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CHINA'S WORLD

Vietnam's Impossible Bind: How to Stand Up to Beijing

Fence-mending visit underlines Hanoi's thousand-year-old balancing act



Nguyen Phu Trong, Vietnam's top Communist official, seen in Hanoi in February, is visiting Beijing this week.

PHOTO: REUTERS

By ANDREW BROWNE

April 7, 2015 4:57 a.m. ET

HANOI—On a fence-mending visit to Beijing this week, Vietnam’s top Communist official will face a dilemma that has dogged his country’s leaders for much of the past millennium: how to show deference to China without appearing meek back home.

To pull this off, Vietnamese rulers have resorted to all kinds of diplomatic contortions and outright deceptions during a long history of domination by China. In the 18th century, the emperor Nguyen Hue sent a double to the Chinese court. Earlier, the Vietnamese installed two emperors—a boy who dealt with Beijing and a “senior emperor” who took care of other business.

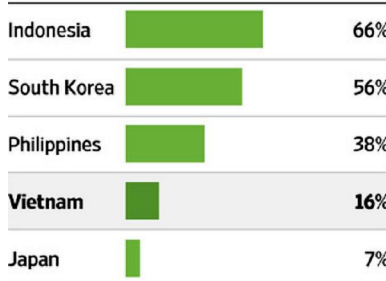
Such tricks confirmed Beijing’s view of Vietnam as cunning and duplicitous. But there’s no getting around Vietnam’s bind: It can’t escape the demands for humility from its much more powerful neighbor any more than it can run away from its own ancient culture, which is shaped by heroic resistance to Chinese bullying.

Today, Hanoi’s dilemma is particularly acute. An economy increasingly dependent on China adds pressure to get along with Beijing. Yet, after China last May dragged a gigantic oil drilling rig into disputed waters, public sentiment is running heavily against the neighbor to the north.

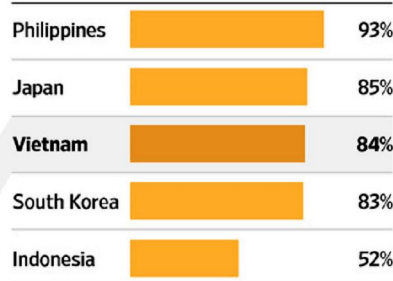
Tempered Trust

A survey last year of Asian countries’ attitude to China showed suspicion in Vietnam was high.

Favorable views of China in selected Asian countries



Survey participants concerned territorial disputes with China could lead to military conflict



Note: Survey based on interviews with about 1,000 adults with a margin of error of 3.2 to 4.5 percentage points depending on the country
 Source: Pew Research Center

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A Pew survey last year showed that 84% of Vietnamese worry that China’s territorial assertiveness could lead to war.

These attitudes greatly complicate the mission of Nguyen Phu Trong, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam who arrived in Beijing on Tuesday on a four-day visit, the

highest-level visitor from Hanoi since the rig debacle. The party’s domestic critics--activists, writers, civil-society organizations—are likely to interpret any compromise he makes on territorial issues as weakness; any deal as a sellout.

Moreover, the stakes are rising. Nguyen Quang A, a prominent Vietnamese economist, says that anti-Chinese nationalist sentiment in Vietnam, while perhaps not strong enough to bring down the government, could “undermine the foundations of this system.”



China moved its first deep-water drilling rig, pictured in a file photo, to disputed waters off Vietnam in May last year. *PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS*

The economist was among those who signed an open letter last May to urge Vietnam’s leaders to join the Philippines’ legal challenge of China’s claims to almost the entire South China Sea. Reflecting the government’s ambivalence, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung suggested last year that Hanoi was considering such a move, but since then leaders have instead attempted to reset cordial ties with China.

Increasingly, governments around the region are running up against a similar problem. Aware of China’s growing economic clout, politicians are torn between nurturing ties with Beijing, while resisting domestic criticism they’re allowing excessive Chinese influence.

In Myanmar, a repressive military junta buckled under those twin pressures. Fearing that their country was losing its independence to China, leaders opened up the political system and reached out to the U.S. and Europe.

Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka a newly elected government is looking into cozy deals that outgoing politicians cut with Chinese state companies. A huge Chinese port project is now on hold.

For its part, the Chinese government is also under pressure from domestic popular opinion. The need to pander to vocal nationalists helps to explain its growing territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea, where it's been constructing large military facilities on top of tiny land features, turning half-submerged reefs into bristling fortresses.

In short, the Communist parties of both China and Vietnam are in a corner. But Mr. Trong, the Vietnamese party chief, has options. Later this year, he is expected to travel to the U.S. to mark the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations.

The prospect of warming political ties, and closer military cooperation, between these two former foes will give Mr. Trong some leverage in his negotiations in Beijing, even though China's official Xinhua News Agency in a commentary on Tuesday warned against such a gambit.

"Interpretations of Trong's expected U.S. trip as a move to counterbalance China smell of Cold War-era machination and confrontationalism, which should have long been dumped to the dustbin of history," Xinhua said.

Still, no diplomatic coalition that Vietnam can pull together will be enough to balance the might of China.

Vietnam cannot escape its geography. China, however, knows that it can never subdue Vietnam. The last time Chinese troops crossed the border, in 1979, they were badly mauled.

"Again and again the power of China has broken on the rock of Vietnam," writes the scholar Brantly Womack in his book "China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry." Vietnam has suffered more through military incursions, but China has been forced to withdraw.

In the end, writes Mr. Womack "the relationship has been a negotiated one." History suggests that Mr. Trong will find a way to patch things up in Beijing. His real problems may begin once he gets home.

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