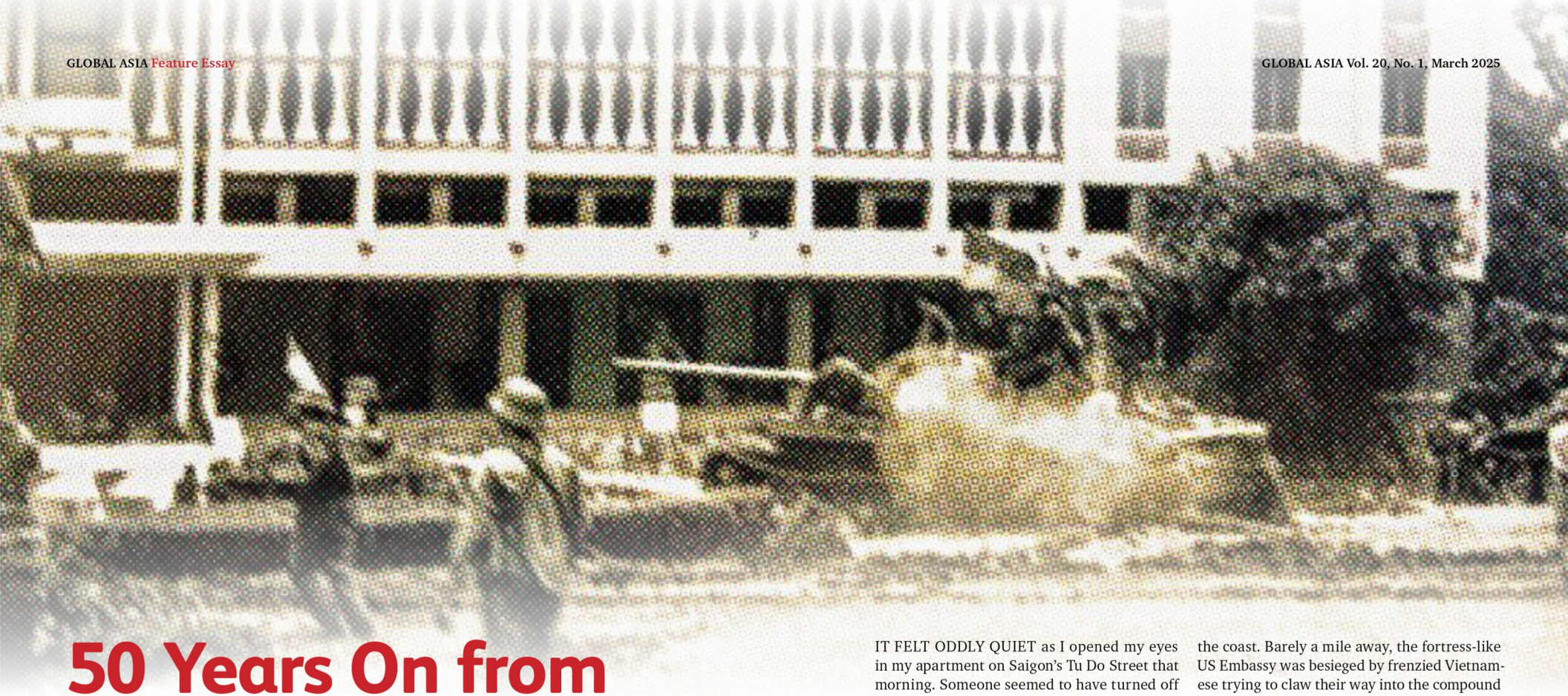

50 Years On from the Fall of Saigon

A Personal Reflection

By Nayan Chanda

The fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, was iconic in Vietnam's prolonged and painful journey to peace and future prosperity. It echoes to this day as a reminder of the limits of power to subdue a determined people.

Nayan Chanda, one of *Global Asia*'s founding board members, was then a *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondent and was on hand to witness what unfolded — and what followed in the years afterward.

IT FELT ODDLY QUIET as I opened my eyes in my apartment on Saigon's Tu Do Street that morning. Someone seemed to have turned off the familiar background noise — there was no thump-thump of helicopters interspersed with gunshots and dull explosions wafting into my bedroom. It was the morning of May 1, 1975. Lying in bed as the whirr of the ceiling fan accentuated the heavy silence, I wondered if this was how peace sounded.

A day earlier, on April 30, Saigon had felt like a city caught in a spasm. US military helicopters had thundered overhead, scooping up the last Americans and their Vietnamese associates. Saigon harbor, below my apartment, had seethed with desperate people: thousands of Vietnamese with backpacks and children in their arms thronging, frantically trying to board anything that floated on the Saigon River. They had been hoping to somehow make it out to the ships of the US Navy's Seventh Fleet, reportedly sailing off the coast. Barely a mile away, the fortress-like US Embassy was besieged by frenzied Vietnamese trying to claw their way into the compound while a steady stream of helicopters evacuated the lucky ones from the rooftop. When the last CH-46 Sea Knight finally took off after releasing tear gas at the desperate civilians in the stairwell, the embassy's cast-iron gate, which had been holding back the crowds outside, was broken open. A frenzied mob ran through the abandoned building looting and vandalizing what remained. Among the abandoned items of embassy property was a framed quotation from Lawrence of Arabia that captured the bitter irony of the moment:

Better to let them do it imperfectly
Than to do it perfectly yourself
For it is their country, their war,
And your time is short.

Top: The presidential palace is overrun by troops on April 30. Above: The author in Saigon, 1975.
Photos: Nayan Chanda

After witnessing the ransacking of the embassy, I ran back to the Reuters office on the corner of the Presidential Palace to use their

telex machine. But before I could finish writing my "situationer" for the news agency (for which I had become a stringer), I was startled by the loud rumbling outside. Through an open door, I saw a camouflaged tank with the fluttering blue, red and gold flag of North Vietnam's National Liberation Front barreling toward the Palace gates. Sprinting in the direction of the tank with my camera around my neck, I tried to establish my journalist *bona fides* and waved to the soldiers sitting atop. They waved back. I hurried back to the office to send a flash to Reuters: "The Vietnam War ended today at 11:25am."

What followed in the next few hours was something that nobody, not even the victors in green, could have foreseen. Throughout the morning, a procession of tanks, armored personnel carriers and heavy Russian trucks, some towing long-range artillery pieces, poured into downtown Saigon. Thousands of residents stood on the roadside and on balconies to watch the victors' parade.

THE AFTERMATH

I saw some South Vietnamese soldiers throwing their uniforms and gear down on the pavement as they tried to melt into the crowd for safety. By late afternoon, the streets filled with curious crowds. That evening, as the world media was cut off from Saigon, speculation was rife about what dire fate had befallen the defeated capital, and the area around the Presidential Palace had been turned into a military encampment. Saigon residents squatted next to the revolutionary soldiers whom they called *bo doi*, in baggy olive-green uniforms and rubber-tire "Ho Chi Minh sandals," getting an instant lesson about the North Vietnamese army and their fearsome guns. It was in this moment that I ran into my friend Pham Xuan An, the much sought-after *Time* magazine bureau chief. Surprised to find him standing outside the palace with a quizzical smile on his face, I asked him why he didn't get on the chopper. He said he had missed the flight, though his family had managed to leave. Some years later, I learned why: He turned out to be the highest-ranking communist spy in South Vietnam, who for decades had provided strategic intelligence to Hanoi. In long sessions at his home packed with singing birds, I learned how as a student he had joined the Communist Party to fight the French and had, at the party's orders, spent time in a college in California. For him, the end of the war, I understood, meant a new lease on life. He would no longer have to live in perpetual fear of being exposed, tortured and killed.

Other communists such as Bui Huu Nhan, a southern cadre who had moved to North Vietnam after 1954, had a more elementary appreciation of peace. "I'll be able to see my mother, my brothers, my nephews," he told me. "Sitting in Hanoi, I wondered when will I be able to eat the delicious mangosteen, durian of my natal delta. To me this is victory." Many South Vietnamese soldiers, though apprehensive about their future, expressed similar sentiments about peace at last.

Visiting Hanoi a few months after the fall of Saigon, I met Ngo Dien, a senior official at the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry. Receiving me in the cavernous hall of the colonial building, he beamed as he recited a 15th-century poem written after the last of the Ming invaders had been driven out of Vietnam:

There are no more sharks in the sea,
There are no more beasts on earth,
The sky is serene,
Time is now to build peace for ten thousand years.

WAITING FOR A LONG PEACE

What Dien could not have expected, and I certainly had not foreseen, was how all these hopes for a long peace would come crashing down so quickly. Vietnam's internal problems, ethnic

Clockwise: A North Vietnam tank claims the streets; FEER's cover of June 6, 1975; interview with Hoang Tung in July 1975; a public weapons demonstration.
Photos: Nayan Chanda

I had expected to see the Vietnamese flag hoisted on the US embassy flagpole. When I asked why this had not happened, one official said they had received no such instruction from Hanoi. Privately, one cadre lowered his voice and told me: 'The Americans will be back soon.'

divide and post-war economic challenges would add fuel to the historical animosity of its neighbors to unleash full-scale wars on two fronts. The Chinese flags and Mao portraits that appeared briefly in Cholon in 1975 were promptly ordered down but they were an early warning of the battle to come. Within two years, it would blow up into a bitter feud with China, leading to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. We now know that relations had deteriorated enough for newly rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping to take his eyes off his country's economic modernization to instead plan war. In July 1978, Deng led the Chinese Politburo to secretly decide to "teach Vietnam a lesson" for its insolence. The final decision on the time and scale of the attack had to wait until Vietnam had revealed its hand in Cambodia.

THE CAMBODIAN DIMENSION

While the world was focused on the drama of helicopter evacuations, few noticed the trickle of Vietnamese refugees fleeing Pol Pot's killing fields in Cambodia. Within two years, the Khmer Rouge malignancy spilled into Vietnamese territory. Hundreds of Vietnamese villagers along the border were killed in unreported Khmer Rouge raids. When Hanoi finally lifted the veil in the spring of 1978, I and other foreign reporters were flown in to witness the gory sites of civilian massacres. We also visited Khmer refugee camps in the Mekong Delta, which had clearly become recruitment centers for a "resistance army" that the Vietnamese military would later send to remove Pol Pot. Briefing visiting journalists in Hanoi, Colonel Vo Dong Giang didn't mince words. The end to the conflict, as he put it, would come in one of two ways: "Either the Cambodian regime will change its policy or the regime will be changed by the Khmer people."

While the Vietnamese army assembled men and material in the south in preparation to invade Cambodia, the Chinese too firmed up their July plans to deliver punishment across the border. In the winter of 1978-79 — just a handful of years after Dien had recited the poem hoping for "ten thousand years of peace" — Vietnam was back at war. In other parts of the world, as Christmas bells were ringing, pith-helmeted Vietnamese soldiers riding camouflaged tanks rolled into Cambodia. With Pol Pot and his men retreating to the Cardamom Mountains in the west, the Vietnamese installed in Phnom Penh their Khmer friends who had earlier fled to Vietnam. Months earlier, Vietnamese had engaged in frenzied diplomacy trying to expedite stalled normalization talks with Washington. Having failed in that effort, Vietnamese party secretary Le Duan had flown to Moscow. He signed the long-delayed friendship treaty with Leonid Brezhnev as insurance against Chinese retaliation that was sure to come after the removal of China's Khmer Rouge ally.

It did come as feared. Barely one and a half months after the fall of Phnom Penh, a force of Chinese PLA troops 200,000-strong poured into Vietnam in what was called "a counter-attack in self-defense."

Months later, I travelled through Vietnam's mountainous border region to see many of the provincial capitals turned into rubble. I also saw the hulking carcasses of Chinese tanks. On a later visit to Beijing, a Chinese official complained to me that the ungrateful Vietnamese with "black hearts" had used China-donated cement to build anti-tank defenses. In July 1980, in the streets of Nanning, not far from Vietnam, I saw enough Chinese soldiers — arms wrapped in bandages and hobbling on crutches — to get a sense that China's planned delivery of a lesson to Vietnam may not have succeeded. But the cost to Vietnam had turned out to be heavy, and not just in destroyed infrastructure. At times, Vietnam had to bear the cost of stationing 800,000 troops along its northern border to defend against new invasions.

PASSING OBSTACLES TO PROSPERITY

Vietnam's costly duel with China was not the only obstacle to Hanoi's dream of rebuilding the country in peace. Its entanglement with the Khmer Rouge and reinforced alliance with Moscow foiled Vietnam's hope of normalizing relations with the US and modernizing its battered economy. After the US Embassy was abandoned on April 30, I had expected to see the red and gold Vietnamese flag hoisted on the embassy flagpole, as it was in all other diplomatic missions. When I asked why this had not happened, one official said they had received no such instruction from Hanoi. Privately, one cadre lowered his voice and told me: "The Americans will be back soon." They know that Vietnam has always been a cork in the bottle of Chinese expansion, he explained. It was a sentiment I had repeatedly heard in post-liberation Saigon. Hoang Tung, editor of the Communist Party daily *Nhan Dan*, told me Hanoi would not publish secret American documents left behind in the chaotic evacuation. "We have no desire to rub salt in the American wound." It was not just a question of sentiment. Tung recalled what Ho Chi Minh had advised him after the historic victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu: "Do not gloat over the victory ... In the new phase we want French friendship and co-operation." But the vagaries of geopolitics — Sino-American détente, Sino-Soviet rivalry and, of course, victorious Vietnam's pride — meant that its American dream had to be postponed for nearly two decades.

Before that, the diplomatic logjam to US-Vietnamese relations first had to be resolved in China. In September 1990, the day after Vietnam's National Day, Chinese and Vietnamese leaders flew to Chengdu for a secret meeting. They agreed to bury the hatchet on Cambodia, at least for now, and agree to a coalition government involving the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam's Cambodian protégés, and non-communist forces under UN auspices. With Vietnamese troops out of Cambodia, the Third Indochina War was over and relations among the combatants normalized; Vietnam could finally taste peace. On Aug. 6, 1995, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher hoisted the stars-and-stripes over the newly opened embassy building on a drizzly morning in Hanoi. Several hours later, and eight thousand miles away, Vietnamese officials too raised their red and gold flag over the new Vietnamese embassy in Washington, DC.

If April 30, 1975 — the day then US Ambassador Graham Martin reluctantly boarded the last helicopter evacuating his embassy — spelled the end of the American war in Vietnam, it was on that August day 20 years later that Vietnam was finally ready to start building peace. No doubt Dien would have loved to have recited that peace-embracing 15th-century poem at this more appropriate moment.

Nayan Chanda is founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and is a *Global Asia* editorial board member. He witnessed the fall of Saigon while a correspondent based in the city for the legendary *Far Eastern Economic Review*. He remained a correspondent for *FEER* for many years, later serving as editor.