Chapter - V

Conclusions
The spectacular highlight of the process of the reorientation of Australia's foreign policy in the post-war period was the manner in which Australia asserted its position as part of Asia. The Australians, who were for long at home with the Americans and the Europeans, were constrained to carve for themselves the right kind of niche in Asia and to eventually emerge, as some fancied to claim, as the "strongman of Asia". This amounted to shirking themselves of their cultural exclusiveness symbolised by the otherwise long pursued 'White Australia Policy'. Confirmation of this sudden transformation that had occurred in Australia's Outlook of Asia, was the outcome of the active and benign role it voluntarily undertook to resolve the regional problems and thus won a universal approbation.

In Southeast Asia, a proximate region to the fifth continent, Indochina remained a establishing factor during the post-war period. Vietnam being a predominant power not only in Indochina but also in the entire Southeast Asian region and as a key player in the Cambodian conflict, had engaged the Australian interest. Keeping in mind the variations in the course and character of this engagement, this study of Australia's attitude and policies towards Vietnam from
1950 to 1993 may broadly be classified into four periods: the first period (1950 - 1972) and the third period (1975 - 1983) were dominated by the Liberals, while the second period (1972 - 1975) and the forth period (1983 - 1993) were associated with the Labour government.

Looking at the Asians with contempt and apprehension and perceiving Asia as an enigmatic neighbour, Australia was scarcely concerned with the political, strategic and economic potentials of Asia till 1942. But the failure of Britain on which Australia depended for the shaping and the pursuit of its foreign and defence policies since its formative years, to stall the Japanese occupation of Australia's near north, woke up the Australian foreign policy planners to the fact that Australia could ignore Asia at its own peril only. The emergence of expansive China as a communist state in 1949, and its support to communist movements in Southeast Asia, perplexed anti-communist Australia. Subscribing to the 'domino theory', Australia feared that the communist dominated Southeast Asia would not only pose security threat but also threaten Australian trade with complete disruption. Australia, therefore, was obliged to distance itself from Britain which was in the process of retreat from the east of Suez, and to turn to the US which had been advocating the establishment of a defensive perimeter, some kind of 'Maginot Line', against China. The shift in the Australian foreign policy direction culminated in the Australian entry into the ANZUS which formed the bed rock of Canberra's foreign and defence policies, and the SEATO which was aimed at strengthening the regional defence against what seemed to be a perennial communist threat in Southeast Asia. ANZUS and SEATO, while ensuring American presence in the region which was critically important to the Australian security, made demands on the Australian participation in the Vietnam war and thus extended moral, material and physical support to its "powerful and willing friend", the US.
In line with its new 'engage Asia' policy, Australia focussed its attention on Southeast Asia, a region critically important in strategic terms. Australia's relations with Indonesia, an immediate Southeast Asian neighbour, had a flying start, thanks to its championing the cause of Indonesian independence. Because of Commonwealth connection, Australia's relations were intimate with Malaysia and Singapore, while Australia's close relations with Thailand and the Philippines are to be attributed to the fact of their membership of the US-sponsored SEATO. But Australia's relations with Vietnam were to be pinned down to a different category. Though Australia was not unaware of the goings on in Vietnam since early 1950s, its interest in Vietnam was casual due to lack of proper understanding of the country and of the nature of the nationalist movement carried on against France. Australia failed to grasp the crucial point that the Vietnamese, for all their being communists, were nationalists essentially and that despite its being a recipient of the Chinese support during its struggle for independence, Vietnam was never a stooge of China and on the other hand, displayed an unrelenting distrust of China in view of its long struggle against Chinese political hegemony in the past. Australia cherished a strong belief that Vietnam invariably deriving support from China and the USSR, was by itself a source of communist threat from within the region. Blurred by the obsession of communist threat and bounded by treat commitments under ANZUS and SEATO, Australia had to participate in the Vietnam War. This gave an impression to many in Australia that Australian forces in Vietnam were not, in fact, fighting the Vietnamese but the Chinese.

The Australian involvement in Vietnam, started off on a modest scale, blossomed into the largest participation of 8300 troops at its peak spanning over as many as seven years. It sparked off intense debate in the Australian Parliament when opposition Labour Party vociferously condemned the Liberal-Country coalition government's Vietnam policy. In an unprecedented manner, the Australian press gave wide coverage to the issue of war and the Australian public,
though initially supported the Australian participation in the Vietnam War, gradually veered to the other extreme as the startling reports of the casualties of the Australian soldiers began to pour in. Anti-conscript movement made matters worse for the government. The Australian press had a field day as numerous peace rallies were staged across the continent nation. Mounting domestic opposition culminated in the rousting of the Liberal government and the victory of the Labour Party in the hustings of December 1972.

The one positive aspect of the Vietnam War was the lessons Australia drew from it. The first lesson was that Australia's Vietnam policy failed because of lack of clear perspective of the Vietnamese situation. Way back in early 1950s, the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, had observed that Vietnam was "the wrong war against the wrong man in the wrong place". But Australia was more concerned about the demonstration of its loyalty to and the solidarity with its 'big brother' who was involved in a crusade against communism. With the fall of South Vietnam to the communists which symbolised the failure of the strategy of their allies, the Australians took a vow to refrain from sending troops to fight in wars not of their own.

The second lesson was the realisation that the fear psychosis which blinded Australia from seeing the benefits that accrue of political and economic cooperation in a shrinking world, was in fact detrimental to the advancement of the national interests. The third lesson was that the foreign policy should not be made to be subservient to the defence policy. This entailed a realisation that the right approach was that the foreign policy and defence policy should serve each other as they are complementary from the view point of political sagacity. The fourth lesson was that the better way of containing communist expansion was not to take up arms against it, but to initiate measures to improve the economic lot of the masses since poverty breeds communism. In fact, Australia took a major step in this direction by initiating Colombo Plan. But Australia discontinued this
strategy as the process made undue demands on its time and patience and took recourse to the policy of 'forward defence' in which it discerned a hope for quick solution in the really covetable arresting of the fall of 'dominoes'.

The fifth lesson was that the Australians recognised the dire need for a bipartisan foreign policy in the larger interests of the nation. In Australia, as in the US, many shared the view that Vietnam War was a 'mistake' or an aberrant aspect of their foreign policy. This could have been scrupulously avoided if only the ruling coalition had given due consideration to the views of the opposition Labour Party while taking crucial decisions to commit Australia militarily more and more. But it was determined by the context. The ruling party hastily dismissed the opposition's views as scummy which proved fatal. The sixth lesson was that in view of the fact that a country's foreign and defence policies are usually dictated by the national interests, it was imprudent to think that the national security interests could be advanced through intimate relations and alliance obligations. Hanging on to the coat tails of the 'big brother' for security purposes was proved to be a wrong premise as the US initiated secret parleys with China that culminated in the normalisation and the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the two bitter foes. Again, in Nixon's 'Guam Doctrine' according to which the process of American military disengagement from Vietnam was initiated, Australia was subjected to betrayed as it was glaringly not taken cognizance of. Again, though Australia fought alongside of the US, it was not made a party to the Paris negotiations aimed at securing a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War. The result was that Australia suffered naturally from the feeling of neglect and thus found itself in an awkward predicament. Though Australia was in a dilemma as to withdraw its troops by way of following the US example, the Australian government being driven to the wall by the external and domestic compulsions, had no choice but to toe the American line. However, Australia realised the importance of the pursuit of a foreign policy tempered with a true spirit of
independence which became a valid basis for the restructuring of its foreign policy under Whitlam's Labour government which was formed in December 1972.

The altered foreign policy under Whitlam government found better expression nowhere else than in Australia's relations with Vietnam. Perceiving the importance of a stable, self-reliance and peaceful Southeast Asia for Australia's security and trade, the Labour government focussed attention on bringing about a peaceful co-existence in Southeast Asia in the post-Vietnam war era and encouraged Hanoi to pursue a policy of peace, friendship and cooperation towards its neighbours in the region. Accordingly, Whitlam government not only recognised the communist government in Hanoi, paying scant regard for ideological differences, but also supported its membership in the UN. Continuing to be critical of the American intervention in Vietnam and making a candid admission of Australia's part in the devastation of Vietnam during the war, Whitlam administration offered aid, though modest, for the economic reconstruction of Vietnam. No doubt, Australia's "new" foreign policy caused displeasure to the US, but this was offset by Australia's avowed position as a committed ally in the ANZUS. In the wake of the capitulation of South Vietnam by the communists, Canberra cooperated with the US not only in relief operations but also in airlifting Vietnamese refugees to Australia for which Americans paid tributes that Australia richly deserved.

Fraser's Liberal government (1975-1983) shared the views of the predecessor Labour government and continued the policy of positive disposition towards Vietnam. Fraser government, while advising ASEAN countries that the isolation of Vietnam was good neither for them nor for the region, encouraged Vietnam to come out of the international isolation and to establish bilateral relations with its non-communist neighbours, and in this context made several gestures including the recognition of the Unified Vietnam, the offer of support to Vietnam's admission into ESCAP and the UN and the stepping up of the quantum
of aid to Hanoi. The three developments that occurred in a row within a span of four months, namely, Hanoi’s entry into the Soviet-dominated COMECON in August 1978, its conclusion of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR in November and its invasion of Cambodia in December led to the nose-diving of the relations between the two countries. Australia was convulsed by these developments which in its view, altered the balance of power in the region by pushing Vietnam into the deeper embrace of the Soviet Union only to heighten the fears of further expansion of Soviet influence. Accordingly, Fraser administration’s policy towards Vietnam was drastically altered.

The Cambodian problem had its origins in 1970 when Prince Sihanouk was thrown out of power by the pro-American Lon Nol. In turn, Lon Nol government was dislodged by the Maoist Khmer Rouge Supported by Prince Sihanouk and a new government called Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was established in 1975. Deeply disturbed by the frequent violation of the Vietnamese territory by the Khmer Rouge forces and taking advantage of the simmering discontentment of the Cambodians who became the victims of the cruel and genocidal policies of the DK regime, Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and drove away the Khmer Rouge leaders and their associates into the jungles of the Thai-Cambodian border and stationed its troops in Cambodia, offering protective cover to the new government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) headed by Heng Samrin. Australia saw in the Vietnamese action in Cambodia not only a blatant violation of the basic principles governing the international relations but also the deeper entrenchment of the USSR in the regional affairs through its unstinted support to Vietnam. Expressing its fury and frustration, Fraser government suspended the aid to Vietnam. Australia also co-sponsored ASEAN’s resolution in the UN calling for Vietnam's military pull-out, the self-determination of the Cambodian people and a peaceful settlement of the problem. Australia’s tirade against Vietnam was intensified following Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.
Nonetheless, within two years of Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, a shift in Australia's Indochina policy was noticed. Yielding to the mounting public pressure, Canberra withdrew its support to the DK in the UN in February 1981, and thus incurred the wrath of ASEAN. Australia also refused to recognise the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) of the Cambodian guerrilla groups exclusively on the grounds that it comprised the Khmer Rouge. Fraser administration's denunciation of the Khmer Rouge which constantly posed a security threat to Vietnam, prepared the ground for Canberra's reestablishment of friendly ties with Vietnam.

If Fraser's reign was marked by Australia's major involvement in the Cambodian spat, the successor Labour government (1983-1991) signified Australia's deep participation in the Cambodian peace process. The crux of Hawke administration's Indochina policy was to create a durable peace in Cambodia and to draw Vietnam's isolation to a close. The onus of realising these objectives rested on Foreign Minister Hayden and his successor Gareth Evans.

Perceiving that the prevailing regional political scenario characterised by discord, divisions, tensions and hostility between the countries of the region and the unwelcome presence of the great powers to fish in the troubled waters, was hardly conducive for a negotiated settlement of the Cambodian problem, Hayden set out on his mission focussing its utmost attention on ending the isolation of Vietnam. It was fervently hoped that after joining the ranks of the international community, Vietnam would contribute its mite for transforming Southeast Asia into a region of peace and prosperity. Hayden, therefore, sought to translate into action his party's election promise to resume aid to Vietnam, but was frustrated by ASEAN and its allies who found Australia's move conflicting with their strategy of bringing round Vietnam by subjecting it to economic isolation.
Undeterred by this set-back, Hayden sought to play the role of a facilitator to clear the clouds of mistrust and misunderstanding and to create a congenial climate of mutual understanding and appreciation among the principal parties to the Cambodian conflict. His firm views on the Khmer Rouge which found expression in Australia’s refusal to co-sponsor the annual ASEAN resolution at the UN perceiving it as one-sidedly critical of Vietnam assumed the form of the proposal to set up a tribunal to try Pol Pot and his associates. These moves, at once prompted Vietnam to pay glowing tributes to Australia and embittered the ASEAN Countries. But, it was not long before ASEAN joined the international community to acknowledge Hayden’s genuine concern for the region and to accept Australia as a "responsible and knowledgeable voice".

During his five year tenure of office of the Foreign Minister, Hayden’s singular contribution to the Cambodian peace process was to impart "a sense of urgency" for the effort to find a solution and to keep the Cambodian issue "very much alive" at a time when many were courting its natural death. His dialogue with all the parties to the Cambodian problem and in particular with Vietnam facilitated the evolution of a consensus on the broad principles of the settlement.

Gareth Evans who became the Foreign Minister (1988-1991) after Hayden’s exit, proved a worthy successor of an illustrious predecessor. Treading his predecessor's path, he had an eye to the settlement of the Cambodian problem. Finding a congenial atmosphere in the fast changing international milieu reflected in super power cooperation and Sino-Soviet rapprochement, Thailand's positive approach to the Communist states of Indochina, Vietnam's troop withdrawal from Cambodia and the regional peace efforts symbolised by the Jakarta Informal Talks and the international initiative represented by the Paris International Conference on Cambodia (PICC) which foundered after coming close to success, Evans sought to break the diplomatic impasse by unveiling his peace plan which advocated "the very substantially enhanced UN role in the settlement". The
endorsement of his plan by the Permanent Five Members of the Security Council (P-5) epitomised the "remarkable" response of the international community to it. Thus, the Australian 'idea' which had become the 'UN Plan', was refined and developed into what came to be called as 'Red Book'. Which, encompassing the detailed elements of a comprehensive settlement, served as a basis for the Paris Peace Accord that heralded a new era of peace and freedom in Cambodia. Thus the Cambodian crisis which was identified by Australia as one of the potential sources of regional instability, was bidden adieu.

Australia which yelled with deep concern that the isolation of Vietnam was detrimental to the interests of the region and whose efforts at enabling Vietnam to pursue a course of fruitful interaction with the countries in the region and beyond were frustrated earlier by Vietnam's adversaries who used 'isolation' as a diplomatic bargaining chip to encourage Vietnam's full support of the Cambodian peace process, was gratified as Vietnam was freed from the shackles of the disastrous 'international isolation' with the achievement of the Cambodian settlement. Demonstrating Australia's concern and commitment to enable Vietnam to take its due place in the regional affairs, Foreign Minister Evans noted in his address on the signing of agreements on a comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodian conflict at the PICC on October 23, 1991: "Vietnam should now be welcomed back into the mainstream of regional life". Taking lead in this direction, Australia unfroze in October 1991 the direct aid, frozen in 1978.

One of the major goals of Australia's Southeast Asian diplomacy was to promote regional security by arresting Soviet expansion that was facilitated by Vietnam's dependence on Moscow. It was a matter of true delight for Australia to notice that, with the signing of the Cambodian peace agreement, the last political impediment of bilateral relations of Vietnam to diversify its foreign relations. The diminished dependence of Vietnam on the USSR was evident from Japan's supplanting the Soviet Union in 1991 as Vietnam's largest foreign trading partner.
While patching up its ties with its two most important neighbours, namely, China and Thailand, Vietnam initiated the normalisation talks with the US which held the key to the international aid. A new chapter began in Vietnam’s relations with Australia itself. While political issues dominated the dealings between the two countries in the pre-Cambodian settlement period, the focus was subsequently on the economic cooperation. Thus the Labour government's cherished ambition of integrating Vietnam into international life turned into a reality in 1991 and in bringing about this transformation, due credit should be given to the Foreign Ministers Hayden and Evans among others, as their diplomatic tenacity and sagacity made all the difference. If Australia is to be held responsible to a considerable extent for the emergence of Indonesia as an independent nation, it can stake a legitimate claim for credit for the regeneration of Vietnam by virtue of its substantial contribution.

One may safely conclude that the evolution of Australia's policy towards Vietnam may rightly be ascribed to the strenuous efforts of both the major political parties. True, the Liberal government's constant preoccupation with the perceived security threat from the expansion of the aggressive communism in Australia's neighbourhood through Vietnam, eventually got degenerated into mere obsession. Consequently, the ill-founded and the ill-conceived liberal administration's policies landed Australia in the disastrous Vietnam War. This sorry state of affairs lasted for a couple of decades when there occurred a drastic reversal in matters of the nature of perceptions, with the Labour government that took over in 1972, veering to the other side. Obviously, the Labour government took advantage of its long regime from 1972 onwards, save the brief spell of eight intervening years (1975-1983) associated with the Liberal regime, to undo the mistakes of the preceding regime and to place Australia's relations with Vietnam on an even keel governed by the right kind of perception, positive approach and above all the due recognition of Vietnam's size and significance in the context of
the Southeast Asian region. To sum up, the Australian foreign policy towards Vietnam initially comprised erroneous trends because of the Liberal Party's setting out with preconceived notions and inadequate perceptions about Vietnam which were duly superseded by the wholesome trends, obviously an outcome of the succeeding Labour Party's really profound perceptions.