A Bilateral Dialogue
Regime: US–Vietnamese
Relations after the Fall
of Saigon
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In the absence of diplomatic relations the opportunities for ade­quate exchange between states are limited. Without them a send­ing state is often denied *inter alia* the benefit of experienced personnel on the spot furnishing it with informed reports on conditions in the receiving state and enjoying easy access to representa­tives of the host government. Furthermore, in circumstances of non­recognition the problems of contact are compounded since no agree­ment can be made with a government or state whose very existence is denied. Even in cases of extreme estrangement, however, the obstacles to dialogue need not be insurmountable. States may choose to approach each other, for example, through the diplomatic corps of third states or international organizations. They may receive and send special missions or envoys or signal each other from afar by subtle use of alternative modes of communication. While marvel­ling at the sophistication of these unconventional diplomatic meth­ods most writers have nevertheless subscribed to the view that such communication is somehow inferior to its conventional counter­part, representing no more than a pitstop on the way to something more substantial.

The exchange of formal relations is, of course, the highest point in the relationship between states – the exchange of diplomatic marriage vows – though what seems to be missing from much con­temporary writing is an understanding that marriage does not suit everyone. Not only is it possible to engineer an extremely effective system of contacts outside diplomatic wedlock but this system may offer such advantages to hostile states as to bring into question the advantages – at least in the short term – to be gained from con­ventionalization. This chapter examines the suggestion that it is
not the establishment of normal relations *per se* which should be the goal of hostile states but the establishment of a stable system of contacts. The current analysis describes the attempt under President Carter to re-establish ties with Hanoi in the 1970s and how the abandonment of the goal of the formal upgrading of diplomatic relations made an ironic contribution to the effectiveness of communication between them. The jettison of unrealistic goals by two sides destined to be formally estranged for some time encouraged contacts better suited to the political realities in which they found themselves. Such was the efficiency of this unconventional method of communication between them that a Congressional enquiry held in 1988 into the feasibility of establishing an interest section in Vietnam reported that 'the United States has more contact with the Vietnamese on operational and policy levels than any other Western nation including those which maintain diplomatic relations'.

The establishment of a system of unconventional diplomacy between hostile states is a process of learning by which both sides devise methods of communication which enable them to tiptoe through the minefield which separates them. Given the extreme levels of hostility between the United States and Vietnam after the war, the history of their diplomacy provides an even more dramatic example of the great advances which can be made and the ground that can be lost in the choices made by enemies to talk to one another.

**CARTER AND THE FAILURE OF NORMALIZATION**

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War what slender prospects there may have been for both the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to re-establish cordial relations took a further knock when Saigon finally fell to its communist neighbours in April 1975. The Ford Administration complained that the invasion was in flagrant breach of the Paris Peace Agreement of 1973 which had guaranteed the political autonomy of the South. The chasm which existed between the two states became even more difficult to bridge when in 1976 the United States refused to recognize the re-unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). There were no formal diplomatic contacts, the SRV was still unrepresented at the General Assembly of the United Nations and the closest US mission to Hanoi remained a rather modest embassy in the Laotian capital, Vientiane.