Vietnamese Refugees and Singapore's Policy

Mary Yuen
University of Cincinnati

Introduction

Following the final stages of the Indochina War of 1975, a wave of refugees and displaced persons flowed out from the area as a result of the spreading conflict and political upheaval. During the peak period of refugee activity (1978–79), 482,793 people arrived in first asylum countries by boat and another total of 503,127 arrived through land. It is not surprising, therefore, that the two countries which had been receiving the majority of the migrants decided that they could no longer accept anymore. In June of 1979, Thailand forcibly repatriated 42,000–45,000 Kampucheans by taking them by buses to the heavily mined border and pushing them across. In the same month, Malaysia announced it would no longer allow refugee vessels to land on its shores and began towing boats back out to sea. After a regional and international conference on this matter, it was decided that temporary asylum could be offered to the Indochinese refugees provided that they be resettled elsewhere. However, thirteen years after these agreements, the continued flow of refugees has begun to strain the willingness of Asian asylum countries to provide even temporary care for them.

Among the ASEAN states who have admitted refugees, Singapore has been one of the least affected by the crisis. Since 1977, the government has allowed 30,000 asylum-seekers to disembark as compared to the 214,000 who have gone through Malaysia. Nevertheless, the discussion of the refugee problem is still relevant to Singapore because of the republic's sensitivity to potential sources of conflict in neighboring states. It is thought that the maintenance of regional peace is closely linked to internal political stability, racial harmony, and economic growth. Thus, this regional connection is a major factor which shapes Singapore's perception of the problem.

Of the various Indochinese ethnic groups which have migrated from their homes, only Vietnamese refugees have come to Singapore shores. The Vietnamese boat people have attracted much international attention because of their dangerous mode of travel. Risking death by drowning, starvation, or pirate attacks, they have nevertheless managed to land in such far-flung places as Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Australia,
Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea. This paper will therefore concentrate on Singapore's policy toward this specific refugee group. The purpose of the analysis is threefold:

1. To define Singapore's policy toward the Vietnamese refugees;
2. to trace the development of the policy and examine other factors which led up to its formulation;
3. and to examine the rationale and reasoning behind those policies.

In discussing the Singaporean perception of this problem, I will make reference to the impact of the refugee exodus on other ASEAN states. Finally, while the West's attitude toward ASEAN's policies will be briefly discussed, they will be examined in the context of how the international environment has affected the actual policy output of the Singapore government, if at all.

Policy Context

In choosing the contextual factors that apply to Singapore's response to the refugee exodus, I will use Howard Leichter's [1979] scheme for analyzing public policy. The formulation of any policy involves the consideration of both internal and external constraints. The contextual factors which will be discussed here do not cover all of Leichter's categories; rather, they have been subjectively chosen according to their importance in shaping the final policy output.

Political Factors

The principal political motivation behind a refugee policy was the outcome of the Vietnam War and the danger that a Communist Vietnam posed to the region. Moral and ethical considerations were subsumed under the potential political implications. Fears that the communist tide could sweep through Singapore and result in the same massive exodus of its own people was the image that the leaders evoked in speeches to Singaporeans. The then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee expressed this apprehension in a speech delivered to the Stanford Research Institute meeting in 1980:

The sight of these refugees — precursors of the even more tragic boat people — was a pitiful one. But there is more to it than the human tragedy of these refugees. A chilling thought struck thinking Singaporeans whether or not the same fate was awaiting us. There were no effective barriers between the victorious North Vietnamese army and Singapore.6

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described Vietnam's program to force out large numbers of its people as "a political weapon being used to castigate the world".7 Today the allegation that Vietnam was deliberately trying to
destabilize the region with a massive influx of refugees seems absurd, but it was a real possibility given the chaos and confusion following the 1975 Communist victory in Indochina.

Geographical and Demographical Factors

Singapore, because of its geographical position, became a landing point for asylum-seekers in the late '70s for two reasons. First, many merchant and commercial ships who had rescued refugees at sea came into the republic's port with the expectation of dropping off their human cargo. Second, in the latter part of the '70s when refugee vessels were being rejected by Malaysian authorities, many of them drifted down to Singapore shores. Thus, the fear that the island would be crowded with these migrants was a major consideration.

In defending its eventual policy decision, Singapore has always called attention to its limited land space and high population density. Suggestions that the string of islets outside the main island be used to house the refugees were rejected with the argument that they are largely undeveloped and had no running water supply. A final constraint is the lack of natural resources which prevents a large number of people from settling.

Social Factors

Ethnically speaking, there existed the possibility that the overwhelming Chinese composition of the refugees would disturb the delicate relations between the Chinese and non-Chinese communities in Singapore. This is significant in light of the fact that Singapore has been trying to dispel its image as a "Third China" since its inception into nationhood. Lee Kuan Yew aptly described this dilemma in a BBC television program interview:

If I make the error of believing that I'm Chinese and that these (the refugees) are Chinese, there will be no Singapore... Thus, a move which would allow a large ethnic Chinese population to come in would have caused uneasiness among the non-Chinese communities and raise suspicion in neighboring states.

Regional Factors

The collective reaction of ASEAN toward the refugee problem has been firm and consistent from the beginning. Although these countries provided a generally safe haven for the migrants, they did so reluctantly and on a temporary basis with the clear assumption that the refugees would be resettled elsewhere. Since 1976, however, the resettlement offers have steadily decreased and resulted in the hardening stances of the ASEAN governments. Because Malaysia and Thailand have been the most
affected outflow of migrants, the other ASEAN states have attempted to relieve their burden by taking up some of the share themselves and by uniformly pressing for an international resolution of the problem. To this end, Singapore decided to allow a refugee transit camp to continue running on its island. Indonesia and the Philippines also followed suit by offering the islands of Galang and Bataan as temporary asylum shelters.11 Thus, the element of regional cooperation has been influential in the shaping of Singapore policy toward Vietnamese refugees.

International Environment Factors

On the international scale, Singapore and the other ASEAN states have cooperated quite extensively in relieving the plight of the boat people. The major responsibility for the care and uptake of the refugees, however, is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This organization carries out two main functions, that is, to provide refugees with international protection and, at the request of the host government, to assist them towards durable solutions to their problems.12

Nevertheless, accusations that the West has been deliberately slow in resettling the migrants is becoming a major source of tension. Although the UNHCR is financially responsible for the care of the camps, the local governments have had to bear the brunt of administrative tasks.13

In the case of Singapore, the actual care and running of the refugee camp is left in the hands of the UNHCR and its implementing partners. Unlike other ASEAN governments (in particular, Thailand and Malaysia), the Singapore government does not insist on close governmental maintenance of the camp. Consequently, the government only sets the conditions and limitations for which refugees are allowed to disembark. Although sensitive to international opinion, the republic has nevertheless maintained that it should be the international community which should deal with the situation and not the regional actors alone.

Policy Formulation

In formulating any policy, it is the role of the policy maker not only to identify the problem but also to seek a satisfactory solution for it.14 Under this section, I will examine Singapore’s final policy decision and the factors which influenced its formulation.

It is important at this point to define the term “refugee”. According to the UNHCR, they are:

...people who, because they fear persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, leave their country of origin and are unable to avail themselves of the protection of that country.15
The ASEAN states have differed markedly on this definition. Malaysia, for example, has defined the means of how these refugees have gotten away from Vietnam as the determining factor. In 1978, the freighter *Hai Hong* arrived in Malaysian waters with 2,500 asylum-seekers on board. They were refused recognition as refugees and prevented from disembarking since their escape from Vietnam in such a large number must have had the official sanction of Vietnamese authorities.16

Singapore also has experienced confusion over the question of who should be accepted as a refugee. The first Vietnamese asylum-seekers came to the republic by boat in May of 1975. In the following months, approximately 2,000 were given temporary refuge on St. John’s Island. This camp was closed with the resettlement of all the migrants by October of 1975.17 Of the 2,000 boat people, 108 Vietnamese, the majority of whom were fishermen, were offered permanent residence in Singapore. A few months later, Lee Kuan Yew made the statement that he was willing to accept those refugees now in Singapore who could support themselves.18 Yet except for the 108 fishermen, no one else was offered resettlement. By 1977, boat people without travel documents were officially regarded as illegal migrants. This policy decision is particularly puzzling since the majority of the refugees had to secretly arrange their escape from Vietnam and were not likely to approach Communist officials for travel documents. The Government based its reasoning on the argument that these people were fleeing their country in search of a different lifestyle rather than government persecution.19 By October of 1978, the present policy toward Vietnamese boat people was formulated:

1. No refugee boat of any kind would be allowed to enter Singapore waters, nor to offload its human cargo. Only on the rarest of occasions, in cases of dire hardship, would an exception be made to permit a refugee boat temporary docking rights at a Singapore wharf. In those instances, only emergency repairs and provisions would be provided before the ship sailed to another destination.

2. The only Indochinese refugees permitted entry into Singapore waters and to disembark at all must meet the following conditions:
   a. Refugees must be on board a ship which had picked them up on the high seas.
   b. The country whose flag the rescue ship was flying, through its local Embassy in Singapore, must guarantee, before the refugees’ disembarkation, that it will assure prompt passage to and resettlement in its territory.
   c. Refugees meeting these criteria could land and temporarily reside in Singapore providing that their local expenses were underwritten by other than Singapore sources, usually the UNHCR.20

The rationale behind these policies is complex and involves a combination of the factors mentioned in the section under Policy Context.
Singapore simply could not accept a large number of migrants because of its lack of space and the shortage of natural resources. Nor did it want to upset the racial balance by bringing in another ethnic group. The policy, in short, reflected Singapore's determination to distance itself from the rescue, care, and trouble of getting resettlement offers. This supported the Government's view that it was ultimately the international community's responsibility to relieve the plight of refugees.

In October of 1978, Singapore added another condition to the previously mentioned policies in that the maximum number of refugees allowed on its soil at any time would not exceed 1,000. Also, the longest period any refugee could stay would thereafter be 90 days. Countries that exceeded the 90-day deadline would be penalized by even sharper restrictions. Nevertheless, Singapore has been flexible on that 1,000 ceiling limit provided that all the refugees have been guaranteed resettlement.21

As mentioned earlier, one refugee transit camp was allowed to continue. In June 1978, following negotiations with the Singapore government, the Hawkins Road camp was opened. The camp, a former British Naval Base residential area located in Sembawang, occupies a land area of approximately 3 hectares and can accommodate 2,000 people in emergency situations. It includes 22 two-storey detached houses, covered areas for provisional accommodation and meetings, 5 converted containers for storage, a pre-fabricated medical clinic, and an education/language center. This camp would accommodate only "direct arrival" refugees (the rescue-at-sea cases under the conditions defined on the previous page) and transitions from the Galang refugee camp in Indonesia who are moved via Singapore to their country of resettlement. The UNHCR negotiates every two years with the Singapore government to lease this territory and presently pays a rent of S$8,000.00 per month. The most recent lease is valid until the end of 1990.22 The policies just defined remain essentially unchanged up to today.

Policy Implementation

As mentioned earlier, Singapore authorities do not insist on close governmental maintenance of the camp. The UNHCR must report the arrival and settlement country of each refugee to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). MHA checks that the number of asylum-seekers do not exceed the 1,000 limit and that they do not overstay their allotted 90 days.23 Thus, with regard to this policy, Singapore plays mainly an enforcer role to ensure that its regulations are adhered to.

The UNHCR came into existence on January 1, 1951 originally for a 3-year period. It was created by the General Assembly of the United Nations which recognized a universal responsibility toward refugees and displaced persons for whom new homes had still to be found as a result of the Second World War. But after the problem of European refugees had
faded, the refugee problem arose in other parts of the world and the UNHCR's mandate was extended for 5 year periods. In the exercise of international protection, the UNHCR seeks to ensure that refugees are granted asylum and a favorable legal status in their asylum country. An essential element of this legal status is the safeguard provided by the generally accepted principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits expulsion or forcible return of a person to a country where he may have reason to fear persecution.

It is the policy of the UNHCR, wherever possible, to find local implementing bodies to help administer and organize their camps and services. In the case of Singapore, there are three such partners. The first is the Catholic Welfare Service which provides transportation, material household needs, maintenance of the camp, and teacher transport and training. The Singapore Red Cross administers the distribution of the $2.50 per day allowance, mail services, training of refugee family members, and the payment of camp staff. The third body is the international Intergovernmental Committee on Migration. This organization provides the medical assistance and care for the boat people. In addition, the UNHCR employs two Resident Administrators who work with an elected Refugee leader and Refugee Committee. The administration and general atmosphere within the camp is considered quite good compared to other Southeast Asian establishments. There are several reasons for this. First, the limited number of people who may enter the camp allows for easy administration. Second, people are allowed to leave the camp at specified hours of the day; consequently, there isn't a "barbed wire" mentality. The mood among the refugees is often light and optimistic and this again makes for easier administration. Third, people move quickly in and out of the camp because of the 90 days limit on their stay. The stories of oppression, violence, and depression in other ASEAN camps is not a problem in Singapore precisely because of the rigid conditions which the government has set. This has not been the case of other ASEAN countries who have had to accept the majority of their refugees without definite offers of resettlement. The result is overcrowded and badly administered camps.

Problems of implementation due to conflicts of interest between the UNHCR and the Singapore government have been minimal. This is due to the fact that from the beginning of the refugee problem, Singapore has adopted a very firm and clear stand on the issue. It has very rarely strayed from that position which is why the UNHCR, while it would welcome more concessions or allowances from the Singapore government, nevertheless, does not press or persist in such requests. This does not mean that Singapore's position has not been challenged. A recent incident occurred in September of 1987 in which 2 Vietnamese stowaways from a Vietnamese flag vessel sought refuge at the U.S. embassy. The two stowaways were forcibly returned to Vietnam by Singapore authorities. The following is a chronology of events relating to the incident:
Sept. 1: On arrival in Singapore harbor 2 Vietnamese jump off the Vietnamese ship on which they have stowed away, swim to shore and make their way to the U.S. Embassy. After an interview, the stowaways are transferred to the UNHCR, which conducts a further interview and informs the Government of Singapore (GOS), noting desire of stowaways to seek asylum in a third country, stating that they are "asylum seekers under the protection of the UNHCR" and asking the GOS to refrain from returning the two to Vietnam. The GOS takes the two into custody.


Sept. 3: Swedish offer of resettlement received. UNHCR presses Ministry of Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs to accept the offer. U.S. makes further representation to Home Affairs, which responds that to allow illegal entrants would encourage more of the same.

Sept. 4: U.S. raises issue with Foreign Affairs. MFA notes U.S. concern.

Sept. 8: U.S. again raises issue with MFA.

Sept. 9: Ship departs with the two stowaways.

Sept. 16: U.S. Ambassador to Singapore expresses U.S. Government distress with GOS action in this case to the Acting Foreign Minister.

Sept. 18: Secretary of State George Schultz raises issue with Foreign Minister Dhanabalan. Dhanabalan commits GOS not to return stowaways immediately to their ship if informed that a resettlement guarantee is being sought. U.S. Embassy in Singapore follows up with working level GOS officials to nail down this commitment.29

This incident provides an example of the determination of Singapore to adhere to its policies without exception. To relent in one case would encourage the arrival of more asylum-seekers. The republic's response is also part of a larger trend, that is, the growing discontent among ASEAN nations with the refugee situation.

Policy Evaluation

In evaluating the policies of the Singapore government and the extent to which they have been effective, one can see that the goal of limiting the flow of refugees onto the island has been achieved. Since 1978, only a few have overstayed their allotted three month period. Exceptions have been made over the 1,000 ceiling limit, particularly during the heavy outflow period of 1978–1982.30 However, all refugees have been guaranteed reset-
tlement immediately after their rescue and arrival into Singapore's port. 31

The long term implicit goal of stopping the refugee exodus from Vietnam remains a problem and it is this issue along with the Kampuchean question that remains the major irritant in ASEAN-Vietnam relations. It has been ASEAN's and in particular Singapore's position that the refugee problem has to be solved at its source, that is, Vietnam. Merely concentrating on the humanitarian rather than the political elements will not lead to a long-term solution. In a parliamentary discussion held on 10 January 1979, Dr. Lau Teik Soon, Member of Parliament from Serangoon Gardens, expressed the need for ASEAN unity and action in this matter:

... we must voice strongly our concern with the refugee problem which has affected our ASEAN neighbors, viz. Malaysia and Thailand. It has been estimated that about 170,000 refugees from Indochina have gone to Malaysia and Thailand. As a result of the changeover in the government of Phnom Penh, many more refugees may leave that country. ASEAN should press for international sanction against the states from where the refugees come. At the same time, ASEAN should persuade the liberal-minded states in the West to take in more refugees. 32

To this end, two conferences were set up in May and July of 1979. The first was held in Jakarta and included the ASEAN nations, the UNHCR, Vietnam, and major resettlement countries. Discussion was held over the establishment of "refugee processing centers" which would temporarily house refugees awaiting resettlement and the exercising of regional and international pressure on Vietnam to stem the flow of boat people.

The Geneva Conference on Refugees which followed resulted in the agreement and implementation of the proposals discussed at the Jakarta meeting. This Conference was significant in that the world community recognized refugee assistance as an international responsibility. Besides the granting of financial pledges to the UNHCR for the Indochina program, a number of countries also set regular rates of resettlement offers or substantially increased their former rates. 33 The Orderly Departure Program (ODP) was also developed to cut down on those people fleeing by open boat through the provision of a legal and direct departure route from Vietnam. Besides stemming the outpour of boat people to ASEAN shores, it allowed Vietnamese authorities to check the influx of refugees leaving. 34

As a regional entity, therefore, ASEAN has been successful in calling international attention to the refugee exodus. But the understandings reached in the 1979 conferences have not been long-term as evidenced by the decreasing number of resettlement offers by Western nations. The crowded conditions of the camp and increasing administrative problems have led to renewed threats of refoulement and forced repatriation. 35 ASEAN officials also resent Western interference and their accusations of human rights violations. Other complaints include that of fraud in UNHCR contracts, disagreements over the handling of UNHCR facilities,
and the treatment of refugees by local officials. These and other tensions have compelled Thai authorities to close down two of its camps in April of 1986. Malaysia also decided to adopt a number of unilateral initiatives, including the announcement of the closure of Pulau Bidong camp with one year's notice. In light of the hardening positions of ASEAN asylum states, the future of Singapore's refugee policy is uncertain. However, the present policy has achieved its major objective. Given the already rigid requirements for asylum, it is not likely that there will be any radical changes. The change will occur in the collective sense as the region becomes more immune to the plight of refugees. In the meantime, as evidenced in the 1987 Foreign Minister's Meeting on Indochinese Refugees held in Singapore, ASEAN will continue to call for greater international action and the formulation of a long-term solution.

Conclusion

The Singapore government's position on refugees has been consistent since its formulation in 1978. Given the government's reaction to the stowaway incident, it is not likely that its standards for refugee admittance will be relaxed. In any case, there does not exist any internal or external pressure to change it as the growing reluctance to accept refugees is likely to increase. Because the refugee exodus could adversely affect regional stability, the maintenance of which is crucial to the continued existence of Singapore, the republic continues to keep a firm stand on this issue. Leniency or softness in this respect is construed to be threatening the survival of the nation.

Ultimately, as the ASEAN states argue, the final resolution of the refugee problem lies in the hands of the Vietnamese government. To prevent the further outpour of its people, the regime, along with the international community, must find ways to its improve economic, political, and social conditions. Until this occurs, the flow of refugees will continue.

FOOTNOTES

3. UNHCR Information Pamphlets.
4. The term "Vietnamese" refugees here includes those who are ethnic Vietnamese and those who are of ethnic Chinese origin.
5. The Vietnamese exodus, on the whole, can be divided into three phases. The first phase was the American evacuation which began in April of 1975. This group was composed mainly of people who worked for U.S. government agencies and those who would most certainly have suffered political persecution had they remained because of their association with past Vietnamese regimes. The second phase lasted from mid 1975 to late 1977. As the new Communist administrators concentrated on setting up their system in the South, many fled to avoid the re-education camps and the worsening economic conditions. The third phase began in early 1978. The ethnic composition of people who fled during this period was half Vietnamese and half Chinese. By mid 1979, following the Chinese invasion, that figure was raised to two-thirds Chinese. Source: Scott C.S. Stone and John E. McGowan, *Wrapped in the Wind's Shawl: Refugees of Southeast Asia and the Western World*, (Presidio Press, 1980), pp. 40–41.


8. UNHCR Information Pamphlets.


12. UNHCR Information Pamphlet.


15. *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, United Nations. For a complete definition of the term “refugees”, please refer to Appendix II.


22. Interview with UNHCR Representative in Singapore.

23. Interview with UNHCR Representative in Singapore.

24. There are three solutions which the UNHCR considers in dealing with asylum-seekers. The most preferred is voluntary repatriation on the part of the refugee. UNHCR provides the material and financial assistance for the refugee to return home. However, the repatriation must be voluntary and the UNHCR cannot guarantee the safety of the refugee once he returns home.
The second most preferred solution is local integration in which the refugee is offered permanent settlement in a country that has similar historical and cultural roots. Thus, the UNHCR would opt to place the Vietnamese in either China or Southeast Asia. The least preferred solution is that of resettlement. This requires a great deal of effort on the part of the UNHCR in negotiating with foreign governments for resettlement opportunities.

Source: UNHCR Information Pamphlets.

25. Interview with UNHCR Representative in Singapore.
27. Interview with UNHCR Representative in Singapore.
28. Interview with UNHCR Representative in Singapore.
30. The following is a yearly breakdown of the Vietnamese asylum-seekers who have entered Singapore since 1977:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>1841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>5448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>9279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>5535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>2749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>90 (1 January–31 March)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNHCR Office in Singapore.

31. Interview with UNHCR Representative in Singapore.

Although initially successful, the program’s effectiveness is now being questioned. ODP interviews of potential refugees were suspended from January of 1986 to July of 1987. However, they have since resumed.

35. This has not been the case with the Singapore camp whose population has been decreasing since the early 1980’s.


BIBLIOGRAPHY
