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The Border Security Framework and Logics of Conflict Resolution on a 19th-Century Vietnamese Frontier

**by Andrew Hardy
(EFEO)**

Followed by a response to 'The Border Security Framework
and Logics of Conflict Resolution on a 19th Century
Vietnamese Frontier'

**by Muhadi Sugiono
(Universitas Gadjah Mada)**

The Border Security Framework and Logics of Conflict Resolution on a 19th-Century Vietnamese Frontier

Andrew Hardy, EFEO

The Long Wall of Quang Ngai (1819-1903)

Since 1819, a long wall has stretched from north to south across the province of Quảng Ngãi in central Vietnam. Before its abandonment in 1903, soldiers of a Mountain Defence force (Sơn Phòng) manned the dozens of forts dotted along its length. The wall, locals say, was built to divide the stateless Hrê people of the western valleys from the Vietnamese kingdom in the plains. Indeed, vestiges of this 127-km line still demarcate the zones inhabited by these two ethnic groups: even today, few Hrê live to its east, and the Viet population of the western districts is low.

Since 2005, a joint team of Vietnamese and European scholars have surveyed the monument and explored its history.¹ Their early work was guided by 19th-century documents indicating that the wall was built by the Vietnamese court to protect lowland villages against raids from the hills. This was, it appeared, a wall in the ‘classical’ tradition, erected by the government of a sedentary farming population as a barrier against the highly mobile and militarily superior forces of a ‘barbarian’ people, able to launch deadly attacks and take rapid refuge in impenetrable terrain.

A negotiated policy of national defence (1819)

Then in 2009, research was first authorised in the province’s western districts. Dry stone masonry was found to feature prominently in the landscape of the Hrê valleys: fences, cattle pens, fish traps, field terracing, irrigation dams and channels were all built in stone. The Long Wall was a more complex structure, but it too was made by stacking locally sourced stones without mortar. From this architectural detail flowed a series of unsettling questions: Did Hrê people participate in the wall’s construction? How was that organised? Is there a place in this narrative for the idea of ‘barbarian’? From this point, our research started to show that the wall’s construction was initiated by the Vietnamese court, negotiated with the Hrê population and built with labour and technology from both communities. Far from embodying a classical vision of civilised/barbarian society, it was a joint venture agreed between two communities and, moreover, part of a comprehensive policy of Vietnamese national defence.

No document casts light on the way this negotiation was carried out. But records exist of talks that led to a similar engineering project along the Cambodia border at Vĩnh Thanh (today’s An Giang and Kiên Giang provinces in the Mekong Delta). Built by the same Vietnamese mandarin in the same year, the Vĩnh Tế Canal was negotiated with the Cambodian ambassador to Vietnam and dug with Viet and Khmer labour. The chronicles record the ambassador’s reply to this Vietnamese initiative – “Opening that canal is in the interest of the Cambodian people: our king also wishes it, only he did not dare to request it”.

¹ Led by Andrew Hardy (EFEO) and Nguyen Tien Dong (Vietnam Institute of Archaeology).

They record the Vietnamese king's message to the workers of Vĩnh Thanh – “Digging this canal will involve great hardship. This is a state project for border planning, and it is not a small matter. People will suffer hardship, but will reap real benefits for generations”. They further record the Vietnamese king's words to the Cambodian king – “Your country borders on Vĩnh Thanh. Now this canal will not only benefit the Việt people but will also bring countless benefits to your country.”²

The wall and canal were elements in a broader Vietnamese policy of national defence. That policy aimed to neutralise a perceived threat from the kingdom of Siam by reinforcing the defences of frontier areas made vulnerable by the existence of local conflict. In both cases, the defences were strengthened through the construction of a hard linear border, which was conceived and negotiated with a view to serving the long-term interests of both zones' local inhabitants.

How well did the Long Wall serve the interests of the people of Quang Ngai? Answering this question requires attention to the economic and security dimensions of relations between the Hrê and Việt inhabitants.

Economic integration (1801-1819)

The two regions were economically interdependent: the Hrê bought salt from the Viet, while the Viet imported rice from the Hrê. Before the wall's construction, trade in these essentials and other items was periodically halted by Hrê raids and Vietnamese reprisals. We know about these interruptions, as trade was taxed and the chronicles record the granting of tax holidays in years when fighting prevented collection of customs duties: six times between 1801-1819.³ In the same period, harvest failure and rice shortages among the Viet of Quang Ngai are also recorded six times: rice had to be distributed from state granaries or brought in from neighbouring provinces.⁴ For the Viet community, peace on the frontier was essential for food security.

Cross-border trade was also important for the Hrê. Their participation in the wall's construction was motivated by a will to protect their fields from encroachment by Viet migrants. The Long Wall was a physical boundary beyond which unauthorised Viet were not allowed to travel, and thus represented the court's recognition of the inviolability of the Hrê people's territory and of their rice-growing land, on which landless Viet liked to establish farmsteads. At the same time, the Hrê imported salt from the coast. Consumption of imported ceramic and bronze luxuries (jars, bowls, gongs, etc.) was also an important feature of the Hrê political system. Both before and after the wall's construction, the Hrê heavily depended on trade with the Viet.

Trade tensions arose from differences in economic culture between the two populations. Hard bargaining, dodgy weights and shady practices were a part of Viet commercial life: *caveat emptor* governed every market transaction. Highlanders did not share this commercial culture: their sense of value was not always economic, yet they knew when they

² *Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Chinh Bien*, tháng 9, 1819, q. LX.

³ *Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien*, entries for the years 1804, 1805, 1806, 1810, 1811, 1813.

⁴ *Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien*, entries for the years 1803, 1807, 1811, 1812, 1813, 1819.

had been cheated. The resulting clash of economic values was described by a French observer in terms of abuses stemming from “a principle” among Viet hilltraders “to pay their debts as seldom as possible” This, he concluded, “resulted in acts of revenge”.⁵

At the level of intention, the Long Wall thus embodied a set of distinct policies intended to govern relations at the frontier. Its broader purpose was national defence. Its local aim was territorial demarcation. At the same time, it established a framework for the control of relations between two populations with different economic needs and different economic cultures. The boundary was designed to provide security for the two zones’ continued economic integration.

The balance of military power

In terms of security, the wall was more remarkable in its intention than its results. Peace along the border lasted a decade after its construction: in the 1830s, Hrê raids resumed with dreadful regularity exacting a high annual toll in cattle rustled and people kidnapped or killed. The establishment of colonial rule at the turn of the 20th century led to the abandonment of the wall, abolition of the Mountain Defence force and occupation of Hrê country by French-led troops, with a consequent reduction in incidents of violence and increase in inter-zone trade.

A key element in the persistence of cross-border violence was the balance of military power. Thanks largely to the landscape, the two sides were evenly matched throughout the 19th-century, with some advantage to the Hrê. This was the case despite the fact that both Hre and Viet enjoyed a limited form of military superiority in each others’ territory. During Hrê incursions, isolated Viet villages and border garrisons could rarely resist the raiders, who often numbered hundreds of heavily armed men and could quickly withdraw into impenetrable forest. During reprisals, Vietnamese columns operating in Hrê country counted up to 2,000 troops and relied on the destruction of villages and crops to obtain the surrender of raiding villages and return of stolen people and property. There was, however, no balance in the cost of operations: while plunder made Hrê attacks highly profitable, the mobilisation of a column represented a huge expense for the Vietnamese state with little return, as well as a high chance of ambush, defeat and loss of life.

These forms of military superiority were limited by their temporary nature: lasting minutes and hours for the Hrê raiders, days and weeks for the Vietnamese army. This limitation created an equilibrium. Only with the occupation of their valleys by French-led forces equipped with firearms and, above all, a different model of governance did the balance start to shift. Then, during the second half of 20th century, technological and political developments during the Vietnam War and under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam gave the plains-based forces military superiority, incontestable today.

The infrastructure of border security (1837-1838)

⁵ Charles-Marie Trinquet, ‘Le plateau d’An-khé’, *Revue Indochinoise* 1906, p. 1164 [1061-1070, 1152-1165]

The balance of military power, shaped by the landscape and available technologies, placed great weight on the organisational aspects of border security. A picture of that framework emerges clearly from documents in the Vietnamese royal archives (*Châu bản*). I focus here on one of those reports, written in 1838, which informed the court that taxes at a border market called Phu Hoa were impossible to collect because trade there had ceased. The report, and the king's comments inscribed in vermilion ink, reveal the different actors involved, the infrastructure established along the border and the way it was used by the Vietnamese authorities to control mobility and maintain security.

In a key sentence outlining the measures adopted after recent raids, the author describes the infrastructure in place: "we have already dug a further ditch on the far side of the wall, then had bamboo spikes planted there, so if they [the Hrê] want to enter the market there is only one small road that goes through the gate of the fort, and there are no longer any other byways and shortcuts along which they can sneak to go trading".⁶ Consisting of an earth/stone embankment, a ditch and an impenetrable hedge, this 'hard' boundary was designed to prevent travel between the two territories.

At the same time, the arrangements provided for mobility between the two zones: cross-border roads, forts with gates for the control of passage, border markets for highland-lowland trade. Vietnamese military and civilian institutions sent men to operate this apparatus, manning forts, collecting taxes, controlling travel. Archaeological investigation of one such fort – Deo Chim Hut site in Hanh Dung commune, Nghia Hanh district, Quang Ngai province – confirms this account of the infrastructure in place.

This report was written because, in 1837, the infrastructure had failed. Hrê raiders had again crossed the wall, interrupting trade. Tax revenues immediately dried up, forcing the authorities to act. Two policy solutions were envisaged. In 1837, local mandarins decided to tighten up the border: fortifications were improved and travel restricted to controlled crossing points. Then in 1838, the king expressed his approval of these measures. Indeed, he improved on them, ordering the mandarins to "implement a strict prohibition on trading in order to cut the roads people travel along, and await the time when the mountain barbarians wholeheartedly and contentedly volunteer to request permission to conduct trade". He thus transformed the mandarins' policy of controlled circulation into a full embargo, cutting the flow of salt and other goods to the hills.

This document shows how the infrastructure was designed both to effect territorial separation and to allow control of cross-border passage to secure the two populations' economic relations. At the same time, however, the king's decision about the infrastructure's use involved a negation of commerce: economic embargo was used as a political weapon to enforce submission. Both policies were ambitious applications of the logic of the barrier, and illustrate how the imperatives of human security and economic integration were in constant tension.

Identification and knowledge (1837-1838)

⁶ *Châu bản* number 131, dated 04.04.1838.

What explained the renewed raiding in 1837? The report details the local authorities' investigation of the incident. To start with, two officials were sent to check on the local tax collectors' work. Then the province's senior mandarins met to discuss the situation. They summarised their conclusions as follows:

The Thạch Bích barbarians (...) are of perverse and brutal character. Over the past three to four years, they have still regularly brought merchandise there, to trade and exchange it with Kinh people; in name, they are barbarians who have already submitted, but in reality their hearts are treacherous, and they have many times secretly sneaked in and conducted robbery, and only because they have not been caught in the act they were, until the 1st month of last year [1837], still allowed to come to the market to trade and exchange goods in the normal way. In the 2nd month of last year, they followed the fierce barbarians and assembled more than 300 men who came to the market to steal the merchandise of the traders, and after that went on to surround and attack Hưng Nhân Fort. At that time, the army captured and beheaded 4 men, and recognised two men, who were submitted barbarians at Làng Chanh village, who in the past had continued to come to the market and trade. Since then, because their origin has been revealed, they absolutely do not dare to come to the market anymore and trade and exchange goods.

This analysis explains the interruption to trade – Hrê people's fear of arrest at market – but offers no insight into the causes of renewed raiding. Why did the mandarins not address this key question? My sense is that their thinking was constrained by formal frameworks of state knowledge of people, which rendered the question irrelevant. The report reveals two levels of such knowledge, with respect to the individual and the group.

At the individual level, the mandarins struggled with an issue faced by all pre-modern states: the identification of tax-payers, vagrants, lawbreakers and other individuals for the purposes of control. For inhabitants of the Vietnamese heartlands, identification was done by village heads who answered to the bureaucracy for the villagers under their charge. With the Hrê, the mandarins possessed no such channels. In the example reported here, they were aware of the violence and robbery but, unable to identify the individual perpetrators, were obliged to turn a blind eye. Then a facial identification was made: two raiders were recognised as men from Làng Chanh village who regularly attended market. This “red-handed” identification did not only worry those two individuals: no Làng Chanh villager – and indeed no Hrê at all – dared come to this market, fearing that reprisals would be collective.

That fear was well-founded, owing to the second form of state knowledge of people, at group level. In the 19th century, the ethnonym Hrê had yet to be invented and no ethnonym is used in this or other reports. The Hrê were sometimes named generically (“mountain barbarians”), sometimes after their geographical location (“Thạch Bích barbarians” named after a nearby mountain). Here, we see them identified by political category, as “submitted barbarians” (docile traders) or “fierce barbarians” (hostile raiders). It was this last logic of identification that obstructed analysis of the raiding's cause. Despite an earlier reference to the “evil and artful tricks” of profit-hungry hilltraders, for which these raids may have been acts of vengeance, the resumption of raiding was ascribed here to the character of the perpetrators' group.

When explaining the violence, the mandarins based their analysis not on investigation into grievances or other specific causes but on their identification of a group's political morality. And this moral categorisation of groups as docile or hostile posed a particular problem in the Làng Chanh case. Its villagers used to be "submitted" in the past; but now, after the two men's identification, they were not re-categorised as "fierce"; instead, they were labelled "submitted barbarians" who "followed the fierce barbarians". They had become neither one nor the other. And their refusal to align their behaviour to the court's moral categories of knowledge of people made them immoral and thus unknowable, "perverse" people whose "hearts are treacherous". Because they raided, they were immoral; because they were immoral, they raided. A circular and self-sufficient logic of moral identification informed the court's knowledge of its enemies, making superfluous any further investigation of the causes of conflict.

Institutional formalism (1857-1858)

The report does not inform us whether the 1838 closing of the frontier at Phu Hoa bore fruit. Other data suggests that it did not: Hrê raids continued through the 1840s and increased in the 1850s. A document from this period of intensifying conflict sheds further light on the way the frontier was organised: the formalism of its political and military institutions. In 1858, a provincial mandarin reported on a series of incursions just south of the end of the wall. On each occasion, cattle were rustled, people kidnapped, skirmishes fought by militia and the raiders disappeared with impunity into the forest.

The report is long and detailed, and is distinguished by deep concern for the local population, a considerable effort of data gathering and analysis, and a critical approach to current policy. Its author was particularly distressed to find that at each of 6 forts in remote locations – "on the peaks of bare mountains in the middle of wild forest" – 15 village militiamen were posted to defend the country against bands of 200 raiders. Little wonder that most did not actually live in the forts, but visited them occasionally during the day; little wonder that border guards informed them in advance of their forthcoming inspections, which they conducted as a pure matter of form; little wonder that "we can say the fort is held in name but not in reality". The mandarin understood why the killing in 1857 of a courageous border guard and 6 villagers in battle had damaged morale: since then, "the people have been all the more cowering and afraid: whenever they hear the sound of the bandits' shouts, most of them scatter, run away and slip off, and even their village officials flee too; although the Customs Officers and Resident Guards try to run after them, shouting and urging them back, they do not succeed." Something was wrong, he concluded, with the organisation of the country's defence.

His investigations led him to propose extensive policy changes: abandonment of remote forts; repair and construction of other forts; creation of a large well-armed headquarters; troop reinforcements; training of militiamen and payment of their leaders; reassignment of responsibility for defence from the province to the district; establishment of a new scale of rewards for bravery and punishments for negligence and cowardice. All appear to be intelligent, well-argued and practical reforms and all were approved by the king, with the exception of payments to militia leaders. The final section lists the names of those held

responsible for the lapse in defences, with recommendations based on common-law-style precedent for their reward and punishment.

Similar lists of rewards and punishments may be found throughout the archive: they formed the backbone of the state's apparatus of coercion. They also provide a clue to the flaw at the heart of this energetic man's policy, and an explanation for the further intensification of violent incidents in the early 1860s. His proposals worked on an institutional logic, seeking improvements in the formal institutions of frontier defence. As in 1838, no attempt was made to investigate or address the root causes of conflict. These were reforms to a disfunctioning system of security and did not constitute a policy for peace.

Peace policy and personal prestige (1863-1871)

Crisis-level violence in the early 1860s led a local man to seek appointment as commander of the Long Wall. Nguyễn Tấn held office there from 1863 to his death in 1871, during which time he achieved a complete pacification of the border. We possess several documents on the policies he adopted: his own memoir; the royal archives; and a pagoda he founded to celebrate his success. These documents shed light on the methods and policies he applied to bring about peace.

Nguyễn Tấn's memoir contains a summary of his approach to the problem.

- Research. "In 1863 (...) I consulted plans made by my predecessors and collected accounts made by the elders. I travelled and observed the country's geography and studied processes of change, in order to make appropriate decisions." The memoir is full of the impressive knowledge he thus acquired: descriptions of rivers, mountains and roads; data on commerce and customs levies; information on military arrangements and their historical evolution; and a short but penetrating ethnographic study of the Hrê including a vocabulary of their language.
- Human resources. "In 1864-1865, I recruited strong soldiers, organised training and manoeuvres for military strategy, built an altar for ceremonies where the rituals were observed in all strictness and purity, chose an auspicious day and assembled the officers and troops to remind them of military discipline, urging them that the court's prestige depended on their deployment of all their forces to ensure that no mountain was left unpenetrated and no highland village unattacked." His choice and treatment of men was reflected in the highest tribute he received after his death: the chronicles record how his officers and the local population built a temple for his worship.
- Military action. "Then commenced the period of conquest". Descriptions of specific military campaigns are given in the memoir, in addition to a theoretical study of tactics and organisational details relating to the disposition of troops, forts and soldier-farmer settlements along the border. An archive report confirms his account that few villages remained to be subdued by February 1867, giving details of the 2,000-man-strong column being prepared at that time to reduce them.⁷
- Conciliation. "In 1866-1867, our troops were in high spirits, the enemy's strength was declining. I issued food and clothes to [the Hrê], exhorted them on the subject of fortune and misfortune and gradually conciliated them until slowly their village headmen bowed their heads and submitted, with some asking to keep their land, others asking to pay tax." A report

⁷ Chau Ban, 1867.01.28-???. Ministry of War report to the king.

details another column's mission in 1868: "to clear vegetation along the forest and mountain roads, and at the same time to conduct patrols to barbarian villages in order to conciliate them and maintain peace in the border region".⁸

These methods bore fruit: the late 1860s saw only one or two annual raids and this tranquillity is recorded in the archives, along with its author's reward from the king. The memoir makes no mention of the specific policies he adopted after his campaign's success. But they are listed in a report sent in by his successor, soon after Nguyễn Tấn's death in 1871. They included collection from the Hrê of taxes in rice and rattan; the establishment of markets for trade in betel; pacification measures including a ban on contact with 'fierce barbarians', rewards for the surrender of raiders, compensation for people and livestock abducted. These were not innovations in Vietnamese governance – the report noted "if there are fields then there must be tax, that is an institution of the nation" – but their application to the Hrê would have been unthinkable in the past. Indeed, Nguyễn Tấn's achievement was to bring a measure of Vietnamese governance into Hrê country without the permanent presence of troops there. It is possible that the effort killed him: he died in 1871 after an illness, aged 50.

Peace in Quang Ngai did not long survive his death. The return of war in the 1870s suggests that peace depended not only on policy, but on some other factor. A clue to this emerges from the sources' focus on Nguyễn Tấn's use of a combined strategy of military operation and conciliation. In an 1867 report, it took the form of a general statement of political morality: "attacking and defeating dishonest people is not as good as conciliating them to restore them to honesty". This resonates with references elsewhere containing terms like *tiểu phủ* (*tiểu diệt* 'eradicate' and *phủ dụ* 'conciliate'). This word formed part of Nguyễn Tấn's official title: 'envoy for eradication and conciliation' (*tiểu phủ sứ*). There was nothing new about this approach to conflict resolution. His success stemmed from the way he handled a set of classical tools.

How he did so is explained in a eulogy erected in Nguyen Tan's ancestral temple.

Attacking and conciliating have always been two fundamentally difficult problems. He first banned all travel into barbarian country, forbidding all coming and going for trade. Once the barbarians had nowhere to turn, he used his prestige to attack and repress them, turning the barbarian country into our country, the barbarian people into our people, and then used his own gratitude to conciliate them, so they cheerfully paid taxes to us, and became as gentle as we are."⁹

This was a 'sandwich' strategy, with military action preceded by a ban on cross-border travel (reducing trade tensions, depriving the Hrê of imports) and followed by conciliation and the "cheerful" payment of tax. The strategy was further seasoned with an essential ingredient, Nguyễn Tấn's prestige. His official biography notes (in a list of "strange things" about him) that during his time tigers no longer attacked people; the rain stopped wherever he led the army; his rituals prevented "great river fish" from harming the Hrê; and that the Hrê

⁸ Chau Ban, 1868.02.16-0000103. Ministry of War report to the king.

⁹ Nguyễn Chánh, inscription placed in Nguyễn Tấn's ancestral temple, reproduced in Nguyễn Đức Dung, appendix 2, p. 236.

lamented his death.¹⁰ The most striking example of his mastery of the charismatic gesture is the pagoda he founded in a valley retaken from the Hrê. My reading of its foundation inscription suggests it was built not only as a monument to its author's achievements, but also to sanctify the landscape and incite the in-migration of Viet settlers.

Talks (1871, 1874)

This combination of policy and prestige was not shared by his successor. Đỗ Đăng Đệ was by no means a negligible personality: a man of literary reputation, he led a successful military campaign on the wall in the 1850s, and rose to ministerial rank in the 1880s. He was also a close friend of Nguyễn Tấn's and father of his son's wife. Yet he failed to build on his predecessor's achievement. By 1874, he was reporting a flare-up in incursions, defeats during reprisals and the destruction of forts. The problem, he said, was military and the deteriorating security situation a result of mediocre officers and troop shortages. But his personal excuses for this failure – "I have a weak constitution, have many diseases, and my health deteriorates from year to year: I truly do not have enough strength to brave places of miasma and travel the length and breadth of the region of mountains and torrents" – suggest that Đỗ Đăng Đệ, who was 60 in 1874, no longer had the energy to cultivate the charisma necessary for successful maintenance of peace on the border.

Within six months he had left office for health reasons. At this point the reports descend into a chaos of recriminations among the province's senior civilian and military officials, with mutual accusations of their incompetence, buck-passing, interpersonal conflicts, lack of reputation and inability to inspire the population's respect.¹¹ The incursions continued.

Đỗ Đăng Đệ's mission failed, but during his stay in Quang Ngai he left a precious insight into the governance of cross-border relations. Two of his reports contain specific details of the way talks were organised with Hrê leaders.

1871 He assembled the Hrê headmen (92 people) and told them of his recent appointment, confirmed that he would uphold his predecessor's policies (outlined above), asked them not to cause disturbances and approved their request for a reduction in taxes. He then invited them to feast on beef, rice and salt, and gave them gifts of money and rice. There is no indication that this meeting was not a success.

1874 After a revival of raiding, he was instructed to invite "the headmen of the taxpaying barbarians in the vicinity of the wall to come to the section, give them food and drink and treat them to a feast; and then issue a Royal Decree to explain matters". All assembled, except one group who "announced that the mountains and forests, torrents and streams there are within their borders and are no concern at all of ours, and from now on we cannot come and go and make any communications." At this, he sent a delegation of taxpaying Hrê to explain his policy to the refractory group, and increased troop patrols on the border. The attempt at conciliation and the defensive precautions failed: an army of 1,000 Hrê attacked two days later, and 21 soldiers of the 70-strong force that engaged them were killed.

¹⁰ Cao Xuân Dục, *Đại nam chính biên liệt truyện*, Hanoi: Nxb Văn học, 2004, p. 776.

¹¹ Chau Ban, 1874.12.28-0000357, Ministry of War report to the king.

A key detail in these accounts is the invitation to eat. Feasting was at the heart of the H'rê political system, at the gatherings of the village leaders who governed this stateless society: nothing was ever discussed without the ritual slaughter of animals and consumption of large quantities of meat and alcohol. The headmen arrived on horseback accompanied by an entourage of specialists in gong music, poetry and martial arts, who competed to display their talent on the longhouse verandah. Occasionally these cultural contests, personality clashes between the headmen or disputes about land ended in deadlock. The ensuing pitched battle fought by their followers in nearby dawn-lit fields served to test their respective military clout, but the dispute could be resolved only on the basis of customary law. For this, a meeting was convened where ten respected elder men, five on each side, sought to persuade the others of their side's legal right. "Those men had to be very clever" – an elderly H'rê man, veteran of the Vietnam War and retired district official told me during an interview about those meetings – "much cleverer than we ever were: they had to know how to talk".

Interviews like this are my main source of knowledge of the H'rê political system in the early 20th century.¹² A reading of texts relating to Nguyễn Tấn leaves no doubt that this framework for talks also existed in his day, and that he well knew how to use it: the presence of H'rê vocabulary in his memoir suggests that he spoke a few words of the language. Đỗ Đăng Đệ adopted the same framework, but as the events of 1874 show, the right framework was not sufficient. It was necessary to persuade. That year a section of the H'rê community were beyond persuasion: they had already decided on a policy of rupture.

Why so? In 1871-1874, something was clearly missing from the blend of policies and qualities that Nguyễn Tấn had so skilfully brought into play. Because the report gives no explanation for the dramatic renewal of violence, we can only speculate on the reasons for the breakdown. Did Đỗ Đăng Đệ misjudge the balance required between the multiple logics of conflict resolution: military preparations, conciliatory talks, policies of economic integration? Perhaps, but my sense is simply that he was not there. For Đỗ Đăng Đệ did not attend the 1874 talks. He sent a representative.

¹² Interviews in Sơn Hà district, Quảng Ngãi province, by Andrew Hardy and Đào Thế Đức, 2009-2012.

A response to ‘The Border Security Framework and Logics of Conflict Resolution on a 19th-Century Vietnamese Frontier’

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Borders are an important concept in relation to security and peace, and constitute an integral part of territorial sovereignty. History has showed us that borders have been a source of conflict as well as of security. Conflicts have resulted from the expansion and violation of borders on the one hand, and their defence on the other (Keegan 1993), and remain a source of conflict in the 21st century world. Similarly some conflicts have also been resolved through the establishment of borders. Borders specify spaces where the parties – otherwise in conflict – can enjoy and exercise authority and control over a specified territory. Not less importantly, borders are also associated with security: it is within the limits of the borders that a ruler is assumed to guarantee the people’s security.

The most significant development in the concept of borders took place through modern thinking about nation-states. Nation-states reflect the institutionalization of the concept, understood first and foremost in military terms. Borders are associated with states’ territories and sovereignty (Biersteker 2002, 157-75) and border control has traditionally been a core business of the state (Anderson 1996). States make every effort to guard their borders in order to protect their territories and sovereignty. In many historical contexts, they did not only patrol their borders but also established physical barriers to make them less easily penetrable. At the same time, international law provides a legal framework to guarantee the borders of the states through the principles of territorial integrity and non-intervention (Zachre 2002, 215-50).

But no single trajectory reflects the development of thinking about borders. Many believe that the role of the borders has diminished. Some even argue that in the wake of globalization borders have become increasingly irrelevant and argue that we are now living in a ‘borderless world’ (Ohmae 1990). This globalist view is, however, an exaggeration: physical barriers remain attractive in many parts of the world. While the Berlin Wall was demolished more than twenty years ago, walls still separate many communities and prevent or limit interaction between them: examples include India (between India and Pakistan and between India and Bangladesh), Israel, Northern Ireland. In addition, living behind heavily guarded borders equipped with walls, barbed wire and electronic equipment has become popular in many different parts of the world. While most of Europe is internally borderless, externally European Union is perceived as building a fortress (Amnesty International 2014).

Borders thus remain important, but not always in the same way as traditionally understood. It is true that in some contexts physical barriers are less important and are increasingly replaced by border policing. States continue to strive to determine who and what may enter their territories and who and what may not. Instead of relying on physical barriers, they increasingly turn toward regulatory instruments, sophisticated surveillance and information technology as well as law enforcement mechanisms (Andreas 2003, 79).

The study on the Long Wall of Quang Ngai conducted by Andrew Hardy and his Vietnamese colleagues, touches upon the different meanings of borders in a specific historical context.

First, the Wall reflects the significance of the physical barrier in the traditional understanding of borders. The Long Wall of Quang Ngai served as an instrument of national defence established by the Viet against the more powerful Hrê. *Second*, the study indicates that the peace enjoyed during the years 1863-1871 cannot be ascribed simply to the Wall. While important, the Wall as a physical barrier did not suffice for the maintenance of security. Other instruments of policy such as knowledge and surveillance contributed to that achievement. Far from being an instrument for exclusion, the establishment of the Wall did not prevent cross-border mobility of people. Designated gates enabled officials to control that mobility and identify those who crossed: knowledge of the identity of border crossers significantly reduced the frequency of attacks. *Third*, the security enjoyed in 1863-1871 resulted from the exertions of an outstanding individual official, Nguyen Tan, whose achievement was to create a cross-border relationship of dialogue with the Hrê. The fragile peace of those years depended on talks held on an ongoing basis by the two parties that relied on personal relations established by Nguyen Tan; it was interrupted when that conversation ceased. *Finally*, far from severing relations between the Viet and the Hrê people or from separating them in a completely exclusionary way, the Wall also united them, through its function of maintaining and regulating economic integration between the two peoples. As such, the Vietnamese government exercised control over cross-border flows of people and goods and was able to levy taxes from those economic activities.

ASEAN and its Borders

Returning to the contemporary world of Southeast Asia, borders have undoubtedly played an important role in bringing peace and security to the region. These borders have, on the whole, been more ideological and political than physical. During the Cold War in Europe, East and West were separated by the Berlin Wall, but no such physical barrier was ever erected in Southeast Asia. The barriers were ideological. The establishment of ASEAN in 1967 was a milestone in the transformation of a part of the world characterized by underdevelopment, conflict and instability into a region known for its stability and dynamism. ASEAN's creation has been seen as an effort to build borders to separate non-communist nations from the threat posed by communist governments. This point is still debated: did an ideological motivation really underpin the establishment of ASEAN? Some argue that ASEAN was not an anti-communist regional organization despite the fact that all five founding member countries were non-communist countries with close attachments to the West (Anwar 2001, 27). My view is that it is difficult to regard ASEAN's establishment during the Vietnam War, with increased threats of communist insurgencies in all five founding countries, as a coincidence.

The significance of borders in Southeast Asia has also been manifested in ASEAN's adoption of principles of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Of course, these principles are not uncommon in international relations. Various international organizations have adopted them and they are recognized in the UN Charter. ASEAN's adoption of the principles was unique, because its members did not only regard them as norms or guiding principles, but as a political commitment which all countries have to obey (Bellamy and Drummond 2011, 185; Rüländ 2011). ASEAN applied these principles not only to relations between member states but also in their relations with other countries outside ASEAN. These principles were adopted in the Bangkok Declaration of the

establishment of ASEAN and more strongly formulated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) adopted in 1976.¹³ The TAC gives the principle of non-interference as one of the most fundamental principles of ASEAN.

The principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity may be seen as political borders for ASEAN. The significance of this idea may be better understood in the light of the historical context of the principles' adoption by Southeast Asian countries. Most were newly independent countries and vulnerable from interference not only by their neighbouring countries but also by the great powers from outside the region. They were easily drawn into rivalry between the great powers, who used the region as a sphere of influence. The principles' adoption therefore was intended to serve as political protection for ASEAN countries from these two challenges to their independence (Keling et al 2011; Dosch 2012).

The principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity have served as instruments of conflict management between ASEAN countries. Indeed, conflict between member countries became almost unthinkable after the establishment of ASEAN. But the principles are increasingly under attack now amid developments taking place within ASEAN member countries (with the emergence, for example, of internal conflicts such as the ones in Mindanao (the Philippines), in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat (Thailand), in Papua, Maluku and, earlier, Aceh (Indonesia) and in Myanmar). The principles limit ASEAN countries' ability to respond these problems, which become more controversial as some countries turned toward democracy (Narine 2008). As a result, efforts have been made to redefine the principle, with former ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan among the high level ASEAN officials expressing strong support for their redifinition. While no significant change has yet taken place, it is no longer taboo among ASEAN member state officials to discuss the principles in public.

Rethinking ASEAN's Borders

While often criticized as placing excessive emphasis on borders, as reflected in the principle of non-interference, ASEAN's track record in fact shows a pragmatic approach which is reflected in historical change. This is especially true with regards to its 'ideological' borders. With the end of the Cold War, ASEAN opened its doors to cooperation with countries upholding different ideologies. This pragmatism was reflected in two decisions that reflected a reduction in the relevance of ASEAN's ideological orientation. The *first* was Vietnam's admission to ASEAN (1995). The admission of this communist country into a non-communist club was smooth: contrary to many expectations, ASEAN showed a high degree of flexibility and compromise in dealing with differences. The *second* was the expansion of cooperation beyond ASEAN, through the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Plus Three. The ASEAN Regional Forum was established in 1994, as a mechanism for confidence-building and preventive diplomacy through dialogue, while ASEAN Plus Three, established after the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, was initially focused on economic cooperation, but expanded into other areas such as politics, security and culture in its later development.

¹³ The adoption of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality) by ASEAN in 1971 was other important political borders which ASEAN member countries clearly would like to establish. ZOPFAN was basically a demand especially directed to the powerful extra-regional powers (US, China and Soviet Union) to leave Southeast Asian countries alone.

The expansion of ASEAN membership to include all ten Southeast Asian countries (before East Timor's independence) and the expansion of cooperation into wider forms of regionalism through the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Plus Three reflected significant change in the way ASEAN countries thought about borders and, consequently, about its security. ASEAN changed from an exclusionary into more inclusionary institution. Previously ASEAN could be seen as both creating political and ideological borders, which separated and protected its member countries from external threats, both perceived and real. The expansions of the 1990s indicated ASEAN's willingness to bring together countries which were in many cases in competition with one another.

This change in the meaning of borders for ASEAN was associated with a global phenomenon: the changing discourse of security that took place following the end of the Cold War (Buzan, 1991; George, 1994). Many characterized this event as the triumph of liberal ideas, as exemplified for example by the seminal work of Francis Fukuyama on 'the End of History.' Liberal ideas become increasingly influential, including discourse on security. Traditional understandings of security tended to emphasize confrontation and the identification of threats and enemies and, therefore, accentuated the importance of the role of borders. Now, liberal ideas about peace and security tended to emphasize greater cooperation and the removal of borders. Frameworks of mutual interests, especially but not exclusively couched in terms of material interests, allowed liberal ideas to promote cooperation rather than confrontation.

Liberal thinking influenced ASEAN leaders in the aftermath of the Cold War. In line with liberal prescriptions, ASEAN adopted a more cooperative rather than confrontational approach to security. Countries previously seen as threats such as Vietnam and China, as well as great powers outside the region, were no longer regarded as enemies which, by consequence, had to be excluded. Instead, they were invited to be a part of ASEAN, in the case of Vietnam, or to be part of wider regional mechanisms for confidence-building and conflict prevention, in the case of extra-regional powers. In other words, at this time ASEAN changed its conception of peace and security from negative to positive: it no longer framed security in terms of 'secure from', and began instead to define security in terms of 'secure with'. As a result, the role of borders diminished.

The establishment of the ASEAN Community further strengthened the way ASEAN deals with borders. The ASEAN Community is inclusive in character. It will bring Southeast Asia into a single community, yet maintain the differences among its ten members. At the same time, despite the fact that the ASEAN Charter (the legal basis for the ASEAN Community) clearly refers to principles, norms and values that all ASEAN member countries should promote, adherence to them is not a prerequisite for community membership. As such, ASEAN Community will consist of countries with different ideological orientations, and will not exclude any member on the basis of a poor record on human rights or democracy. The latter point was reflected, for example, in ASEAN's resistance to pressure to exclude Myanmar from ASEAN because of the military junta's human rights violations (Acharya 2009, 127).

Of course, rethinking of borders has also taken place elsewhere. In fact, the development of the European Union constitutes the most progressive thinking with regard to the abolition of

borders as traditionally understood. Moreover, with the Schengen Agreement a large number of the European countries committed themselves to the abolition of borders and the free movement of people. The rethinking of borders in Southeast Asia has obviously not gone as far in Europe. But it is by no means certain that ASEAN will take the same steps as the European Union.

Indeed, the logics underlying such rethinking in ASEAN and the EU are quite different. In the European case, regional integration and the abolition of internal borders took place among countries with more or less shared or common identities. The Union's expansion, known as enlargement, took place through a framework of accession known as the Copenhagen criteria, which in essence are rules defining whether a country is qualified to be a member of European Union. ASEAN does not apply specific criteria for its membership. The only criteria is geographical. As such, instead of building a community of countries with a common identity, ASEAN is building a common identity out of the differences between its member countries.

Without any doubt, common identities can serve the function of strengthening security. People feel more secure when surrounded by others sharing the same identity. In extreme cases, security can be achieved through the assertion or re-assertion of identities: forms of ideological extremism use the assertion of identity – the definition of 'us', and hence the exclusion of those who are not 'us' – as a way of answering the challenge of insecurity. Thus by sharply confronting 'us' and 'them', identities are a form of border in themselves and can be conflictual in character.

This, however, is unlikely to be the direction ASEAN will take in its quest for regional identity. Having enjoyed greater security by embracing rather than excluding others following the end of Cold War, it is unthinkable for ASEAN to turn the clock back. In other words, ASEAN will strive now to make its borders the basis for negotiation, dialogue and cooperation rather than for exclusion and confrontation.

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