



One Issue Leads to Another: Issue Spirals and the Sino-Vietnamese War

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Rather than competition over one issue or another (such as territory or status) leading to war, in this study it is argued that war is often likely the result of an *issue spiral*—a dynamic process in which tension increases as multiple issues accumulate. Once an initial issue disagreement is established, the development of enemy images may cause states to view the “other’s” behavior and intentions in relation to additional issues as threatening. States may subsequently seek to gain an advantage on a new issue in order to prevent one’s competitor from doing so, or in order to gain leverage on other issues. A state’s aggressive actions in relation to new issues tend to reinforce their rival’s perceptions that the state has aggressive intentions in relation to earlier established disagreements, further increasing tension. Issue accumulation, furthermore, increases the stakes of competition, which increases the likelihood that states will be willing to bear the costs of war seeking favorable issue settlement. As tension heightens and the rationality of engaging in large-scale militarized conflict increases, a state may initiate war if a rival presses its demands on an issue fearing that failure to demonstrate resolve will lead one’s competitor to press its demands on other issues as well. An examination of relations between China and Vietnam in the 1970s reveals that an issue spiral, in which one issue led to another and the accumulation of issues contributed to the deterioration of relations, precipitated the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War.

China and Vietnam engaged in a brief but costly war from February 17 until March 16, 1979.¹ The Sino-Vietnamese War was the first major militarized conflict between China and Vietnam following the establishment of both as communist states. 80,000 Chinese troops and 75,000–100,000 Vietnamese troops were committed to the conflict. Even though action was limited, casualties numbered estimates of 25,000 Chinese and 20,000 Vietnamese (Womack 2006:200).

What was particularly surprising about the war was that China and Vietnam had previously appeared to have been close allies. During Vietnam’s war against the United States, China and Vietnam engaged in a relationship of “close collaboration” based on Chinese assistance, and Chinese leaders sent Vietnam a “warm congratulations” upon the liberation of Saigon (Burton 1978–79:704). China and Vietnam, it was said, were “as close as lips and teeth” (Womack 2006:162–163). Why was it that despite both states being communist in orientation and despite seemingly having had such close relations for several decades, China and Vietnam took up arms against one another in February of 1979?

¹ China announced it was withdrawing forces on March 5, but fighting continued until the withdrawal was completed on March 17. See Pike (1987:220–221).

Previous research suggests that certain issues may be more contentious than others (Hensel 1996; Senese 1996; Ben-Yehuda 2004). Specifically, conventional wisdom is that territorial disputes are more likely to escalate to war than other types of disputes (Vasquez and Henehan 2001; Senese and Vasquez 2008; Vasquez and Valeriano 2008). Such research is based on data coded by the Correlates of War project that identifies militarized interstate disputes as being driven by territorial, policy, regime or some “other” type of revisionism (Jones, Bremer, and Singer 1996). Since only one issue is identified as being at stake for each militarized conflict, the implicit assumption is that there is a primary issue of importance for each dispute or war.² Similarly, in regard to the Sino-Vietnamese War, some scholars have attempted to identify the central issue that led China and Vietnam to engage in direct conflict. James Mulvenon (1995), for example, argues that although there were a number of points of disagreement between China and Vietnam that Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia on Christmas of 1978 was the primary cause of the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Rather than competition over one issue or another (such as territory or policy) leading to war, in this study it is argued that war is often likely the result of an *issue spiral*—a dynamic process in which tension increases as multiple issues accumulate. Once an initial issue disagreement is established, the development of enemy images may cause states to view the other’s behavior and intentions in relation to additional issues as threatening. States may subsequently seek to gain an advantage on a new issue in order to preempt one’s competitor, or to gain strategic supremacy. A state’s aggressive actions in relation to new issues tend to reinforce their rival’s perceptions that the state has aggressive intentions in relation to earlier established disagreements, further increasing distrust and tension. Issue accumulation, furthermore, increases the stakes of competition, which increases the likelihood that states will be willing to bear the costs of war seeking the resolution of issues in one’s favor. As tension heightens and the rationality of engaging in large-scale militarized conflict increases, a state may initiate war if a rival presses its demands on an issue fearing that failure to demonstrate resolve will lead one’s competitor to press its demands on other issues as well.

The next section reviews relevant literature and introduces the concept of an issue spiral. An issue typology is then employed to identify issues under contention in regard to Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s. Whether one issue disagreement tends to contribute to the development of another and whether issue accumulation tends to lead to the deterioration of relations is assessed. Support for expectations concerning the centrality of issue spirals to the onset of war would suggest that it might be prudent to move beyond comparing differences across issues in relation to variables such as hostility level to examining the dynamics of issue accumulation.

Issue Spirals

Realist approaches tend to assume that regardless of how a state defines its foreign policy goals that states must pursue power in order to achieve national objectives. As a consequence, variation in foreign policy issues is relatively unimportant and international politics can be characterized as an unending struggle for power (Morgenthau 1948). Liberalism also tends not to focus on issue variation in seeking to explain outcomes, but rather has traditionally examined such variables as regime type, level of economic interdependence, and extent of involvement in intergovernmental organizations (Russett and O’Neal 2001).

² One issue is identified for each state in relation to each dispute from 1816 to 1992. Up to two issues have been coded for each state in relation to each dispute from 1993 to 2001. See Ghosn et al. (2004).

Issue research has demonstrated, however, that interstate relations tend to vary in relation to the type of issue under contention since different issues have different characteristics (Mansbach and Vasquez 1981; Hensel 2001). Certain issues tend to be more escalatory than others. Arms races are more likely in the context of territorial competition than competition over other issues (Rider 2009). Territorial disputes, furthermore, produce a higher number of fatalities (Senese 1996) and are more likely to escalate to war than policy or regime disputes (Vasquez and Henahan 2001; Senese and Vasquez 2008).

Although research has examined whether certain types of disputes tend to be more volatile than others, states may at times contend over multiple issues simultaneously. Once an initial issue disagreement is established, states may develop enemy images of one another. An enemy image is a belief that some “other” is inherently threatening (Holsti 1962, 1967; Silverstein and Holt 1989). Information consistent with such images tends to be accepted while discrepant information tends to be discounted, ignored, or assimilated so that it is consistent with the image (Finlay, Holsti, and Fagen 1967; Jervis 1976; Jervis, Lebow, and Stein 1985). Due to the formation of enemy images as a result of an initial issue conflict, a state may begin to assume that the “other” has hostile intentions in regard to additional issues. States that might otherwise have status quo interests may engage in revisionist behavior in regard to new issues vis-à-vis rival states fearing that if they fail to do so, their rival will.³

Furthermore, a state may seek to gain an advantage on a new issue in order to gain leverage over other issues. For example, two states may become competitors due to positional issue conflict—contestation concerning influence over activities and prestige within a system or subsystem (Thompson 1995, 2001; Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson 2008). Due to such competition, a state may seize an area of territory fearing that one’s rival may do so and in order to enhance the ability to project power throughout the region and elevate one’s positional influence. Such behavior may lead to contention over territory in addition to the positional dispute.⁴

Issue conflict initiation and the development of enemy images may also result in a reevaluation of the status quo in relation to other issues. Previously non-threatening realities may now seem threatening, resulting in the establishment of additional issue disagreements. For example, a state’s leaders may not view the presence of another state’s ethnic kin within one’s own boundaries as being problematic as long as the states are not rivals. If states become enemies, leaders may begin to believe that a large presence of their rival’s kin within their state boundaries puts their security at risk. A state may consequently take harsh measures against or seek to expel individuals of their rival’s ethnicity, potentially leading to the development of a new issue conflict in which a state objects to the mistreatment of their ethnic kin residing in another state.⁵

³ Similarly, Wendt (1999) argues that representing the “other” as an enemy may result in states with status quo interests acting as revisionists based on the principle of “kill or be killed.”

Leng (1983) argues that states “learn” that it pays to engage in coercive behavior over repeated crises. Rivals, however, may act aggressively prior to the onset of crises fearing that one’s competitor may gain an upper-hand on a new issue if they fail to act preemptively. Such behavior may lead to crises during which poor crisis management may contribute to the further deterioration of relations.

⁴ Chile and Peru’s rivalry (Thompson 2001), for example, began as a positional contest in 1832 centered on competition over establishing commercial and political dominance of the Pacific Coast (Collier 2003:51–52) with spatial conflict concerning the Tacna-Arica region in the Atacama Desert (Dennis 1931) later accumulating.

⁵ Political leaders may fear that individuals of a rival’s ethnicity might serve as “fifth column.” Upon the cooling of relations between China and Thailand following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, for example, Thai leaders expressed concern that the Chinese minority in Bangkok would engage in subversive activity (Shinn 1989:214). Such fears can lead or contribute to repression. The mass repression of Vietnamese in Cambodia during Pol Pot’s reign, for example, was predicated in part on eliminating enemies that may serve as a fifth column seeking to undermine or overthrow the regime (Nguyen-vo 1992:83). The inhumane treatment of Vietnamese in Cambodia became a source of diplomatic friction between Cambodia and Vietnam leading up to the Vietnamese invasion in 1978 (Haas 1991:59).

Revisionist behavior in relation to new issues is likely to be viewed by rival states as unwarranted aggressiveness. A state's leaders may not perceive that some of their own actions are viewed by others as threatening. As a consequence, another state's aggressive actions on new issues are likely to be viewed as being unprovoked and may be taken as an indication of a rival's irrational malevolence, thereby solidifying and intensifying images of hostility (Jervis 1976).

The emergence of new issues may strain relations in regard to previously established issue disagreements as states view the "other's" aggressive actions in relation to new issues as unprovoked and as an indication that one's competitor has aggressive intentions in relation to earlier established disagreements. For example, a state that seizes territory seeking to gain an advantage over a positional contender may reinforce the contender's perception that their rival is aggressively seeking regional supremacy. The seizure of land may consequently not only initiate competition over territorial concerns, but may also intensify positional competition.

The development of enemy images can lead to an *issue spiral* in which tension increases as multiple issues accumulate. The establishment of an issue conflict and development of an enemy image can lead to issue accumulation, which in turn increases distrust and suspicion of the "other." Tension increases and states may begin to view the "other" as the main problem in settling all disagreements (Senese and Vasquez 2008:17). Issue spirals increase perceptions of fear and distrust, and can lead to the conclusion that the only way to achieve favorable issue settlement in regard to all disagreements is through imposing one's will.

Along with the psychological consequences of issue spirals that may increase the likelihood of war, issue spirals also increase the rationality of a state choosing the option of war in seeking to settle one's disagreements (by leaving one's rival unwilling or unable to continue to compete over relevant issues). Issue accumulation increases the stakes of competition. For example, status and influence are at stake for states competing over positional concerns. If a territorial issue accumulates, valuable resources (for example, oil, water, minerals) may also now be at stake. Given that war is costly, states may be more willing to bear the costs of war when the potential benefits of favorable issue settlement are higher (establishing status/influence *and* acquiring resources, versus only establishing status/influence).⁶

As tension and the rationality of engaging in large-scale militarized conflict increases, a state may initiate war if a rival presses its demands on an issue fearing that failure to demonstrate resolve will lead one's competitor to press its demands on other issues as well. A difficulty of resolving territorial disputes may be that states are hesitant to give in to territorial demands fearing that doing so will encourage other competitors to press their own demands on other issues (Hensel 2000; Walter 2003). Similarly, states may be unwilling to give in to a rival's demand on one issue when multiple salient issues are under contention fearing that doing so will lead one's rival to press its demands on other disagreements.⁷

In this project, I argue that one issue disagreement tends to contribute to the development of another and contention over multiple issues increases the probability that states will engage in militarized conflict. In order to examine issue accumulation it is necessary to rely on an issue typology. The next section consequently discusses an issue categorization scheme utilized to assess the issues under contention in regard to Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s.

⁶ The accumulation of territorial contention among positional rivals occurred, for example, between Chile and Peru (as noted in footnote 4) just prior to the War of the Pacific.

⁷ A state pressing its demands on an issue when there are multiple ongoing disagreements is less likely to invoke a militarized response if the issues at stake are of low salience.

Multidimensional Issue Competition

Research that has examined whether certain issues are more contentious than others has tended to rely on the Correlates of War type of revisionism associated with militarized interstate dispute data in which disputes are classified as being over territory, policy, regime, or some “other” issue (Jones et al. 1996). Territorial disputes involve making claims to territory, policy disputes involve declaring intention not to abide by the policy of another state, and regime disputes involve attempting to overthrow another state’s regime. All militarized interstate disputes from 1816 to 1992 have been coded as being exclusively over one issue or another by the Correlates of War project.⁸ The Arab-Israeli War, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War, for example, each are coded as being territorial disputes while the Sino-Vietnamese War is coded as being a policy dispute.

The Correlates of War approach does not take into account that wars may be driven by multiple issues. The wars that Israel has engaged in with her neighbors seemingly have not only a territorial (and water conflict) dimension, but also an ethnic/religious dimension. Similarly, an examination of Sino-Vietnamese relations may reveal that more than a single policy issue was under contention at the time of war in 1979.

Unlike the Correlates of War approach, data collected on territorial issue conflict by Huth and Allee (2002) and the Issue Correlates of War data on territorial, river, and maritime claims (Hensel, Mitchell, Sowers, and Thyne 2008) allows for the possibility that states may have multiple ongoing issues. Such data also includes measures of issue salience which better enables predicting which disputes are likely to escalate to war. While providing the means for a much deeper investigation of territorial conflict, both projects are currently restricted to the examination of geopolitical issues.

In order to identify relevant territorial and nonterritorial issues of contention, in this study I rely on a typology that extends on work that has categorized rivals as being spatial and/or positional in nature (Thompson 1995, 2001; Colaresi et al. 2008).⁹ Spatial contenders are states with conflicting territorial claims. Positional contenders compete over establishing influence and prestige within a system or subsystem. States may also compete over ideology due to differing political belief systems, or may engage in identity issue conflict in which hostility is rooted in ethnic, religious, or racial animosities or in which a state objects to the perceived mistreatment of individuals of an ethnic minority group in another state (Dreyer 2010).

Along with potentially competing over different types of issues (spatial, positional, ideological, and identity), states may compete over multiple issue claims within each issue type. For example, there may be multiple territorial issue claims among spatial contenders or multiple issue claims related to positional competition. As a consequence, the number of issue claims that states may contend over at any given point in time may be numerous. The analysis of Sino-Vietnamese relations will allow for the possibility not only that China and Vietnam may have engaged in different types of issue competitions simultaneously, but also that the contenders may have engaged in multiple issue disagreements in regard to each type of issue conflict. As the discussion will reveal, Sino-Vietnamese relations can be characterized as centering on spatial, positional, and identity competition, and China and Vietnam engaged in

⁸ Up to two issues have been coded for each state in relation to each dispute from 1993 to 2001. See Ghosh et al. (2004).

⁹ This line of research has demonstrated that there are important empirical differences between spatial and positional rivalries. For example, positional rivals are more likely to war with one another by joining an ongoing dispute, while wars between spatial rivals tend to be dyadic (Colaresi et al. 2008).

multiple spatial issue conflicts and multiple positional issue conflicts, resulting in several issue claims being under contention simultaneously.

The next section will address two related questions. First, does engagement in an issue disagreement tend to contribute to the development of additional issue disagreements? Whether one issue tends to lead to another, in other words, will be examined. Second, does having multiple issues on the agenda tend to result in escalation, de-escalation, or is there no relationship between the number of issues under contention and level of hostility?

The Sino-Vietnamese War

Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s are examined as the primary case for analysis for several reasons. Although territorial issues came under contention between China and Vietnam during the period under investigation, competition over territory was not the primary reason for the Sino-Vietnamese War. Kenny (2002:53) refers to the territorial claims as issues of “secondary importance,” while the Correlates of War identification of the war as a policy dispute indicates that territory was not the central issue of disagreement. Supportive evidence would consequently suggest that the war was due to issue spiral dynamics rather than simply being a war that was due to the salience of territory. Furthermore, an additional case will be briefly presented (Thailand-Vietnam) to examine whether issue spirals in which territory is not an issue under contention tend to lead to escalation and war.

China-Vietnam (along with Thailand-Vietnam) is a case of “strategic rivalry” (Thompson 2001). Strategic rivals view one another as competitors and enemies (Colaesi et al. 2008:3–4). Given the existence of enemy perceptions among rival states and the rivalry issue typology utilized in this project, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings beyond cases of rivalry. Nonetheless, recent research on multidimensional issue conflict suggests that it is not unusual for rivals to contend over multiple issues. Eighty-two strategic rivals have competed over more than a single type of (spatial, positional, ideological, or identity) issue (Dreyer 2010).¹⁰ In regard to geopolitical issues (territorial, river, and maritime claims) in the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe, there are 66 cases of rivalry in which there have been multiple ongoing issue claims (Mitchell and Thies 2010). Such evidence suggests that issue accumulation is relatively common among international rivals. Thus, the findings from the case study may be generalized to a large number of other cases of rivalry.

The Sino-Vietnamese case (as well as the Thailand-Vietnam case) also provides for variation in regard to the variables of interest. As the following discussion will reveal, Sino-Vietnamese relations have varied in regard to the number of issues under contention. Whether an issue disagreement contributed to the development of additional disagreements or whether new issues emerged independent of previous disagreements can consequently be assessed. In relation to levels of hostility, China and Vietnam were at peace with one another in the early 1970s, experienced clashes along the border in the mid-1970s (that did not escalate to full-scale war), and engaged in war in the late 1970s. China and Vietnam consequently experienced eras of low, moderate, and high levels of hostility enabling an investigation of whether hostility levels varied in relation to the number of issues under contention.

A final reason to examine the Sino-Vietnamese case is that the question of why China and Vietnam engaged in war just 4 years after the conclusion of the Second Indochina War following previous years of sustained cooperation constitutes an empirical puzzle. As noted in the introduction, China and

¹⁰ There are ninety-one rivalries driven primarily by a single type of issue.

Vietnam were seemingly close allies during the Vietnam War. Seeking to validate its own communist revolution, the Chinese Communist Party committed itself to supporting revolutionary movements abroad. China and the Soviet Union's support aided the North Vietnamese in their quest for national unification and American withdrawal. Sino-Vietnamese relations from 1950 to 1975 have been described as an "intimate comradeship" (Womack 2006:164–174). Despite such previous high levels of cooperation, China and Vietnam engaged in war in 1979. What caused relations to drastically shift from close allies to rivals at war?

One Issue Leads to Another

As the following discussion will reveal, China and Vietnam contended over several issues during the 1970s. Positional conflicts included Vietnam's shifting allegiance to China's major regional competitor—the Soviet Union, and contention concerning establishing influence over Cambodia. Spatial competition included conflicting claims over border areas, the Gulf of Tonkin, the Paracel Islands, and the Spratly Islands. China and Vietnam also contended over an identity issue in which China objected to the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese residents in Vietnam.

Although China and Vietnam may have appeared to have been close allies throughout the Second Indochina War, cracks in the Sino-Vietnamese alliance began to appear prior to the end of the war. Relations initially became stained due to positional competition in which the Vietnamese believed that China wished to maintain the division of Vietnam in order to dominate Southeast Asia, and the Chinese feared an Indochina dominated by a Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. Vietnam was deeply offended by Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The move toward the normalization of relations between China and Vietnam's principal enemy, the United States, was "massively demoralizing" to Hanoi (Kissinger 1979:711), and caused "irreparable damage" to Sino-Vietnamese relations (Lo 1989:69). The Vietnamese viewed the visit as the second time in which China was "selling out" Vietnam's pursuit of complete unification and liberation (the first being the Geneva Conference on Indochina in 1954) (Lo 1989:69).

The Soviet Union sought to take advantage of the cooling of Sino-Vietnamese relations by expanding influence over Hanoi at China's expense (Ray 1983:50–54). Soviet leaders asserted that Nixon's visit to China was designed to undermine and fracture the socialist camp and that China was seeking to reach an agreement with the United States behind the backs of the Vietnamese. The Soviets pledged continued "fraternal support" to Hanoi and China began fearing encirclement as a result of increased Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation (Gilks 1992:229). An enemy image of Vietnam began to develop as Chinese leaders expressed concern over both Soviet "global hegemonism" and Vietnamese "regional hegemonism" and began viewing Vietnam as an "Asian Cuba" enacting the Soviet's plan of establishing domination over Southeast Asia (Burton 1978–79:699–722; Ray 1983:84).

Similarly, in Vietnam an enemy image of China began solidifying. Vietnam had warned China, "Vietnam is our country; you cannot discuss the Vietnamese issue with the Americans. You have already made one mistake in 1954. Don't make another one" (quoted in Gilks 1992:84). China's disregard of Vietnam's wishes confirmed Vietnamese suspicions that China could not be trusted. Vietnam's government, "perceived the Nixon visit as an act of fathomless betrayal and final proof of a much more insidious agenda on the part of Mao Zedong and the Chinese leadership" (Mulvenon 1995). Pictures of Mao were subsequently removed from shops in Hanoi and ethnic Chinese in Vietnam were looked upon with increasing suspicion (Lo 1989:69).

The initiation of positional issue conflict and burgeoning development of enemy images led to a reevaluation of the status quo in regard to the territorial arrangement along the border and the initiation of spatial claims. Historically, China's border with Vietnam had been amorphous and ethnic groups on both sides enjoyed close relations (Kenny 2002:52). After the turning point in relations following Nixon's visit to China, newfound concerns regarding territorial security (Lo 1989:70) led Chinese leaders to believe that they had to "stabilize the border to make China safe for development" (quoted in Kenny 2002:52). Hanoi accused China of territorial encroachment and China accused Vietnam of creating tension along the border (Lo 1989:70). Clashes are reported as having occurred as early as 1973, the year following Nixon's visit to China (Turley and Race 1980:70-72; Lo 1989:70-72; Nguyen 2006:26). It was only until after China and Vietnam were beginning to view one another as enemies due to the establishment of positional competition that the ill-defined nature of the border came to be viewed as a threat to each state's security.

Along with competition concerning territorial delineation along the border, China and Vietnam also became engaged in spatial competition regarding the Gulf of Tonkin. In December of 1973, Hanoi announced, to China's displeasure, its intention to begin exploration for oil in the Gulf (Chang 1986:24; Duiker 1986:60-61). The dispute has largely been driven by speculation concerning the oil potential of the area (Hood 1992:122). Territorial contention over the Gulf later became overshadowed by the Paracel and Spratly Islands territorial issue conflicts (Hood 1992:129, 134). This at times obscures, however, that the Gulf of Tonkin dispute contributed to the development of the Paracel Islands competition.

Two territorial disagreements emerged at the end of the Second Indochina War, one of which was the Paracel Islands dispute. In January of 1974, China seized control over the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea from South Vietnamese troops. Although Hanoi objected to the Chinese take-over of the Paracels, a formal claim was not issued until the end of the Vietnam War (Lo 1989:85-90; Nguyen 2006:26). China's seizure of the Paracels was due in part to fear that Hanoi would seek to gain control of the islands due to North Vietnam's aggressive actions in regard to the land border and Gulf of Tonkin disputes. Lo (1989:72) argues that a "sense of urgency" was "instilled by the increase in border incidents and the emergence of a dispute over the division of the Tonkin Gulf." China consequently acted in order to preempt Hanoi's claim to the islands (Burton 1978-79:707).

China also seized the islands in part seeking to gain leverage in regard to their positional competition with the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Control over the islands enhanced China's ability to influence regional activities by extending Chinese presence a further 200 miles from the mainland. This provided them with an outpost to monitor Soviet and Vietnamese naval activities in the South China Sea (Hood 1992:129, 134) and influence over a major navigational route (Chen 1987:130). China feared, furthermore, the positional consequences of a Hanoi take-over of the Paracels in conjunction with Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation. Lo (1989:78) argues, "the most plausible rationale for the Paracels operation was that it constituted China's response to changes in the strategic situation of the South China Sea. By the early 1970s, China's concern with the increase in Soviet influence in the region, including Soviet naval activities in the South China Sea, had been growing. In this context, the strategic value of the mid-ocean islands, which commanded major sea-lanes, was highlighted. The concurrent deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations and emergence of territorial disputes between the two countries linked the disputes over the Paracel and Spratly Islands to China's concern with the Soviet threat to its security. The Paracels operation was

launched to forego any future possibility of Soviet influence in these islands via the co-operation of Hanoi." The Chinese consequently seized the Paracel Islands in part to enhance their regional stature and to prevent Vietnam and the Soviet Union from gaining a positional advantage through Vietnamese control over the islands and Soviet cooperation with Vietnam.

The second territorial disagreement that emerged between China and Vietnam at the end of the Second Indochina War was the Spratly Islands dispute. Saigon seized control over five features of the Spratly Islands in August of 1973 (Kenny 2002:66; Fravel 2008:278), which China claimed to be "a wanton infringement on China's territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Lo 1989:57). Following the Paracel operation, Saigon took control over additional features in the Spratlys. Hanoi was preoccupied with the Second Indochina War at the time and did not issue a formal claim over the islands (Kenny 2002:66). At the end of the war in April of 1975, however, Hanoi occupied the islands resulting in the initiation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's territorial issue conflict with China over the Spratlys (Hood 1992:125).

Similar to the Paracel Islands dispute, contention over the Spratlys in part emerged from positional considerations. Vietnam and the Soviet Union desired Vietnamese control over the islands in order to enhance the ability to project power into the South China Sea (Lo 1989:78). The Soviets encouraged the occupation of the Spratlys by issuing government studies that predicted that there were huge oil reserves under the islands (Kenny 2002:66) and by providing Vietnam with diplomatic support in relation to the claim (Chen 1987:110). The capture of the islands was also a "response" to China's Paracel operation (Womack 2006:182), and consequently emerged in part due to contention over an earlier established territorial issue as well.

A second positional issue conflict emerged in 1975 in which China and Vietnam began competing for influence over Cambodia (Kampuchea) (Ross 1988:244). Both Vietnam and China had their favorite leaders in Phnom Penh who were friendly to their country's interests. When the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia in 1975, the new regime formed close relations with China. Kampuchean leaders sought Chinese assistance in order to protect Cambodia against the alleged Vietnamese plan of "incorporating Kampuchea into a new Indochinese empire" (quoted in Ray 1983:67-68).

China's desire for close relations and a pro-Chinese regime in Cambodia grew out of the objective of preventing Vietnam and the Soviet Union from gaining an upper hand in regard to China's positional competition with the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. China's establishment of friendly relations with the Khmer Rouge placed limits on Vietnamese and Soviet influence over Southeast Asia. Preempting Vietnamese control over Cambodia contributed to the goal of preventing encirclement (Ross 1988:246).

Territorial competition, furthermore, contributed to creating a psychological atmosphere of fear and distrust, which made each state wary of the other's intentions in regard to Kampuchea. Vietnamese leaders concluded that, "China's insistence on an exclusive right to all the South China Sea islands" (along with China's refusal to accept the legacy of French colonialism), "clearly implied that Beijing was not about to acquiesce to a dominant Vietnamese position in either Kampuchea or Laos." Chinese leaders felt that Vietnam's territorial conflicts with China and Kampuchea "revealed Hanoi's expansionist designs in the region," which contributed to Chinese concern over Vietnam's intentions in regard to Kampuchea (Chang 1986:45-46).

While initially rooted in positional and spatial concerns, China's rivalry with Vietnam later also became driven by identity issue conflict in which China objected to the mistreatment of ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam (*Hoa*). Vietnam's policies toward the *Hoa* included the seizing of assets, denial of the

right to choose one's citizenship voluntarily, the reduction of food rations, withholding of jobs, imposition of extraordinarily high taxes, mass arrests, killings, forced deportations, etc. (Amer 1991). Although the violation of Hoa rights began earlier, China did not raise the issue formally (that is, diplomatically) until 1978 (Benoit 1981:50; Cima 1989:219).

The identity dispute arose in part out of a reevaluation of the status quo following the establishment of China and Vietnam as rivals. While Vietnam had not previously viewed the Hoa as a threat to Vietnamese security, as China and Vietnam were beginning to view one another as enemies, Vietnam worried that China would rely on the Hoa as a "fifth column" that would seek to undermine local government authority in the event of war with China. Such concerns contributed to the harsh measures taken against the Hoa and their expulsion from Vietnam (Elliot 1981:10-11; Ross 1988:241).

Identity issue conflict emerged in part, furthermore, out of Vietnam seeking to gain leverage over the border dispute. In 1977, Vietnam instituted a policy of "purification" along the border in which all Chinese and non-Vietnamese residents in border areas were expelled from Vietnam under the rationale that if ethnic Vietnamese exclusively resided in disputed border areas that it would diminish the legitimacy of China's border claims (Chang 1986:45; Chen 1987:49). Such forced deportations contributed to the development of the identity dispute, which was the final issue to accumulate between China and Vietnam in the 1970s.

The examination of Sino-Vietnamese relations during the decade suggests that one issue disagreement tended to contribute to the development of another. Figure 1 depicts the sequence in which issues accumulated. Relations initially began to deteriorate due to Soviet/Vietnamese-Chinese positional competition in which the Vietnamese believed that China wished for Vietnam to remain divided and in a subservient position vis-à-vis China in Southeast Asia, while China feared Soviet-Vietnamese regional domination and encirclement. The initiation of positional issue conflict and emerging development of an enemy image of the "other" resulted in a reevaluation of the status quo concerning the border and initiation of spatial issue conflict. A dispute over the Gulf of Tonkin also emerged, and competition over the land border and the Gulf resulted in China taking action to prevent Hanoi from gaining control over the Paracel Islands. China, furthermore, sought to gain an advantage in regard to the positional competition with the Soviet-Vietnam alliance by enhancing their ability to project power into the South China Sea and by preventing heightened Soviet-Vietnamese stature via Vietnamese sovereignty over the Paracels and Soviet cooperation with Vietnam. The SRV's occupation of the Spratlys similarly emerged from positional concerns regarding the enhanced ability to influence regional activities and as a "response" to China's Paracel operation.

Issue	Year of Initiation
Positional: Vietnam/Soviet-China Competition	1972
Spatial: Land Border	1973
Spatial: Gulf of Tonkin	1973
Spatial: Paracel Islands	1975
Spatial: Spratly Islands	1975
Positional: Cambodia	1975
Identity: Violation of Hoa Rights	1978

FIG. 1. Sino-Vietnamese Issue Accumulation

(Notes. Each issue remained under contention from initiation through the 1979 war.)

The second positional dispute, which concerned influence over Cambodia, grew out of the earlier established positional competition between China and Vietnam/the Soviet Union in which China hoped to limit the alliance's influence over Southeast Asia and prevent encirclement. Territorial competition, furthermore, made both China and Vietnam suspicious of the "other's" intentions regarding Kampuchea. The identity dispute, lastly, emerged due to a reevaluation of the status quo concerning the large presence of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam following the establishment of enemy images and also out of Vietnam seeking to gain leverage on the border dispute.

The analysis in this section suggests that the establishment of an issue disagreement can contribute to the development of additional issue competitions. The next section examines the consequences of having multiple issues on the agenda at once after one issue has led to another. Does the establishment of new issue disagreements strain relations in regard to previously established disagreements? Do new issues that emerge from previous disagreements take on an importance in their own right? Does contention over multiple issues contribute to the outbreak of war?

Escalation and War

Concerning China and Vietnam, the establishment of new issue disagreements worsened relations in regard to earlier established issue conflicts. Once the border dispute emerged, Vietnam received the "full support" of the Soviet Union, which transferred military equipment to the Vietnamese and reprimanded the Chinese for border incursions (Chen 1992:144). In regard to the South China Sea territorial disputes, Vietnam similarly turned to the Soviet Union for support (Rich 2003:481–482). Increasingly close collaboration between Vietnam and the Soviet Union on territorial issues heightened Chinese concern regarding the potential of Soviet/Vietnamese regional hegemony and consequently intensified positional competition.

Vietnam's actions in regard to the Gulf of Tonkin and the Hoa similarly increased Chinese worry over the potential for Soviet-Vietnamese collusion. In a thinly veiled reference to the Soviet Union, Chinese leaders demanded that, "no third country be allowed to conduct prospecting in the Bac Bo (Tonkin) Gulf" (quoted in Lo 1989:72). In regard to Vietnam's mistreatment of the Hoa, the Chinese stated that, "behind every anti-Chinese step taken by the Vietnamese authorities is the large shadow of Soviet imperialism" (quoted in Rich 2003:482). The Gulf of Tonkin and identity disputes increased China's suspicion that Vietnam was acting as the Soviet Union's agent in the Soviet/Vietnamese quest for regional dominance.

The identity dispute, furthermore, exacerbated relations in regard to the previously established border dispute. As noted above, the identity issue emerged in part due to Vietnam's policy of expelling non-Vietnamese residents from contested border areas. As the border area was cleared, violent incidents intensified as the Chinese attempted to retain control over disputed land. While the Vietnamese sought to resolve the border issue by expelling ethnic Chinese, such actions instead further increased Chinese resistance and resulted in escalation along the border (Chen 1987:49–50).

Competition over disputed issues intensified in the months prior to war. Border incidents mounted and increasing numbers of Hoa were expelled from Vietnam. The Soviet Union and Vietnam signed a formal alliance, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, on November 2, 1978, seemingly confirming Chinese fears concerning encirclement via Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation. The struggle over Cambodia came to a head with Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea on Christmas Day, 1978. Less than 2 months later, the Sino-Vietnamese War began.

The escalation of relations followed a general pattern in which as issues accumulated, relations increasingly soured. Border incidents began in 1973 and intensified in following years (Chen 1987:49–50) in correspondence with the establishment of additional issue claims. At the point in which China and Vietnam engaged in war in 1979, as many as seven issues were on the agenda. Womack (2006:192) argues that the issues that led to the Sino-Vietnamese War include, “the Vietnamese alliance with the Soviet Union, Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, Vietnam’s mistreatment and expulsion of ethnic Chinese, and territorial disputes.” This corresponds with the issues identified in this analysis—the two positional issues (the Vietnamese-Soviet competition and Cambodia), the identity issue (the mistreatment of the Hoa), and conflicting territorial claims (the land border, Gulf of Tonkin, Paracel Islands, and Spratly Islands). Other scholars identify the same set of issues as contributing to the breakdown of Sino-Vietnamese relations (Burton 1978–79; Duiker 1986; Kenny 2002). The analysis herein is consequently consistent with descriptive historical accounts of the war.

Each issue disagreement contributed to the outbreak of the militarized conflict. The positional issue disputes were undoubtedly important. China’s positional competition with Vietnam and the Soviet Union was the first established issue of contention (from which additional issues emerged) and Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia was a catalyst to the outbreak of major militarized conflict. Scholars have emphasized, however, that the other issues were important as well. Amer (1999:99) argues, for example, that although it was previously assumed that competition for influence over Cambodia was the major reason for the deterioration of relations that, “it is highly unlikely that China and Vietnam would have perceived the other party’s influence in Cambodia and Laos so negatively if their bilateral relations had not already been tense over other issues.” Burton (1978–79:720) similarly argues that although the Soviet factor and Cambodian disputes were important causes of the war that, “it is incorrect in downplaying the significance of the border and territorial disputes, the overseas Chinese questions and other internal variables.”

Rather than emphasizing the importance of a particular issue that led to the Sino-Vietnamese war, historical accounts have stressed that the conflict was due to contention over multiple issues. Pike (1989:258) describes the war as resulting from what China considered to be, “a collection of provocative actions and policies on Hanoi’s part.” Burton (1978–79:720) states that the “issues involved in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict are numerous and complex.” Duiker (1986:89) believes that, “it is clear that there were several factors involved in the breakdown in Sino-Vietnamese relations.” One discussion of the war invokes the Chinese proverb that, “it takes more than 1 day to accumulate three feet of ice” (Lawson 1984:311), which is consistent the notion that it was the gradual accumulation of multiple issue disagreements that eventually led to war.

Along with reinforcing and intensifying fear and distrust, issue accumulation increased the stakes of contention between China and Vietnam. The potential benefits to China of engaging in war—rolling back the Vietnamese advance in Cambodia, reducing Vietnamese and Soviet influence in Southeast Asia, securing sovereignty over disputed territories, and protecting ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam—were much higher than they had previously been when only a single or a few issues were under contention. The accumulation of issues increased the potential benefits of engaging in war, which likely increased the willingness of China to bear the costs of war seeking favorable issue settlement through the imposition of force.

When Vietnam invaded Cambodia, China feared that failure to demonstrate resolve would lead to Vietnam pressing its demands on other issues as well.

Numerous historical accounts of the war have emphasized China's stated intention to "teach Vietnam a lesson" (Duiker 1986; Cima 1989; Ross 1991:1172; Chen 1992:150–151; Hood 1992:50; Amer 1999:72). Chinese leaders hoped to demonstrate that China "cannot be pushed around" (quoted in Garrett 1981:211) and that "*any* challenge to Chinese power in Indochina would fail" (emphasis added, Ross 1991:1172) in the hopes of preventing further Vietnamese attempts at revising the status of any issue. Failure to punish Vietnam for pressing its positional claim concerning Cambodia could have led (China feared) to additional challenges on other issues under contention.

It was not the particularly salient nature of territorial competition (Vasquez 1993) that alone led to the Sino-Vietnamese War. Although spatial issues played a role in the escalation of relations as discussed, the other issues were as important, if not more important, than the territorial claims. Kenny (2002:53) argues that Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union, the invasion of Cambodia, and the mistreatment of the Hoa were "principal causes" of the war while territorial issues played a "secondary role." The Correlates of War categorization of the Sino-Vietnamese War as a "policy" dispute (Jones et al. 1996) similarly indicates the importance of nonterritorial competition in regard to escalation to war.

Furthermore, there are cases of issue spirals that escalate to war in which territory is not an issue of contention. For example, engagement in positional competition and the accumulation of ideological issue conflict preceded Thailand's involvement in the Second Indochina War. The next section briefly reviews issue spiral dynamics in the context of the nonterritorial Thailand-Vietnam rivalry.

Thailand's Involvement in the Vietnam War

In an initial period of rivalry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Thompson 2001), Thailand (Siam) and Vietnam contended for influence over Cambodia and Laos (Seekins 1990:14–15; Dommen 1994:3). Such competition subsided as France replaced Siam as the dominant power in the region and created the so-called Indochinese Union consisting of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the late nineteenth century (Buttinger 1972:63; Savada 1994:xxx). Yet Siam retained ambitions of establishing regional hegemony. During World War II, through Japanese assistance Thailand was able to temporarily recover some of its lost control over Laos and Cambodia from France (Wilson 1970: 26–30; Seekins 1989:29–30). Following the end of the war, Thailand set out to reestablish itself as the "leader among independent nations" in Southeast Asia (Nuechterlein 1965:94, 138). Hoping in particular to regain influence in Laos and Cambodia, Thailand supported a coup attempt in Laos, provided Sihanouk's government in Cambodia with arms and ammunition, and proposed a union of Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand (Fineman 1997).

Vietnam, however, also had aspirations of regional leadership. Since the 1930s, the Indochinese Communist Party advocated the establishment of a federation between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This was expressed after 1951 as the goal of working toward the establishment of a "special relationship" after decolonization in which Vietnam would lead an Indochinese federation that included Cambodia and Laos (Duiker 1986:65–66; Pike 1987:206; Cima 1989:214).

Along with competition concerning regional leadership, Thailand and Vietnam became ideological competitors following the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a communist state in 1954. Thai leaders were convinced that Communist China and North Vietnam posed the greatest threats to their state's security (Nuechterlein 1965:139). Fears of heightened Vietnamese positional stature through the spread of communism in Southeast Asia prompted Thailand to work toward preventing the establishment of additional communist

regimes in the region. For example, by 1960, Thailand's Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat concluded that failure to establish an anti-communist regime in Laos would result in Laos falling into the North Vietnamese and Chinese spheres of influence (Nuechterlein 1965). Thailand consequently supported efforts to install an ideologically friendly regime in Laos in order to prevent Vietnam from gaining leverage over the positional competition through the further spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

The potential for the unification of Vietnam under communist rule conflicted with Thailand's ideological goals and would increase Vietnam's regional stature. Both ideological and positional claims were consequently at risk. It was believed, furthermore, that North Vietnamese success could create a domino effect in which additional states in the region would fall to communism (Weatherbee 2008:112). Militarized confrontation could discourage further future attempts of revisionism in which Vietnam would aggressively seek positional and ideological goals by conveying that there would be costs associated with such behavior.

Thailand became directly involved in the Second Indochina War, contributing over 11,000 troops to the military effort at the peak of involvement in Vietnam (Weatherbee 2008:350). The lack of territorial conflict between Thailand and Vietnam demonstrates that war can occur due to issue spirals even in the absence of competition over territory. Similar to the Sino-Vietnamese War, Thailand's involvement in the Vietnam War was due to contention over multiple issues and out of fear of the consequences of failing to demonstrate resolve.

Conclusion

States contend over a variety of issues. Scholars have examined differences across issues in relation to the likelihood of militarized conflict and have determined that territorial disputes are more likely to escalate to war than policy or regime disputes (Hensel 1996; Vasquez and Henehan 2001; Senese and Vasquez 2008; Vasquez and Valeriano 2008). Such research has demonstrated that there is utility to examining issue variation in relation to interstate competition.

Yet instead of war being over one issue or another, war may at times be the result of a dynamic process in which multiple issues accumulate over time. It may be multidimensional issue competition rather than competition over a particular type of issue that tends to lead to war. In this study, it is argued that war is at times the result of an *issue spiral*—a dynamic process in which tension increases as multiple issues accumulate. The establishment of an issue disagreement and development of an enemy image of the “other” can lead to states acting aggressively in regard to new issues in order to gain an advantage over one's competitor or to prevent the “other” from doing so. Such actions contribute to the solidification of the perception that the “other” has hostile intentions regarding earlier established disagreements. New issues may also arise as the development of an enemy image results in a reevaluation of the status quo. As issues accumulate, tension increases and states may conclude that the “other” is the main problem in settling all disagreements. Issue accumulation also increases the stakes of competition and consequently increases the willingness of states to engage in war due to the potential of securing enhanced benefits. Seeking to demonstrate resolve, a state may initiate large-scale militarized conflict reacting to a rival pushing its demands on an issue in order to prevent a competitor's further engagement in revisionist behavior on other issues under contention.

The analysis of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s supports the expectations of the issue spiral perspective. Issue disagreements tend to contribute to

the development of additional disagreements. China's positional competition with Vietnam and the Soviet Union led to the development of the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands disputes in which each side sought to increase their ability to influence activities in the region through enhancing their presence in the South China Sea. China engaged in the Paracel operation, furthermore, to preempt Vietnam from extending territorial sovereignty after Vietnam had revealed its aggressive territorial ambitions (as perceived by China) due to the earlier land border and Gulf of Tonkin contests. Similarly, the SRV's occupation of the Spratlys was in part to prevent further Chinese acquisition of territory after the Paracel operation.

Competition over Cambodia emerged in part due to both China and the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance seeking to gain leverage over the earlier established positional issue conflict. Each was also suspicious of the other's intentions in regard to Kampuchea due to territorial disagreements. The identity dispute similarly emerged in part from previous disagreements in which Vietnam attempted to gain an advantage on the land border dispute by expelling ethnic Chinese from contested areas.

New issues also emerged in part due to reevaluations of the status quo following the establishment of enemy images. The amorphous border was not viewed as being particularly troublesome until after the downturn in relations following the emergence of positional competition and development of rivalry. The large presence of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam similarly was not seen as being especially threatening until after China and Vietnam were beginning to view one another as enemies and Vietnamese leaders feared that the Hoa could compromise internal security in the event of war with China.

The establishment of new disagreements contributed to the deterioration of relations in regard to earlier established issues. As territorial disagreements emerged, Vietnam turned to the Soviet Union for support, thereby reinforcing Chinese fears concerning encirclement and intensifying positional competition. The Vietnamese policy of expelling non-Vietnamese residents in contested areas, furthermore, contributed to the escalation of relations along the border (that is, the intensification of the border dispute).

Sino-Vietnamese relations followed a general pattern in which levels of hostility increased as issues accumulated. China and Vietnam were at peace with one another in the early 1970s. Border clashes began in 1973 and increased in intensity and frequency as issues accumulated. Seven issues were on the agenda when China and Vietnam finally engaged in war in 1979.

The new issues that emerged from previous disagreements took on an importance of their own right once established and each issue disagreement contributed to the outbreak of war. Rather than the militarized conflict being primarily over a particular issue, positional, territorial, and identity issues all fueled the deterioration of relations. Not only did the accumulation of issues increase tension, but it also increased the potential benefits of victory at war, enhancing the willingness of China to initiate militarized conflict.

As tension and the rationality of engaging in large-scale militarized conflict increased due to issue spiral dynamics, China initiated war to "teach Vietnam a lesson" following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Failure to demonstrate resolve on a salient issue may invite one's rival to push its demands on additional issues. In initiating war, China sought to demonstrate that attempts at revisionism would fail in order to discourage Vietnam from pressing its claims on other issues under contention as well.

The analysis suggests that rather than examining militarized conflict from a static perspective and in relation to the primary issue of importance at stake that it may at times be necessary to examine dynamic interstate relations and multidimensional issue conflict. My argument is consistent with the "volcano model" of

enduring rivalry in which tension builds (as issues accumulate) until there is an explosion (outbreak of severe militarized conflict) (Goertz and Diehl 1998; Diehl and Goertz 2000:168–172). This is accordant with an increasing or convex pattern of rivalry evolution in which levels of hostility increase over time or increase to a point after which the rivalry “withers away” (Diehl and Goertz 2000: 169–172). Issue accumulation that occurs rapidly upon the establishment of rivalry may help explain instances of militarized conflict and war that occur near rivalry initiation, after which levels of hostility may fluctuate around a basic rivalry level barring further accumulation.

The issue spiral perspective highlights the importance of settling initial disagreements quickly given the likelihood that failure to do so will lead to the accumulation of additional issues, escalation, and militarized conflict. Once a spiral is set in motion, due to increasing levels of hostility and distrust, it becomes increasingly unlikely that mediation will be successful. If initial mediation efforts fail, it may be only after sustained conflict and failure to resolve issues through uses of force that states may come to the conclusion that compromise is preferable to the continuation of conflict (Grieg 2001).

Issue salience may affect the likelihood that an issue spiral will escalate to war. The ICOW project has developed measures to gauge levels of tangible and intangible salience for geopolitical issues (Hensel and Mitchell 2005). Militarized conflict is more likely over highly salient geopolitical claims than less salient geopolitical claims (Hensel et al. 2008). Developing ways of measuring the salience of nonterritorial issues will be necessary to fully examine the effects of issue salience on the dynamics of issue spirals in which states compete over both territorial and nonterritorial issues.

Along with developing further ways of examining issue salience, there are other avenues for future exploration. Several questions remain unanswered, including, what causes the establishment of an initial issue disagreement? What strategies can states employ to prevent issue accumulation? How can states effectively manage multiple ongoing claims? These questions and others will need to be addressed in order to move toward more fully understanding not only the causes of conflict, but also the conditions necessary for establishing sustained peace.

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