

# PROCESS AND PATH OF NATIONAL UNIFICATION IN VIETNAM: HISTORY AND EXPERIENCES

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National independence and reunification is the essential revolution path to the Vietnamese people, the objective need of national defense and building, the most powerful motivation in the process of struggle for national liberation and development.

The national separation and the process of reunification took place during the feudal dynasties in Vietnam.

After the Second World War, the Yalta bipolar order was founded. Due to the distribution of garrison areas among the Allies against the Fascist, many countries were partitioned, such as Germany, China, Vietnam and Northern Korea. Under the international détente tendency, maintaining the original bipolar order seemed to be the popular strategy of powerful nations, whereas the whole nation of Vietnam still resiliently continued the resistance war against colonialism in the next 30 years (1945-1975) for a complete national independence and reunification.

## **1. The process of national unification in medieval and modern Vietnam**

Under the period of Hung Kings, people widened their living places, moving from mountainous areas down to alluvial plains and developed the rice farming. That was also the period of which fights against natural disasters were of high demand. Humans needed power to explore dense forests, prevent rain forests, droughts and floods. Therefore, the community solidarity was soon set up, serving as a foundation for the birth of Vietnamese nation. Archaeological researches on the Stone and Bronze Ages revealed the fact that the Vietnamese nation has a local origin and its formation process began from early period in thousands of years.

Vietnamese people are always proud of a common shared origin. The legend of “Children of Dragon and grandchildren of Fairy”<sup>2</sup> reflects the community consciousness among people

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<sup>2</sup> According to the legend, Lac Long Quan married Au Co. 100 children were born at a time of delivery. 50 of them followed Au Co to mountainous areas to earn living and the rest followed Lac Long Quan to the coastal areas. The oldest son was Hung King who had set up Van Lang. Hung was the first king in Vietnam and was the national ancestor.

settling in Vietnam land all possessing “Dragon and Fairy” origin, which is their pride of national origin and unity.

The Vietnamese history is the process of national building and defense, but the typical period is the history of holding off the aggressive forces, gaining and maintaining national independence and reunification.

The divisive situation in Vietnam used to happen during the tenth century with the scuffle among 12 military forces which lasted for 3 years. Later Dinh Bo Linh demolished the separatist troops and reunited the nation to form the kingdom of Dai Co Viet. At first, the capital city was in Hoa Lu (present-day Ninh Binh) but around a century later it was removed to Thang Long (today Ha Noi). Since then, the Vietnamese nation began its prosperous era, fixing with the birth and development of the early feudalism. By sixteenth century, Vietnam fell into a long-lasting schism when Mac Dang Dung usurped the throne of Le emperor, creating the conflict between the North regime and the Southern regime. In the seventeenth century, the Trinh lords proclaimed themselves King in the North while their Nguyen lords held the central part of Vietnam. The country was divided into two kingdoms that constantly waged wars with each other (1627-1672). This weakened the country which encouraged the Siamese and Chinese to invade the country in the late eighteenth century. Emperor Quang Trung of the Tay Son dynasty, however, successfully defeated all foreign invaders and reunified the whole country. After centuries of conflicts and schism, the country was then completely unified under by the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945).

From the middle of the nineteenth century, the schism in Vietnam happened again owing to the French invasion and colonization. The country was divided into three main regions: Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina with three different governing systems: protectorate for North and Central while a colonial regime was set up in the South.

During the Second World War, the whole Vietnamese nation was united in the Viet Minh Front, cooperating with the Allied forces consisting of American army in China to fight against Japanese invaders. At the end of the war, fascism was wiped out. Thanks to this “one-in-a-thousand-year” opportunity, the Vietnamese nation under the Viet Minh’s slogan of national unity stood up to carry out a general uprising, broke the government systems of Japanese fascists and their henchmen, set up a nation-wide united government before the Allied troops came back to Indochina. “The newly-founded government belongs not only to a certain social class but also to the whole nation, except those who follow and support the French and Japanese invaders, and the ones who betrayed their fatherland and the enemies.

Anyone that lives in Vietnam has the right to partly stand in the administration system and takes responsibility to protect that government”.<sup>1</sup>

In his letter to the president of the United States of America, Ho Chi Minh, President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, stated: “When Japanese fascists were defeated in August 1945, the whole nation of Vietnam was reunited under a contemporary government and this government immediately came into action so that peace and order was reset, a republic democratic government was set up on the basis of legal foundation which helped the Allied troops in the process of disarming the enemies”.<sup>2</sup>

In conclusion, national freedom and unity was achieved by a revolution carried out by the Vietnamese people rather than the help from the Allies. The duty of the Allies was to disarm the Japanese troops but in fact they occupied and separated Vietnam.

## **2. Regaining the national independence and unification during the anti-French war (1945-1954)**

After the success of the revolution in August 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, an independent and united government, was officially established on 2 September, 1945, much beyond the expectation of the Allies at the Potsdam (July 1945).

In the Declaration of Independence, President Ho Chi Minh requested the Allied to recognize the independence and unification of Vietnam. Unfortunately, the United States turned their back to this call while the Soviets kept silence.

On 1 January, 1946, the Vietnamese people carried out their general election to found the First National Assembly which presented the Vietnamese people’s will and hope for an independent and united country. The National Assembly released Constitution and formed an official government on 3 March, 1946.

Under the American and British support, the French troops returned to Vietnam. On 23 September, 1945, the French army attacked and reoccupied Saigon, then quickly controlled the entire Southern Vietnam. The French formed the so-called Nam Ky self-controlled government, continued to occupy Buon Ma Thuot, separated Tay Nguyen to form the so-called Tay Ky self-controlled government in February 1946.

Wishing to solve conflict in peace, the Vietnamese government signed with the French the Provisional Agreement on 6 March, 1946. Accordingly to this agreement, France still did

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam Communist Party: *Complete Party Document*, Volume 7, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p.114.

<sup>2</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Complete*, Volume 4, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p.176.

not recognize the independence but only the integrity of Vietnam (“as a whole country”). This was up to the people’s idea at that time. However, in reality, the French colonialists continued to separate Vietnam by forming the so-called “L’Anam government” in March 1946 under the leadership of Nguyen Van Thinh.

In June 1946, Ho Chi Minh visited France to “solve the matter of the Vietnamese independence to reunify three regions of North, South and Central Vietnam”. In an interview in Paris on 25 June, 1946, Ho Chi Minh strongly affirmed that “The Vietnamese people insisted on the reunification and independence of the country”.<sup>1</sup> Before the official negotiation with France, Ho Chi Minh visited Basques. In reply to the French Prime Minister G. Bidon during a reception on 2 July, 1946, Ho Chi Minh said: “Although the people in Basques have their own customs, language and characters, they are still French. France has many provinces, it is still a unified nation and it cannot be separated”.<sup>2</sup> In the press conference on 27 July, 1946, reply to the question of “What would you do if L’Anam refused to integrate into Vietnam?”, he said: “the people of L’Anam and our people shared the same origin, why would not they want to be Vietnamese? Basques and Breton do not speak French but they are still French. The people of L’Anam speak Vietnamese, why do they think about preventing the reunification of Vietnam?”.<sup>3</sup> He claimed: the Southern region is a part of Vietnam, no one has the right to separate it and no forces can separate it from Vietnam”.<sup>4</sup>

In his speech during the anniversary for the Vietnamese independence’s day in Paris on 2 September, 1946, Ho Chi Minh clarified further that “the Vietnamese people’s strong desire is our resuscitating nation will never be separated and nothing can separate it... The separation cannot bring the prosperity. It is unfair if people aim at a weak, separated Vietnam to promote the France’s prosperity”.<sup>5</sup>

During the meeting of the First Congress on 31 October 1946, having entrusted by the Parliament to establish the new government, Ho Chi Minh declared the government’s goal: “inside is to construct and outside is to utilize the national independence and unification”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 3, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 3, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 4, p. 272.

<sup>4</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 4, p. 369.

<sup>5</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 4, pp. 283-284.

<sup>6</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 4, p. 427.

In his call to United Nations in December 1946, Ho Chi Minh accused the French plot: “Kneading the Nam Ky Republic with a lackey and puppet government” and affirmed that the Vietnamese people “will fight until the final man in order to preserve the most sacred right: territorial integrity and national independence for country”.<sup>1</sup>

In order to salvage a faint peace and avoid a war against the French, the Vietnamese government had endeavored to use diplomatic channel to negotiate with the representative of the French government. Yet, “the French colonialist policy always aimed at assimilation and domination of Vietnam instead of recognizing the independence and autonomy of the country”.<sup>2</sup> The French policy was supported by the British and American governments.

The French, however, escalated the war. On 18 December 1946, General Morlière sent an ultimatum, demanding the Vietnamese government to dismiss its force and handle the control of Hanoi to the French troops. Having failed to solve the conflict with the French by peaceful dialogue, the Vietnamese people realized that military struggle was the only solution. Ho Chi Minh issued the *Call for National Struggle* in order to gain complete independence and unification. In his letter to the people of Vietnam, France and Allied countries, Ho Chi Minh affirmed: “This struggle will be long and miserable. Even though we have to sacrifice our time and lives, we will fight until the country has been completely independent and unified”.<sup>3</sup>

The whole Vietnamese nation unanimously stood up to carry out a struggle self-reliantly, especially during the period 1945-1949 when the DRV had not received international aid.

The long-lasting and heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people triumphed gloriously with the Dien Bien Phu victory on 7 May 1954. On 21 July 1954, the Geneva Accords were signed, recognizing the basic rights of Vietnam: independence, sovereignty, unification, and territorial integrity.

### **3. Re-establishment of National Independence and Reunification in the 20-Year Anti-American Struggle (1954-1975)**

The Geneva Accords on Indochina in 1954 did not divide the country into the two countries but temporarily split it into two regions along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel was not

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<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 4, p. 469.

<sup>2</sup> George C. Herring: *Cuộc chiến tranh dài ngày nhất của nước Mỹ (The Longest War in American History)*, Nxb Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1998, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 4, p. 484.

a political and territorial border. According to the Geneva Accords, the French troops would withdraw to the south of the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel and would return to France within two years. Vietnam would then be unified through a free nation-wide election. Yet, the United States' government from President Dwight Eisenhower to President Gerald Ford wanted to permanently divide Vietnam by turning southern Vietnam into an independent state which inclined toward the United States. The United States' government therefore helped southern Vietnam to hold a separate election in order to create a dictatorial and fascist government.

According to Senator John Kennedy, the independent state established in southern Vietnam should be "the child of the United States". Both Eisenhower and Daley agreed that "if the nation-wide election is to be held immediately, it is very likely that Ho Chi Minh will win the election. Nevertheless, the two-year delay will offer the United States a 'good time' to prepare for reactions. Also, the presence of Canada in the International Inspection Committees will also enable the United States to carry out its strategy". Even the loyalists to Ngo Dinh Diem were aware of the fact that "Ho Chi Minh's reputation is clearly a mishap for Diem during the national election". "The Eisenhower government insisted on turning Southern Vietnam to a country which will serve as a base to fight against the Communism and to prove the existence of "democracy" in Asia.<sup>1</sup>

The United States founded the Saigon government and created all sorts of "evidences" in order to eliminate the Geneva Accords, thus, eliminated the nation-wide election and increased its interference in Vietnam with a variety of strategies. Since 1965, the United States poured troops into Vietnam and launched both air and navy attacks in northern Vietnam.

During the period 1954-1964, the Vietnamese fought against the American interference, aiming at peace and national reunification. During this period, the Vietnamese still received neither support nor aid from such important allies as the Soviets and China. Scholars are unanimous that: "despite the disagreement from the Soviets and China, Hanoi decided to go on in its own path".

This historical fact proves that there was neither "assigned war" nor "ideological war" in Vietnam. Also, there was no such a thing as "northern invasion of the south". In the contrary, there was only the American invasion of Vietnam and the Vietnamese anti-American struggle. This was clearly different from the situation of the countries which were divided after the Second World War in both Europe and Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> George C. Herring, p. 52-56.

In the years following the conclusion of the Geneva Conference (1954), the Vietnamese people patiently honored the Geneva Accords in order to maintain peace for a national reunification. The agreement of the temporary division at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel did not mean “division for governance”. Ho Chi Minh affirmed that “Central, South and North are all Vietnamese territory. The country will certainly be unified. The Vietnamese nation will certainly be liberated”. He added that “the struggle to solidify peace, to unify the country, to gain complete national independence and democracy is also a long and hard struggle”.<sup>1</sup> “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s government unanimously declares that its utmost aim is to persistently honor the Geneva Accords, meaning that it will call for an immediate reconciliation conference between the north and the south before carrying out a nation-wide election to unify the country”.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, backed by the United States’ interference, the Ngo Dinh Diem government increased its troop mobilization, suppressed all political powers in the South, denied the reconciliation conference with the DRV government, and eliminated the Geneva Accords in order to maintain the territorial division permanently.

Due to the racist policies promulgated by both American and Ngo Dinh Diem governments, from the late 1959 to early 1960, the Vietnamese people in the South began to stand up to dethrone the Ngo Dinh Diem governances in the rural areas. By late 1960, the National Liberation Front was established, raising the banner of unifying all classes in the struggle against the American disguised colony and the Ngo Dinh Diem racist government, aiming at an independent, democratic, peaceful, neutral South in order to eventually reunify the country.

After the Dong Khoi movement in the South, the Vietnamese people entered an increasing fierce liberation war, gradually defeated all military tactics which the United States applied in both southern and northern Vietnam.

In 1965, the United States escalated its invasion of Vietnam through the tactic of “Local War”, pouring thousands of American and allied troops to southern Vietnam and commencing the air and navy attacks of the North. “Anti-American invaders to salvage the country” then became the most sacred duty of the Vietnamese people in both the North and the South of Vietnam.

On 6 June 1969, with the establishment of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, in Southern Vietnam existed two governments, two armies, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 7, pp. 322-323.

<sup>2</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 8, p. 57.

three political forces (the Southern revolutionary force, the Republic of Vietnam force, and the intermediary (or the third) force).

The Vietnam War divided the United States greatly. Desperate attempts by President Richard Nixon in 1972 aiming at an upper-hand solution for Vietnam failed bitterly. In the daily increasing protest of the people in the United States and throughout the world he could do nothing. The United States forced Saigon to sign the Paris Accord in 1973 and, “to lessen the bitterness of the pill”, Nixon promised Saigon that Washington would continue its support and would even “react with all possible forces” should Hanoi encroach the Accords. On the other hand, Nixon warned Saigon that if President Nguyen Van Thieu refused to sign the Paris Accords, the United States would immediately stop aids and sign the agreement by itself.<sup>1</sup>

Because of their military defeats, the United States and Saigon government were forced to sign the Paris Accords on 27 January 1973, recognizing the national unification of Vietnam but still aiming at a long-term territorial schism. By that time the United States had two options: 1). Honoring the Paris Accords for peace, national reconciliation, and an allied government including three forces in which one force would be under its control. The Saigon government, then, would no longer exist independently; 2). Humiliating the Paris Accords to continue the war. Washington and Saigon went for the second option and eventually failed after the decisive battle in the spring of 1975. Many years after the war, the Vietnam syndrome is still there in the United States, especially the debate whether the United States had won or lost in Vietnam as well as the causes of the bitter loss. The Saigon government which had been heavily dependent on the United States, could not survive on its own and consequently collapsed. The strategy to divide Vietnam permanently sullenly failed.

With the general offensive and general uprising in the spring of 1975, the Vietnamese people have disintegrated the Saigon government and army, completed the national revenge for the disgrace of losing the country, eliminated the risk of lengthy territorial division, and reunified the country. By 1975, the 30-year struggle for national independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was completed with a glorious victory.

#### **4. From Territorial to Administrative Reunification**

George C. Herring, professor of history at Kentucky University and editor of the *Journal of Foreign Affairs*, ensures that “for Vietnam, the national unity is the dream of the whole people”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> George C. Herring, p. 327.

<sup>2</sup> George C. Herring, p. 10.



Right after the war ended, one of the first tasks of the Vietnamese people was to complete the unity of state machine building. National unity was the desire of the whole people, at the same time, an objective rule of the revolution and Vietnamese history.

From 15 to 21 October 1975, the unification conference between delegates from the North and South Vietnam in Sai Gon announced the Communiqué which confirmed that the State of Vietnam and the Nation of Vietnam is one; the State needed to unify the state machine; a general nationwide election according to democratic, equal, popular, direct and secret rules needed to be organized to elect the National Assembly.

On 25 April 1976, 98.77% of Vietnamese voters participated in the General Election (99.36% in the Nord and 98.39% in the South) and elected 492 deputations for National Assembly which comprised of all social classes, ethnicities, religions in an independent and united Vietnam.

The success of the General Election indicates the willingness of the whole Vietnamese people to build up an independent and united Vietnam. Vietnamese people had struggled to fulfill Ho Chi Minh's statement: "Our country will be united; North and South will be one home".

From 24 June to 3 July 1976, the first meeting of the National Assembly, Session VI, had decided the name of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the capital of Hanoi, national flag with red ground, with a 5 wing-star in the middle, anthem is *Tiến quân ca* (*Army March*); the national symbol entitled the name "Socialist Republic of Vietnam"; Sài Gòn was changed to be Ho Chi Minh city; a committee was also set up to draft the Constitution; and elected leaders of the most essential positions of the country.

The unity of state machine institutionalized the unity of territory, which had been completed previously, created good conditions for uniting other fields. Associations and socio-political organizations had also been united, including: Ho Chi Minh Youth (2 June 1976), Vietnam Trade Union (8 June 1976), Vietnam Woman Union (10 June 1976), Vietnam Journalist Association (7 July 1976), Vietnam Youth League (20 September 1976).

Having completed the aims of national independence and country unity, Vietnamese people started to build up a peaceful, united, independent, democratic and healthy country. Step by step, Vietnam was then considered a trusty friend and partner of other countries, and strongly integrated into the international community.

#### **4. Some historical experiences**

Vietnam's unifying process had been taken place in different periods, sometimes woeful while other times heroic. Such a process required a huge sacrifice of the whole nation, of many consecutive generations who shared the same willingness about independence and unity for the country. Perhaps, no nation in this world had sacrificed as much for the national independence and unity as Vietnam. The process of national unity in Vietnam was conditioned by historical contexts of Vietnam and this leaves us with rich historical experiences.

*Firstly, in order to unify the country, we have heightened the national autonomy, determinedly struggle for national independence, determinedly struggle against any invading and colonizing purposes.*

The situation of the country and people division during modern period of history in Vietnam was mainly resulted from the invasion and colonization by the colonialism and imperialism, which lasted for centuries (from the mid-nineteenth century to 1975), which imposed policies on Vietnam and divided the country. Therefore, the national unity often linked to struggle for national independence, against the imposed and colonialist policies by the invading colonialism and imperialism. When realizing that the Second World War would end shortly, Ho Chi Minh had an immortal saying: "We must regain the country independence even though we have to burn the Truong Son mountain range". After the success of the August Revolution, in his historical Independent Statement, he ensured the strong willingness of the whole nation in protecting the country's independence with the iron will: "dying rather than losing the country and being slaves. The whole Vietnamese people used their all minds and strength, even the lives and resources to protect the country's independence as such".

The country unity was an internal task of the nation, decided by the people of each country, not by intervention from the outside. In order to unify the country, it must first have national independence, therefore must prevent any dividing forces from the outside. National independence is the first condition for unifying the country. The twentieth century has entered into the history of the human being as the century of world-wide de-colonization. Human enters the twenty-first century with the appearance of terrorism. Numerous local-scale wars, armed conflicts, threats and army fights, in addition to imposed policies and tyranny. These are the reasons for international instability and insecurity. In order to protect the national independence and the country's unity, peoples of different countries and the human cannot be without alert about expansionist and peace destructive forces.

*Secondly, we must prolong the struggle for country unity by peaceful means, following the people's will and desire.*

In the face of the invasive wars by the foreign imperial forces, Vietnamese government and people have determined to follow the view of humanity and peace, tried to use negotiation and diplomacy. The war was the final option, when there were no other ways to achieve peace.

The resistant war against the French and the United States was only launched when diplomatic way had failed. Vietnamese government had determined to follow the country unity through peaceful ways based on the will and desire of the people. This had been evidenced through the signing of a series of agreements. Vietnam-French Provisional Agreement (6 March 1946) noted clearly that: the country unification will be determined by the people through polls (however, the French beaked the agreement). The Geneva Accords in 1954 about Indochina regulated that the country unity will be conducted through a unifying general election within 2 years (but the USA and Saigon administration destroyed it). The Paris Agreement noted that: the question of Vietnam unity is self decided by the people in North and South regions (however, Saigon administration continued the war under the American aids).

After the winning the foreign invading enemies, the country unity had been completed by a peaceful general election (April 1976), meeting the desire and will of the Vietnamese people.

*Thirdly, we must be determined with the country unity aim, while having suitable steps and resolutions.*

From the perspective of national interest, peoples of the countries never choose to divide their country. National unity will many times strengthen the nation's strength, therefore often the aim of the Vietnamese people throughout the history of struggle for freedom and independence.

"Vietnam is one country, Vietnamese nation is one. Rivers can be dried up, mountains can be eroded, but such idiom will never change". The aim of the 1945 August Revolution was to "regain peace, unity, freedom and democracy for the country". The aim of the resistant war against the French was "to protect and develop the victory of 1945 August Revolution; that is peace, unity, freedom and democracy". The aim of Vietnamese people after Geneva Accords in 1954 was also to "implement unity, complete independence and democracy for the whole country."<sup>1</sup>

In order to accomplish the aim of unifying the country, one must have good strategies and suitable steps. For Vietnam, such a process had taken place as follows:

1- Struggle to eliminate the foreign invasion, regain the independence for the North (1954) and the whole country (1975).

2- After having eliminated colonialism, the country became independent and united in terms of territory, and started to unify the state in the following fields

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<sup>1</sup> Ho Chi Minh: *Completed*, Volume 7, pp. 337-339.

+ Organizing the political election between delegates in order to achieve the highest agreement and action as well as aims, plan and resolutions for the general election.

+ Organizing the general election on the basics of popular, direct and secret voting to create a National Assembly for the whole country, which represent all the people. The National Assembly is the highest power institution of the state, which holds the power of legal making and most essential decision-making body of the country.

3- The state unity enables the possibility to unify other sectors and areas such as: Constitution, legal system, currency unit, socio-economic policy, etc.

Vietnam is a nation which loves freedom and peace. For a long history to today, the Vietnamese people always desire to live in a peaceful, free, and united country. Since the early fifteenth century, after having destroying the Chinese Ming invaders to regain the country independence, Nguyen Trai, one of the very first founders of Le Dynasty, a cultural figure of the world, had called for “ending the war forever” in order for the people to enjoy peace.

It was also the desire of national independence and unification, the Vietnamese people had to overcome numerous struggles against foreign invasions. History has taken place as such. We cannot re-create history. Yet, history has offered us expensive experiences for resolving many important issues of the world today and one of which is the question of peace and unity for the nations in this changing world.

*Hanoi, June 2010*