DIPLOMAT
3 June 2021

Why There Is No Gulf Between Chinese and Vietnamese Alliance Policies: A Response

National security interests and ideological values are key to understanding Chinese and Vietnamese alliance policies.

By Khang Vu

Alliance politics among communist states is special in two ways. First, it is driven not only by traditional balance of power but also by a universal ideology. Second, it reflects the domestic power structure of those communist states, which in this case is civil-military relations. Ngo Di Lan's recent rebuttal to my earlier piece on the similarities between Chinese and Vietnamese alliance policies is an important contribution to the debate on whether communist states ally differently from non-communist states.

Lan is correct to point out that the definition of "alliance" varies between scholars, and that how the concept is defined matters to the general findings. In my earlier piece, an alliance denotes a formal commitment that obligates signatories to "take certain actions in the event of war." Lan concurs with this definition, as he also defines a formal alliance as "military assistance to its partner(s), which often includes a clear promise to mutually defend each other in the event of war." For this reason, Lan doubts whether the 1977 Vietnam-Laos Treaty of Amity and Cooperation can be counted as an alliance treaty since it is unclear what kind of obligations Vietnam and Laos have in the event either party is attacked.

This is a fair criticism, as the second clause of the 1977 treaty does not specify that Vietnam has to come to Laos' defense, apart from the two nations pledging to support one another's "defense capacity, preserving independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and defending the people's peaceful labor, against all schemes and acts of sabotage by imperialism and foreign reactionary forces." Lan suggests that the Vietnam-Laos treaty is open to interpretation of commitment, which is different from the Vietnam-Soviet Union 1978 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Article 6 of the Vietnam-Soviet Union treaty spelled out the obligations explicitly, stating that "in case either party is attacked or threatened with attack, the two parties signatory to the treaty shall immediately consult each other with a view to eliminating that threat, and shall take appropriate and effective measures to safeguard peace and the security of the two countries."

However, Lan seems to ignore the history of how both Vietnam and Laos interpreted the 1977 treaty, although he claims that the treaty is open to interpretation. As scholars doing archival research, we have to work with what is declassified and accept what is not. The Vietnam-Laos treaty is a case in point. The treaty sets up an overarching legal basis for understanding bilateral relations and includes three protocols dealing with border delineation, joint defense cooperation, and economic collaboration. The joint defense cooperation protocol later underpinned the Mutual Defense Treaty between Vietnam and Laos signed on September 22, 1977, which Vietnam's Ministry of Defense formally recognizes.

We do not know what exactly is promised in the joint defense protocol, given that the Vietnam-Laos treaty is still in effect and it is not uncommon for governments to conceal such

information from the public. Still, close readings of what Lao and Vietnamese officials, U.S. intelligence sources, and foreign scholars have noted can clear up some confusions. Sisana Sisane, a member of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and Minister of Information, Propaganda and Culture, when asked by a foreign journalist why the Vietnam-Laos treaty is "special," answered that because the treaty was a "military alliance."

Similarly, Siang Pasason, the official organ of the LPRP, argued that under the treaty, Vietnam is obligated to send troops to Laos upon the latter's request when there is threat to its security. Additionally, "the Vietnamese troops will withdraw from Laos as soon as the Lao government requests it, and when there is no menace from the outside." Vietnam's People's Army Newspaper also noted that after the Vietnam War ended, Hanoi still sent military volunteers and experts to Laos upon Vientiane's request to help defend the Lao regime against hostile and reactionary forces. U.S. sources have confirmed what Vientiane and Hanoi said. Former U.S. Ambassador to Laos William H. Sullivan, when testifying before a Congressional committee in 1981, noted that Vietnam and Laos asserted that the treaty gave Laos "the right to call upon military assistance from its ally." Scholars and government officials of the 1980s often characterized the Vietnam-Laos treaty as encapsulating a "militant solidarity" and "special relationship," which lends credence to the argument that the treaty constituted a military alliance with a clear obligation.

Such an interpretation of the 1977 treaty is in line with a formal alliance commitment. Indeed, the treaty served as the legal basis for Hanoi's stationing of more than 40,000 troops in Laos to protect the new Pathet Lao government against China and domestic unrest in the late 1970s. Laos did not view Vietnam's military presence on its soil as a violation of its sovereignty since it was the Lao government that requested it. In 2000, Hanoi sent military assistance of up to 10,000 troops during a small outbreak of domestic unrest in Laos, following a request from Vientiane. To this day, the Vietnamese armed forces still help Laos train its army. Lan's argument that the 1977 treaty is not an alliance treaty does not conform to the empirical evidence. Hence, as I argued initially, the Vietnam-Laos treaty is a legitimate deviant case of Vietnam's alliance policies.

Second, Lan argues that alliances do not have to be formal to be taken seriously. He cites the U.S. informal commitment to Israel and Taiwan to suggest that the United States and China were informal allies in the 1980s. If this holds, my argument that China only allies with states that share both national security interests and ideological values would be invalid. However, Lan's point is misleading as he considers the U.S.-Taiwan and U.S.-China relations to be of similar informal character while in fact the two relationships are totally different from the perspectives of Taipei and Beijing.

In its informal relationship with the United States, Taiwan did not call the U.S. an ideological enemy and codify those sentiments into its foreign policy. Contrarily, Taipei emphasized the democratic values that it shares with Washington as the basis of the informal alliance. On the other hand, Beijing, while working with Washington to contain the Soviet Union, still called the United States an imperialist and an ideological enemy. This underpins China's non-alignment foreign policy after its alliance with the Soviet Union collapsed. Lan recognizes that my theory applies only to non-U.S. contexts, but he evokes cases of U.S. informal commitments to counter it. There is unfortunately a limit to how much a theory can explain.

Finally, Lan argues that it is not convincing to treat all communist states similarly for the differences in their levels of national power can bring about different reasons for pursuing alliances. Great powers provide security in exchange for leverage over small states and their competitors; and small states give up their policy autonomy for a security guarantee. Lan means that China allies because it wants to control junior partners and Vietnam allies because it wants to protect itself against immediate threats and hedge against risks.

However, it is contestable if there have to be any differences between the two. An alliance is first and foremost a means for a state to increase its security. Doesn't controlling small powers allow great powers to protect themselves against risks, too? It is not wrong to argue that China maintains an alliance with North Korea to "control" it, as Lan suggests, although how much China can actually control North Korea is unclear. But it is more logical and openly acceptable to attribute the alliance to China's fear for its security (North Korea as a "buffer.") Again, this undermines his claim that China does not need alliances because it can provide for its own security.

Importantly, leaders of great and small powers alike have to protect their standing against domestic challengers, and that impacts how they ally with other states. The domestic effect on alliance policies is clear when considering how Mao Zedong had to approach his relationship with the "revisionist" Soviets in the mid-1960s carefully in order to avoid delegitimizing his own struggles against Chinese revisionists at home. Moreover, I showed the similarities between Sino-Soviet and the Vietnam-Laos alliances, cases that feature both great and small powers, in the original commentary to demonstrate that differences in national power do not matter to how these communist state sallied with each other. In both cases, great and small communist powers were guided by a combination of national interests and ideological values.

Even contrary to Lan's argument that Vietnam allies because it cannot protect its own security, scholars argue that the Vietnam-Laos alliance allows Hanoi to "exercise tight control over all central departments of the Lao Party, Government, and army," a behavior that he only associates with great powers. China also perceived Vietnam's alliance with Laos in imperialist terms, as Beijing feared Hanoi was able to subdue Vientiane under its shadow. It is thus difficult to distinguish between allying to control and allying to hedge against risks.

Lan attributes Vietnam's non-alignment to its wariness of alliances and that as a small power, Hanoi wants to maintain an independent foreign policy. Vietnam certainly keeps open its choices of allies pending future changes in its strategic environment. However, it is still unclear whether Vietnam will really ally with another power if push comes to shove. On the other hand, it is already evident that Vietnam has broken its rule of non-alignment in the case of Laos.

The resilience of the China-North Korea and Vietnam-Laos alliances demonstrates that national security interests and ideological values have been and will be key to understanding Chinese and Vietnamese alliance policies, regardless of the differences in their national power. As the Vietnamese Consulate in Luong Prabang puts it, the Vietnam-Laos alliance is born out of "a common enemy and a shared ideology."

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