

China-US rivalry poses challenge for Vietnam's leaders, observers say

- Recent meeting of senior Chinese and Vietnamese officials suggests Hanoi has 'picked a side and is leaning closer to its neighbour', academic says
- But others say Vietnam cannot afford to sacrifice its core interests in the South China Sea just to placate Beijing

Laura Zhou in Beijing

Vietnam's leaders will have to walk a fine line in their dealings with China, as Hanoi looks to manage its maritime disputes with Beijing while preventing itself becoming embroiled in the rivalry its giant neighbour has with the US, observers say.

Following the visit of Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe to Hanoi on Monday, where he met Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Beijing said the Southeast Asian nation had given its assurance that it would not support any attempt to undermine China.

Wei's visit was the first by a senior Chinese official to Vietnam since a power shift in Hanoi that saw 76-year-old Trong given a third term as party secretary and Phuc, who ranks second to Trong in the politburo, named president – a position less powerful than the prime minister's post he had previously held.

During the meetings, the two sides pledged to strengthen military ties and work more closely together to manage disputes in the South China Sea, the Chinese defence ministry said.

Feng Chao, an expert on Southeast Asian affairs at Shanghai International Studies University, said the meetings reflected the efforts of the two militaries to reduce the risk of miscalculations.

“Trong is relatively moderate and Phuc is widely considered as a pragmatic figure with an objective view of China,” he said. “The meetings could be a sign that Vietnam has picked a side and is leaning closer to its neighbour China, which has a higher priority in its foreign policy.”

However, Zhang Mingliang, a Southeast Asian affairs expert at Jinan University in Guangzhou, said the two countries' media had a different take on the meetings.

According to the Chinese defence ministry statement, Phuc told Wei that Vietnam would “be vigilant and resolute in resisting any attempt to undermine Vietnam-China relations, and will never follow other countries in opposing China”, he said.

While this point was played up by China's state media it was not mentioned at all in Vietnamese news reports.

According to the Vietnam News Agency (VNA), Trong said the two sides should “make greater efforts to maintain a peaceful and cooperative environment based on respecting the legitimate rights of each other and their friendship, for peace, stability and cooperation in the region and the world”.

Phuc, meanwhile, stressed the importance of developing a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with China “in a healthy, stable, sustainable and long-term manner and for win-win cooperation”.

“It is necessary to intensify collaboration between the armies’ political agencies and step up communication work on bilateral friendships and traditions so as to prevent hostile forces from undermining the ties,” VNA quoted him as saying.

Zhang said that the fact that Hanoi stopped short of saying it would not follow other countries in opposing China suggested it was trying to balance its relations with Washington as well as Beijing.

“The position declared by the two Vietnamese leaders includes some factors that make China feel better but in Vietnam’s version its stance on the South China Sea issue is closer to the position of the US,” he said.

Le Hong Hiep, a senior fellow with the Vietnam Studies Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, said the leadership reshuffle was unlikely to change Hanoi’s foreign policy under which it had been able to “maintain a delicate approach”.

“Vietnam wants to maintain a stable and peaceful relationship with China and separate its South China Sea dispute from its overall relationship,” he said.

“However, it can’t afford to sacrifice its core interests in the South China Sea just to placate Beijing because the South China Sea means more than just sovereignty and territorial integrity for Vietnam.”

China’s most advanced amphibious assault ship likely to be deployed in disputed South China Sea

Hanoi’s policymakers might look for different ways to balance the country’s interests in the South China Sea, where the US and its allies could be its “natural partners”, Le said.

“Due to the intensifying tensions between the US and China, Vietnam’s efforts to deepen ties with the US and its allies may irritate China, but Vietnam has no other options if China forces its hand by continuing its aggression [in the disputed waterway],” Le said.

“As such, Vietnam-China relations are likely to fluctuate depending on the level of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea.”

Vietnam has strengthened its diplomatic and military ties with the US in a bid to counter Beijing’s aggression in the South China Sea, while Washington has prioritised its relationship with Hanoi under its “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy, which China regards as an attempt to contain its rise.