

DIPLOMAT
25 August 2021

China's Wedge Strategy Towards the US-Vietnam Partnership

Through a variety of measures, Beijing is seeking to reinforce Vietnam's neutrality in the competition between the superpowers.

By Khang Vu

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is undertaking her first trip to Southeast Asia this week, during which she will visit two important U.S. partners, Singapore and Vietnam. Much has been said about how Harris' trip will boost the Biden administration's image in Southeast Asia, but there has been little written about China's responses to the U.S. initiatives. This is an unfortunate miss given that China is the main target of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. How it responds to those initiatives will therefore be an important determinant of whether U.S. attempts to woo these Southeast Asian partners are successful.

One of the partners that the United States is courting is Vietnam, whose ties with Washington have tremendously improved over the past two decades. From a broader perspective, Beijing has opposed the U.S. alliance system in Asia and sought to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its Asian allies, including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. China seeks to weaken that alliance system by de-aligning these allies, turning them into neutrals in order to prevent the U.S.-led containment that it fears. Most notable is Beijing's political and economic attacks on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which are aimed at preventing these countries from reaching a consensus on the Chinese threat.

Vietnam falls into a different category of Chinese wedge strategy, in which China seeks to reinforce Vietnamese neutrality, instead of de-aligning it, since Vietnam is not a formal U.S. ally. Hanoi considers itself a neutral country under its "four noes" policy, of "no military alliance, no affiliation with one country to counteract the other, no foreign military base in the Vietnamese territory to act against other countries, and no force or threatening to use force in international relations." Such a policy is rooted in Hanoi's search for a balance between ideological values and national security interests, which stipulates that Vietnam only allies with states that share both. Vietnam is officially neutral between the United States and China, since it only shares security interests with the former and ideological values with the latter (as well as strong economic ties to both.)

China understands Vietnam's delicate balancing act and seeks to reinforce Vietnam's neutrality in two ways. First, it seeks to tone down the security discord between the two countries to reduce the U.S.-Vietnam convergence on security matters. China thus wants Vietnam to stick to its "four-noes" policy. Second, it emphasizes the shared ideological values between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and stoke Hanoi's fear of a U.S.-backed "color revolution," in a bid to keep Vietnam away from the U.S. camp. An examination of what Chinese media and scholars have said in the past year demonstrates the deliberate nature of this strategy.

First, China seeks to present maritime and territorial disputes as a small issue in the generally positive China-Vietnam relations. A Global Times contributor wrote on the occasion of

Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe's visit to Vietnam in April, "the divergences between Beijing and Hanoi on the South China Sea are merely a minor factor in their overall bilateral ties. Judging from narratives made by top officials of both China and Vietnam, maintaining friendship and cooperation between the two countries is the mainstream."

At the same time, Beijing tries to persuade Hanoi that the territorial dispute is a bilateral matter and the two countries have successfully and peacefully solved such disputes in the past. A Chinese commentator wrote that, "China previously had territorial disputes with its neighbor Vietnam. But through rounds of friendly negotiations, the two sides signed the Land Boundary Treaty on December 30, 1999 and resolved the dispute. Although China and Vietnam still have disputes over islands and reefs in the South China Sea, they remain under control." China also stresses that these land border pacts show the two countries can peacefully "solve maritime issues without external intervention."

Officially, China does not want the United States to interfere with the South China Sea disputes and has framed Washington as a disturber of the peace in order to warn Asian states not to cooperate with it. The Chinese government has said, "The United States is not a country directly involved in the disputes. However, it has kept interfering in the issue. Under the pretext of preserving stability, it is flexing muscles, stirring up tension and inciting confrontation in the region." A Chinese scholar also accused the United States of using the maritime dispute to "drive a wedge in China-Vietnam relations." China's point is clear: China-Vietnam bilateral disputes can be managed bilaterally and there is no need for closer security cooperation between Hanoi and Washington.

Second, China stresses the common socialist values between the CCP and the VCP and warns Hanoi about Washington's hostile intentions. China officially does not oppose positive developments in U.S.-Vietnam relations, but it reminds Hanoi that "there is no fundamental conflict between China and Vietnam apart from the South China Sea issue," and the two countries are ideologically, politically, and economically linked. Beijing also points to the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy: that Washington is seeking to oppose socialist China but it is also courting socialist Vietnam. As such, Washington must harbor ill intentions towards the VCP.

Beijing has also warned that closer U.S.-Vietnam relations could encourage anti-VCP forces within Vietnam to threaten the party's hold on power. When former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Hanoi in October 2020, China cautioned Vietnam that it "should not to make the mistake of judging that the U.S. will put aside its ideological prejudices and differences with the Communist country. If it mistakenly believes this, it will have a major impact on Vietnam itself." Beijing also said that even if the U.S. and Vietnam were to align closer, ideological factors would become a "thorn" in the relationship.

Chinese warnings of a U.S.-backed "color revolution" persisted after Biden's victory. In January, a Chinese writer in the Global Times argued that "Vietnam, which is close to China in geopolitics, trade and ideology," would be wary of joining the Quad. That same writer later noted that "the Biden administration has attached great importance to values-based diplomacy, which will pose [a] challenge for not only China, but also Vietnam – another socialist country whose values are different from that of the U.S." Beijing also reminded Hanoi of the U.S. Cold War efforts to use Vietnam as a springboard to attack China, and that developments between the

CCP and the VCP are on the right track despite the maritime dispute. Recently, a Chinese commentator argued that Hanoi would stick to its “four noes,” or policy of neutrality, despite the recent visit to the country of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, given Hanoi’s desire to preserve political stability.

It is unclear how successful China’s wedge strategy has been, but Vietnam maintains a firm position that it seeks to befriend all countries, diversify its external relations, and cultivate positive ties with all its major partners. Hanoi also sticks to its “four noes” policy because it wants to signal a peaceful intention and a defensive posture, and to avoid being exploited by “hostile forces” and “political opportunists.” In April, the VCP affirmed that continued Vietnam-China cooperation would prevent hostile forces from “driving a wedge into the Vietnam-China relationship.” Simultaneously, Hanoi upgrades its ties with Washington and views the U.S.-Vietnam partnership as a contributor to regional peace and stability. It also leaves open the possibility of closer security cooperation with Washington if the situation demands.

Harris’ visit to Vietnam will without a doubt build upon the bipartisan consensus on a closer U.S.-Vietnam relationship. On the eve of the visit, a Global Times writer warned about the U.S.’ “self-serving” strategy, claiming that the visit could not “roil South China Sea waters.” Beijing also delivered a shipment of 200,000 COVID-19 vaccines a day before Harris’ visit as a signal of goodwill, and made clear that it would not consent to the visit if the objective was to “boost anti-China goals.” Vietnam in return thanked China for its vaccine donations and declared that it would stick to an “independent and self-reliant foreign policy,” not aligning with one country against any other.

Obviously, there are certain limits on how far the U.S. and Vietnam can develop their ties given their differing ideological values. To counter the Chinese wedge strategy and alleviate Hanoi’s fear of U.S.-backed regime change, Washington should continue to respect Vietnam’s political system, as it has done for the past decade, and avoid aggressively pushing Hanoi off its diplomatic balance and complicating China-Vietnam ties in the process. U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation should aim at building a positive sum regional order, not dragging Hanoi into a zero-sum U.S.-China rivalry, as China perceives. Vietnam understands well how aligning closely with one major power against Chinese interests can lead to punishments from Beijing.

China’s wedge strategy toward the U.S.-Vietnam partnership will continue in the future alongside its attempts to undermine the entire U.S. Asian alliance system. How the United States responds to Beijing’s charges will determine the cohesion of U.S. ties with other Asian powers and the success of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as a whole.

GUEST AUTHOR

Khang Vu

Khang Vu is a doctoral student in the Political Science Department at Boston College.