



Vietnam: riding the Chinese tide

Do Thanh Hai

Centre for Information and Analysis, Bien Dong Institute for Maritime Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Vietnam's perception of China is nuanced and complex, a mixture of challenge and opportunity. Given its geographic proximity and overwhelming power, China represents a permanent strategic challenge Vietnam cannot escape. However, the two countries are partners in the defence of socialist ideals and communist rule. These circumstances have clearly shaped Vietnam's China policy, which is a mixture of cooperation and struggle. Vietnam's strategy is not about confronting China directly but finding a way to live with and benefit from its power.

KEYWORDS Vietnam; China threat; South China Sea

Introduction

As part of *The Pacific Review's* series on The China Threat, this article examines how the rise of China has been perceived by its southern neighbour Vietnam. The case of Vietnam is particularly interesting and unique in that it is the country most exposed to the power of China's on almost all measures. The two countries share a 1281-kilometre long land border and a vast expanse of waters in the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea proper. The headwaters of Vietnam's most important rivers, the Red River and Mekong River, are in China. The two nations also share a history of diplomatic and political exchange punctuated by wars and conflicts that is at least two thousand years old. Such proximity and connectedness makes China a 'constant feature of political life' in Vietnam.

In the series' previous articles, The China Threat has been seen as a more or less temporary and sectoral phenomenon. Goodman (2017) posited that The China Threat was part of identity politics in Australia, which surfaced occasionally, especially at elections, to rally popular support but gradually diminished as economic benefits from China played out after the political dust had settled. In discussing Thailand, Hewison (2017) pointed out that Beijing was no longer seen as a threat in Bangkok since China withdrew its support to the Communist Party of Thailand in 1979. Since the end of the Cold War, Sino–Thai relations have progressed smoothly, and have become even closer since the military junta took power in Thailand in 2014. In Vietnam, however, the fear of China is perpetual, wide-ranging and complex. Unlike Australia and Thailand, Vietnam is not an ally of the United States and has a long history of standing in the shadow of China.

This article builds on the understanding of Vietnam's strategic traditions and its interactions with China to explain the country's changing perception of China. The focus is on the period after 1991, when the two countries normalized relations, and it is structured in five parts. The first presents the puzzle of Vietnam's response to the challenge of China. The second seeks hints from the history of Vietnam's interactions with China. The third investigates the period from normalization until 2002, where Vietnam saw China in a larger context as an ideological partner. The fourth discusses Vietnam's underlying anxiety at China's rising influence over South-East Asia between 2002 and 2009. The final part charts how Vietnam has coped with China's maritime assertiveness since 2009.

Insecure yet terrified

By all accounts, China represents a conceivable threat to Vietnam. According to Stephen Walt (1987), a threat is composed of four major elements: aggregate power, offensive power, geographic proximity and perceived aggressive intentions. From the Vietnamese perspective, China possesses all of these attributes. Its aggregate power remains overwhelming to Vietnam, which in terms of size and population is equivalent to a middle-sized province of China. Living next door to China, Vietnam has reason to be anxious about its neighbour's rapid naval modernization, through which its arsenal has been constantly upgraded with advanced missiles, submarines, fighter jets and aircraft carriers.

There remain between the two countries a range of unresolved territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam's naval capabilities cannot match those of China. Vietnamese strategists are convinced that China's ultimate goal is absolute control of the South China Sea, a maritime domain rich in hydrocarbons and of strategic importance in terms of navigation. China resorted to force to gain control of a number of offshore islets at the expense of Vietnam in 1974 and 1988. Over the last decade China has acted assertively on many occasions, causing dangerous clashes and serious stand-offs at sea between the two countries' maritime forces.

However, it seems that Vietnam has not been as alarmed at the revival of the Middle Kingdom as many Western scholars may have thought. There are no signs of Vietnam hastily beefing up its defence at all costs, or falling into the embrace of other powers as a backstop to China's rise. Neither have the Vietnamese indicated that they acquiesce to China's claims over remote and barren offshore rocks in return for stronger security for the mainland. There is no doubt that Vietnam feels acutely insecure and vulnerable in the face of China's massive economic and military power. Yet, in spite of China's increased assertiveness, Vietnam has not turned its back on China but has obstinately pushed for more dialogue and greater cooperation.

Clearly, the rise of China may be beneficial for Vietnam in many ways. As socialist countries, Vietnam and China share an interest in safeguarding communist rule. An economically strong China could provide a verified model of development and plenty of opportunities for doing business, and thus enhance the position of Vietnam in the eyes of other major powers. This complicates Hanoi's interactions with Beijing. Vietnam is therefore hesitant to challenge Chinese power comprehensively. Vietnam has chosen to face China not by attempting to redress the asymmetry of capacity between them but by making the imbalance of power work for its own interest. This indicates that Vietnam's view of China is more nuanced and complex than has generally been thought.

Water and the boat

Speaking in a hearing at the National Assembly in November 2014, on the heels of the crisis over China's deployment of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig in an area claimed by Vietnam, then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung described Vietnam's policy towards China as 'cooperation cum struggle' (Thuy, 2014). What this indicates is that the Vietnamese political elite never rule out cooperation and partnership with China even when relations are under severe stress. During this oil rig confrontation, Vietnam stood firm and indicated that it would take every measure possible to defend its territorial sovereignty and integrity. Then, after China withdrew the oil rig, Hanoi held no grudge but immediately dispatched a senior official to Beijing to mend the broken ties between them (Spegele & Khanh, 2014). Though this pattern of behaviour would surprise many observers, it has historical roots in the thousands of years that the Vietnamese have coped with Chinese power.

Vietnam has a long history of resisting China and has kept detailed and public records of China's suzerainty over it lasting about a thousand years. Over the two millennia when they were two independent feudal empires, the Chinese attempted to invade Vietnam on at least nine occasions. Womack (2006) argues convincingly that Vietnamese identity has been shaped through the long struggle to defend its homeland against foreign aggressors, mostly from the north. In spite of such a bitter history, Vietnam and China lived in peace most of the time. The 'tyranny of geography,' a term coined by Thayer (2002, p. 271) to describe Vietnam's geographic misfortune, forced the Vietnamese to find a distinctive way to live in harmony with the northern giant without having its autonomy compromised.

After roughly one thousand years under Chinese domination, the Vietnamese realized they should be watchful of their northern neighbour's expansionism. While there was no point in being part of the Chinese kingdom, it was equally untenable to confront it in long-lasting conflicts. Therefore, Vietnamese rulers worked out their own tributary formula, giving symbolic homage to Chinese monarchs to prevent them interfering in Vietnam's internal affairs. Such a tributary relationship cost Vietnam little in terms of formalistic admiration and annual tributes to China but offered it peace, recognition and support when necessary. Marr (1981, p. 49) described such a form of interaction as follows:

This reality [China's overwhelming size], together with sincere cultural admiration, led Vietnam's rulers to accept the tributary system. Providing China did not meddle in Vietnam's internal affairs ... Vietnam monarchs were quite willing to declare themselves vassals of the Celestial Emperor. The subtlety of this relationship was evident from the way in which Vietnamese monarchs styled themselves 'king' (Vuong) when communicating with China's rulers, but 'emperor' (Hoang de) when addressing their own subjects or sending messages to other Southeast Asian rulers.

Still, the Vietnamese resisted whenever the Chinese encroached on their sovereignty and autonomy. From the Vietnamese perspective, stronger hard power did not guarantee domination on the battlefield or final victory. The key to winning was the disposition of forces and will-power, which could allow the weak to defeat the strong, and a small number of troops to overrun a larger army. Vietnam defeated China in most of their conflicts. However, after every conflict Vietnamese rulers did all they could to reset the tributary system. Ironically, the victors usually took the initiative to send envoys to Beijing to offer deference to the losers in exchange for peace and recognition. For the Vietnamese, it was not always about competing with its colossal neighbour, but about living together

harmoniously and productively. The logic behind this strategy is that historically the Vietnamese perceived Chinese power as a ‘force of nature.’ According to Hai and Kim (2017, p. 197):

Vietnamese have traditionally viewed China like floods and storms that feed into the deltas. China is a force of nature, to which Vietnamese, like reeds, must once bend while remaining firmly intact. When harnessed, this force can be nourishing and productive. At other times, as recent incidents in the South China Sea, it is terrifying and destructive.

Today’s Vietnam is on a much better footing with China. The globalized world has widened the range of options Vietnam has for coping with China. Vietnam is no longer alone in the face of Chinese power. Hanoi has established a range of partnerships with major powers and throughout South-East Asia, which has provided it with greater breathing space vis-à-vis Chinese power. However, traditional perceptions linger in how the Vietnamese think about China today. Explaining Vietnam’s need to normalize relations with China in the early 1990s, then Minister of Defence Le Duc Anh put it bluntly, ‘For the sake of our national interest, at critical times our ancestors used to actively establish relations with China, which caused no harm to independence and sovereignty but opportunities to struggle against their adverse impacts’ (Ninh, 2011). At the same time, the Vietnamese have shown greater calmness and confidence in dealing with a rising China. After all, China will always be enormous to Vietnam. Talking about how the rise of China would affect Vietnam, a strategist in Hanoi calmly said, ‘the higher the water rises, the higher the boat floats.’ In his metaphor, China is the water, and Vietnam is the boat.

Ideological partner

In the late 1980s, Vietnamese ideologues rethought the country’s relationship with its neighbours. After a decade-long confrontation following the short but ruinous border war in 1979, conservative circles in Hanoi started viewing China more as a fraternal socialist country than as a hegemonic and expansionist power, as it had been seen in the early 1980s. There was a growing belief that Vietnam could count on China’s support to safeguard the communist regime in Vietnam (Co, 2003, pp. 30–36). Consequently, despite the concerns of Vietnamese realist political elites about China’s territorial ambitions, Vietnam’s party chief Nguyen Van Linh and Defence Minister Le Duc Anh were looking for ways to approach the Chinese leadership and pushed for reconciliation between Hanoi and Beijing on the basis of socialist solidarity (Thayer, 1994a, pp. 516–17).

The shift in Vietnamese leaders’ perceptions about China mostly resulted from changes in international and domestic contexts in the late 1980s. Its involvement in the Cambodian conflict put Vietnam at loggerheads with ASEAN countries, China and the West. Turmoil in eastern Europe and the decline of the Soviet Union on the one hand weakened the socialist camp and on the other hand stimulated concerns in Hanoi about the danger of popular uprisings in the form of ‘velvet revolutions.’ Even worse, Vietnam was facing a severe socio-economic crisis at a time when aid from the Soviet Union was running out. As the global balance of power shifted against Vietnam, conservative leaders in Hanoi started turning to China for help against what they called ‘peaceful evolution’, their term for alleged attempts by Western powers and hostile forces to overthrow communist rule.

It should be noted that during that time China's relations with the West were also troubled due to its heavy-handed handling of the Tiananmen crisis in 1989. Under mounting pressure from the West, Beijing attempted to gain some breathing space by mending relations with the Soviet Union and improving ties with South-East Asia. Chinese officials then floated the idea of 'an Asian socialist community', hinting at reviving an ideological front to resist the West's demand for democratization (Thayer, 1994a, p. 518). In distress, Vietnamese leaders interpreted China's proposal as an appeal to international communism and a sign of its intention to mend its broken relations with Vietnam (Thayer, 1994b, p. 353).

As a result, conservative elites in Vietnam approached the Chinese to propose reconciliation between the Hanoi-backed Hunsen government and the Beijing-backed Khmer Rouge forces as a way to resolve the Cambodian conflict and expressed a wish to revive the earlier ideology-based alliance between Vietnam and China. To the surprise of the Vietnamese, the Chinese turned down both propositions, perhaps because Beijing no longer considered ideology the defining factor of their foreign policy. Chinese leaders told their Vietnamese interlocutors they regarded the two countries as 'comrades but not allies' (Co, 2003, p. 94). Still, conservative leaders in Hanoi were of the view that comradeship mattered in Sino-Vietnamese relations because the two countries faced the same threat of 'peaceful evolution.' Being isolated by the West, China was also interested in rapprochement with South-East Asian countries, including Vietnam.

The normalization that took place in November 1991 opened a new chapter in Vietnam-China relations. As hostilities receded, suspicions gradually lessened and cooperation rapidly expanded. The two countries established party-to-party and state-to-state dialogues and increased exchanges of delegations at all levels. The expansion of the party-to-party dialogue was a unique feature of Vietnam's relations with its nearby neighbours Laos, China and Cambodia. Between 1991 and 2001, there were at least 18 meetings between senior Vietnamese and Chinese party and state leaders to foster cooperation and resolve 'historical differences' (Ly, 2013, pp. 141-142). Due to their traditional ties, similar political system and ideology, as well as their geographic proximity, Vietnam's communist leaders accorded China the status of Vietnam's most important partner. In Vietnam's hierarchy of international partners, neighbouring and traditionally friendly countries usually rated highest. Though the Vietnamese leadership embraced a foreign policy of multilateralization and diversification, China appeared to be 'first among equals' among Vietnam's partners.

The Vietnam-China border was reopened and cross-border exchange expanded dramatically. China also provided loans for a number of important development projects in Vietnam. Vietnam wanted cooperation from China not only to maintain the regime but also to develop its economy. Vietnam-China bilateral trade increased more than 35-fold in five years, from US\$32.23 million in 1991 to US\$1.15 billion in 1996, then increased to US\$2.8 billion in 2001 (Huan, 2002, p. 189). China also offered loans and assistance for upgrading Vietnam's China-built factories. China provided Vietnam, as a fast-growing transitional economy, with practical experience and a model of how to develop a capitalist economy without significant detriment to a single-party political system (Ly, 2013, p. 143). At the same time, Hanoi expected that China would cooperate in resolving 'historical differences' through negotiation for the sake of socialist solidarity. Though tensions flared periodically, disputes over the offshore islands and maritime spaces in the South China Sea were generally well managed (Ramses and Thao, 2005).

By the turn of the century, Vietnam–China relations reached their peak. Both sides maintained frequent visits by and meetings among senior leaders and conducted regular exchanges on ideology and party building. In February 1999, Chinese President Jiang Zemin proposed the motto ‘friendly neighbourliness, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and future-oriented relationship’ for Sino–Vietnamese ties. The idea was welcomed by Vietnam’s party chief Le Kha Phieu (Chan, 2013, p. 37). In December 2000, when Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Hanoi, both sides adopted a Joint Statement for Comprehensive Cooperation. In 2002, Chinese leaders also called Vietnam and China ‘good neighbours, good friends, good comrades, and good partners’ (Storey, 2011, p. 114). The most remarkable achievement in bilateral relations was that the two countries managed to settle their long-standing disputes over land borders and maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Tonkin, in 1999 and 2000, respectively.

In the decade between 1991 and 2001, Vietnam clearly had a positive view of China. Still, there was a widespread and mainstream belief that socialism was in temporary retreat. Therefore, political elites in Vietnam largely viewed relations with China from the prism of ideology, considering it a reliable ideological partner and a cooperative neighbour. China was generally responsive to Vietnam’s concerns and cooperative in settling disputes over the land border and the boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin. China was also actively engaged with ASEAN to negotiate a code of conduct as a confidence-building measure in the South China Sea. However, unsettled disputes and China’s sporadic assertiveness in the South China Sea proper aroused lingering suspicion among Vietnamese realists about China’s strategic intentions.

Looming hegemon

Once China became a full dialogue partner with ASEAN in 1996, its influence quickly grew throughout South-East Asia. In the second half of the 1990s, Beijing started ‘charm offensive’ diplomacy, engaging extensively with ASEAN to better its image in the eyes of South-East Asian nations. Economically, during the 1997 Asian financial crisis China gained ASEAN’s support because it refrained from devaluing its currency and offered support to distressed nations, in stark contrast to the United States, which turned its back on the victims, criticising them for what had happened (Halloran, 1998). In November 2002, China and ASEAN signed a Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN, which laid out the roadmap for a China–ASEAN Free Trade Area for ASEAN-6 and for the rest of ASEAN in 2010 and 2015, respectively. Trade between ASEAN and China has grown dramatically ever since. In 2003 alone, it increased by 43 per cent to a new high of US\$78.2 billion, ASEAN exports rising by 50 per cent to US\$47.3 billion (Yong, 2005, p. 22). China also increased aid to South-East Asian countries. In 2003, China’s aid to the Philippines was quadruple that of America’s, its aid to Laos three times greater, and its aid to Indonesia two times greater (Kurlantzick, 2006, pp. 273–274).

In the political and security spheres, China made efforts to dispel the ‘China threat theory’ and presented a benign image within ASEAN. Beginning in May 1999, China negotiated with ASEAN to establish a code of conduct in the South China Sea. After three years, ASEAN and China had been unable to reach consensus on a number of issues, most controversially the code’s scope of application. In November 2002, China and ASEAN agreed to sign the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea, basically a watered-down political statement to indicate there was no

intention of a threat or use of force to resolve existing disputes. China took another step to reassure its South-East Asian partners of its intention to maintain peace and stability through applying for admission to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). At the Ninth ASEAN Summit in Bali in October 2003, ASEAN accepted China's application, making it the first non-ASEAN party to the TAC. On the same occasion, both sides adopted a Joint Declaration on a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (Saunders, 2016, p. 374). Beijing upgraded its public diplomacy, trying to sell the idea of 'peaceful rise', which was later changed to 'peaceful development.' It organized museum exhibits, cultural exchanges, and business forums, hosted overseas scholars, and expanded the international reach of its media, which in one way or another presented China as a peacekeeper and regional leader (Kurlantzick, 2006, p. 273).

Thanks to its charm-offensive policy, China increased its presence and influence in South-East Asia at the expense of the United States. Ten years after the China–ASEAN Dialogue was established, China operationalized 27 separate ASEAN–China mechanisms, as compared to only 7 active ASEAN–US mechanisms (Goh, 2005). In the early 1990s, almost all countries in ASEAN viewed China as a threat. However, this perception had changed by the early 2000s. One South-East Asian diplomat revealed that by then South-East Asian leaders no longer questioned the rise of China (Kurlantzick, 2006, p. 274). While disappointed at US military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, ASEAN political elites welcomed progress in Sino–ASEAN relations as a 'deeper political trust and higher level of cooperation' (Breckon, 2004, p. 2). Beijing's growing influence was manifested in South-East Asia reducing its engagement with Taiwan and banning Falun Gong activities within their own countries as a show of deference to China (Kurlantzick, 2006, p. 275).

While other South-East Asian nations appeared comfortable with China's rise, Vietnam watched China's expanded footprint in South-East Asia with caution. Hanoi had not been convinced by Beijing's 'peaceful development' thesis (Burghardt, 2005). It was evident that Vietnam was actually concerned about China's unchecked rising power, which would undermine ASEAN unity and the regional status quo. At the same time, political elites in Hanoi were equally worried about the distraction the war on terrorism was causing the United States. As a result, they approached US officials, urging them to pay more attention to China's increased activism in South-East Asia (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2004). In their view, China's comprehensive penetration into the region was 'aggressive', not simply 'active' (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2003). In private, Vietnamese diplomats also criticized the rigid position of the US on Myanmar, arguing that such a stance would only push Rangoon towards China (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2005a). Clearly, Vietnam was particularly anxious about China's rise and the regional imbalance of power. Other South-East Asian countries' deference to China undermined ASEAN unity with regard to the South China Sea dispute. In September 2004, Hanoi was clearly angered when informed that Manila had quietly worked with China on a joint-development project in the Spratly area, without consulting Vietnam and other South-East Asian claimants (Storey, 2008, pp. 3–4). Also, the Vietnamese were clearly uncomfortable about China's outreach to Laos and Cambodia on its western flank. Jörn Dosch (2006, p. 250) reported a Vietnamese source, which made this clear:

Vietnam is concerned about China's rising influence in Laos and Cambodia. China is the strategic backbone of Cambodia security and China and ASEAN are seen by the Cambodian and Laotian governments as credible forces to counterbalance Thailand and Vietnam. Though Laos still sees Vietnam as its closest ally, the former's generational transfer of political power could lead to a

preference of China as a security guarantor and an economic partner in the midst of competition for influence in Laos between China, and Vietnam, and Thailand to a lesser extent.

All of this indicated that Hanoi no longer viewed China as a purely ideological and cooperative partner. China's expansion seemingly re-awakened Vietnam's innate concerns about China's hegemonic tendencies. In July 2003, the Eighth Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam was convened to review the national defence strategy. At the plenum, Vietnamese political elites introduced two new concepts: *doi tac* (object of cooperation) and *doi tuong* (object of struggle). *Doi tac* referred to 'anyone who respects our independence and sovereignty, and establishes and expands friendly, equal and mutually beneficial relations with Vietnam.' *Doi tuong* was defined as 'any force that plans and acts against the objectives we [Vietnam] uphold in the course of national building and defence.' Interestingly, the resolution argued against a simplistic distinction between *doi tac* and *doi tuong*, claiming *doi tac* and *doi tuong* can coexist in the one country. It advocated a complex and pragmatic application of these concepts:

with objects of struggle, we can find areas of cooperation; with partners, there exist interests that are contradictory and different from those of ours. We should be aware of these, thus overcoming the two tendencies, namely lacking vigilance and showing rigidity in our perception, design, and implementation of specific policies. (Thayer, 2008, p. 27)

Setting aside semantic ambiguities, the concepts *doi tac* and *doi tuong* were indicative of a significant change in Vietnamese thinking about foreign affairs. Hanoi no longer regarded any country as merely a partner (to cooperate with) or purely an adversary (to struggle against). This meant that ideology would play a lesser role in defining Vietnam's partners and antagonists, while national interest would become a more salient factor in Hanoi's calculations. This shift effectively paved the way for cooperation with the United States in the field of security and defence, previously considered quite sensitive topics in Hanoi. Consequently, in November 2003 Vietnam's Defence Minister Pham Van Tra made a historic visit to Washington. Just a week later, the US Navy's USS *Vandegrift* (FFG-48) was permitted to make a landmark visit to Ho Chi Minh City; this was also the first visit of a US Navy vessel to Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War. Vietnam also started cooperative programs with the US in the field of non-traditional security, such as counter-terrorism, anti-drug smuggling, de-mining, search and rescue, and disaster relief.

It was quite clear that Hanoi carefully opted for low-profile and non-combative cooperation with the US to avoid sending the 'wrong message' to Beijing. Vietnam assured China that it had no intention of seeking an alliance with the US to counter China's rise. However, Hanoi made it clear to Washington that Vietnam recognized the United States as a legitimate actor and a key factor in maintaining regional peace and stability. In other words, what Hanoi really wanted was not so much protection as the steady presence in the region of the United States as a check on China's behaviour (Burghardt, 2005). In fact, it was not only the US that Vietnam counted on for that job. Between 2001 and 2008, Vietnam also worked to step up security cooperation with Russia, India and Japan, upgrading relations with those countries to strategic partnership in 2001, 2006 and 2007, respectively (Thayer, 2012). At the same time, it advocated for an extended version of an East Asia Summit, which included India, Australia and New Zealand, apart from the ASEAN Plus Three countries (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2005b). Perhaps it was fear of a future in which China dominated the region that prompted Vietnam to

play a more active role in shaping a state of affairs whereby no single power could dominate the region.

Interestingly, relations between Vietnam and China continued to expand. In 2007, an important mechanism, a Joint Steering Committee on bilateral relations, was inaugurated. Vietnam engaged extensively with China to complete land-border demarcation before the end of 2008. In the same year, the countries agreed to designate their relationship as 'a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership' in March 2009, an upgrade from the 'strategic partnership' of June 2008 (Thayer, 2012). In 2009, both sides agreed to install a hotline for direct communication between senior leaders. However, the pattern of exchange of high-level visits became noticeably asymmetric. Between 2007 and 2014, top Chinese leaders seldom paid official visits to Hanoi and most of the high-level exchanges between the countries occurred in Beijing.

Rough seas

For most of the 1990s, the South China Sea problem was just an irritant in the warming relations between Hanoi and Beijing (Tønnesson, 2003). Tensions at sea arose from time to time, but were well managed in general. No significant clashes occurred between Vietnam and China, though they exchanged protests against each other's activities several times every year. As Vietnam integrated into the world economy, Hanoi considered international law to be in its national interest and gradually adjusted its maritime claims to conform with the spirit and letter of UNCLOS (Hai, 2015). In 1992, the Vietnamese were infuriated at China's assertion of a claim over the Tu Chinh area off the southern Vietnamese coast, but about 600 nautical miles from Hainan Island (Thayer, 1994b, p. 356). However, Vietnam was committed to resolving disputes through peaceful means and managing incidents through diplomatic channels. The dilemma facing Vietnam was that while it was in no way abandoning critical offshore interests, it had no interest in picking a fight with China.

Consequently, Vietnam consistently pushed for bilateral and multilateral discussions on the South China Sea disputes. In 1995, Vietnam and China set up a joint working group at the technical level to discuss marine issues, including sovereignty over offshore features of the Spratlys and Paracels, and maritime boundaries in the South China Sea beyond the Gulf of Tonkin. Though the joint working group made no progress, it provided a mechanism to control and defuse tensions when needed. At the same time, in order to preserve the status quo Vietnam was active in ASEAN–China negotiations on a code of conduct for the South China Sea aimed at preventing assertive actions and further complications. As mentioned above, in November 2002 ASEAN and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China, a political statement that fell short of a binding treaty as had initially been expected. In the end, diplomatic efforts through bilateral and ASEAN channels yielded no concrete results in resolving the disputes. It was clear that China did not want to settle its South China Sea disputes once and for all and the problem remained a permanent headache for decision-makers in Hanoi.

There is a broad-based consensus in Vietnam that China ultimately wants to monopolize the South China Sea, but whether it can achieve this goal depends on other claimants and powers, most importantly the United States (Quan, 2016). This explains why the Vietnamese were nervous when the United States became absorbed by the war on terror, while China became more and more powerful and influential. Since 2005, the

Vietnamese have seen signs that China is adopting a more heavy-handed approach towards Vietnam in the South China Sea (Hai, 2015, pp. 98–99). There has been more harassment and an increase in seizures of Vietnamese fishing boats and fishermen. The most serious incident happened on 8 January 2005 when the Chinese coast guard opened fire on Vietnamese fishing vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin, even though these vessels were fishing in the common fishing area, killing nine Vietnamese fishermen (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2005a). This atrocity perpetrated by Chinese law enforcement forces shocked Vietnamese officialdom, prompting Hanoi to make strong public protests.

Since 2006, relations between Vietnam and China have also been strained because the latter stepped up its interference in the former's hydrocarbon exploration and development activities in the South China Sea. It was reported that between 2006 and 2007 China issued some 18 protests against Vietnam's joint projects with international oil consortiums, including such big names as KNOC (Korea), Pogo, Chevron (US), BP, Pearl Energy, Premier Oil (UK), Gazprom (Russia), Santos (Australia), Idemitsu (Japan) and CGG Veritas (France) (Fravel, 2011, p. 302). This time the Chinese were more determined to block Vietnam's activities by applying significant pressures on international oil firms to force them to halt their projects with Vietnam. For example, in August 2007, China's political councillor in the Chinese Embassy in the United States, Jia Xiudong, summoned Chevron executives to Washington and demanded a halt to the company's project in Block 122 (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2007b). BP representatives also reported Chinese warnings about its gas pipeline project off Vietnam's southern province of Ba Ria, Vung Tau. China's strategy worked this time, as even big oil companies such as BP, Chevron and Santos feared indemnities to their stakes in China (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2009). It was later revealed that Chinese vessels even tried to intimidate and drive away Vietnamese exploration vessels by colliding with and ramming them (Bentley, 2014).

As China became more assertive and flexed its muscles, the South China Sea problem was no longer an irritant, but became a major security concern for Vietnam. Policy-makers in Hanoi were apparently frustrated with China's all-inclusive claims and arbitrary protests, as many blocks on exploration were too close to Vietnamese shores and too far from the Chinese coast to be virtually 'beyond dispute' (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2007a). It should be noted that most of the diplomatic wrangles between Vietnam and China over oil activities were carried out behind the scenes, making it very difficult for Hanoi to present its case at ASEAN forums and to the international public. Consequently, bureaucrats in Hanoi approached US diplomats and officials to voice their concerns about China's assertiveness and asked for support in persuading US oil firms to continue to work with Vietnam in defiance of China's threats (US Embassy in Hanoi, 2007a). Interestingly, Vietnamese officials argued that China's actions were in fact a destabilizing factor and a direct challenge to the US presence in the region.

Since 2009, the South China Sea has no longer been just a problem for Vietnam; it has emerged as a regional flashpoint. What really drew international attention to this maritime region was that China openly challenged the current maritime order. In March 2009, Chinese vessels harassed the naval ship USS *Impeccable* as it conducted surveillance in the vicinity of Hainan Island (Odom, 2010). This confrontation indicated that China no longer recognized US maritime primacy based on the concept of freedom of navigation. In May, China protested against Vietnam's and Malaysia's submissions to the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelves and officially formalized the nine-dash-line claim, which had no basis in UNCLOS. The nine-dash line, which originally had 11 dashes, was drawn in 1933 and published in 1948 by the then

Republic of China. However, it was never mentioned in official documents of the People's Republic of China until 2009. With this map attached to the *notes verbales* to the United Nations, Beijing clearly showed that UNCLOS was not the only basis for its maritime claims in the South China Sea (Beckman & Davenport, 2010). During the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi in July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the United States had national interests in the South China Sea, prompting fierce rebuttals from Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (Pomfret, 2010).

China then tried to show it was the real master of the East Asian seas by sending its overwhelming fleets of fishing and maritime law enforcement vessels, backed by People's Liberation Army warships, to exercise de facto control over the waters. Chinese vessels cut cables of Vietnamese survey ships on at least on two occasions in 2011, harassed a Philippines survey vessel near the Reed Bank, imposed blocks over the Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal claimed by the Philippines, and in May 2014 sent the giant oil rig Haiyang Shiyou 981, with a cordon of ships to protect it, to waters Vietnam claimed as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Chinese fishing vessels protected by Chinese coast guards went further south to fish illegally in the EEZ of Indonesia and of Malaysia. Chinese vessels were reportedly not hesitant to engage in violent acts such as ramming to suppress resistance by vessels from other countries. In addition to flexing its physical muscles, China used economic leverage to impose its will on its challengers. In September 2010, amid tensions over the Japanese seizure of the captain of a Chinese fishing boat, Beijing imposed a ban on rare earth exports to Japan (Bradsher, 2010). In April 2012, China initiated restrictions on banana imports from the Philippines due to the confrontation between Manila and Beijing over the Scarborough Shoal (Higgins, 2012).

From the Vietnamese perspective, China is essentially an opportunist revisionist nation harbouring intentions of taking control of the South China Sea at the expense of the status quo that Vietnam prefers. Former Foreign Minister Vu Khoan expressed suspicion of China's intentions, saying 'they [Chinese] talk of friendship, while finding ways to encroach upon our territories' (Binh, 2016). Beyond that, Vietnamese analysts also believe that Beijing has a bigger goal: to coerce other countries into its own sphere of influence and build a new regional order centred on Chinese power. Beijing thus took advantage of the US being distracted by the war on terror and perceived the US as being in decline to expand its influence. Also, the Chinese strategy was to 'squeeze the soft and hand off the hard' [*mềm nắn rắn buông*], that means demanding more from the appeaser while giving up on the hardliner. In this vein, China deliberately utilized civilians as covert forces to provoke other countries to be impatient and fire the first shot, so that China would have an excuse to resort to force. Beijing is still not ready to initiate a large-scale conflict to assert its preponderance.

For Hanoi, the key is to send the 'right messages' to Beijing, showing its unbroken resolve to resist unreasonable claims and actions while leaving China no excuse to use force in a legitimate way. On the one hand, Hanoi has patiently directed tensions and rows through diplomatic channels. On the other hand, Vietnam has stood firm against China's strategy, staunchly holding the line while resisting any Chinese attempts to encroach and rallying international pressure to force China to fall back. This was manifested clearly in the Haiyang Shiyou 981 crisis in mid-2014. Vietnam may feel insecure in the face of a rising China, but it has definitely not been helpless. Hanoi has invested significant resources to develop a capable deterrent, including land-based coastal defence systems, 6 Kilo-class submarines, Gepard frigates and fast-attack crafts, and advanced

Sukhoi fighters (Hiep, 2013, pp. 353–356). These platforms have given Vietnam multiple options for any contingency in which the islands under its control are under attack. It has gradually built up a strong coast guard and fishery administration fleet, which can be quickly deployed to handle incidents at sea and stand up to perceived violations by Chinese law enforcement vessels.

Equally importantly, Hanoi has gradually reduced its vulnerability to Chinese political and economic power through diversification of partners, supplies and markets. Over the last 10 years, Vietnam has established 15 strategic partnerships and 10 comprehensive partnerships with major countries that are considered critical to Vietnam's security and development. This network of partnerships has apparently provided Vietnam with ample breathing space in the face of an assertive China, helping it foster cooperation, communicate concerns and mobilize support when needed. In the same period, Vietnam has become a champion of economic liberalization. Hanoi has actively negotiated and concluded a range of ASEAN-centred free trade agreements (with China, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand); bilateral free trade agreements with Japan, Chile and South Korea; free trade agreements with the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union; and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Currently, Vietnam is a party to negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. All these are indicative of Vietnam's vigorous attempts to strengthen its autonomy and meet the challenge of China through ASEAN multilateralism, strengthened partnerships with major powers and integration with the world economy.

Though tensions simmer, Vietnam has spared no effort to make progress in its relations with China. Hanoi has clearly avoided 'tit for tat' reactions and has focused on managing and defusing tensions in the South China Sea through bilateral dialogue and ASEAN meetings. A case in point is that, during the war of words prompted by a cable-cutting incident involving Chinese vessels in June 2011, Hanoi sent an envoy to Beijing to push for easing tension and urge accelerated negotiations on an agreement on basic principles guiding the settlement of maritime issues. The agreement was signed in October 2011, opening the way for three specialized working groups on delimitation in the area beyond the Gulf of Tonkin, joint development in this area and maritime cooperation on less sensitive issues such as environmental protection, search and rescue, disaster relief and prevention. As mentioned earlier, during the Haying Shiyou 981 oil rig crisis in mid-2014, Vietnam persistently called on China to discuss management of the incident and after China withdrew the oil rig Hanoi moved to reconcile with Beijing. Between 2012 and 2015, Vietnam and China agreed to install three more hotlines between their foreign ministries, fishery agencies and defence ministries. Remarkably, maritime tensions have not estranged Vietnam from China, but have provided incentives for Hanoi to engage more extensively with Beijing. According to statistics put out by China, between 2011 and 2015 trade volume between Vietnam and China more than doubled, from US\$40 billion to US\$96 billion, despite acute strains over the South China Sea (Changwen, 2016). Vietnam was expected to eclipse Malaysia as China's largest ASEAN trading partner from 2016.

Conclusion

Vietnam's view of China is nuanced and complex, having been shaped by geopolitical realities, strategic cultures established throughout the course of history and the relationship between the two countries. Traditionally, the Vietnamese viewed a rising China not

in terms of an imminent threat, but as a natural phenomenon, which could be damaging at times but could be harnessed to serve their national interest. The basic tenet of Vietnam's strategic culture was to defer to China's nuanced regional status while resisting its excessive claims and making full use of interactions in order to nourish Vietnam. While this tradition still matters, Vietnam's current perception of China has also been influenced by ideological affinity and the breadth and depth of the bilateral relationship. Accordingly, since normalization Vietnam has largely considered China as a traditional and ideological partner, hoping that the latter would help the former defend communist rule in Hanoi. As China rose economically and militarily to become a dominant power on its doorstep, Vietnam worked to strengthen ASEAN-led multilateral arrangements and facilitate other powers' engagement in regional affairs to dilute China's influence. Since 2009, as China has acted like an opportunist expansionist, Vietnam has shown its resolve to resist any Chinese encroachment. On the one hand, Hanoi has bolstered its self-defence capabilities and on the other hand it has further increased its international networks to buffer China's assertiveness. However, this has not resulted in Vietnam backing off from engaging with China. Though tensions in the South China Sea have run high for a long while, most of the dialogue and cooperative mechanisms between Hanoi and Beijing have been maintained. Hanoi has made every effort to quarantine the South China Sea from any spillover that would affect their overall bilateral relations and to conduct its external affairs so as to create conditions that make it hard for China to resort to armed conflict. At the same time, Vietnam has continued to engage with China to increase the depth and breadth of their bilateral relationship. The case of Vietnam indicates that riding the Chinese tide can be likened to the art of Judo, which requires toughness, flexibility and adroitness if one is to transform a foe's strength into one's own advantage.

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Notes on contributor

Do Thanh Hai is a Senior Fellow at the Bien Dong Institute for Maritime Studies of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV). His previous positions include vacation scholar at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra and Deputy Director of the Centre for Political and Security Studies of the DAV's Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies in Hanoi. He obtained his doctorate from the Australian National University. He is the author of the book titled *Vietnam and the South China Sea: Politics, Security and Legality* and published by Routledge in 2017.

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