



## China-Vietnamese Relations in the Era of Rising China: Power, Resistance, and Maritime Conflict

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## China-Vietnamese Relations in the Era of Rising China: Power, Resistance, and Maritime Conflict

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### ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, China and Vietnam have experienced heightened conflict over their disputes in the South China Sea. But Chinese policy and the writings of Chinese observers make clear that, for China, this conflict is a struggle between a great power and its smaller neighbor over China's demand for a sphere of influence on its borders. Since 1949, the People's Republic of China has consistently maintained that Vietnam reject strategic cooperation with an extra-regional power. For Vietnam, however, China's looming presence poses an existential threat that drives Vietnamese leaders to seek support from extra-regional powers. Since 2010, China has relied on coercive diplomacy and threats of crisis escalation to constrain Vietnamese reliance on outside powers, especially the United States, to challenge Chinese interests.

In the twenty-first century, China and Vietnam have experienced heightened tension over their sovereignty disputes over the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea and the related disputes over the demarcation of their respective exclusive economic zones (EEZ).<sup>1</sup> But, for China, Sino-Vietnamese conflict is more than a dispute over sovereignty and economic rights. It is a struggle between a great power and its smaller neighbor over the great power's demand for a contiguous sphere of influence—a border region free from the political and strategic influence of another great power. Since 1949, the People's Republic of China has consistently maintained that Vietnamese leaders reject strategic cooperation with an extra-regional power, including the United States and the Soviet Union. For Vietnam, however, China's looming presence on its northern border poses an existential threat that drives Vietnam to seek extra-regional great power support for Vietnamese security and foreign policy independence.<sup>2</sup>

This Sino-Vietnamese conflict of interest has contributed to heightened tension and war, and to reduced political and economic cooperation. But the strategic advantages that China enjoys over both Vietnam and over extra-regional powers on mainland East Asia have ultimately compelled Hanoi to accommodate Chinese interests. These advantages, including Chinese ground force superiority on the Sino-Vietnamese border, have increased with the rise of China. But not only does China now enjoy greater leverage against Vietnam on the land border, but Chinese naval superiority in Vietnamese coastal waters constrains Vietnam's ability to secure outside support to resist Chinese demands.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Because this article addresses the Sino-Vietnamese political conflict, it makes no effort to assess Chinese and Vietnamese competing legal claims in the South China Sea.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of Vietnamese threat perception of rising China, see Do Thanh Hai, 'Riding the Chinese Tide,' *Pacific Review*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2018). On the importance of the common border for Vietnamese security and diplomacy, see Carlyle A. Thayer, 'The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,' *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (December 2011).

Nonetheless, beneath Vietnamese accommodation is persistent anti-Chinese nationalism, reflecting popular hostility towards China's enduring challenges to Vietnamese independence.<sup>4</sup> This nationalism constrains Vietnamese cooperation with China and creates pressures for ongoing resistance to Chinese power, particularly regarding the maritime territorial disputes.<sup>5</sup>

This article's national interest approach to Sino-Vietnamese cooperation and conflict differs from David Kang's scholarship that analyzes the contemporary relevance for Sino-Vietnamese cooperation of shared Chinese and Vietnamese dynastic-era norms regarding the legitimacy of a hierarchical regional order under Chinese leadership.<sup>6</sup> It also differs from Brantly Womack's scholarship on Sino-Vietnamese asymmetry that stresses the role of Vietnamese rhetorical and symbolic deference to Chinese 'status' in reassuring China of Vietnamese long-term accommodation of Chinese interests and enabling a stable and 'mature' cooperative relationship.<sup>7</sup> It similarly challenges Christina Lai's constructivist approach that stresses the importance of positive diplomatic rhetoric in creating a constructed cooperative Sino-Vietnamese relationship.<sup>8</sup>

The first part of this article briefly examines the primacy of national interest dynamics and China's search for border security in Sino-Vietnamese relations during the Cold War and from the end of the Cold War through 2010. Since 1949, China has sought a sphere of influence in Indochina. The second part of the article examines the 2010 to 2014 period. It examines the writings of Chinese scholars, government analysts, and foreign policy journalists to establish China's great power perspective on Sino-Vietnamese relations and their maritime disputes and China's opposition to Vietnam's effort to secure security cooperation with the United States, including its coercive maritime diplomacy in 2014. It also considers the role of nationalism in Vietnamese policymaking. The third part of the article examines Sino-Vietnamese relations after 2014, when Vietnam again cooperated with outside powers and challenged Chinese sovereignty claims and its security interests in Indochina. Nonetheless, during this period, China's continued rise had contributed to greater Chinese confidence in managing Vietnamese challenges and thus to reduced tension and to expanded economic and political cooperation. When China is confident in Vietnamese accommodation of Chinese security interests, Vietnamese challenges to Chinese sovereignty and economic claims assume secondary foreign policy significance. The conclusion briefly considers the prospects for Sino-Vietnamese cooperation in the twenty-first century and the prospect for recurring episodes of heightened tension.

<sup>3</sup>On the growth of Chinese maritime power during this era, see, for example, Eric Heginbotham, et. al., *The US-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND\\_RR392.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR392/RAND_RR392.pdf); Robert S. Ross, 'The Changing East Asian Balance of Power and the Regional Security Order,' in Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø, and Wang Dong, eds., *US-China Foreign Relations: Power Transition and its Implications for Europe and Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>On the early origins of Vietnam's anti-Chinese nationalism, Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 2, 20–21 Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1958), 105–09; Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>For a revealing discussion of contemporary popular anti-Chinese nationalism regarding the territorial dispute, see Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party-Ruled Nation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), chapter 3. For a Chinese analysis of the importance of nationalism in Vietnam's policy toward the maritime dispute, see Zhang Cheng, 'Yuenan zai Nanhai Youqi Jinqun Huodong de Xin Dongxiang ji Zhongguo de Yingdui' (The New Trend in Vietnam's infringement on oil and gas rights and China's response), *Bianjie yu Haiyang Yanjiu* (Boundary and ocean studies), vol. 5, no. 1 (January 2020), pp. 114–115.

<sup>6</sup>David Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), chapter 8. For a challenge to this perspective, see Kosal Path, 'The Duality of Vietnam's Deference and Resistance to China,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2018).

<sup>7</sup>Womack, *China and Vietnam*, chapter 10.

<sup>8</sup>Christina Lai, 'A Coercive Brotherhood: Sino-Vietnamese Relations from the 1990s to 2018,' in *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, no. 123 (May 2020).

## Sino-Vietnamese Relations: 1949-2010

After 1949, China set out to secure its borders. Its intervention in the Korean War and its military assistance to the Vietnamese insurgency against the French reflected an effort to establish border security. By 1954, China enjoyed secure borders for the first time since the Opium War. Not only had China, with its diplomatic and military assistance to the Vietminh, contributed to the French defeat and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, but the Soviet Union assured China that it would not be active in East Asian affairs. When Chinese Communist Party Politburo member Liu Shaoqi visited Moscow in summer 1949, Joseph Stalin told him that China was responsible for support for revolution and resistance to U.S. imperialism in Asia.<sup>9</sup> From 1949 through the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union deployed only token military forces in its Far East.<sup>10</sup>

Chinese focus on border security was reflected at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Rather than push for the unification of Vietnam, China supported an agreement that would prevent the escalation of the U.S. air war to China's border and that would prohibit the stationing of foreign forces in Indochina. Once the United States agreed to withdraw its military forces from post-war Vietnam, Beijing pressured Vietnamese communist leaders to accept a divided Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> Subsumed within a Chinese sphere of influence and thus lacking support from another great power that could enable it to resist Chinese demands, North Vietnam accommodated Chinese interests. And through the 1950s, Beijing advised Hanoi to focus on economic development, rather than on unification. In the early 1960s, when the South Vietnamese government inflicted heavy costs on southern Vietnamese communists, China continued to counsel moderation and it did not provide Hanoi with military assistance.

But when the U.S. Army cooperated with South Vietnam to suppress the communist insurgency in the south and deployed military forces to South Vietnam, it challenged Chinese security in Indochina. China then changed its policy on armed insurgency in South Vietnam. In August 1962, for the first time since the Vietnamese war against the French, China provided North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front with military assistance.<sup>12</sup>

But as the Vietnam War escalated and a North Vietnam victory seemed likely, Chinese leaders grew concerned that the Soviet Union would displace Chinese influence in Hanoi and replace the United States as a challenge to Chinese security. At stake was Soviet presence in a unified Vietnam and Soviet encirclement of China. Hence, as the war continued, Beijing pressured Hanoi to use guerilla warfare and depend on self-reliance, rather than wage positional warfare that would require greater reliance on Soviet assistance and would risk escalation of U.S. military operations near China's borders.<sup>13</sup> Beginning in 1965, Chinese leaders frequently warned North Vietnam that should it turn to Moscow for military assistance, China would retaliate. From 1966 to 1970, except during the 1968 Tet offensive, reflecting North Vietnam's urgent need for immediate military assistance, China reduced its military aid to North Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, as Soviet military and economic influence in Hanoi increased, China applied escalating pressure on Vietnam to restrain its cooperation with the Soviet Union and to tolerate Sino-Cambodian defense cooperation and Cambodian belligerency on the

<sup>9</sup>Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 74–75.

<sup>10</sup>Paul F. Langer, 'Soviet Military Power in Asia,' in Donald S. Zagoria, ed., *Soviet Policy in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Harry Gelman, 'The Soviet Far East Military Buildup: Motives and Prospects,' in Richard H. Solomon and Masataka Kosaka, eds., *The Soviet Far East Military Buildup: Nuclear Dilemmas and Asian Security* (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1986); Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1982).

<sup>11</sup>Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup>Yin Chengzhi, 'China's Military Assistance to North Vietnam Revisited.' *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2019), pp. 226–256.

<sup>13</sup>Li, Danhui and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973* (New York: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 132–143; Nicholas Khoo, *Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup>Li and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973*.

Sino-Vietnamese border. In 1978, as Vietnam planned to occupy Cambodia with Soviet alliance support, China warned that it would militarily retaliate on the Sino-Vietnamese border.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia.<sup>16</sup> China then waged a ten-year low-intensity war of attrition on the Sino-Vietnamese border and supported the anti-Vietnamese insurgency in Cambodia.<sup>17</sup> China was determined to compel Hanoi to end security cooperation with the Soviet Union, withdraw from Cambodia, and acquiesce to China's demand that no foreign power challenge Chinese security on its periphery.

When Vietnam lost Soviet support at the end of the Cold War, China became the sole great power in Indochina and Vietnam accommodated Chinese interests. In 1989, Vietnam opened negotiations with China and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to end its occupation of Cambodia and it began to withdraw its forces from Cambodia. In 1989–1990, senior Vietnamese diplomats made three visits to Beijing, seeking to resolve the conflict. In 1991, Hanoi agreed to the Comprehensive Political Settlement, which called for Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, the dissolution of the Vietnamese-imposed Hun Sen government, the installation of China's ally Prince Sihanouk as head of state, and UN-administered elections.<sup>18</sup>

Content with Vietnam's accommodation of Chinese interests, Beijing restored Sino-Vietnamese cooperation. In 1991, it welcomed to Beijing Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Do Muoi and Chairman of the Council of Ministers Vo Van Kiet. Later that year, Chinese and Vietnamese leaders announced normalized relations and signed a trade agreement and border agreements.

For the next 20 years, China and Vietnam enjoyed cooperative relations. After joint surveys of the land border region, in 1999 China and Vietnam signed a border agreement based on China's 1885 treaty with France. In 2000, they signed two agreements regarding the Tonkin Gulf that demarcated the territorial waters and their respective EEZs and they established regulations to manage fishing operations.

Despite the improvement in relations, China and Vietnam had not resolved their maritime sovereignty disputes. In 1974 China ousted South Vietnamese forces from some of the Spratly Islands and in 1988 it ousted Vietnamese forces from the Paracel Islands. Hanoi, first preoccupied with waging war against South Vietnam and then contending with Sino-Soviet rapprochement and China's emerging dominance in Indochina, acquiesced to China's use of force and its occupation of Vietnamese-claimed islands.<sup>19</sup>

But from 1991 to 2009, Vietnam expanded its presence on Chinese-claimed features in the Spratly Islands.<sup>20</sup> Vietnam's PetroVietnam signed 99 contracts with foreign energy companies for oil and gas exploration in Chinese-claimed EEZ waters.<sup>21</sup> China protested these contracts, lodging 18 protests with the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry.<sup>22</sup> There were also incidents between Vietnamese fishing boats and Chinese Coast Guard ships in the Tonkin Gulf, with Vietnamese casualties, and near the Paracel Islands. Between 2005 and 2010, China seized over 63 Vietnamese fishing boats and detained over 725 fishermen.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Zhang Xiaoming, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975–1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chapters 7 and 8.

<sup>16</sup>On the role of Vietnamese nationalism in the Sino-Vietnamese war, see Alexander Woodside, 'Nationalism and Poverty in the Breakdown of Sino-Vietnamese Relations,' *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 3 (1979), pp. 381–409.

<sup>17</sup>Zhang Xiaoming, 'China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment,' *China Quarterly*, no. 184 (2005).

<sup>18</sup>Richard H. Solomon and Stanley Karnow, *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2000); Robert S. Ross, 'China and the Cambodian Peace Process: The Value of Coercive Diplomacy,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 31, no. 12 (December 1991).

<sup>19</sup>On Chinese use of force in 1974 and 1988, see M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 280–296.

<sup>20</sup>Alexander L. Vuving, 'South China Sea: Who Occupies What in the Spratlys?,' *Diplomat*, 6 May 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/south-china-sea-who-claims-what-in-the-spratlys/>.

<sup>21</sup>Hong Hiep Le, *Living Next to the Giant: The Political Economy of Vietnam's Relations with China under Doi Moi* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2016), pp. 137–38.

<sup>22</sup>Do, 'Riding the Chinese Tide,' p. 214.

<sup>23</sup>Le, *Living Next to the Giant*, pp. 140–142.

Nonetheless, with the exception of a brief naval encounter in 1994,<sup>24</sup> the sovereignty and EEZ disputes did not disrupt Sino-Vietnamese cooperation. On the contrary, in the context of Chinese satisfaction with the strategic trends in Indochina, Vietnam and China developed extensive formal bilateral mechanisms to enhance cooperation and manage disputes. Moreover, between 2000 and 2010, two-way trade increased by over 1,400%, from US\$ 1.95 billion to US\$ 27.6 billion. Vietnamese exports to China grew from US\$ 1.5 billion to US\$ 7.5 billion. Chinese companies also made significant investments in Vietnamese infrastructure projects and Vietnam was China's largest engineering investment target in Southeast Asia. Between 2005 and 2009, the number of Chinese investment projects in Vietnam increased by nearly 400%. Chinese preferential loans also contributed to major Vietnamese industrial and infrastructure projects.<sup>25</sup> The Sino-Vietnamese border passes, which only recently had been the route for Chinese divisions invading Vietnam, had become Sino-Vietnamese trade routes.

After 1991, Hanoi did not cooperate with a foreign power to challenge Chinese authority in Indochina; China's post-Cold War sphere of influence was secure. And for China the Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands sovereignty disputes lacked consequential material economic and strategic significance. Vietnam had challenged Chinese maritime claims, but China nonetheless welcomed the development of extensive Sino-Vietnamese political and economic cooperation.

## THE RISE OF CHINA AND SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS, 2010-2014

Beginning in 2010, for the third time since 1949, China became involved in intensified great power competition in East Asia. The United States, focused on the rise of China and China's heightened activism in East Asia, challenged Chinese diplomacy. Part of the American effort entailed reaching out to a receptive Vietnam to develop U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation. Once again, China resisted Vietnamese cooperation with an extra-regional power.

Contemporary Chinese policy toward Vietnam reflects its larger policy toward the United States and U.S. involvement in the South China Sea disputes. For China, the importance of the disputes is secondary to the implications of U.S. intervention in the disputes to contain the rise of China, just as Hanoi's interest in the unification of Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s was secondary to Chinese interests in excluding a rival's strategic presence from Indochina. There are minimal energy resources in the vicinity of the Spratly and Paracel Islands.<sup>26</sup> And the islands do not have great military significance. As non-moveable objects, any defense installations on the islands are vulnerable targets in war time. The protracted Sino-Vietnamese sovereignty dispute reflects long-held historical claims to sovereignty and the associated nationalism and policy rigidity.<sup>27</sup>

But as a security issue, China resists U.S. intervention in the sovereignty and EEZ disputes to oppose Chinese diplomacy and it insists that other claimants do not cooperate with U.S. policy toward China. Since the 2010 Obama pivot to East Asia, Chinese government analysts, scholars, and foreign policy journalists have argued that the United States intervenes in the disputes to 'challenge' China's relations with the ASEAN states. Internationalization is 'Americanization.' The United States creates regional conflicts and 'cries wolf' about Chinese intentions to block Chinese cooperation with its neighbors and to confront China with 'unprecedented pressure.'<sup>28</sup> It fabricates 'the atmosphere

<sup>24</sup>Philip Shenon, 'China Sends Warships to Vietnam Oil Site,' *New York Times*, 21 July 1994, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup>Le, *Living Next to the Giant*, pp. 90–92, 95, 100–108, 112–114, 166–168.

<sup>26</sup>U.S. Energy Information Agency, U.S. Department of Energy, 'Contested Areas of South China Sea Likely Have Few Conventional Oil and Gas Resources,' <https://www.eia.gov/analysis/studies/worldshalegas/>.

<sup>27</sup>On the role of nationalism in the maritime dispute, see Kosal Path, 'The Sino-Vietnamese Dispute over Territorial Claims, 1974–1978: Vietnamese Nationalism and its Consequences,' *International Journal of Asian Affairs* vol. 8, no. 2 (2011); Hannah Cotillion, 'Territorial Disputes and Nationalism: A Comparative Case Study of China and Vietnam,' *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2017); Kerkvliet, *Speaking Out in Vietnam*.

<sup>28</sup>Li Xiaoguang, 'Yatai Diyuan Zhanlue Geju Yanbian—Cong Aobama Fang Ri dao Zhong Mei Zhanlue yu Jingji Duihua' (The evolution of the Asia-Pacific geo-strategic structure—from Obama's visit to Japan to the China-U.S. strategic dialogue), *Zhanlue yu Guanli* (Strategy and management), nos. 9–10 (2014), p. 134.

and the illusion of maritime security tensions as a pretext to intervene' in the disputes.<sup>29</sup> It creates 'suspicions' to 'alienate' China's neighbors and to drive a 'wedge' between them to draw them close to the United States.<sup>30</sup>

China thus opposes other claimants, including Vietnam, 'internationalizing' the disputes. In particular, China requires that they do not rely on U.S. support and cooperate with outside powers to explore or drill for oil in disputed waters. Rather, they should carry out joint exploration with China or not carry out any exploration. But whereas in the past, when the French, the United States, and then the Soviet Union established military presence in Indochina, China relied on force to restore border security, by 2010 Chinese use of force is no longer necessary.<sup>31</sup> The rise of China and the modernization of the PLA had consolidated Chinese military superiority on the Sino-Vietnamese land border and on Vietnam's maritime periphery, so that in the twenty-first century China can rely on coercive diplomacy and the threat of escalation to compel Vietnam to resist U.S. overtures and to accommodate Chinese security. As a Chinese government analyst explained, China can use many 'measures' to pull Vietnam 'close to China' and to 'completely sink America's tool to contain China.' China has 'chips' and it can use 'smart power' against Vietnam.<sup>32</sup>

### ***U.S.-Vietnam Cooperation and the Internationalization of the Sovereignty Disputes***

The turning point in U.S. policy toward Vietnam was the Obama administration's 'pivot' to Asia, its response to China's 'assertive diplomacy.' In March 2009, Chinese ships harassed the USS *Impeccable* operating within China's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In December, China engaged in contentious diplomacy toward the United States at the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Following the January 2010 announcement of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, China, for the first time, suspended U.S.-China diplomatic dialogues and announced sanctions on U.S. corporations engaged in defense cooperation with Taiwan. In March, China seemed to side with Pyongyang after North Korea sank the South Korean naval ship *Chonan* and in July it protested loudly against U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in international waters in the Yellow Sea. In September, it retaliated against Japanese detention of a Chinese fishing boat captain after the boat had rammed a Japanese Coast Guard ship in disputed waters. China's assertive diplomacy was also on display in November and December, when China's diplomats railed against Norway and China imposed economic sanctions on Norway after the Nobel Prize Committee awarded democracy activist Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Obama administration, reacting to Chinese activism, reached out to Vietnam. In July and October 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Hanoi and called for a U.S.-Vietnam 'strategic partnership.' In October 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited Vietnam.<sup>33</sup> In December the

<sup>29</sup>Zhang Haiwen, 'Nanhai Zhengduan Bianhua Qushi Pinggu' (Evaluation of the evolving trend in the South China Sea disputes), in National Defense University Institute of Strategy, ed., *Guoji Zhanlue Xingshi yu Zhongguo Guojia Anquan* (The international strategic situation and Chinese national security) (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 108, 123.

<sup>30</sup>Pei Yuanying, 'Meiguo Duiwai Zhanlue Zhongdian Dong yi Zonghengtan' (A brief discussion of the shift to the East of the focus of U.S. foreign policy), in Zhang Deguang, ed., *Dongdang Chixu Fusu Jiannan* (Continued turmoil, renewed difficulty) (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2013), p. 178; Yin Chengde, 'Meiguo Zhanlue Zhongxin Dong yi qi dui Zhongguo de Yingxiang' (The Shift in the US strategic focus to the East and its influence on China), in Zhang, ed., *Dongdang Chixu Fusu Jiannan*, p. 189; He Zhigong and An Xiaoping, 'Nanhai Zhengduan zhong de Meiguo Yinsu ji qi Yingxiang' (The American factor and its influence in the South China Sea dispute). *Dangdai Yatai* (Contemporary Asia-Pacific), no. 1 (2010), 132–145, 140; He Sheng, 'Yuegong "Shier Da" yu Yuenan de Zhanlue Zouxiang' (The strategic direction of the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* (Contemporary international relations), no. 2 (2016), p. 22.

<sup>31</sup>On the importance of Chinese presence on the land border for Vietnamese policy, see Thayer, 'The Tyranny of Geography.' For an early discussion of PLA ground force modernization, Susan M. Puska, 'Rough But Ready Force Projection: An Assessment of Recent PLA Training,' in Andrew J. Scobel and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *China's Growing Military Power: Perspectives on Security, Ballistic Missiles, and Conventional Capabilities* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), pp. 223, 244–245. On the PAVN, see, for example, Wendell Minnick, 'Vietnam Pushes Modernization as China Challenge Grows,' *Defense News*, 30 August 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2015/08/30/vietnam-pushes-modernization-as-china-challenge-grows/>.

<sup>32</sup>Wang Yueling, 'Meiguo Chongfan Yatai yu Woguo Zhoubian de Haiyang Zhengduan Wenti' (U.S. return to the Asia-Pacific and the maritime disputes on China's periphery), in Ba Zhongtan, ed., *Meiguo Zhanlue Tiaozheng yu Zhongguo Guojia Anquan* (The adjustment of American strategy and Chinese national security) (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2013), pp. 179.

<sup>33</sup>Secretary of State Clinton's 30 October 2010, remarks in Hanoi, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/150189.htm>.

U.S. Navy held its first engagement with the Vietnamese Navy and then it began annual engagements with the Vietnamese Navy. In 2010 the USS George Washington aircraft carrier hosted a combined Vietnamese civilian-military delegation while operating in disputed waters and the destroyer USS John S. McCain visited Da Nang. In 2012 Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta visited Cam Ranh Bay and announced that 'Access for United States naval ships' to Cam Ranh Bay 'is a key component of this relationship and we see a tremendous potential.'<sup>34</sup>

As the United States developed defense cooperation with Vietnam, it also changed its policy toward the South China Sea disputes. Prior administrations had merely asserted U.S. interest in freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of the disputes. But in July 2010 in Hanoi and then in November 2011 in the Philippines, Secretary Clinton called for 'collaborative' and 'multilateral' negotiations among the claimants, supporting the ASEAN position that there should be multilateral negotiations to resolve the disputes, in opposition to China's preference for bilateral negotiations with each of the claimants.<sup>35</sup> The United States also declared that historical authority over a territory does not contribute to sovereignty claims, challenging China's position. Thus, the United States 'gave full play to its role in guiding and encouraging' Vietnam's challenge to Chinese interests.<sup>36</sup>

Chinese analysts assessed these developments, including Clinton's 'historic visit' to Hanoi,<sup>37</sup> as the first steps in U.S.-Vietnamese cooperation against the rise of China and the 'China threat.' For China, Vietnam's purpose was clear—in recent years it has spared no effort to pull an extra-regional great power into the South China Sea conflict.<sup>38</sup> It cooperates with the United States to send a 'clear signal' to China<sup>39</sup> and it has 'joined hands' with the United States to challenge Chinese power and to 'balance' China.<sup>40</sup> The common U.S.-Vietnam 'anti-China, restrain-China' interest drives Vietnam to improve ties with the United States as a 'bargaining chip' against China power.<sup>41</sup> Vietnam 'caters' to the Obama administration's 'rebalance' to deal with the Chinese 'threat.'<sup>42</sup>

Chinese observers argue that Vietnam has developed defense cooperation and arms sales with the United States not only to strengthen its capabilities, but also to contribute to its effort to 'internationalize' the dispute and to pull the United States into the Sino-Vietnamese conflict to 'restrain' China.<sup>43</sup> China thus interpreted the Trump administration's transfer to Vietnam of six patrol boats not only as support for Vietnam against China, but as part of its opposition to China's growing role in the region.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>34</sup><https://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=505>.

<sup>35</sup>See Secretary of State Clinton's 23 July 2010, press availability in Hanoi, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>; Marc Landler, 'Offering to Aid Talks, U.S. Challenges China on Disputed Islands,' *New York Times*, 23 July 2010, at [www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24dipl.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/24/world/asia/24dipl.html); interviews with Clinton administration official.

<sup>36</sup>Zhao Weihua, 'Yuenan Nanhai Zhengce Tiaozheng: Yanbian yu Shizhi' (Vietnam's South China Sea policy adjustment: Evolution and substance), *Dongnan Ya Yanjiu* (Southeast Asian studies), no. 1 (2019), pp. 21–22.

<sup>37</sup>Pei, 'Meiguo Duiwai Zhanlue Zhongdian Dong yi Zonghengtan,' p. 178.

<sup>38</sup>Cheng Hanping, 'Yintai Zhanlue' Shiyu xia Mei Yue Weirao Nanhai Wenti de Zhanlue Hudong: Lujing, Mubiao yu Yingxiang' (U.S.-Vietnam strategic interactions around the South China Sea issue in light of the Indo-Pacific strategy: Path, objective and influence), *Yatai Anquan yu Nanhai Yanjiu* (Asia-Pacific security and South China Sea studies), no. 2 (2019), p. 77.

<sup>39</sup>Yang Yaoyuan and Yang Chao, '21 Shiji lilai Yuenan dui Mei "Huoban Guanxi" Zhengce Pingxi: Neihan, Yuanqi, Tezheng ji Yingxiang' (Comments on Vietnam's policy of 'partnership relations' toward the United States since the 21 century: Meaning, origins, features, and influence), *Dangdai Yatai*, no. 5 (2016), p. 145; Li Dalu, 'Nanhai Zhengduan zhong Yue, Ma, Yinni Sanguo dui Hua Zhiheng Zhanlue de Chayi Fenxi' (Analysis of the shortcomings of the three countries Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia balancing strategy toward China in the South China Sea dispute), *Dangdai Yatai*, no. 2 (2017), p. 46.

<sup>40</sup>He, 'Yuegong, "Shier Da" yu Yuenan de Zhanlue Zouxiang,' p. 22; Yue Ping, 'Yuenan Daguo Pingheng Waijiao Chengxian Xin Tedian' (The Vietnamese balancing diplomacy between big powers presents new features), *Shijie Zhishi* (World knowledge), no. 13 (2017), p. 34.

<sup>41</sup>He and An, 'Nanhai Zhengduan zhong de Meiguo Yinsu ji qi Yingxiang,' p. 141.

<sup>42</sup>Yue Ping, 'Shei Shi Yuenan Fan Hua Youxing de Muhou Tuishou' (Who is the pushing hand behind the Vietnamese anti-China protests), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 13 (2018), p. 29.

<sup>43</sup>Liu Lin, 'Yue Nan: Jiaqiang Junli, Hushi Nanhai' (Vietnam: Strengthening military power, tiger's eye on the South China Sea), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 15 (2011), p. 39.

<sup>44</sup>Yue, 'Shei Shi Yuenan Fan Hua Youxing de Muhou Tuishou,' p. 26.



For Chinese observers, the effect of U.S. policy was consequential. Although Vietnam was ‘clearly weaker than China,’ because the United States voiced support for Vietnam at ‘critical times,’ Vietnam ‘dares to continuously increase’ its provocations, ‘not afraid of strong Chinese retaliation.’<sup>45</sup>

For China, Vietnam is part of the U.S. region-wide strategy to resist the rise of China. The Obama administration promoted cooperation with Vietnam ‘as part of its “Asia-Pacific rebalancing” strategy,’ so that Vietnamese internationalization of the territorial dispute contributed to U.S. ‘containment’ of China.<sup>46</sup> Vietnam is also a key element in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. The United States ‘uses Vietnam for its own needs’ and it ‘makes great effort to rope in Vietnam’ into ‘something the United States can use.’ It strives to make Vietnam a ‘model’ for its ‘demonstration effect’ in the region to put ‘great strategic pressure’ on China.<sup>47</sup> The United States has thus used the Sino-Vietnamese South China Sea dispute to ‘sow discord between’ China and the ‘concerned countries on the Indochina Peninsula’ to ‘contain’ China; it has improved relations with Vietnam to ‘check and balance China.’<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Shiyou 981 Confrontation and Chinese Coercive Diplomacy***

As Vietnam cooperated with the United States and challenged Chinese sovereignty claims, China pushed back, challenging Vietnamese security. In 2011 and 2012 Vietnamese ships carried out seismic surveys in disputed waters in the South China Sea. Chinese ships cut the cables of the Vietnamese ships. In 2011 the situation was particularly tense, with hostile Chinese diplomacy and Chinese nationalists demanding that China punish Vietnam.<sup>49</sup> On 20 March 2013, Chinese patrol boats confronted a Vietnamese fishing boat near the disputed Paracel Islands. Two Chinese boats fired flares at a Vietnamese fishing boat, causing a fire that destroyed the boat’s cabin.<sup>50</sup> Then, in late April 2013, local authorities in Hainan organized tourism to the Paracel Islands. The ‘tourists’ included 200 provincial officials. Vietnam did not interpret the cruise as tourism, ‘but something more like imperialism.’<sup>51</sup>

Sino-Vietnamese tension was of little concern to China, but for Vietnam heightened tension carried the risk of escalation and a naval clash with its stronger neighbor. But then, in May 2014, the prospect for armed conflict increased considerably. Earlier in the year, Sino-Vietnamese negotiations to replace the expired 2005 agreement on joint exploration in disputed waters had ended without success.<sup>52</sup> China then sent its Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig into the Vietnamese-claimed EEZ. This was

<sup>45</sup>Cong Yong, “Nanhai ‘981’ Zuanjing Pingtai Chongtu Zheshe de Yuenan Nanhai Zhengce” (Vietnam’s South China Sea policy as reflected in the South China Sea “981” drilling platform conflict), *Dangdai Yatai*, no. 1, (2016), p. 137.

<sup>46</sup>Pan Jine and Zhou Zengliang, ‘Yuenan Nengfou Wanzhuan ZhongMei ‘Pingheng Shu’ (Can Vietnam manipulate China -US ‘balancing’), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 23 (2017), p. 31.

<sup>47</sup>Song Xiaosen and Yu Xiangdong, ‘Yuenan dui Meiguo Yin Tai Zhanlue de Renshi yu Yingdui: Yi Rongru Guoji Zhanlue wei Zhongxin’ (Vietnam’s understanding and response to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy: Taking international integration as the center), *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu* (Southeast Asian affairs), no. 2, 2020, pp. 120.

<sup>48</sup>Li Wei and Luo Yifu, ‘Zhongguo Zhoubian Waijiao zhong de Lanmei Hezuo Jizhi Fenxi’ (Analysis of the wave of cooperative mechanisms in China’s periphery diplomacy), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, no. 5 (2019), pp. 17–25, 24; Wu Xinbo, ‘Meiguo de Yatai Zhanlue’ (U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy), in Zhou Fangyin, ed., *Daguo de Yatai Zhanlue* (The Asia-Pacific Strategies of the Great Powers) (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2013), p. 28; Cong, ‘Nanhai ‘981’’, p. 137.

<sup>49</sup>Edward Wong, ‘China Navy Reaches Far, Unsettling the Region,’ *New York Times*, 14 June 2012, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/world/asia/15china.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/world/asia/15china.html?_r=0); Jane Perlez, ‘Dispute Flares over Energy in South China Sea,’ *New York Times*, 4 December 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/world/asia/china-vietnam-and-india-fight-over-energy-exploration-in-south-china-sea.html>; M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2011). See Kerkvliet, *Speaking Out in Vietnam*, pp. 66–73, for an on-the-ground perspective on the protests.

<sup>50</sup>China acknowledged that its vessels had fired, but they called them ‘warning shots.’ See Wu Dengfeng, ‘Suowei “Zhongguo Haijun Jianting Qiangji Yue Yuchuan” Yishi Chun Shu Niezao’ (The so-called ‘Chinese naval vessels fired on Vietnamese fishing boats’ is pure fabrication), *Xinhua*, March 26, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2013-03/26/c\\_124506582.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2013-03/26/c_124506582.htm); The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry Statement is at [http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_baochi/pbnfn/ns130326202046/view](http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_baochi/pbnfn/ns130326202046/view).

<sup>51</sup>Didi Kirsten Tatlow, ‘Chinese Cruise to Disputed Paracel Islands Angers Vietnam,’ *New York Times*, 3 May 2013, at <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20130503/c03islands/en-us/>.

<sup>52</sup>‘China, Vietnam Launch Consultations on Sea-Related Joint Development,’ *Xinhua News Agency*, January 9, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/09/c\\_133032429.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/09/c_133032429.htm). On the 2005 agreement, see ‘Oil Companies of China, the Philippines and Vietnam Signed Agreement on South China Sea Cooperation,’ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, 5 March 2005, <http://ph.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/nhwt/t187333.htm>.

the first time that China had drilled for oil in the South China Sea since 1994 and it challenged Vietnamese maritime claims.<sup>53</sup>

As tension escalated, Hanoi sent 29 ships to surround and disrupt Haiyang Shiyou 981's drilling. China sent its own ships to the area and soon Chinese ships collided with Vietnamese Navy ships. Chinese ships fired water cannons at the Vietnamese ships and a Vietnamese fishing boat sank after a collision with a Chinese boat.<sup>54</sup> Simultaneously, nationalist, anti-Chinese protests erupted throughout Vietnam. 1,000 protesters gathered at a Taiwanese steel mill in Ha Tinh province. At least 21 Chinese died and over 100 Chinese were injured. Protesters damaged hundreds of Chinese-owned businesses in Vietnam. In Ho Chi Minh City, a woman set herself on fire in protest against China.<sup>55</sup> Protesters gathered at the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and at the Chinese Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City. Over 4,000 Chinese fled Vietnam, including approximately 3,000 Chinese who fled across the Sino-Vietnamese border. China sent ships to Vietnam to evacuate more than 1,000 Chinese.<sup>56</sup>

### **Crisis Resolved**

Vietnamese leaders initially stood on the side of the anti-China nationalists, praising their patriotism. Soon, however, it was clear that the maritime tension could escalate into Sino-Vietnamese hostilities and that the domestic demonstrations could force Vietnam's hand to escalate its conflict with China. Moreover, in 2014 Chinese and Vietnamese forces exchanged military fire on the land border, further heightening bilateral tension and the possibility of crisis escalation.<sup>57</sup>

Vietnam was now in a crisis with China and Vietnamese leaders faced significant domestic instability that could grow into nation-wide demonstrations. Meanwhile, despite the U.S. pivot to Asia, the Obama administration limited its response to a statement from the state department spokesperson.<sup>58</sup> And Beijing had yet to send in its navy or its air force to deal with Vietnamese 'intransigence.'<sup>59</sup>

Vietnamese leaders moved quickly to deescalate the crisis and restore domestic stability. In mid May, they deployed security personnel to suppress the anti-China demonstrations and to protect Chinese and their businesses.<sup>60</sup> In August, politburo member Le Hong Anh visited China, where he met with Chinese Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping as the Special Envoy of Vietnamese Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. The purpose of the visit was to 'to prevent the reoccurrence of

<sup>53</sup>'China, Vietnam Launch Consultations on Sea-Related Joint Development,' *Xinhua News Agency*, 9 January 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/09/c\\_133032429.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-01/09/c_133032429.htm).

<sup>54</sup>'Tensions Rise in South China Sea as Vietnamese Boats Come Under Attack,' *Guardian*, 7 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/07/chinese-vietnamese-vessels-clash-south-china-sea>; 'Vietnam boat sinks after collision with Chinese vessel,' *BBC*, 27 May 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27583564>.

<sup>55</sup>'At least 21 Dead in Vietnam Anti-China Protests over Oil Rig,' *Guardian*, 15 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/15/vietnam-anti-china-protests-oil-rig-dead-injured>; 'Vietnamese woman dies in self-immolation protest against China,' *Guardian*, 23 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/23/vietnamese-woman-dies-self-immolation-protest-china>.

<sup>56</sup>Kate Hodal, 'China Evacuates 3,000 Nationals from Vietnam as Conflict Simmer,' *Guardian*, 17 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/18/china-evacuates-nationals-vietnam>; 'Chinese Flee Vietnam as Hanoi Counts Cost of Riots,' *Guardian*, 19 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/19/chinese-flee-vietnam-hanoi-riots>.

<sup>57</sup>Edward Wong, 'Deadly Clash Reported on Border of China and Vietnam,' *New York Times*, 19 April 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/world/asia/deadly-clash-between-vietnamese-border-guards-and-chinese-migrants-reported.html>. On the Vietnamese leadership's uneasy relationship with anti-China nationalism, see Tuong Vu, 'The Party v. the People: Anti-China Nationalism in Contemporary Vietnam,' *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 99, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>58</sup>See the statement by the U.S. State Department Spokesperson, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/05/225750.htm>, 7 May 2014. See the Chinese analysis of U.S. and ASEAN reluctance to support Vietnamese claims in Zhao Weihua, 'Zhong Yue Nanhai Zhengduan Jiejue Moshi Tansuo' (An exploration of a method to resolve the Sino-Vietnamese South China Sea dispute), *Dangdai Yatai*, no. 5 (2014), p. 110.

<sup>59</sup>Ben Blanchard, 'China Says Will Never Send Military to Oil Rig Spat with Vietnam,' *Reuters*, 13 June 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea/china-says-will-never-send-military-to-oil-rig-spat-with-vietnam-idUSKBN0E012X20140613>.

<sup>60</sup>'Chinese Flee Vietnam as Hanoi Counts Cost of Riots.' On Vietnam's response to the demonstrations, Bui Nhung T., 'Managing Anti-China Nationalism in Vietnam: Evidence from the Media During the 2014 Oil Rig Crisis,' *Pacific Review*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2017), pp. 169–187.

the tense incidents.<sup>61</sup> Le Hong Anh reported Vietnam's agreement to negotiate a new agreement for joint exploration in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, Liu Yunshan, secretary of the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, stated 'We expect Vietnam to continue to work with us to bring bilateral relations back to the track of healthy and stable development.'<sup>62</sup> Xi Jinping said that 'A neighbor cannot be moved away and it is in the common interests of both sides to be friendly to each other.' He warned Vietnam 'especially' to 'make correct political decisions at critical moments.'<sup>63</sup>

### **Renewed Chinese Tolerance and Sino-Vietnamese Stability**

The resolution of the 2014 confrontation was the turning point in Sino-Vietnamese relations and in the development of China's confidence that it could compete effectively with the United States for influence in Vietnam. When China threatened use of force, and when Vietnam's developing relationship with the United States proved inadequate to deter Chinese pressure and contain the crisis, Vietnam yielded. Vietnamese cooperation with the United States was now constrained by the Sino-Vietnamese 'balance of power and geopolitical factors' and its strategic framework was 'determined.'<sup>64</sup>

As the crisis unfolded, a Chinese scholar wrote that Vietnam sought greater cooperation with the United States, but it had to 'worry that the United States would sacrifice it as a bargaining chip in ... a compromise with China.' Although anti-Chinese sentiment has run high in Vietnam, Vietnamese leaders 'have other ideas ... They do not want a deterioration of relations with China.' Another scholar wrote that Vietnam would worry about China's reaction and that it would not excessively 'provoke' China with cooperation with the United States.<sup>65</sup> Vietnam would thus manage the maritime conflict with bilateral level consultations.<sup>66</sup> Chinese media commentators concurred. One commentator, in a reference to the 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam, observed that Vietnam has 'drawn lessons from history and that will not again ally with one country to oppose another country' and will maintain 'balanced distance' with the great powers.<sup>67</sup> Another commentator wrote that Vietnam would 'neither be close nor distant' from the United States and that it would seek a balance between the United States and China.<sup>68</sup>

In this context, in October 2014, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met with Vietnamese Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh and announced that the United States would ease its arms embargo on Vietnam.<sup>69</sup> Vietnam also secured an Indian announcement of its intent to supply Vietnam with naval vessels. In December, Hanoi filed a statement with the international Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in support of the 2012 submission by the Philippines regarding its EEZ dispute with China and in January 2015 it opened discussion with Manila on establishing a strategic partnership.<sup>70</sup> Then, in April 2015, a U.S. combat ship docked in Da Nang to participate in the first formal U.S.-Vietnam joint naval exercise.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>61</sup>'Special Envoy's China Visit Seeks Healthy Ties: Spokesman,' *VietnamPlus*, 25 August 2014, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/special-envoys-china-visit-seeks-healthy-ties-spokesman/64740.vnp>.

<sup>62</sup>'China, Vietnam Call Truce on Maritime Tensions,' *China Daily*, 27 August 2014, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-08/27/content\\_18498591.htm?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-08/27/content_18498591.htm?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter).

<sup>63</sup>'Xi Calls for Mended China-Vietnam Ties,' *Global Times*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/878643.shtml>.

<sup>64</sup>Zhao, 'Zhong Yue Nanhai Zhengduan Jiejue Moshi Tansuo,' p. 113.

<sup>65</sup>Zhao, 'Zhong Yue Nanhai Zhengduan Jiejue Moshi Tansuo,' pp. 96–97; see Yang and Yang, '21 Shiji yilai Yuenan dui Mei "Huoban Guanxi" Zhengce Pingxi,' pp. 143–44.

<sup>66</sup>Cong, 'Nanhai '981,' pp. 137–38.

<sup>67</sup>Li Chunxia, 'Cong Diren dao Quanmian Huoban: Yuenan Fazhan dui Mei Guanxi de Zhanlue Kaoliang' (From enemy to comprehensive partner: Consideration of Vietnam's strategy to develop relations with the United States). *Guoji Luntan* (International forum), vol. 16, no. 4 (2014), p. 16.

<sup>68</sup>Li, 'Yatai Diyuan Zhanlue Geju Yanbian,' See the historical analysis in Li Jinming, 'Xisha Qundao: Zhongguo Lingtu bu Rong Zhiyi' (Xisha Islands: Chinese territory cannot be questioned), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 13 (2014), pp. 26–29.

<sup>69</sup>For a Chinese discussion, see Yang and Yang, '21 Shiji yilai Yuenan dui Mei "Huoban Guanxi" Zhengce Pingxi,' pp. 144–145. Also see Michael R. Gordon, 'U.S. Eases Embargo on Arms to Vietnam,' *New York Times*, 2 October 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/world/asia/us-eases-embargo-on-arms-to-vietnam.html>.

Nevertheless, China was now confident in Vietnamese restraint. In April 2015, in the immediate aftermath of a U.S.-Vietnam joint naval exercise, Xi Jinping traveled to Hanoi. Xi and Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong issued a joint communique that reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation. Most important, Vietnam agreed to bilateral negotiations over the maritime dispute, meeting Beijing's demand that it not internationalize the maritime dispute, and to joint exploration of the South China Sea. The joint communiqué stressed

effectively utilizing the Government-level negotiation mechanism on Vietnam-China boundary and territorial issues, ... actively studying transitional solutions that do not affect stances and policies of each side, including actively studying and discussing cooperation for common development ... not taking actions that can further complicate and expand disputes.<sup>72</sup>

After Xi visited Hanoi, Pham Binh Minh traveled to Washington and the United States lifted its arms embargo on Vietnam. But a Chinese commentator observed that while Vietnam would continue to cooperate with the United States, its failure in the 1970s and 1980s to balance relations between China and the Soviet Union had taught it a 'lesson.' For Vietnam, the key question is how to avoid becoming a 'chess piece in great power relations.' Thus, Vietnamese cooperation with the United States 'will be accompanied by balancing relations with China.'<sup>73</sup> A senior Vietnamese policy analyst agreed. Because of 'historical lessons,' the 'parameter of Vietnamese policy' is not to become any other country's ally<sup>74</sup>

## SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF RISING CHINA

In the aftermath of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 incident, the continued rise of China consolidated Chinese strategic presence in Indochina and increased its region-wide influence. This trend further undermined U.S. strategic value to Vietnam and contributed to greater Vietnamese restraint. It also bolstered Chinese confidence in dealing with Vietnam: 'the rise of Chinese military power has reshaped the Asia-Pacific geopolitical structure,' so that China's neighbors now risk economic retaliation and they 'must bear an enormous security cost' to balance China. China's rise has thus 'strengthened the preference' of U.S. allies and security partners 'to not take sides' in the U.S.-China competition, so that, 'the great trend in the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific is toward loosening and collapse.'<sup>75</sup> The implications for Sino-Vietnamese relations is clear: 'Vietnam's prior relatively advantageous position of drawing support from distant superiority no longer exists.' Moreover, because China completed construction of its maritime facilities on its artificial islands, it has strengthened its ability to 'check wanton aggression of its maritime rights.' In this new 'power structure,' Vietnam's disregard for China 'has transformed into extreme concern' and it has a 'feeling of crisis.'<sup>76</sup> 'The more that time goes on, the less advantageous it is for Vietnam' and when China

<sup>70</sup>Sudhi Ranjan Sen, 'India to Sell Warships to Vietnam, Increase Footprints in South China Sea,' *NDTV* (India), 19 December 2014, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-to-sell-warships-to-vietnam-increase-footprints-in-south-china-sea-715108>; Vu Trong Khanh and Nguyen Anh Thu, 'Vietnam, India to Expand Oil Exploration in Contested South China Sea,' *Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/vietnam-india-to-expand-oil-exploration-in-contested-south-china-sea-1410777168>; Sanjeev Miglani, 'India to Supply Vietnam with Naval Vessels amid China Disputes,' Reuters, 28 October 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUSKBN0IHOLE20141028>; "1st Meeting of Philippines-Viet Nam Joint Commission on Concluding a Strategic Partnership Held in Manila", Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, 30 January 2015, <https://www.dfa.gov.ph/authentication-functions/78-newsroom/dfa-releases/5302-1st-meeting-of-philippines-viet-nam-joint-commission-on-concluding-a-strategic-partnership-held-in-manila>.

<sup>71</sup>Sam LaGrone, 'U.S. and Vietnam Start Limited Naval Training on Twentieth Anniversary of Establishing Diplomatic Relations,' *USNI News*, 6 April 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/04/06/u-s-and-vietnam-start-limited-naval-training-with-vietnam-on-20th-anniversary-of-establishing-diplomatic-relations>.

<sup>72</sup><http://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-china-issue-joint-communique/74208.vnp>, *Vietnam Plus*, 8 April 2015.

<sup>73</sup>Pan Jine, 'Ruan Fuzhong Fang Mei: Yuenan Qin Hua Pai Daoxiang Qin Mei Pai?' (Ruan Fuzhong visits the United States: Will Vietnam's pro-China faction turn to pro-America faction?), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 16 (2015), p. 33.

<sup>74</sup>Le Dinh Tinh, 'Strategic Thinking: Theory, Practice and the Case of Vietnam,' *International Studies* (Vietnam), no. 38 (2018), pp. 99–130.

<sup>75</sup>Zuo Xiyang, 'Meiguo Yatai Lianmeng Tixi Hui Zouxiang Wajie Ma' (Will the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific go toward collapse), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World economics and politics), no. 10 (2019), pp. 62–64, 72.

achieves 'regional superiority vis-à-vis the United States, Vietnam will encounter weakness in Sino-Vietnamese negotiations.'<sup>77</sup>

2016 was a key year for Chinese confidence in Vietnamese acquiescence to a Chinese sphere of influence. In early 2016, the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam introduced the principle of 'patience and persistence' in achieving its sovereignty goals.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the composition of the post-congress party leadership established that going forward Vietnamese leadership changes would not affect Vietnamese foreign policy. One Chinese analyst concluded that Vietnamese leadership changes would not alter Hanoi's strategy, because there is a 'high-level consensus' that Vietnam requires a 'pragmatic diplomatic strategy and balanced great power diplomacy.'<sup>79</sup>

In July 2016, the PCA ruled against Chinese EEZ claims on the Philippines continental shelf. From China's perspective, the combination of Chinese opposition to the PCA decision with the weak U.S. response amounted to a Chinese victory and a U.S. defeat. These 'hard cold facts' required Hanoi to adjust its South China Sea policy. The Vietnamese Foreign Ministry simply welcomed the PCA decision and urged resolution of the dispute through peaceful, diplomatic, and legal measures.<sup>80</sup> Then, in October, Vietnam welcomed, for the first time, a Chinese military ship visit to Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>81</sup>

Following the July PCA decision, anti-Chinese nationalist demonstrations recurred in Vietnam. But Hanoi quickly suppressed them, in contrast to 2014.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, from 2016 to early 2019, there were multiple incidents involving Chinese and Vietnamese fishing boats. Vietnam seized Chinese fishing boats and Vietnam charged that a Chinese Coast Guard ship sank a Vietnamese fishing boat.<sup>83</sup> But these incidents did not become nationalist causes in Vietnam and the conflict did not escalate.

Similar to the period prior to 2010, constrained U.S.-Vietnamese security cooperation enabled China to tolerate ongoing Vietnamese challenges to Chinese interests.<sup>84</sup> Since 2016, China's has overlooked Russian arms sales to Vietnam. Russian submarines first arrived in Vietnam in 2013 and 6 submarines had arrived by 2017.<sup>85</sup> In 2017, Vietnam took delivery of 20 medium-range radar systems that would target Chinese aircraft.<sup>86</sup> In 2018, Vietnam agreed to purchase one billion dollars of additional Russian defense equipment.<sup>87</sup> China did not voice significant opposition to these sales.

<sup>76</sup>Zhao Weihua, 'Yuenan zai Nanhai Xin Dongxiang yu Zhong Yue Guanxi Zoushi'(Vietnam in the new trend in the South China Sea and the path forward in Sino-Vietnamese relations), *Bianjie yu Haiyang Yanjiu*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 2020), pp. 102–103.

<sup>77</sup>Zhao, 'Zhong Yue Nanhai Zhengduan Jiejue Moshi Tansuo,' p. 111.

<sup>78</sup>National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), 'Maintaining Maritime Order in the Asia-Pacific,' (Tokyo, February 2018), p. 67.

<sup>79</sup>Pan Jine, 'Yuenan Lingdaoceng de Gengti yu Zhong Yue Guanxi Fazhan de Qianjing' (Replacement of Vietnam's high-leadership and the prospects for Sino-Vietnamese relations), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 9 (2016), p. 26; Zhang Lei, 'Yuenan Gongchandang Shier Da hou Zhong Yue Guanxi Fazhan Yanjiu' (A study of developments in China-Vietnam relations after the twelfth congress of the Vietnamese Communist party), in Xie Lincheng, ed., *Yuenan Gaoqing Baogao (2017)* (Report on Vietnam's National Condition [2017]) (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2017), p. 300.

<sup>80</sup>Liu Guchang, ed., *Guoji Wenti Zonglun Wenti, 2016/2017* (Overview of international issues, 2016/2017) (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2017), pp. 91–2; 'Vietnam Welcomes "South China Sea" Ruling,' *VNExpress International*, 12 July 2016, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-welcomes-south-china-sea-ruling-3435294.html>; Shawn W. Crispin, 'Will Vietnam File a South China Sea Case Against China?,' *Diplomat*, 3 August 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/will-vietnam-file-a-south-china-sea-case-against-china/>.

<sup>81</sup>Liu, *Guoji Wenti Zonglun Wenti*, pp. 92–93.

<sup>82</sup>'Vietnam Removes Protesters Gathered for Anti-China Rally in Hanoi,' *Guardian*, 17 July 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/17/vietnam-removes-protesters-gathered-for-anti-china-rally-in-hanoi>; 'Rare Rallies in Vietnam Say "Hands Off" to China over Sea Row,' Reuters, 11 May 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china/rare-rallies-in-vietnam-say-hands-off-to-china-over-sea-row-idUSBREA4A02B20140511>.

<sup>83</sup>See, for example, Oliver Holmes, 'Vietnam Seizes Chinese Vessel in the South China Sea,' *Guardian*, 4 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/04/vietnam-seizes-chinese-vessel-detains-crew>; 'Vietnam Says Chinese Coast Guard 'Sunk' Fishing Boat in Disputed South China Sea,' *South China Morning Post*, 12 July 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1988945/vietnam-says-chinese-coastguard-sank-fishing-boat-disputed>.

<sup>84</sup>See the discussion in Cheng Hanping, *Yuenan Haiyang Zhanlue Yanjiu (A Study on the maritime strategy of Vietnam)* (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2016), 226–8.

<sup>85</sup>Hoang Thuy and Hoang Phuong, 'Vietnam's New-Found Submarine Power and Where it Came From,' *VNExpress International*, n. d., 2017, <https://e.vnexpress.net/interactive/2017/vietnams-new-found-submarine-power-and-where-it-came-from>.

<sup>86</sup>'Vietnam's Restocking: Subs, Ships, Sukhoi, and Now Perhaps F-16s and P-3s?,' *Defense Industry Daily*, 2 May 2017, <https://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/vietnams-russian-restocking-subs-ships-sukhoi-and-more-05396/>.

In 2015 India and Vietnam established a 'strategic partnership,' which led to negotiations on defense ties and Indian arms sales to Vietnam. In 2014, shortly after Le Hong Anh visited Beijing and met with Xi Jinping, India provided a 100 USD million export credit to Vietnam for arms purchases.<sup>88</sup> In 2018 and 2019, India and Vietnam carried out joint naval exercises.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, China has not voiced concern over Vietnam-Indian security cooperation.

In 2020 Japan and Vietnam reached agreement for Japan to sell surveillance ships to Vietnam.<sup>90</sup> This was the first Japanese ship sale to Vietnam and it suggested greater Vietnamese cooperation with U.S. allies in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Nonetheless, China did express public opposition to the agreement.

Most revealing is continued Chinese tolerance of U.S.-Vietnam defense cooperation. In May 2016 President Barack Obama visited Hanoi and announced formal lifting of the U.S. embargo on arms sales to Vietnam.<sup>91</sup> In March 2018, the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Carl Vinson visited Da Nang for a four-day port call. Vietnam also received assistance from the U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program, including the transfer of a U.S. Coast Guard cutter. This was the first major defense transfer between the United States and Vietnam. The FMF program also funded Vietnamese acquisition of 24 45-ft Metal Shark fast patrol boats. Twelve of the ships had been delivered by 2018. And the United States funded Vietnamese participation in the U.S.-led Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative. The U.S. Department of Defense provided Hanoi with over 16 USD million in assistance in 2017 and 2018.<sup>92</sup>

China has also tolerated Vietnamese island construction in the South China Sea. Since 2015, Vietnam carried out reclamation work in the South China Sea and it has positioned military equipment on these features. Vietnam has thus mimicked, on a smaller scale, Chinese land reclamation and defense activities in the South China Sea. But China has limited its response to foreign ministry statements urging respect for Chinese sovereignty.<sup>93</sup>

### **Expanded Sino-Vietnamese Political and Economic Cooperation**

Confident in Vietnamese cooperation with its security interests vis-à-vis the United States, China expanded its political cooperation with Vietnam. From 2015 to 2016, Chinese law enforcement incidents against Vietnamese fishing boats reduced from 73 to 41 and declined dramatically in 2017.<sup>94</sup> China and Vietnam also carried out joint coast guard patrols of the fishing grounds in the Tonkin Gulf. By 2017 they had carried out 23 such joint patrols and in recent years they have carried out two patrols each year.<sup>95</sup> The Vietnam–China Land Border Joint Committee jointly manages

<sup>87</sup>'Vietnam Places Orders for Russian Weapons Worth Over \$1 Billion: TASS,' Reuters, 8 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-russia-arms/vietnam-places-orders-for-russian-weapons-worth-over-1-billion-tass-idUSKCN1L008K>.

<sup>88</sup>Carl Thayer, 'India and Vietnam Advance Their Strategic Partnership,' *Diplomat*, 11 December 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/india-and-vietnam-advance-their-strategic-partnership/>; 'India Tightens Vietnam Defense, Oil Ties before China Xi's Visit,' CNBC, 15 September 2014, <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/09/15/india-tightens-vietnam-defense-oil-ties-before-china-xis-visit.html>; Sanjeev Miglani, 'India to Supply Vietnam with Naval Vessels amid China Disputes,' Reuters, 24 October 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-vietnam/india-to-supply-vietnam-with-naval-vessels-amid-china-disputes-idUSKBN0IHOLE20141028>.

<sup>89</sup>Ankit Panda, 'India, Vietnam Conclude Second Iteration of Bilateral Naval Exercise off Cam Ranh Bay,' *Diplomat*, 22 April 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/india-vietnam-conclude-second-iteration-of-bilateral-naval-exercise-off-cam-ranh-bay/>.

<sup>90</sup>Japan and Vietnam Ink First Maritime Patrol Ship Deal as South China Sea Row Heats Up,' *Japan Times*, 11 August 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/08/11/national/japan-vietnam-patrol-ships-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>91</sup>Gardiner Harris, 'Vietnam Arms Embargo to be Fully Lifted, Obama Says in Hanoi,' *New York Times*, 23 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/24/world/asia/vietnam-us-arms-embargo-obama.html>.

<sup>92</sup>U.S. Department of State, 'U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam,' 16 August 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285176.htm>.

<sup>93</sup>David Brunnstrom and Ben Blanchard, 'Images Show Vietnam South China Sea Reclamation, China Defends Own,' Reuters, 7 May 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam-idUSKBN0NT04820150508>; Derek Grossman, 'China Tolerating Vietnam's South China Sea Activities, for Now,' *China Brief*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2 March 2017), Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/china-tolerating-vietnams-south-china-sea-activities-now/>.

<sup>94</sup>NIDS, 'Maintaining Maritime Order in the Asia-Pacific,' p. 66.

<sup>95</sup>'China, Vietnam Wrap Up 23rd Joint Patrol in Beibu Gulf,' *China Military Online*, 6 December 2017, [http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2017-12/06/content\\_7857752.htm](http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2017-12/06/content_7857752.htm).

border stability and maintenance. In 2018, China and Vietnam carried out their first provincial-level joint patrol of the land border.<sup>96</sup>

Once Vietnam had accommodated Chinese security interests, Chinese economic cooperation with Vietnam improved. Whereas Vietnamese exports to China had stagnated from 2009 to 2014, during the period of growing U.S.-Vietnam cooperation and Vietnamese challenges to Chinese maritime claims, following the resolution of the Haiyang 981 confrontation in late 2014 through 2018 Vietnamese exports to China more than doubled and Vietnam's trade surplus with China steadily increased.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, whereas Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam stagnated from 2009 to 2014, beginning in 2015 Chinese FDI in Vietnam dramatically increased. By 2018 Chinese FDI had had an increase from approximately US 75 USD million in 2014 to nearly US\$ 400 million.<sup>98</sup>

### *The Limits to Sino-Vietnamese Cooperation*

But China has not tolerated Vietnamese resource development in Chinese-claimed waters in cooperation with outside powers. In March 2018, China compelled Vietnam to cancel its agreement with the Spanish company Repsol to drill for oil in a Chinese-claimed EEZ.<sup>99</sup> China pressure also persuaded the Indian oil company ONGC Videsh to move its joint operations with Vietnam to a less sensitive area of the South China Sea. An Indian government official remarked that 'There is no hydrocarbon found in that block. We have been present there because the Vietnamese government had asked us to be there.' An ONGC Videsh executive reported that its interest in the sensitive area was strategic rather than commercial, given that oil development there was high-risk with only moderate potential.<sup>100</sup> Vietnam's state oil firm PetroVietnam explained that maritime tension with China affected its offshore exploration and production activities.<sup>101</sup>

In 2018 Vietnam cooperated with the Russian energy company Rosneft to drill for oil with a Japanese-owned oil rig, the Hakuryu-5, in Chinese-claimed EEZ waters. The Chinese Foreign Ministry warned Russia and Vietnam that they should 'respect China's sovereignty and jurisdictional rights and not do anything that could impact bilateral relations and regional peace and stability' and stated that such drilling required the permission of Chinese authorities.<sup>102</sup> But Sino-Russian cooperation continued and in May 2019 China responded with threats of conflict escalation. Once again, Vietnamese found itself in a Sino-Vietnamese maritime crisis.

Over the summer and fall of 2019, China sent government ships close to the Japanese oil rig and its ships harassed Vietnamese fishing boats. At one point, up to 35 Chinese coast guard and fishing boats accompanied the China's survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 as it challenged Vietnamese claims in the disputed EEZ. In August, The Chinese Navy carried out live-fire military exercises in the Gulf of Tonkin

<sup>96</sup>Vietnam-China Land Border Joint Committee Convenes 7th Session, *People's Army Newspaper*, 14 January 2017, <https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/vietnam-china-land-border-joint-committee-convenes-7th-session-477286>; 'Vietnamese, Chinese Border Guards Hold Joint Patrol,' *Vietnam Breaking News*, 11 April 2018, <https://www.vietnambreakingnews.com/2018/04/vietnamese-chinese-border-guards-hold-joint-patrol/>.

<sup>97</sup>UN Comtrade Database, 2019, at <https://comtrade.un.org/>

<sup>98</sup>Chinese FDI Trends in Vietnam: Trends, Status and Challenges, *Perspective*, no. 34 (24 April 2019), Yusof Ishak Institute, ISEAS, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEASPerspective201934.pdf>

<sup>99</sup>Bill Hayton, 'South China Sea: Vietnam "Scraps New Oil Project,"' *BBC News*, 18 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43507448>.

<sup>100</sup>Utpal Bhaskar, 'ONGC Videsh Wants to Swap South China Sea Block with another in Vietnam,' *Mint*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/industry/energy/ongc-videsh-wants-to-swap-south-china-sea-block-with-another-in-vietnam-1551650387112.html>; Mai Nguyen, Nidhi Verma, and Sanjeev Miglani, 'Vietnam renews India oil deal in tense South China Sea,' *Reuters*, 6 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-vietnam/vietnam-renews-india-oil-deal-in-tense-south-china-sea-idUSKBN19R25P>.

<sup>101</sup>James Pearson, 'As Rosneft's Vietnam Unit Drills in Disputed Area of South China Sea, Beijing Issues Warning,' *Reuters*, 16 May 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-rosneft-vietnam-southchinasea-exclusv/as-rosnefts-vietnam-unit-drills-in-disputed-area-of-south-china-sea-beijing-issues-warning-idUKKCN1H09H>.

<sup>102</sup>Catherine Wong, 'China's Navy and Coastguard Stage First Joint Patrols Near Disputed South China Sea Islands as "Warning to Vietnam,"' *South China Morning Post*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2147154/chinas-navy-and-coastguard-stage-first-joint-patrols>; Pearson, 'As Rosneft's Vietnam Unit Drills in Disputed Area of South China Sea, Beijing Issues Warning.'

and near the Paracel Islands and it sent one of its largest commercial ships to less than 60 miles from the Vietnamese coast.<sup>103</sup> Then, in September, Chinese ships fired water cannons at Vietnamese vessels.<sup>104</sup>

Once again, Vietnam failed to elicit effective support from the United States, or from any of its Southeast Asian neighbors.<sup>105</sup> After an October meeting between Chinese and Vietnamese defense ministers in Beijing, Vietnam ended its drilling in the Chinese-claimed EEZ. China then withdrew its ships from the disputed waters.<sup>106</sup> In late November, China and Vietnam resumed consultations on maritime cooperation. A week later, a three-day vice foreign ministerial meeting in Beijing publicly ended the confrontation; it focused on Sino-Vietnamese stability, dialogue, and cooperation.<sup>107</sup>

As in 2014, China understood Vietnam's challenge as cooperation with U.S. containment of the rise of China. The United States had encouraged Vietnam to exploit its off-shore resources without Chinese cooperation to draw it into its 'containment strategy.' But the United States failed to provide adequate support for Vietnam. The United States Navy 'flaunts' its military capabilities, but during the standoff, it did not show up. It demonstrated a 'sit by and watch' attitude, allowing China and Vietnam to 'sink into conflict.' Ultimately, the United States could not prevent high-level Sino-Vietnamese meetings and there were no anti-China demonstrations in Vietnam. The outcome of the confrontation was a 'disappointment' to the United States.<sup>108</sup> Mainstream U.S. analysts agreed. They argued that the United States needs 'to do more . . . to rein in' Chinese activities, that China had been successful in blocking Vietnamese oil exploration, and that China is in the 'driver's seat' in the South China Sea.<sup>109</sup> Overall, Chinese observers recognize that Vietnamese worry that they cannot count on the United States for support, that the U.S. commitment to Vietnam is uncertain and that its

<sup>103</sup>Minnie Chan, 'China Puts New Weapons and Warships Through Paces in Live-Fire Drills Near Vietnam,' *South China Morning Post*, 16 August 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3023197/chinaputsnewweaponsandwarshipsthroughpaceslive-fire>; Jesse Johnson, 'China Announces Fresh Military Exercises in South China Sea as U.S. Carrier Enters Waterway,' *Japan Times*, 6 August 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/08/06/asiapacific/chinaholdfreshmilitaryexercisedisputedouthchinasea/#.XnORsqhKiUk>; Khanh Vu, 'Chinese Ship Inches Closer to Vietnam Coastline Amid South China Sea Tensions,' Reuters, 24 August 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/ukvietnamchinasouthchinasea/chineseshipinchesclosertovietnamcoastlineamidsouthchinasea-tensionsidUKKCN1VE064>.

<sup>104</sup>Niharika Mandhana, 'Vietnam told China to Get Out of Its Waters. Beijing's Response: No, You Get Out,' *Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/vietnam-told-china-to-get-out-of-its-waters-beijings-response-no-you-get-out-11572625722>; James Paterson, 'China Ups the Ante in South China Sea, giant crane vessel spotted inside Vietnam-claimed waters,' *International Business Times*, 5 September 2019, <https://www.ibtimes.com/china-ups-ante-south-china-sea-giant-crane-vessel-spotted-inside-vietnam-claimed-2822461>.

<sup>105</sup>Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Vietnam Confronts China, Alone,' *Diplomat*, 26 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/vietnam-confronts-china-alone/>; Richard Javad Heydarian, 'Vietnam a Lonely Island of Resistance to China,' *Asia Times*, 10 October 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/10/vietnam-a-lonely-island-of-resistance-to-china/>; U.S. Department of State press statement, 'Chinese Coercion on Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea,' 20 July 2019, <https://www.state.gov/chinese-coercion-on-oil-and-gas-activity-in-the-south-china-sea/>; for the unattributed United States Department of Defense statement, see 'China Escalates Coercion Against Vietnam's Longstanding Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea,' 26 August 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1943953/china-escalates-coercion-against-vietnams-longstanding-oil-and-gas-activity-in/>.

<sup>106</sup>Chinese Foreign Ministry, 'Zhong Yue Juxing Haishang di Mingan Lingyu Hezuo Zhuanjia Gongzuozu di 13 lun Cuoshang' (China and Vietnam hold the 13th round of consultations of the expert working group on cooperation in maritime low sensitive areas), 21 November 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjwb\\_673085/zjzj\\_673183/bjhysws\\_674671/xgxw\\_674673/t1717773.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjwb_673085/zjzj_673183/bjhysws_674671/xgxw_674673/t1717773.shtml); 'Vietnam, China forge Defence Cooperation,' *VOWWorld*, 23 October 2019, <https://vowworld.vn/en-US/news/vietnam-china-forge-defence-cooperation-795099.vov>; 'Recent Developments Surrounding the South China Sea,' *APNews*, 28 October 2019, <https://apnews.com/17a0a4beaace42d59fe217271fb7c24e>.

<sup>107</sup>Chinese Foreign Ministry, '2019 Nian 10 Yue 24 Ri Waijiaobu Fayanren Hua Chunying Zhuchi Lixing Jizhehui' (Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying's regular press conference on 24 October 2019), 24 October 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt\\_674879/fyrbt\\_674889/t1710473.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/t1710473.shtml); Laura Zhou, 'Vietnam and China Promise To Keep Talking as They Look To Settle Differences over South China Sea,' *South China Morning Post*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3040014/vietnam-and-china-promise-keep-talking-they-look-settle>.

<sup>108</sup>Zhao Weihua, 'Jinqi Nanhai Shitai de Taiqian Muhou' (Behind the scenes of the recent South China Sea situation), *Shijie Shishi*, no. 19 (2019), pp. 66–7.

<sup>109</sup>Gregory B. Poling and Murray Hiebert, 'Stop the Bully in the South China Sea,' *Wall Street Journal*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stop-the-bully-in-the-south-china-sea-11567033378?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>; John Grady, 'Panel: China Now Well Positioned to Bully Neighbors in the South China Sea,' *USNI News*, 27 January 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/01/27/panel-china-now-well-positioned-to-bully-neighbors-in-south-china-sea>.



priority in the Indo-Pacific strategy priority is India, and that the ASEAN countries are in a secondary position in U.S. security policy.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

The maritime sovereignty dispute is not the cause of heightened Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Rather, heightened Sino-Vietnamese conflict over security interests has caused increased tension over the sovereignty and EEZ disputes. When the Sino-Vietnamese security conflict was dormant, the disputes remained politically dormant, despite Vietnamese challenges to Chinese maritime claims, and China and Vietnam developed extensive economic and political cooperation. Only when Vietnam cooperated with the United States did China escalate the conflict.

Sino-Vietnamese conflict reflects China's ambitions for a sphere of influence in Indochina. This is an expected great power security objective. China seeks dominance in Indochina, just as the United States has sought dominance in the Western hemisphere and India has sought dominance in South Asia). But China's interest in a sphere of influence has encountered Vietnamese demands for foreign policy independence and anti-China nationalism. Since 1949, Vietnam's resistance and China's unyielding response have contributed to episodes of heightened tension and, at times, war. But these periods have tended to be short-lived, as Chinese advantages in Indochina and the cost to Vietnam of resistance to Chinese security interests tend to compel stability.

Should the rise of China continue, the emergence of greater balance in the U.S.-China strategic competition will increasingly reduce the value of U.S. security support for Vietnam. Moreover, Chinese ground-force dominance along the Sino-Vietnamese land border and its naval presence in Vietnamese waters will continue to improve, contributing to greater Chinese leverage over Vietnam. In 2020, Vietnam reached agreement with the multinational Noble Corporation to drill for oil in waters near Vanguard Bank. But after a Vietnamese fishing boat sunk after a collision with a Chinese surveillance ship and China then moved its Haiyang Dizhi 8 oil rig into Vietnamese-claimed waters near the Paracel Islands and its coast guard ships into the vicinity of a Vietnamese oil rig, Vietnam canceled the contract and made a termination payment to the Noble Corporation.<sup>111</sup> With little effort and minimal tension, and without inciting overt Vietnamese anti-China nationalism, Beijing had compelled Hanoi to abandon its plan for joint oil production in Chinese-claimed waters.

But the rise of China and the corresponding increase in Vietnamese vulnerability will not necessarily contribute to uninterrupted Sino-Vietnamese cooperation. The rise of China has increased Chinese confidence in managing U.S.-Vietnam cooperation, but Chinese continue to suspect Vietnamese intentions toward the United States and they understand the importance of mass nationalism and leadership interests in contributing to Vietnamese resistance to Chinese maritime claims.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, as China's capabilities grow, Vietnamese nationalism may also grow. Should Chinese leaders expect difficult concessions from Vietnam, the Vietnamese leadership's ability to acquiesce may be constrained by Vietnamese nationalism. If China demands, for

<sup>110</sup>Song and Yu, 'Yuenan dui Meiguo Yin Tai Zhanlue de Renshi yu Yingdui,' p. 121.

<sup>111</sup>'Chinese Ship Returns Near Vietnam Border,' *VOA News*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/chinese-ship-returns-near-vietnam-border>; Khanh Vu, 'Vietnam Protests Beijing's Sinking of South China Sea Boat,' *Reuters*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnam-protests-beijings-sinking-of-south-china-sea-boat-idUSKBN21M072>; Damon Evans, 'Beijing Rattles Oil Companies in South China Sea off Vietnam,' *Energy Voice*, DC Thompson Media, 13 August 2020, <https://www.energyvoice.com/oilandgas/asia/258490/beijing-oil-china-vietnam/>; Drake Long, 'Oil Company Pulls Out of Vietnamese Oil Field as China Puts the Squeeze on Vietnam,' *Radio Free Asia*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/oil-china-07132020173206.html>; Khanh Vu, 'Vietnam Protests Beijing's Sinking of South China Sea Boat,' *Reuters*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnam-protests-beijings-sinking-of-south-china-sea-boat-idUSKBN21M072>.

<sup>112</sup>Zhang, 'Yuenan zai Nanhai Youqi Jinquan Huodong de Xin Dongxiang ji Zhongguo de Yingdui,' pp. 114–115; Wu Shicun, '2020 Nian Nanhai Jushi Zhanwang: Dongdang' (Outlook for the South China Sea in 2020: Potential for unexpected turbulence), *Shijie Zhishi*, no. 1, 2020, pp. 28–30.

example, that Vietnam recognize Chinese sovereignty claims throughout the South China Sea, heightened Sino-Vietnamese tensions could readily develop.

Prolonged Sino-Vietnamese stability and cooperation requires mutual restraint. China must restrain its demands on Vietnam and Vietnam must restrain nationalist forces that promote excessive resistance to Chinese power. But China's continued rise may fuel heightened Chinese nationalist ambitions, in turn eliciting greater Vietnamese nationalism, together leading to spiraling conflict. Only pragmatic leadership in both Hanoi and Beijing can manage this challenging trend in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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