



China and Vietnam: Neither Thick Friends nor Constant Antagonists

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Given their deep historical linkages, China and Vietnam have a relationship that cannot simply be described as uniformly cooperative or conflictual at any given point of time. Vietnam appears to be a near-permanent bulwark against China in Southeast Asia but it will not and cannot simultaneously be in a state of constant antagonism, either.

Relationship Status: It's Complicated

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship is complex and multi-dimensional. Even as clashes between the Vietnamese and Chinese continue, including between their naval vessels in the disputed waters of the Paracels and Spratlys (Dobell 2014; Abuza 2014; *People's Daily Online* 2014; Chan 2014; *China Military Online* 2014), bilateral trade stood at US\$58.5 billion in 2014, up by 16

per cent from 2013 about 10 per cent of Vietnam's exports – mainly food and natural resources – go to China (Abuza 2014). And while tourism between the two countries has dropped as bilateral relations deteriorated (*Global Times* 2015d), regular interactions at the sub-national level continue (*Vietnam Breaking News* 2014; *Vietnam News Agency* 2014; *Vietnam Breaking News* 2015).

Nationalist eruptions are kept in check also by the memory of a common struggle against Western colonialism and imperialism. Despite strong nationalist tendencies on either side, like the Chinese, the Vietnamese too, emphasize people-to-people and cultural exchanges (*Xinhua* 2015i; *Xinhua* 2015f; *Xinhua* 2015j).

Party-to-party ties remain deep with regular bilateral visits (*Global Times* 2014a) and interactions focusing on the study of both theory and each other's experiences,

(*Xinhua* 2014g; *Xinhua* 2014h) and messages of felicitation on important anniversaries on either side (*Xinhua* 2015g; Thayer 2015). Top leaders have also met in third countries on the sidelines of various multilateral forums (for instance, see *Xinhua* 2012; *Xinhua* 2013; *Xinhua* 2014e).

CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping and his counterpart in the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), Nguyen Phu Trong, marked the 65th anniversary of China-Vietnam diplomatic relations through a telephone conversation in February 2015 – the third year that the two have marked the occasion thus (*Xinhua* 2015i). Such regular telephone calls also take place between other officials on the two sides (*Xinhua* 2015f). Trong would later in April 2015, make a formal visit to Beijing as part of the celebrations with a delegation that included ‘about one third of Vietnam’s politburo’ (*Global Times* 2015a).

Beijing’s position on its territorial claims in the South China Seas remains uncompromising.

Xi has not only lauded the support extended by the two countries and peoples to each other, (*Xinhua* 2015j) and their common adherence to the leadership of communist parties and the socialist path, (*Xinhua* 2015c) but also called the relationship one of ‘strategic importance’ (*Xinhua* 2015i).

Importantly, the Chinese leader has also used a phrase of comparatively recent vintage stating that the two had become part of ‘a community of common destiny’ (*Xinhua* 2015i). This phrase is now widely used as part of the discourse around China’s ‘one belt, one road’ project – also referred to as the new Silk Roads – and especially also

in the context of Sino-Southeast Asian ties, and possibly suggests a Chinese belief that the Vietnamese are an important factor in any major Chinese relationship with Southeast Asia.

China’s Hard Line

Beijing’s position on its territorial claims in the South China Seas is, however, uncompromising and Vietnam remains the most serious contestant that China faces in the dispute being in possession of the maximum number of disputed islands. China’s deployment of an oil drilling platform, the HS-981, in May 2014 in waters Vietnam claimed as its own, led to clashes at sea between the two sides and the worst anti-Chinese riots in Vietnam in decades (Krishnan 2014).

Vietnam has been indirectly accused of becoming more aggressive vis-à-vis China (Shang 2014; Zhang Hong 2014; Zhao 2014; Zhang Junshe 2014; *Xinhua* 2014a) and of falling victim to ‘instigation from outside’ (*Xinhua* 2014a). On the eve of the CPV General Secretary’s visit to China in April 2015, a *Xinhua* commentary specifically stated that, ‘Some outsiders, for selfish reasons, are exploiting every possible excuse to sow discord between them, while a few in Vietnam’s political circle have been deluded by external Pied Pipers and become accomplices’ (Deng 2015).

While these are usually oblique references to the role of the United States,¹ China has also criticized Hanoi in the past for its ties to India, noting for example, that just a day after China and Vietnam had signed an agreement in 2011 on basic principles guiding the settlement of maritime issues between them, Vietnam’s state-owned

¹ The US has also been directly named. See, *Global Times* (2015a)

energy corporation signed a three-year agreement with India to exploit gas and oil in disputed waters in the South China Sea, ‘heedless of any objection from China’ (*People’s Daily Online* 2014).²

With respect to the involvement of ASEAN, a *Global Times* commentary noted that statement at the 25th ASEAN Summit that concluded in Naypyitaw on 13 November 2014, only mentioned that it was ‘concerned over the situation in the South China Sea’ - a toning down from the expression of ‘serious concerns over the ongoing developments in the South China Sea’ that was included in the 24th Summit statement. This has been interpreted as proof of limits being imposed on Vietnam, among others, on criticizing China (Xue 2014), implying in turn that Beijing had succeeded in convincing others in the grouping of its point of view (*DWNews* 2014). China was, however, back to expressing “serious concern” over an ASEAN statement at the 26th ASEAN Summit over Chinese reclamation activities in disputed waters in the South China Sea and saying it was ‘opposed to the actions of an "individual country" kidnapping the ASEAN’ (cited in *Xinhua* 2015b). Beijing also noted that Vietnam and the Philippines had also undertaken large-scale reclamation work on islands and reefs in their control and so violated Chinese sovereignty (*Xinhua* 2015a).

While acknowledging the differences between the two countries over the South China Sea territorial issues, Xi in his message to his Vietnamese counterpart also declared that it was ‘in line with the fundamental interests of both sides and conducive to regional peace, stability and

prosperity for the two sides to cement political mutual trust, boost win-win cooperation, strengthen guidance of public opinion, and properly handle differences’ (*Xinhua* 2015i).³

China has criticized Hanoi in the past for its attempts to involve India in the dispute.

The references to guiding public opinion⁴ and properly handling differences are probably intended to remind Hanoi to not allow a repeat of the riots earlier in 2014 against Chinese firms (*China Daily* 2014; *Sina.com*. 2014; *Xinhua* 2014i). Chinese

State Councilor Yang Jiechi in a telephone conversation with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Pham Binh Minh, in February 2015 was more specific, asking that Hanoi ‘properly handle maritime issues’ (*Xinhua* 2015g). In an earlier visit in mid-June 2014, even as the rig remained in position, Yang had gone so far as to say that his country would ‘take all necessary measures’ to protect its sovereignty and HS-981 (*Xinhua* 2014c).

Similarly, during his visit to Vietnam in late December 2014, chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and No. 4 on the Politburo Standing Committee, Yu Zhengsheng, called for the development of China-Vietnam relations ‘in a correct path’ (*South China Morning Post* 2014). This was preceded by Xi’s call in August in a conversation with Le Hong Anh, the visiting special envoy of CPV general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong for both sides

² See also *Global Times* (2014) based on an interview with Chu Hao, an assistant research fellow at the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations, Beijing.

³ On guiding public opinion, see also *Xinhua* (2014c)

⁴ See also Vietnamese Ambassador’s statement in *Global Times* (2015d).

to make “correct political decisions” to put ties on the right track (*Xinhua* 2014j).

The Chinese now realize that their assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes has brought Vietnam and the Philippines closer together.

These statements can be interpreted as a renewed demand that Vietnam stick to the bilateral route in resolving disputes. Yu stressed that ‘Megaphone diplomacy can only trigger volatility of public opinion, which should be avoided by both sides’ (*Xinhua* 2014d). Elsewhere, China has accused the ASEAN’s Vietnamese secretary-general, Le Luong Minh, for his ‘biased comments on the issue of the South China Sea’. Le had earlier declared that ASEAN claimants Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam could not accept China’s nine-dash claim line since it was not in accordance with international law (Parameswaran 2015).

Beijing Rethink?

Beijing has, however, not really helped its case by some of its actions. When HS-981 first entered disputed waters, the Vietnamese tried desperately to get in touch with CPC authorities but the latter apparently did not take their calls. Yang Jiechi’s June 2014 visit was received poorly by the Vietnamese for the aggressive tone he took with them.⁵

The Chinese probably now realize that their role in the South China Sea disputes has brought Vietnam and the Philippines together. In late November 2014, two Vietnamese navy warships visited Manila

⁵ Author’s private conversations with Vietnam specialist

for the first time as part of a friendly visit to the Philippines (*Reuters* 2014). Vietnam also made a submission to The Hague’s Permanent Court of Arbitration on a case brought by the Philippines against China over territorial claims in the waters, (Ha and Pham 2014) which the Philippines said was ‘helpful in terms of promoting the rule of law and in finding peaceful and nonviolent solutions to the South China Sea claims’ (cited in Orendain 2014).

One Chinese commentator from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences feared that Vietnam was getting closer to the US and Japan, and that Hanoi was ‘likely to continue with the legal moves’.⁶ A Western analyst has suggested that the balance of views on China within the CPV briefly tilted towards the hardliners on China in the wake of the HS-981 incident with a June 2014 meeting of the Party’s Central Committee unanimously condemning the Chinese action (Abuza 2014). Further, in a message clearly aimed at China, ASEAN foreign ministers meeting at Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia in late January 2015, agreed to ‘intensify efforts towards achieving the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and work vigorously towards the early conclusion of the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea’ (*South China Morning Post* 2015).

The Chinese did not fail to pick up the signals and have tried to bring ties with Vietnam back on even keel. It is, in fact, a sign of the seriousness with which China views ties with its southern neighbour that it sent Yu to visit Vietnam at the end of 2014 (Thayer 2015). Given that Yu is also part of the so-called ‘Iron Triangle’ of those with a Shaanxi connection within the PBSC (along

⁶ Du Jifeng of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies cited in *South China Morning Post* (2014a).

with Wang Qishan and Xi Jinping), his visit was possibly also meant to mark Xi's personal attention to improving ties with Vietnam. In fact, since Hanoi's furious diplomatic and military reaction to HS-981, the Chinese have at least until now, more or less limited provoking their southern neighbour. And even if, China's construction activities in the disputed territories continue, it has largely managed to calm tempers in Vietnam.

Later, during the CPC General Secretary's visit to Beijing, a *Xinhua* commentary declared that 'Tension at sea is not the whole picture for the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Past disputes have been calmed without damage to ties in the long term' (*Xinhua* 2015d). Xi Jinping himself suggested that the two countries 'control their disputes' so as to ensure their ties developed 'in a right track' and that both the two parties and the two nations increase their high-level interactions in order to find 'new solutions to their problems and new ideas to advance the bilateral relationship in a sustained way' (*Xinhua* 2015c).

The Trong visit was soon followed with a visit by Chinese State Councilor and Public Security Minister Guo Shengkun later in April 2015 (*Xinhua* 2015e). China has frequently expressed hopes that Vietnam can come around (*Xinhua* 2014b; Li 2014; *Xinhua* 2014e) to seeing the need for a bilateral resolution of the dispute away from reliance on either the ASEAN or outside powers. Chinese commentaries have also underlined the need for stability in Sino-Vietnamese ties in order to push its 'one belt, one road' initiative. As one commentary noted, 'China doesn't want territorial and maritime antagonism with Vietnam standing in the way of implementing these programs. Vietnam should be roped into this grand vision'

(*Global Times* 2015a; see also *Xinhua* 2015h).

It is a sign of the seriousness with which China views ties with Vietnam that it sent Yu Zhengsheng to visit at the end of 2014.

To this end, Beijing has also tried the soft power approach also by offering opportunities to Vietnam 'for personnel training and media swaps, to lay solid public opinion foundation' for the development of bilateral ties (*Xinhua* 2014 d).

Vietnamese Caution and Implications for India

Meanwhile, with over US\$20 billion in trade deficit with the Chinese, and a heavy dependence on China for the basic raw material for many of its manufactured products, there are also limits to how much Vietnam can antagonize Beijing. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hanoi is actively considering joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) led by the US as a way of reducing its dependence on its northern neighbour. However, there are sections within the CPV – usually identified as those seeking accommodation with China – that also view the demands the TPP imposes as being too heavy and potentially threatening to the Party's control over the economy (Abuza 2014).⁷

History and proximity together ensure that

⁷ Chinese companies are not taking any chances, however. Many, especially those supplying components in the garment sector, are planning to move in greater numbers to Vietnam in anticipation of the latter eventually joining the TPP. This, in turn, only solidifies Vietnam's economic links with China (*Thanh Nien News* 2014).

neither Beijing nor Hanoi can take each other for granted, even if China's economic growth and rapid military modernization are beginning to fundamentally change ground realities. What other regional and external powers need to remember is that this change might not always be opposed by Vietnam. For instance, China's new Silk Roads policy – at least, as Beijing has portrayed it – is about economic development through infrastructure connectivity in a mutually beneficial and non-hegemonic manner. Even if this turns out to be mere rhetoric in the long term, Vietnam could certainly use more capital and infrastructure development expertise to boost its economic growth in the immediate term, and it is China, more than any other country that is best placed to provide a large share of these.

While anti-China voices might have dominated in the immediate aftermath of the HS-981 crisis, the two sides soon returned to their default position of exchanging high-level visits, including between the communist parties, evidence of careful calibration on both sides.

India must note that Vietnamese officials have also stressed their country's 'independent' foreign policy.

There is thus, a tripwire of caution built into the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, perhaps more so, on the Vietnamese side. When the two sides express the desire to 'jointly safeguard the right direction in developing bilateral ties' (*Xinhua* 2015j) or to 'jointly safeguard maritime peace and stability' (*Xinhua* 2015f), not only is each side trying to put the onus on the other to mend matters, it also agrees that no matter where the

responsibility for the dispute lies, it too, must contribute its part to repairing ties.

If they could hold the Chinese to some sort of a stalemate on the disputes in the South China Seas, the Vietnamese will consider their battle won and be more open to Chinese trade and investments. Beijing too, might come around to accepting the need for a stalemate in the short term, in order to further soften Vietnamese resistance. For Hanoi though, the challenge will be to see how the economic exchanges with China do not shift the balance such that Vietnam will eventually find it disadvantageous to counter any future Chinese strengthening of claims on disputed territory.

Indian analysts and policymakers must note that eager as Vietnam is to actively engage New Delhi in its disputes with the Chinese, Vietnamese officials have also stressed their country's 'independent' foreign policy and that it had 'no reason to cooperate with another county to contain a third one'.⁸ This is, no doubt, the result of the aforementioned Vietnamese caution and of their lack of faith in the United States being able to consistently confront and push back against Chinese assertiveness or to support its allies and other smaller nations in the region. India also needs to be aware of domestic pressures on Vietnamese policy vis-à-vis China given the coming leadership change in the CPV in January 2016.⁹ Already, a Chinese scholar has said Beijing should 'take a slightly softer stance on some issues' in anticipation of incumbent Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung – seen as belonging to the pro-American faction of the CPV (Abuza

⁸ Vietnamese Ambassador to China Nguyen Van Tho cited in *Global Times* (2015d).

⁹ The Chinese expect some uncertainties in the domestic politics of Vietnam due to the leadership change and fear the South China Sea issues 'may be misused in political struggles' (Li 2015)

2014) – throwing his hat into the ring for the post of Party General Secretary.¹⁰

If it has any ambitions of becoming a significant player in the region, India must actively consider options – and not just military ones – for augmenting Vietnamese abilities to protect their sovereignty and other interests. New Delhi cannot expect nor should it wait for a lead or direction from the ASEAN or other powers, in order to pursue such action. ■

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¹⁰ Zhou Fangyin, professor at the Guangdong Research Institute for International Strategies, in an interview in *Global Times* (2015c).

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China Report is brought out by Sage Publications Ltd, New Delhi.

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