

VIETNAMESE THOUGHT ON CHINESE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

The rapid rise of China's power and influence in the twenty-first century challenging the unipolar system led by the United States has led to a debate about the appropriate role of China in the world's system and the possible emergence of a new Chinese international relations theory (IRT). The majority of Western and Chinese scholars maintain that there is no general knowledge-oriented Chinese IRT, only action-oriented theory. As late comers to the study of international relations, Vietnamese intellectuals show a lack of awareness about the debate on Chinese new IRT. However, familiarity with Chinese classic and popular texts as well as a long history of dealing with China provides them with a deep understanding of Chinese world view, strategic thought, grand lines of foreign policy, and practices of interstate relations otherwise known as Chinese action-oriented theory. This article analyzes how Vietnamese intellectuals, both inside and outside of the party, including dissidents and overseas Vietnamese, understand and respond to what they perceive to be Chinese action-oriented IRT and its implementation.

Debate about the State of Chinese New International Relations Theory

The rapid rise of China's power and influence in the twenty-first century challenging the unipolar system led by the United States has led to a debate about the appropriate role of China in the world's system and the possible emergence of a new Chinese international relations theory (IRT).

Most Western scholars do not think a Chinese IRT exists. While recognizing that the field of IR studies in China has "come a long way," and today has "developed considerably over the past 30 years," David Shambaugh, in his important analysis, focuses on the development of IR "studies," but not the development of IR "theory," in China.¹

Chinese scholars began to discuss IRT since the mid-1980s. Older scholars, such as Hu Menghao and Huan Xiang talk about two schools of IRT: The Western bourgeois IRT and Marxist or socialist IRT. Most younger scholars and a small number of senior scholars believe that an IRT should be "scientific, universal, and generally acknowledged." The first group maintains that there has been a Chinese IRT since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) based on Marxism-Leninism and the thought and theory of Chinese leaders, such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping; and promotes the development of an IRT with Chinese characteristics. The second group argues that there are only international studies in China, but no Chinese IRT because Chinese leaders have "articulated many strategic viewpoints on international issues but offered no theoretical framework or theory;" and that "practical or policy-oriented theoretical studies have made great progress since the 1980s but they do not

constitute a theory” defined as “a scientific framework for analyzing international policies and international relations”² or, in the words of Qin Yaqing, the process of “abstracting away from the facts of day-to-day events in an attempt to find patterns and group things together into sets and classes of things.”³

From this group a small number of scholars, such as Yan Xuetong and Song Xinling, go back to the pre-Qin era in China to search for theories and practices that could be called Chinese contributions to the study of international relations. Yan Xuetong and his colleagues employ the pre-Qin thought to make philosophical and political arguments about how China will rise, and China’s world leadership characterized by the kingly way (*wang dao*) will lead to world peace.⁴ While Song Xinling explains how the study of Chinese traditional thinking could benefit the development of an IRT in the world, he insists that “There has been no general IRT in China yet, although many scholars are doing their best in theoretical research. Practical or policy-oriented theoretical studies have made great progress since the 1980s, but they do not constitute a theory.”⁵

Another scholar, Qin Yaqing, believes that a Chinese IRT is “likely and even inevitable to emerge,” but he also reinforces Song’s conclusion pointing to three factors which have prevented the development of a Chinese IRT, namely the “unconsciousness of ‘international-ness’ in the traditional Chinese world view, the dominance of the Western IRT discourse in the Chinese academic community, and the absence of a consistent theoretical core in the Chinese IR research.”⁶ Again, in a long essay on “Development of International Relations theory in China: progress through debates,” highlighting three major debates since 1978, he also concludes that “a Chinese IRT school is yet to emerge,” and that debates on IRT in China in the last 30 years have been “shaped and dominated” by American IRT.⁷

However, by making a distinction between knowledge-oriented theory which provides a “perspective to understand the world and an achievement of knowledge production or reproduction,” and action-oriented theory defined as “guidelines for action,” Qin does recognize the existence of Chinese action-oriented theory, such as Mao’s “leaning to one side” and his theory on the “three worlds.”⁸

Vietnamese Understanding of Chinese International Relations Theory

Tap Chí Cộng Sản (Communist Review), a theoretical journal of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), in its electronic version from January 2001 to January 2007, covering a total of 122 issues, contains no article touching on new Chinese IRT and very little on the China model, except a few articles suggesting that Vietnam can learn from the Chinese experience.⁹ Another link to the list of contents (no text available) of TCCS from May 2011 to April 2015 gives the same negative result.¹⁰

A search of google.com.vn on “Yan Xuetong,” the author of a much-debated book on *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, finds no articles or books written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese scholars, except a blog posting a reply in English by a Vietnamese-American professor teaching in the United States to Yan’s op-ed on “How China Can Defeat America,” in the *New York Times*, November 20, 2011.¹¹

Searching “Lý thuyết quan hệ quốc tế Trung Quốc” (Chinese international relations theory) leads to one relevant site containing a single Vietnamese translation of Chinese military strategy from “foreign documents” (*Lý thuyết quân sự Trung Hoa*).¹²

Conversations with Vietnamese experts, diplomats, government officials, scholars working in government think tanks, academics (including those who teach international relations), and overseas Vietnamese experts who returned and worked in Vietnam during the author’s visits to Vietnam in the last two years found no one who was aware of a new Chinese IRT.

One of those scholars, Professor Nguyễn Thiết Sơn, of Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, suggested that one could find Chinese “brilliant concepts and practices” on how to succeed in inter-personal as well as inter-state relations in a book, *Quyền Mưu Thần Bí*.¹³

Quyền Mưu Thần Bí (Mystical Stratagems) is, in fact, a Vietnamese translation of the Chinese-language book, “The Great Classics of Chinese Mystical Culture,” by Zhao Guo Hua and Liu Jian Guo.¹⁴ The book retells the strategies, tactics, plots, schemes, and tricks used by princes and strategists in their struggle for power during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period in China, from 770 BC to 221 BC. It makes a distinction between *wang dao* (kingly way or rule by morality) and *ba dao* (hegemonic way or rule by force). It highlights the practice of alliance formation and balance of power pitting the *lienheng* (forming vertical alliances) against the *hezong* (forming vertical alliances), and the strategy of *yuanjiao jingong* (making alliance with distant states, while attacking the ones that are nearby), etc... These familiar tactics and practices are also mentioned in a more recent discussion by Yongjin Zhang.¹⁵

At almost the same time, a professor at the Ministry of Defense’s Institute of Politics, Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh, in a lecture on the East Sea (Vietnam calls the South China Sea the East Sea because it is in the East of Vietnam’s coast) to an audience of deans and professors drawn from Hanoi’s many universities on December 19, 2012, remarked that Chinese leaders repeatedly said “China and Vietnam share mountains and rivers, similar ideology, a common culture, and interrelated destinies. In practice, while they shake our hands, there are kicking us with their feet.” The colonel told his audience that if they wanted to understand Chinese behavior, they must study the practice of six “extra-ordinary” Chinese strategists, namely Jiang Zi Ya, Sun Zi, Cao, Sun Yatsen, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping. In addition to China’s old practices, Colonel Thanh also explained current Chinese strategy, such as hiding oneself, biding for time, peaceful rise, applying the tactic of “shaking the tree to scare the monkey” to encroach on the East Sea.¹⁶

These two cases show that while Vietnamese scholars are unaware of the existence of a Chinese IRT, they are quite familiar with Chinese traditional strategic thought and use it to analyze and deal with domestic and international relations. They are also familiar with the grand lines of Chinese contemporary foreign policy. In other words, they recognize and understand very well what Western scholars view as Chinese action-oriented theory of IR.

Two factors explain this lack of knowledge about the so-called new Chinese IRT. First, the study of IR in Vietnam is new. The faculty of international relations at Vietnam National University in Hanoi was created separately from the Department of World History only in 1995 in response to

the need of Vietnam's open foreign policy and its extension of relations with the West; and its counterpart in Ho Chi Minh City was established much later, in 2003. The new trend in studying international relations in Vietnam is to go beyond the study of the world view of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism to the study of western IRT. Second, since most Western scholars do not recognize the existence of a new Chinese IRT and the debate about IRT in China has been "shaped and dominated" by American IRT, the few Vietnamese students sent to study IR in the West, particularly the United States, are mostly exposed to theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism and not to the development of new Chinese IRT.

This study will survey Vietnamese thought on traditional Chinese strategic thinking and on more contemporary Chinese action-oriented theory, such as the China model, peaceful rise and peaceful development, building a harmonious world, and the great renaissance of the Chinese nation...

Vietnamese Thought on the China Model

1. China as revolutionary country

China not only provided shelter and a base for Vietnamese patriots in their struggle against French colonialism before 1945 but was also a source of inspiration for Vietnamese revolutionaries, both communists and anticommunists, who wanted to modernize the country and get rid of French colonialism. While Vietnamese nationalists embraced the model of Sun Yat Sen's Republican revolution which led to the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, Vietnamese communists, except for the first few years, subscribed to Mao Zedong's model of Communist revolution which led to the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

According to King C. Chen, in 1902 Phan Bội Châu, one of the most important leaders of the developing Vietnamese nationalist movement, was the "first man to direct revolution in his country from Canton." Since then Canton had become "the Mecca" for Vietnamese nationalists.¹⁷ Châu later was so impressed by the 1911 revolution in China that he abandoned his advocacy of constitutional monarchism and embraced Sun Yat-sen's republicanism.¹⁸

Chinese-language books on the 1911 Chinese Revolution, Sun Yat-sen, and his three people's principles (nationalism, democracy, people's welfare) were translated into Vietnamese and served as the ideology of Nam Đồng Thư Xã (Nam Đồng Literary Group) and later, the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDD or Vietnamese Nationalist Party) which was formed in 1927.¹⁹

VNQDD, according to Chen, was "the most important revolutionary organization in Indochina at that time" and "influenced by the Chinese Kuomintang, the party's organization was modeled on the Chinese party –it adopted the same name (nationalist party); it was based on the same doctrines (The People's Three Principles of Sun Yat-sen); and it was resolved to throw off French domination by force with Chinese aid."²⁰

Nguyễn Tường Bách, a leader of the anti-communist VNQDD, who led the party's retreat into China after being defeated by the Viet Minh (Vietnam Independence League) in the 1945-1946 interparty struggle recognized the support of the "Chinese people" for Vietnam's struggle for

independence. He acknowledged, “For a long period of time, the Chinese people has approved and supported our struggle for national independence. That was a historical fact; without this support, Vietnamese patriots would not have a place to live and survive”²¹

At the dawn of the 20th century anti-feudalism and anti-colonialism were shared goals of both China and Vietnam. Vietnamese revolutionaries valued the model of the 1911 Chinese Republican Revolution; and Chinese people and government appreciated and supported Vietnam’s struggle against Western colonialism. Bach quoted a high-ranking official of Guangdong’s provincial committee as saying when Bach requested to stay in China after the communist victory, “You are an important personality of Vietnam. To us, the important thing is you have participated in the struggle against colonialism.”²²

When Chinese communists took control of the mainland in 1949, the communist-led Viet Minh began to rely heavily on China for support and advice during its resistance war against France. In 1951 the Indochinese Communist Party, which had been dissolved in 1945, was revived in the form of the *Lao Động* Party (Workers’ Party), Chairman Ho Chi Minh, in his political report to the Party Congress, made clear that “The Workers’ Party of Vietnam adheres to Marxism-Leninism and regards Mao Zedong thought as its compass.” Then, at the Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party in January 1953, Ho enthusiastically presented an array of statistics about the success of socialist building in China. In the end, the plenum endorsed a resolution to launch a Chinese-style land reform in 1953.²³

Vietnam began to emulate China’s revolutionary experience. Land reform, class struggle, and protracted warfare were carried out with the assistance of Chinese advisers. In foreign relations, Vietnam also adopted Mao’s “leaning to one side” position and his theory of “three worlds.” It joined the non-alignment movement of Third World countries and adopted the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist line. This was the golden period in the history of Vietnam–China relations.

Hồ Chí Minh was quoted as saying that Vietnam and China shared the “same culture and the same race;” that both were “exploited” [by colonialism] and shared “a common noble goal which is to struggle for national independence and socialism.”²⁴

Hồ gushingly praised the China model of revolution: “The success of the Chinese revolution and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China was the greatest event in human history, following the October revolution in Russia...” he said. “The shining example of the Chinese revolution has enlightened the revolutionary struggle of Vietnam... The people of Vietnam learned from our Chinese brothers their indomitable revolutionary will, their courageous fighting spirit, and their endurance of hardship to rebuild the nation”²⁵

The conflict between the Soviet Union and China which broke out into the open in 1960 put Vietnamese leaders in a difficult position and caused a rift in their position toward China. While Hồ wanted to walk a tight rope between the two communist giants and tried to reconcile them, Party Secretary General Lê Duẩn began to lean toward China in 1963 and was behind the campaign against “revisionist, anti-party” elements purging pro-Soviet elements within the party.²⁶ The Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party meeting in December 1963 passed resolution number 9 affirming that Vietnam did not take side in the Sino-Soviet

conflict. But only one month later, in January 1964, at a meeting of 400 party cadres, Politburo member Trường Chinh told them that, due to the complex situation within the world communist movement, resolution number 9 “could not list everything that needed to be said;” and that the thing that was not said was, in reality, “our domestic and foreign policy are fundamentally in agreement with the domestic and foreign policy of the Communist Party and the State of China.”²⁷

2. China as the main pillar of socialism in the post-Cold War era

In 1990, facing with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the gradual disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the threat of “The End of History,” Vietnam wanted to form a socialist alliance with China to fight against the Western plot of “peaceful evolution.” Now that the Soviet Union, the bastion of communism, no longer existed, China became the largest surviving communist country, the only source of meaningful support for the communist regime in Vietnam. Vietnam counted on China as the leader of the movement to protect and renovate socialism.

Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh told the Chinese ambassador in Hanoi on June 5, 1990 that he was eager to visit China to discuss with Chinese leaders the issue of “protecting socialism” because “the imperialists are trying to eliminate socialism ... they are carrying out the plot of “peaceful evolution;” and that while the Soviet Union was the bastion of socialism, it was burdened with many problems, and “we want to meet true communists to discuss how to protect communism”²⁸ An ardent supporter of Linh’s position was Defense Minister Lê Đức Anh who argued during a politburo meeting on September 9, 1990 that “The United States and the West want to seize this opportunity to eliminate communism. They are eradicating it in Eastern Europe. They say they will eradicate communism all over the world. Clearly, they are our direct and dangerous enemies. We must seek allies. China is our ally”²⁹

However, not all Vietnamese leaders were convinced of their arguments. In a previous Politburo meeting on May 30, 1990, adviser to the Central Committee and former Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng counseled extreme caution in dealing with China. He said, “For thousands of years, China has always been China, we should not trust them blindly.”³⁰ Later, in a Politburo meeting on June 19 to assess the progress in negotiations with China, Đồng commented, “The Chinese always think in term of their Greater Han concept, and the result is they coerce us into accepting their position.”³¹ Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch and Vice-Minister Trần Quang Cơ were two top Vietnamese leaders who also were wary of Chinese intention.³² Thạch’s subsequent dismissal from the Politburo was one of the prices Vietnam had to pay for normalization with China.³³

Earlier, in 1986, facing with severe economic crisis, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) had adopted a *Đổi Mới* (economic renovation) strategy patterned after Gorbachev’s reform. In the Soviet Union, Gorbachev started *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and *glasnost* (political liberalization). In Vietnam, the party launched the process of economic renovation (*đổi mới*), “unshackling literature,” (*cởi trói văn nghệ*) and new thinking (*đổi mới tư duy*); and secretary general Nguyễn Văn Linh was nicknamed “Little Gorbachev.”

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Tiananmen Square incident prompted Vietnamese leaders to have second thought about the Soviet model. The Chinese model advocated by Deng Xiaoping --economic reform under a Leninist system-- became more attractive. The Seventh Congress of the CPV in 1991 apparently emulated the Chinese model of development: continued economic reform, slowing down political reform. For Vietnamese leaders, reform could not be at the expense of political stability and the survival of the communist regime.

To cultivate friendship with China, in 1992, Vietnam promulgated a new constitution, dropping criticism of China as an expansionist *bá* power from its introduction, and stipulated in article 4: “The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of Vietnam’s working class, the loyal representative of the interests of the workers, working people and the entire Vietnamese people, adhered to Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, is the force leading the State and society.” This formulation is a clear imitation of the Chinese term, “Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought.”

Since 1989 Vietnamese leaders have mostly counted on China as a protector of communism and a leader of reform to save remaining communist regimes against Western plots of “peaceful evolution.” The special relationship between the two countries was conducted at several levels. State-to-state relations were reinforced by exchanges between parties, regions, provinces, and mass organizations. Leaders of both countries have agreed to conduct bilateral relations based on “sixteen golden words,” namely friendly neighbors, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future-oriented; and “four goods,” namely, good neighbors, good friends, good comrades, good partners.

Vietnamese leaders believed that cooperation with China will “*aid in maintaining national security and defending and building socialism in both countries.*”³⁴ Party intellectuals argued that the “compatibility of cultural tradition and political regime” between Vietnam and China not only served as a solid foundation for their cooperation but also, according to Nguyễn Huy Quý, editor of *Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Trung Quốc* (Journal of Chinese Studies),

In the context of international politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the solidarity and political cooperation between Vietnam and China is not only *very important to the political conditions of both countries*, but also a *practical contribution to the socialist movement in the world* and to the common struggle of progressive humanity.”³⁵

However, this trusting relationship between two communist neighbors was strained when China, in 2009, drew a nine-dashed line claiming 80 percent of the South China Sea and began to enforce its claims encroaching on Vietnam’s territorial integrity; and almost reached a breaking point in May 2014 when the former placed its huge HD 981 oil rig for exploration work in the sea area within Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.

The old disagreement among Vietnamese top leaders on how to deal with China in 1989-1990 surfaced again and split them between “liberationists” who are fed up with China’s constant pressure and want to find way to escape from its orbit, and “accommodationists” who hope to

appeal to socialist solidarity and traditional friendship to cajole China into finding a compromise solution for the conflict.³⁶

Frustration with Chinese aggressive behavior and disappointment with the benefits of socialist brotherhood prompted Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng to complain, in an interview with the Associate Press and Reuters, in Manila on May 22, 2014, that “What China said was far different from what it did;” and vowed that Vietnam will not exchange its national sovereignty and territorial integrity for “any kind of illusionary peace based on friendship and dependence.”³⁷ Dũng’s statement was a public rebuttal to those who still harbored the illusion of China’s as a benevolent big neighbor and supporter of Vietnamese socialism.

Reactions against the oil rig crisis by Vietnamese intellectuals and other party members are blunter and more passionate. An unprecedented public forum on the topic of “Thoát Trung” (escaping from China’s orbit) was held in Hanoi in June 2014. The following month, 61 party members signed an open letter addressed to the party and its Central Committee in particular warning of the danger of Vietnam becoming a “new type of China’s vassal,” and calling for drastic reforms to reduce the country’s dependence on China.³⁸ Many party theoreticians whose mission is to shape the narrative of party policy have begun to question the wisdom of relying on socialist brotherhood and ideological affinity to protect Vietnam’s sovereignty and maintain communist rule. Chinese behavior has forced Vietnam to revise its view of China. For many Vietnamese, the view of China as a protector of communism and a pillar against Western plot of peaceful evolution has lost its credibility. From being seen as a benevolent big socialist brother, and a reliable friend, China has become a threat to Vietnam’s territorial integrity and to the legitimacy of Vietnamese communist regime.

3. China as a development model of socialist market economy

After Vietnam and China normalized relations in 1991, relations between the two countries rapidly improved. Party loyalists claimed that Vietnam and China have resolved peacefully a number of border issues, including delimiting sea borders in the Tonkin Gulf. Exchanges of visits by leaders at all levels and experience-sharing conferences by experts between Vietnam and China far outpaced the number of exchanges between Vietnam and any other country in the world.

Drawing the lesson from the failure of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Chinese leaders decide to move toward a market economy to raise people’s standard of living but at the same time maintaining a Leninist political system to protect the regime. While Vietnamese party stalwarts believe that “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” or socialist market economy, an attempt to adapt Marxism to local conditions, can serve as a model for Vietnam to follow to avoid the fate of the collapsing communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, party dissidents disapprove of the China model, seeing an inherent conflict between a socialist market economy and a Leninist political system.

In official Vietnamese thought, the Sinicization of Marxism is an attempt to develop Marxism under the Chinese conditions. It is based “on both element of heredity and element of renovation. In the process of reform, new problems will arise, solving new problems leads to the formation of new reasoning through which Marxism is continuously developed.”³⁹ It is a process that Vietnam can learn from and contribute to. Vietnamese officials and intellectuals like it because “both Vietnam and China want to develop their contemporary culture on the basis of heredity and development of the traditional values of Oriental culture in the light of socialism”⁴⁰

Joint seminars to exchange experiences, such as one on “Building the ruling party –Experience of Vietnam and China” attended by a Chinese politburo member in Hanoi in February 2004, were frequently held.

Chinese experience of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is attractive because, according to Nguyễn Thị Hoa, “China and Vietnam are both developing countries with a relative high growth rate... Their development models share several similarities. Before the opportunities and challenges of our era, two countries fundamentally share the same perspectives and solutions, which is how to develop a market economy but still maintain its socialist orientation.” Then, apparently with a great sense of confidence and pride she quoted Alexander Litov who declares “The future of socialism in the world depends decisively on the reforms of socialism in China and Vietnam.”⁴¹

But not everyone agrees with the desirability or the future of socialist market economy. Vietnamese dissidents want both economic reform and democracy. They want to do away with socialism and Leninism.

The earliest person to advocate political pluralism turned out to be Trần Xuân Bách, politburo member and head of the Party’s Central Commission on External Affairs. Bach was immediately kicked out of the Politburo. Another high-ranking party member, General Trần Độ, former head of the Party’s Central Commission on Culture and Arts and a major player in the process of economic renovation and “unshackling literature,” criticized the “confusing combination” of market economy and socialist orientation. “Between market economy and socialism, [the party] must choose one...,” Độ wrote, “Development of the country or preservation of socialism? The choice is simple if one’s primary goal is the national interest rather than party’s interest.”⁴² On June 10, 1995 General Độ sent a petition to the party’s Central Committee blaming the deteriorating situation in Vietnam on the insistence of the party on its monopoly of power, the lack of democracy within the party, and the loss of faith of the people in the party and of the cadres in socialism. He then warned that Marxism could “no longer respond to the developmental need of the country in a radically changing international environment.”⁴³

Two months later, in August 1995, Hà Sĩ Phu, a Prague-trained biochemist and a respected intellectual based in Da Lat, published “Farewell to Ideology,” a theoretical critique of Marxism-Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh thought. He argued that “the nature of Marxist-Leninist thought on society follows the line of reformed feudalism thought, plus the illusion of original communism ... during the accelerated crisis of the industrial civilization. Marxism-Leninism is not an unachieved ideal but a longing that was left behind, a new variation that embodies the industrial trend of feudalism that history has left behind for several centuries. It is not a guiding manual so

mystical that after several centuries no one understands it correctly, it is only crazy predictions that can never happen in real life.”⁴⁴

Professor Phan Đình Diệu, member of the presidium of the National Fatherland Front, pointed out the contradiction between market economy and a Leninist political system. He argued, “There is one basic contradiction: the need to fully develop a market economy under modern circumstances characterized by many challenges and fierce competition which requires comprehensive economic and political reforms clashes with the monopoly of power of a communist party which accepts some contents of reform but still firmly holds on to the concepts of dictatorship of the proletariat, class struggle, and socialist orientation.”⁴⁵

Lữ Phương, a former deputy minister of culture of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, in an exchange of letters with Nguyễn Trung, former Vietnam’s ambassador to Thailand, pointed out:

“The political system that the Communist Party imposed on this country ... has led to nowhere but to a total collapse, incompetence, corruption, [an] undemocratic, anti-human rights system, and pushed the country to dependence on Chinese expansionism. To escape from this dangerous dead-end, Vietnam needs a total transformation, particularly, a rejection of any ideology carrying the name of “socialism” which is incompetent and totalitarian.”⁴⁶

Today, the voices demanding democracy, political pluralism, and doing away with the Leninist political system of one-party state and, hence, rejection the Chinese model of market socialism, are getting louder and bolder.

In 2012, Vietnamese authorities began to discuss the need to write a new constitution for the new situation. On January 2, 2013, the government circulated a draft constitution for review and comment by the public. Almost immediately, on January 19, 2013, seventy-two intellectuals accepted the challenge by making comments to the government’s draft and presenting a draft constitution of their own. The draft proposed the establishment of a presidential system, checks and balance between three branches of government, recognition of private land ownership, political pluralism and doing away with the monopoly of power by the CPV, and to change the country name back from Socialist Republic of Vietnam to Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The petitioners, most of whom are party members, represented the cream of Vietnam’s intellectuals, including a former minister of justice, a retired general and former ambassador to China, an informal adviser to several party secretaries, a teacher of many Central Committee members, two former assistants to Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt, two former advisers to Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải, and a former vice-minister. This petition was then circulated for signatures. From January 19, 2013 to March 17, 2013, it collected 10,413 signatures.⁴⁷

Apparently in response to this movement, on February 25, the government controlled VTV1 broadcast a statement by Secretary General Nguyễn Phú Trọng accusing as holding “degenerating thought” those who propose the abolition of article 4 of the constitution, rejecting the leadership of the party, demanding political pluralism and multi-party, and division of power between the three branches of government.

His comment immediately drew a public rebuttal from journalist Nguyễn Đắc Kiên who made issue with Trọng's accusation and retorted that the only degenerated people are those who engaged in "bribery, corruption and working against the national interest." Kiên said he also wanted to remove article 4 of the constitution, supported political pluralism and checks and balance, and demanded convening a constitutional assembly to draft a new constitution for the country which "reflects the will of the people, not of the party." To him, "people who oppose those demands are reactionary, and going against the interest of the nation and people and against the progress of humanity."⁴⁸

This is a case of David *versus* Goliath: a low-level reporter of an obscure government-controlled newspaper openly criticized the top leader of a single-party state. Kiên was immediately fired from *Gia Đình và Xã Hội* (Family and Society), the newspaper where he worked, but he got the support of young Vietnamese who published a "Declaration of Free Citizens" supporting Kiên, which had drawn 8,600 signatures by March 28, 2013.⁴⁹ In a telephone interview, Kiên said "I have always expected bad things to happen to me. The struggle for freedom and democracy is very long and I want to go to the end of that road, and I hope I can."⁵⁰ This shows the level of public tolerance for party dictatorship was approaching a breaking point and the weakening of the party's power of intimidation.

Clearly, there is a growing gap between party loyalists and the urban class including many party members in their thought of market socialism as a suitable system for Vietnam. China cannot be a development model for Vietnam because, according to a high-ranking member of the Central Committee of the National Fatherland Front, "The prevailing trend in the entire world is the march toward democracy and progress, but China is against it."⁵¹

Anti-Leninist sentiment coupled with intense nationalism and perceived government submission to Chinese aggression spread on by the internet under the condition of economic crisis and rampant corruption can be a deadly combination against the maintenance of socialist market economy. Most Vietnamese no longer believe in the validity of the Chinese socialist development model.

Vietnamese Thought of China's Role in the World and Its Grand Strategies

Three major events help shape Vietnamese and Asian perspective on China: the 1997 Asian financial crisis; the 2008 American banking crisis and its huge debt to China; and China becoming the second largest world's economy in 2010 and, according to the IMF, poised to surpass the United States by 2016.

China's monetary restraint and financial support to needy countries during the 1997 Asian financial crisis projected the image of a rising big country which is benevolent, helpful, and responsible. The American banking crisis of 2008 contrasted with the rapid rise of China led to the question about the prospect of China's replacing the United States as the leading world power, and the emerging vision of a Chinese world order based on the "Beijing consensus" replacing the "Washington consensus."

Vietnam's official view of China's role in the world may be summed up in two points: First, the United States continues to be the reigning superpower in a "one superpower, many big powers" system, but its influence is declining. Second, as the attractiveness of the American development model declines, the attractiveness of the China development model increases.

Phạm Bình Minh, Vietnam's foreign minister, gives his assessment:

... The collapse of the free market economy model may cause many countries, especially the developing countries, to lean toward the economic development model with strong state intervention ... the free market economy model, without state control, has lost its attractiveness, although no clear alternative model emerges . . . *The American values system including its development model may decline while the attractiveness of the Chinese development model may increase.*⁵²

Other writers agree on a number of points about the relative roles of China and the United States in the world and in the Asia-Pacific region. They believe:

1. The United States continue to be the sole superpower, but its power (including military power), influence, and leverage are on the decline;
2. China's has adjusted its foreign policy by moving away from Deng's dictum of "hiding oneself, biding for time" to actively seeking influence in the world; away from exporting revolutions to exporting goods, investment capital, and culture; away from making alliances with faraway countries and attacking nearby countries to developing together and getting rich together; and
3. China is not strong enough to push the United States out of Asia to play a decisive role in the region's economic prosperity, strategic stability, and serve as a model of economic, political, cultural, and social development for the region.⁵³

On China's grand strategy of international relations, Vietnamese scholars observe:

1. China's objective is to engage in deep and comprehensive cooperation with ASEAN with the aim of pulling ASEAN into its sphere of influence, creating a buffer zone against American domination, using it as a stepping stone to become a regional power, then a global power.⁵⁴
2. China's charm offensive, aimed at projecting the image of an "intelligent dragon with a gentle and friendly face," has succeeded in reducing ASEAN's concern over the "China threat" and improving the attractiveness of the "China model."⁵⁵
3. The "continuous and diversified expansion" of Chinese culture through the media [television programs, free movies, Confucius Institutes] is making it more difficult for ASEAN to resist such expansion;⁵⁶ and
4. To build the image of a "friendly, peaceful, and responsible" big power and to eliminate concern over the "China threat," the most important mission of Chinese diplomacy today is to promote the concepts of "peaceful rise" and "building a harmonious world."⁵⁷

Vietnamese scholars associated with the government, in their writing, want to believe in Chinese official statements of good will and intention; they hope and encourage China to behave in a way

befitting of a great power. While they tend to have a more charitable view of China they, however, are still concerned about the potential China threat and skeptical about China's vision of a "democratic, just, and tolerant world."

This "official" way of thinking, this latent suspicion of China's intention, is aptly captured in Brantly Womack's succinct remark, "On the one hand, corresponding to Vietnam's high level of concern and suspiciousness about Chinese behavior, China is viewed as almost diabolically clever in manipulating and pushing Vietnam. On the other hand, China is derided as a global power."⁵⁸

On China's "peaceful development," Nguyễn Huy Quý, a scholar at Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, expresses his reservations: "China can develop peacefully, and the peaceful development of China is not the only road to build up China but can also make a significant contribution to peace, stability, and prosperity of the global community. However, *such results depend on China's future policies and concrete actions* toward other nations, especially, neighboring nations."

Quý takes issue with China's affirmation in its 2005 White Paper that "China did not act as a *bá* [hegemonic] power in the past, it does not act as one in the present, and will not in the future." Professor Quý warned, "That commitment means that at present and in the future, China will never take over territories that it recognizes as belonging to other nations. But *territories on land and at sea belonging to other countries that China insists that they belong to China is another matter.*"⁵⁹ He also reminds that there are "other people" who hold that China's "peaceful rise" represents "the patience of a future hegemon."⁶⁰

On China's proposal to "set aside disputes and joint exploration," Quý thinks it is only a temporary solution and cannot be implemented as long as China insists on her sovereignty over the whole sea area delimited by the "cow-tongue" configuration claiming 80 percent portion of the South China Sea.

On China's vision of "building a harmonious world," Quý welcomes the concept but doubts its success. He explains that building a harmonious world is a "message of peace which is welcome by peoples of the world who sincerely hope that it would happen in reality. Only one thing is certain: the road for China to reach a harmonious society and for humanity to reach a harmonious world is still very long and is paved with many challenges."⁶¹

Outside the official circle and speaking privately, Vietnamese views of China's role, vision, and strategies are quite different and straightforward.

A well-connected Vietnamese-American working in Ho Chi Minh City told the author that the *Tianxi* or world peace under a benevolent China of the Chinese traditional world order cannot be implemented today because 1) Countries have different cultures, they do not adopt/follow any single culture; and 2) The American model is better, because it accepts diversity and has the capacity to change and innovate to deal with new problems and difficulties.⁶²

Another Vietnamese-American who worked as a business consultant in Ho Chi Minh City remarked that 1) While the concepts of “peace under heaven” and “harmonious world” are ideals, they are not realistic. Chinese past and present behaviors do not support this; and 2) There are no clearly identifiable components of Chinese values that can compete with Western concepts of democracy and equality.⁶³

An expert in Hanoi complained that “Chinese top leaders talk about thinking of the big picture (*đại cục*), but lower-level Chinese officials behave like “small-minded men” (*tiểu nhân*)”⁶⁴

Another scholar offered a more detailed explanation. He said: 1) Chinese foreign policies are practical and “Machiavellian” (*gian hùng*). China has a great civilization, but the strategy of the “great renaissance of the Chinese nation” is based on a “depraved character.” As a result, Chinese “soft power” has failed in Africa, Myanmar, and Vietnam; and 2) The so-called “big picture” based on “sixteen golden words” [friendly neighbor, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future orientation] is the opium for Vietnam.⁶⁵

Overseas Vietnamese, including visiting students and scholars, hold a harsher image of China and its policies and strategies. Of all the people this author has spoken to in the last few decades, none, practically no one, trusts Chinese intention, they don’t believe in China’s gospel of “building a harmonious world,” they do not want to live under a Chinese vision of world order, and they don’t think it is an achievable goal.

Typically, Phạm Trần, a Vietnamese journalist in the United States, in a commentary in the California-based *Việt Báo* newspaper on December 14, 2012, characterized China as an “ill-intentioned and cunning neighbor [who] has never respected their 16-word motto of ‘friendly neighbors, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future-orientation,’ and the four-good spirits of ‘good neighbors, good friends, good comrades, good partners.’”⁶⁶

Nguyễn Đăng Hưng, another Vietnamese intellectual from Belgium, compared China to “a monster being transformed into a Nazi fascist power of the 21st century.”⁶⁷

Yan Xuetong’s *New York Times* op-ed titled “How China Can Defeat America” received a stinging rebuttal from Professor Ngô Vĩnh Long of the University of Maine. In the op-ed article, Yan suggested that China must display “humane authority” and “higher-quality moral leadership” in order to compete with the United States. He pointed to the success of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, who drew on a mixture of legalistic realism and Confucian “soft power” to rule the country. Long, on the contrary, reminded the readers that, while the aim of Confucianism was to use both “soft power” and hard power to “pacify all under heaven,” Emperor Wu became “extremely aggressive in his use of hard power. He attacked almost everybody on China’s borders and sent his armies north, south, west, and even penetrated Korea to the north and northeast.” He accused Yan of

Gloss[ing] over two thousand years of Chinese use of hard power at home and abroad. And the ‘soft power’ was but to justify the hard power and has also served as form of cultural imperialism (a *mission civilisatrice*). The term *zhongguo* (central country) and *zhonghua* (central civilization) were invented during the Zhou [dynasty] to indicate its

centrality and has been used by China consistently since the Tang to refer to itself as the hub of the universe.

Long concluded, “Yan’s article is but an attempt by a Chinese scholar (if not an official policy yet) to return to the ‘Charm Offensive.’ China alternates between what this writer call ‘Charm and Harm’ offensives, which are both quite offensive since they are designed to unsettle neighbors and not to promote peace and stability.”⁶⁸

Vietnamese Thought on China’s Greater Han concept

In the long history of Vietnam-China relations, Vietnamese tends to equate the “Greater Han” concept with Chinese imperialism and expansionism. Since the accession to power of communist parties in Vietnam and China, Vietnamese view of China has been influenced by two contradictory factors: Vietnam’s indelible memories of “one thousand years of Chinese domination” and a shared communist ideology.

Bilateral relations between the two countries and Vietnam’s view of China were at their best when the revolutions were new, their leaders young, idealistic, and firmly believed in their ideology and the task of making world revolution. As revolutions grew old, ideological fervor wore off, power politics and national interests set in, bilateral relations began to fray; the memories of Chinese imperialism came back to haunt Vietnamese leaders and people. This was the case when North Vietnam won the war and Vietnam became a unified country for the first time after several decades of division.

Territorial disputes and Chinese aggressive behavior in recent years have prompted some Vietnamese leaders and intellectuals to worry about the relationship of dependency between China and Vietnam, particularly the pattern of thinking underlining that relationship.

Former Vietnam’s Foreign Minister Nguyễn Mạnh Cầm, in an interview with *Tuần Việt Nam* on January 24, 2013 on big power-small power relations remarked, without naming names but clearly directed at China-Vietnam relations, that “the consciousness (*tâm thức*) of slave and master, conquest and tribute relationship remains predominant.”⁶⁹

Cầm’s concern was echoed by Vũ Quang Việt, an economist and former United Nations consultant, who insisted that “the suzerain-vassal relationship between China and Vietnam prevalent in the feudal era still remains strong and guides the thought and action of Chinese and Vietnamese leaders today.”

Việt described the impact of Chinese political culture on Vietnamese thought and behavior as follows:

In the past, Vietnamese emperors usually pretended or even suffered the humiliation of a vassal state to keep the peace. The closed-door policy learned from China would not allow Vietnamese emperors to realize, at least since the 16th century, that the world was bigger with many powers more developed than China. This vassal’s outlook continues to exist in the thinking of quite a few Vietnamese leaders until today and perhaps of the

people as well ... Emperors shared Confucius thought with China and considered Westerners as barbarians who did not understand Confucianism. Communist leaders are mesmerized by the spirit of international solidarity in joining forces to protect socialism.”⁷⁰

He then warned that this kind of thinking and outlook may lead to the loss of Vietnam’s independence because “the pattern of relationship between big nation-small nation has been recorded clearly in China since the Zhou dynasty ... China considered itself the center of the universe surrounded by barbarians that need to be conquered and civilized.”⁷¹ He argued:

However, one looks at it, in reality the suzerain-vassal relationship in the feudal era is a relationship that leads to the expansion of the center; peripheries exist only when China has not been able to occupy them and send Chinese officials to administer them, and when the native populations have not been culturally assimilated. Peripheries will eventually disappear, as evidenced by history, to become parts of China.⁷²

To cope with this potential danger, Việt suggested that Vietnamese leaders must learn from history, be aware of Chinese expansionist tradition, and to find ways to resist it. He pointed out that:

By the Tang dynasty, Vietnamese politics was totally influenced by Confucius thought and Chinese governing system but, according to Việt, Vietnam was still able to preserve its political independence because “from the emperor, to mandarins and simple people, Vietnamese always considered themselves a different people from China, [inhabiting a country] with clearly delineated borders, and were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to protect or restore independence.”⁷³

Throughout the history of Vietnam-China relations, Vietnam was willing to accept Chinese thought, paid annual tributes, and pretended to accept the status of a vassal state, but deep down it never wanted such a relationship.

Vietnamese used to quote General Lý Thường Kiệt who, in the midst of fighting against Chinese invasion in 1076, issued a short poem categorically declaring Vietnam’s independence from China:

“Vietnam’s rivers and mountains belong to the Vietnamese emperor
This is clearly prescribed in Heaven’s book
How dare these bandits invade our land?
They will be resolutely defeated.”⁷⁴

Vietnamese nationalism, thus, provides a strong resistance to the Chinese Greater Han concept.

A few years after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, conflict between Vietnam and China began to emerge and eventually led to the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979. While China called it a defensive war against Vietnam, Vietnam termed it a war of aggression by China against Vietnam.

The Cambodia War put Vietnam and China on opposite sides of the conflict. While China sided with the United States and ASEAN, Vietnam formed an alliance with the Soviet Union. Relations between Vietnam and China reached a nadir, and the China model was no longer acceptable. From Vietnamese perspective, China was no longer a socialist brother but an expansionist power. The process of reform launched in 1986 with its emphasis on economic renovation (*đổi mới*) and unshackling literature (*cởi trói văn nghệ*) got its inspiration from Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*, not from Deng's "four modernizations." A booklet published by *Tạp Chí Thông Tin Lý Luận* (Journal of Information and Theory) in 1979, "*Về Chủ nghĩa Bá quyền và Bành trướng Trung quốc*" (On Chinese Hegemonism and Chinese Expansionism) associated the "four modernizations" with the "illusion of building economic and military power of Chinese hegemonism and Chinese expansionism."⁷⁵

In a White Paper on "Border Issues between Vietnam and China" published in the same year, Vietnam provided evidences to show that China had step-by-step encroached upon Vietnamese borders and took land from Vietnam "since 1949 to the present." An appeal to "all fellow-countrymen and soldiers" to rally to fight Chinese aggression by the Central Committee of the CPV on March 4, 1979 accused "the reactionary rulers in Beijing" of "carrying out a wicked scheme to take over our country, [and] step-by-step pursuing Greater Han expansionism and big power hegemony in the Indochinese peninsula and South East Asian region."⁷⁶ The booklet published by *Tạp Chí Thông Tin Lý Luận* mentioned above contained a lengthy discussion on the "collusion between Chinese expansionism and the global strategy of American imperialism." The view of China as an "expansionist *bá* power" was even enshrined in the introduction to the 1980 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

That was the time when China was viewed in the worst light by Vietnamese leaders and people. This sentiment was recounted by Huy Đức in his new book, *Bên Thắng Cuộc: I. Giải Phóng* (The Winning Side: I. Liberation). The author notes that the consciousness of having "to be vigilant against China runs deep in Vietnamese blood. But in its one-thousand-year history of resistance against the 'Celestial Court' no royal dynasty had publicly identified China as 'the hereditary and long-term enemy' in its official document as under the regime of Secretary General Lê Duẩn."⁷⁷

Exhausted by two wars –one in the north with China and another in the west in Cambodia --and faced with severe economic crisis at home and diplomatic and economic isolation abroad, Vietnam launched a campaign of economic renovation in 1986. To create a peaceful environment for economic development, Vietnamese leaders decided to seek normalization with both the United States and China. After the collapse of Eastern European communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, for Vietnamese leaders, the support of China, the largest surviving socialist country in the world, became of utmost importance. Relations between the two countries gradually improved and cooperation increased. Unlike the 1950's-1960's period when bilateral was bonded by ideologies, the bond in this period were based on party's interests. It is not idealistic but calculated and practical.

Even as they prepared to approach China for normalization of relations, Vietnamese leaders were still ambivalent about Chinese design. Politburo resolution number 13 on May 20, 1988

cautioned: “Normalization of relations with China is a difficult and complicated process and needs time to work out. After the relations between the two countries return to where they were in the fifties and sixties ... we must prevent and overcome the distorted view seeing China only as a *bá* power, but not a socialist country; or seeing China as only a socialist country, but not as an expansionist *bá* power.”

In 2007, territorial conflict over the South China Sea/East Sea began to emerge that impacted negatively on bilateral relations and changed Vietnamese views, including those of its leaders, of China and Chinese intention. In 2009 China officially published a U-shaped line in the South China/East Sea claiming 80 percent of sea area in the South China/East Sea. In the following years, it took aggressive actions to impose its will by imposing unilateral fishing bans, arresting and beating up Vietnamese fishermen, cutting cable of ships conducting explorations in disputed waters, and issuing bids for oil exploration in areas Vietnam considered its own. These actions forced the Vietnam government to protest but, more importantly, it revived the traditional fear of Chinese imperialism and expansionism, and ignited a wave of anti-China sentiment among Vietnamese people and put the communist party of Vietnam in a quandary.

Vietnamese intellectuals pointed out that China did not act as an ideological ally but as an expansionist power based on its own national interest. From London, Dương Danh Huy and Lê Trung Tĩnh explained, “History tells us that China always put its national interest above the spirit of international socialism... *Chinese [territorial] ambitions lie deeper in the Chinese consciousness than ideology ... Vietnam’s sovereignty in the East Sea is an obstacle that China must overcome on its march southward in the East Sea ... For China, although China and Vietnam share a common ideology, the role of Vietnam is not different at all to all other Southeast Asian countries in Chinese strategic interest.*”⁷⁸

On June 25, 2011, eighty-five Vietnamese personalities, including former government officials and high-ranking party members, academics, journalists and writers made public in Ho Chi Minh City a “Declaration on continuous activities of the Chinese government to provoke and seriously violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam in the East Sea” which reminded government leaders of their pledge not to let “an inch of land, a patch of water, or an island to fall into the hands of any foreign country,” and demanded that they stop preventing “patriotic manifestations” of the people including “peaceful and orderly meetings and demonstrations of young people, students, and people throughout the country” against China.⁷⁹

On July 10, 2011, a number of prominent persons in Hanoi sent a petition, “Protecting and developing the nation under the present circumstances,” to the National Assembly and the party’s Politburo warning them that “independence, self-reliance, and territorial integrity of our nation are being violated in a serious way.” They pointed out that “China is trying to increase its power and influence in many forms aimed at penetrating and subverting many countries on every continent ... Recently, China has substantially stepped up its efforts to implement its dark scheme of occupying the East Sea by resorting to actions in violation of international law, blatantly violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other coastal nations.” Interestingly, this petition was published in *Tuần Việt Nam*, an electronic version of a relatively liberal weekly newspaper controlled by the government.⁸⁰

Even Lư Nguyễn, a reporter of *An Ninh Thế Giới* (International Security), a newspaper of Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security, could not resist a mild criticism of Chinese behavior. After warning that Chinese recent behavior was part of a "political scheme aiming at turning the East Sea into a 'Chinese lake,'" he remarked, "The unfriendly behavior of China in the East Sea, although of "minor importance" as they used to say, not only undermines the friendly relations and traditional cooperation between Vietnam and China, *but also clouds the beautiful image about China and its people in the eyes of many Vietnamese.*"⁸¹

Because they distrust Chinese intention, Vietnamese intellectuals see awarding bids to a Chinese company to carry out projects to mine bauxite in the Central Highlands as another Chinese attempt to penetrate and subvert Vietnam. Many have signed petitions to stop the projects for its environmental impact, and for the presence of Chinese workers who might be "disguised soldiers" on Vietnam's most strategically important region. Even the famed General Võ Nguyễn Giáp was drawn into the debate. In 2009, he wrote three letters addressed to the prime minister, politburo, and national assembly warning that by December 2008, "there were already hundreds of Chinese workers at the sites and [that number] was expected to increase to several thousands at each site." He cautioned that continuing the projects would cause "serious consequences to the environment, economy, society, and national security."⁸²

Two other retired generals, General Nguyễn Trọng Vĩnh, former Vietnamese ambassador to China; and General Đồng Sĩ Nguyên, former Vice-Minister of Defense, also expressed concern over Chinese presence in Vietnam's "extremely important strategic location."⁸³ General Lê Văn Cương, former head of the Strategic and Scientific Institute of the Ministry of Public Security, in his March 3, 2009 report, warned that "When China [succeeds in] establishing itself on the Central Highland, she will have the capacity to dominate all of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea."⁸⁴

On August 21, 2011, thirty-six Overseas Vietnamese intellectuals sent an "Open Letter to Vietnamese Leaders on Foreign Threat and National Power" calling upon them to carry out policies that could mobilize all Vietnamese at home and abroad to resist Chinese aggression. They reminded them that:

... A consistent strategy of China in the last almost 60 years is to employ appropriate tactics depending on the time and circumstances [to harm Vietnam]: betraying Vietnam at the Geneva conference in 1954, preventing Vietnam from negotiating with the United States in 1968, using force to take over all of the Paracel Islands in 1974, invading Vietnam in 1979, using force to occupy part of the Spratly Islands in 1988; and after normalization of relations between the two countries in 1991, step-by-step subverting Vietnam's economy, depleting its resources, implementing a scheme to assimilate Vietnam, violating Vietnamese territory, and cruelly treating Vietnamese fishermen in the East Sea.⁸⁵

As a manifestation of popular resentment against Chinese behavior, several spontaneous demonstrations took place in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2011 and 2012, despite efforts of the government to stop and disperse them and arrest some of the leaders and bloggers.

Vietnamese leaders must walk a tight rope between dealing with a powerful and increasingly aggressive neighbor and a swelling anger of their own people against China and perceived government's appeasement of, if not subservience to, China.

On the one hand, government leaders publicly denounce Chinese behavior and pledge to protect the nation's territorial integrity by resorting to the old device of seeking a counterweight to China through cooperation with ASEAN and improvement of relations with the United States and other big powers. On the other hand, they refrain from antagonizing China by preventing and controlling anti-China demonstrations and cajoling China into observing the "16 golden words" and the concept of "looking at the big picture" and "win-win solution" in regulating bilateral relations.

During a two-day defense dialogue between Vietnam and China in Beijing in August 2011, Vice-Minister of Defense Nguyễn Chí Vịnh assured his Chinese counterparts that "Vietnam has no interest in opposing China;" and that China always occupied a preferred position in Vietnam's foreign relations so long as China held on to its pledge to respect Vietnam's territorial sovereignty. He explained in an interview that "Vietnam is a friend, a reliable partner with all countries in the world. But *if Vietnam needs support, understanding, cooperation and development what country can be better for Vietnam than neighboring socialist China*, with a population of 1,350,000,000 inhabitants, a rapidly developed economy, and a high position and prestige in the world, *so long as our [Chinese] comrades respect the independent sovereignty of Vietnam and want Vietnam to develop together [with China]*."⁸⁶

Another military officer, Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh in a lecture on the East Sea, appeared to be more sympathetic to China. He pointed out that actions to control the East Sea were "taken by many countries" not only by China although the latter was the "most active" among them." While he warned against the United States of having committed crimes that "heaven does not condone, earth does not forgive," and was pursuing "peaceful evolution against us via programs of cultural exchange and training," he reminded the audience that "we should not forget that [China] has committed aggression against us, but we also should not forget that *they had "shared their rice and clothes with us. We cannot be ungrateful people."*"⁸⁷

Both statements were severely criticized by net citizens as "appeasement" of China.

For her aggressive behavior in the South China/East Sea, China today is viewed by the majority of Vietnamese people, including many party members and former revolutionaries, primarily as a *bá* power and a mortal threat to Vietnam's independence and territorial integrity. They totally dismiss the sincerity of Chinese strategies of "peaceful rise," "building a harmonious world," and mottos such as "sixteen golden words," "win-win solutions," and "developing together, getting rich together."

Vietnamese leaders and government, on the one hand, are trying to resist China's encroachment to preserve their legitimacy in the eyes of their people, and on the other hand, are trying to do everything necessary to convince and encourage China to keep to their benevolent words and behave like a big brother.

Today, there is a big and growing gap between the Vietnamese people and their leaders in their views of China and the appropriate policy to deal with it. Increased China aggressive behavior has helped to seriously undermine the legitimacy and threatened the existence the communist regime in Vietnam, a situation which may not be in China's best interest.

September 29, 2014

NOTES

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- ² Song Xinning, "Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (February 2001), 63-66
- ³ Qin Yaqing, "Why is there no Chinese international relations theory?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7 (2007), 314.
- ⁴ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Also see an excellent rebuttal by Linsay Cunningham-Cross and William A. Callahan, "Ancient Chinese Power, Modern Chinese Thought," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4 (2011), 349-374
- ⁵ Song Xinning, "Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2002), 161-74
- ⁶ Qin Yaqing, "Why is there no Chinese,.. " 322
- ⁷ Qin Yaqing, "Development of International Relations theory in China: progress through debates," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, no. 2 (2011), 249
- ⁸ Qin Yaqing, "Why There is no Chinese... ," 13-340
- ⁹ <http://tapchicongsan.org.vn/data/tcc/tccs.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://tapchicongsan.org.vn/Home/MagazineDetails.aspx?ID=1>
- ¹¹ Phản biện của GS Ngô Vĩnh Long về bài How China Can Defeat America," (Prof. Ngo Vinh Long's reply to article How China Can Defeat America) <http://dttl-nguoiotgach.blogspot.com/2011/12/pahn-bien-cua-gs-ngo-vinh-long-ve.html>
- ¹² <http://www.vnmilitaryhistory.net/index.php?topic=10485.0>
- ¹³ Nguyễn Lạc and Hoàng Việt Thắng, trans, *Quyền Mưu Thần Bí* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2004)
- ¹⁴ The original Chinese book was published in 1996 by the Guangxi People's Publishing House.
- ¹⁵ Yongjin Zhang, "System, empire and state in Chinese international relations," *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001), 49.
- ¹⁶ "Đại Tá Trần Đăng Thanh giảng về Biển Đông cho lãnh đạo các trường đại học" (Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh lectures university leaders on the East Sea), *Dân làm báo* 19/12/2012 (http://danlambaovn.blogspot.com/2012/12/ai-ta-tran-ang-thanh-giang-ve-bien-ong.html#.UWxq_KfD8dV). Also <http://anhbasam.wordpress.com/2012/12/19/1481-dai-ta-tran-dang-thanh-giang-ve-bien-dong-cho-lanh-dao-cac-truong-dai-hoc/>. A YouTube version can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEQkyp--UUQ>
- ¹⁷ King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 17. Not only important leaders of Vietnamese nationalist parties, such as Nguyễn Hải Thần, Nguyễn Tường Tam, Nguyễn Tường Bách, Vũ Hồng Khanh, and Đỗ Đình Đạo, but also communist leaders, such as Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Phạm Văn Đồng, and Hoàng Văn Hoan had taken refuge in China at one time or another.
- ¹⁸ William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976), 69-70
- ¹⁹ Hoàng Văn Đào, *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*, 3rd Edition (Westminster, CA.: Cơ sở Xuất bản Yên Bái, no date), 25-28; see also King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 17
- ²⁰ Chen (1969), 19
- ²¹ Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua: 54 Năm Lưu Vong* (Vietnam One Century Past: 54 Years of Exile). (California: Nhà Xuất Bản Thạch Ngũ, 2000), 72. Unless specified otherwise, all translations from Vietnamese from now on are by the author.

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- ²² Nguyễn Tường Bách, *Việt Nam Một Thế Kỷ Qua*, 166
- ²³ Tuong Vu, “To Be Patriotic is to Build Socialism: Communist Ideology in Vietnam’s Civil War,” in Vu, Tuong and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds. *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 35, 37.
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- ²⁵ Đỗ Tiến Sâm, *Hồ Chí Minh với Trung Quốc*, 13
- ²⁶ Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, Robert Kendall Brigham, *Arguments without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy*, (Jackson, TN: Public Affairs, 1999), 182
- ²⁷ Nguyễn Minh Cần, *Công Lý Đòi Hỏi*, (Justice Demands) (California: Văn Nghệ, 1997). 98
- ²⁸ Trần Quang Cơ, *Hồi ức và Suy Nghĩ* (Memoirs and Thought) (Hanoi: 2003), 65. Circulated over the internet only. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8qHbRAzdvH7ZTgyMDYxN2MtMjVkJkZS00MTJjLTg5MjQ0OGM5NDUyNmIxOGM0/edit?hl=vi> (Hereafter HUVSN)
- ²⁹ HUVSN, p.88
- ³⁰ HUVSN, p.64
- ³¹ HUVSN, p.77
- ³² HUVSN, pp.73-78
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