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). 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.

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.

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1Because 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.

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

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. 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. It similarly challenges Christina Lai’s constructivist approach that stresses the importance of positive diplomatic rhetoric in creating a constructed cooperative Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

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.

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5 Womack, China and Vietnam, chapter 10.

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 Politiburo 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. From 1949 through the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union deployed only token military forces in its Far East.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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
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.\textsuperscript{15}

In December 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia.\textsuperscript{16} China then waged a ten-year low-intensity war of attrition on the Sino-Vietnamese border and supported the anti-Vietnamese insurgency in Cambodia.\textsuperscript{17} 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.\textsuperscript{18}

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 of 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.\textsuperscript{19}

But from 1991 to 2009, Vietnam expanded its presence on Chinese-claimed features in the Spratly Islands.\textsuperscript{20} Vietnam’s PetroVietnam signed 99 contracts with foreign energy companies for oil and gas exploration in Chinese-claimed EEZ waters.\textsuperscript{21} China protested these contracts, lodging 18 protests with the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry.\textsuperscript{22} 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.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{16}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.
\textsuperscript{17}Zhang Xiaoming, ‘China’s 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment,’ China Quarterly, no. 184 (2005).
\textsuperscript{21}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.
\textsuperscript{22}Do, ‘Riding the Chinese Tide,’ p. 214.
\textsuperscript{23}Le, Living Next to the Giant, pp. 140–142.
Nonetheless, with the exception of a brief naval encounter in 1994, 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. 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. 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.

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.’ It fabricates ‘the atmosphere

and the illusion of maritime security tensions as a pretext to intervene’ in the disputes.\textsuperscript{29} It creates ‘suspicions’ to ‘alienate’ China’s neighbors and to drive a ‘wedge’ between them to draw them close to the United States.\textsuperscript{30}

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.\textsuperscript{31} 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.\textsuperscript{32}

**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.\textsuperscript{33}

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.\textsuperscript{33} In December the


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.’

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. 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.

Chinese analysts assessed these developments, including Clinton’s ‘historic visit’ to Hanoi, 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.’ It cooperates with the United States to send a ‘clear signal’ to China and it has ‘joined hands’ with the United States to challenge Chinese power and to ‘balance’ China. 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. Vietnam ‘caters’ to the Obama administration’s ‘rebalance’ to deal with the Chinese ‘threat.’

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. 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.

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40 He, ‘Yuegong, “Shier Da” yu Yuenan de Zhanlue Zouxiang,’ p. 22; Yue Ping, ‘Yuenan Daqou Pingheng Waijiao Chengxian Xin Tedian’ (The Vietnamese balancing diplomacy between big powers presents new features), Shijie Zhishi (World knowledge), no. 13 (2017), p. 34.
41 He and An, ‘Nanhai Zhengduan zhong de Meiguo Yinsu ji qi Yingxiang,’ p. 141.
42 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.
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.’

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. 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. 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.’

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. 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. 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.’

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. China then sent its Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig into the Vietnamese-claimed EEZ. This was

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45 Cong Yong, “Nanhai ‘981 Zuanjing Pingtai Chongtu Zhese 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.


47 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.


the first time that China had drilled for oil in the South China Sea since 1994 and it challenged Vietnamese maritime claims. 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 shops and a Vietnamese fishing boat sank after a collision with a Chinese boat. 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. 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.

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.

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. And Beijing had yet to send in its navy or its air force to deal with Vietnamese ‘intransigence.’

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. 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

the tense incidents." 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.’ 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.’

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.’

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. Vietnam would thus manage the maritime conflict with bilateral level consultations. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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64 Zhao, ‘Zhong Yue Nanhai Zhengduan Jiejue Moshi Tansuo,’ p. 113.
67 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.
68 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.
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 communicé 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.72

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.’73 A senior Vietnamese policy analyst agreed. Because of ‘historical lessons,’ the ‘parameter of Vietnamese policy’ is not to become any other country’s ally.74

**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.’75 To balance China’s rise, the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific is toward loosening and collapse.75 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.’


achieves ‘regional superiority vis-à-vis the United States, Vietnam will encounter weakness in Sino-Vietnamese negotiations.”

2016 was a key year for Chinese confidence in Vietnamese acquiescence to a Chinese sphere of influence. In early 2016, the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam introduced the principle of ‘patience and persistence’ in achieving its sovereignty goals. 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.’

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.

Then, in October, Vietnam welcomed, for the first time, a Chinese military ship visit to Cam Ranh Bay.

Following the July PCA decision, anti-Chinese nationalist demonstrations recurred in Vietnam. But Hanoi quickly suppressed them, in contrast to 2014. 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. 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. 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. In 2017, Vietnam took delivery of 20 medium-range radar systems that would target Chinese aircraft. In 2018, Vietnam agreed to purchase one billion dollars of additional Russian defense equipment. China did not voice significant opposition to these sales.

77Zhao 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.
78Zhao, ‘Zhong Yue Nanhai Zhengduan Jiejue Moshi Tansuo,’ p. 111.
82Liu, Guoji Wenti Zonglun Wenti, pp. 92–93.
85See the discussion in Cheng Hanping, Yuenan Haiyang Zhanlue Yanjiu (A Study on the maritime strategy of Vietnam) (Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2016), 226–8.
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. In 2018 and 2019, India and Vietnam carried out joint naval exercises. 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. 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 Barak Obama visited Hanoi and announced formal lifting of the U.S. embargo on arms sales to Vietnam. 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.

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.

**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. 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. The Vietnam–China Land Border Joint Committee jointly manages the

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94| NIDS, ‘Maintaining Maritime Order in the Asia-Pacific,’ p. 66.


The Limits to Sino-Vietnamese Cooperation


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.\footnote{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.’} 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...
and near the Paracel Islands and it sent one of its largest commercial ships to less than 60 miles from the Vietnamese coast.\textsuperscript{103} Then, in September, Chinese ships fired water cannons at Vietnamese vessels.\textsuperscript{104}

Once again, Vietnam failed to elicit effective support from the United States, or from any of its Southeast Asian neighbors.\textsuperscript{105} 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.\textsuperscript{106} 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.\textsuperscript{107}

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.\textsuperscript{108} 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.\textsuperscript{109} 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...
priority in the Indo-Pacific strategy, priority is India, and that the ASEAN countries are in a secondary position in U.S. security policy.110

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 sank 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.111 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.112 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

110 Song and Yu, ‘Yuenan dui Meiguo Yin Tai Zhanlue de Renshi yu Yingdui,’ p. 121.
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.

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