Article

Vietnam's Strategy of 'Cooperating and Struggling' with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea

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Abstract

Since the normalization of relations in 1991, bilateral relations between Vietnam and China have developed into one of normal or mature asymmetry. This is a relationship in which China seeks acknowledgement of its primacy and Vietnam seeks recognition of its autonomy. Maritime disputes in the South China Sea have emerged as the major irritant in bilateral relations because of salience of conflicting claims to sovereignty. This article presents an analysis of Vietnam's strategy to maintain its autonomy in relations with China with respect to maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam pursues a strategy of 'cooperation and struggle' with China over maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam's leaders have attempted to prevent maritime boundary disputes from spilling over and impacting negatively on Vietnam's comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with China. At the same time, Vietnam has attempted to manage its maritime disputes with China through government-to-government negotiations and in times of crisis through party-to-party channels. During the oil rig crisis of May–July 2014, Vietnam defended its autonomy by standing up to Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Keywords

China, South China Sea, Vietnam, asymmetry, cooperation and struggle, multi-lateralization and diversification

Introduction

Vietnam's relations with China are one of the most asymmetric bilateral relationships in the world. According to Brantly Womack (2006, pp. 235–237),

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the current relationship between Vietnam and China is one of normal or mature asymmetry that he defines as 'when both sides are confident that their basic interests will not be threatened and that differences can be managed' (ibid., p. 28). Vietnam seeks to enmesh China in a web of bilateral ties in order to make China's behaviour more predictable. This has taken the form of a series of agreements that stress comprehensive cooperation through party-to-party, state-to-state and military-to-military ties (Thayer, 2011: 350–357). Maritime disputes in the South China Sea have emerged as the major obstacle to the maintenance of a mature asymmetric relationship with China because these disputes have the potential to undermine Vietnamese autonomy.

This article discusses Vietnam's strategy towards China on maritime disputes in the South China Sea in its broadest historical, foreign policy and defence context and the implications of this strategy for Vietnam's bilateral relations with China. This article is divided into six parts. Part 1 sets out Vietnamese historical perspectives and its claims to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly islands. Part 2 discusses the reconceptualization of Vietnam's foreign policy in the post-Cold War period as it elevated the importance of national interests over socialist ideology in its relations with China and pursued a policy of 'multilateralizing and diversifying' its external relations with the major powers. Part 3 traces the evolution of Vietnam's new national defence strategy comprising three components: force modernization, national defence industry self-help and international defence cooperation. Part 4 discusses the application of Vietnam's policy of 'cooperation and struggle' with China. Part 5 analyzes Vietnam's counter-intervention strategy to China in the South China Sea. Part 6, offers a summary and conclusion of these developments on Vietnam–China relations.

Part 1. Historical Background

This section reviews the basis of Vietnam's historical claims in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras up to the reunification of Vietnam in 1975–76. These historical claims play an important role in shaping Vietnam's sense of autonomy vis-à-vis its relations with China.

Pre-Colonial Era

Vietnam's claims to features in the South China Sea date to the pre-colonial era. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the ruling Nguyen Lords commissioned a small naval flotilla known as the Hoang Sa Brigade to sail to the present-day Paracel islands on an annual and later intermittent basis. The Hoang Sa Brigade comprised between five and eight boats with a crew of 70 men recruited from present day Quang Ngai province (Bo Ngoai Giao & Uy Ban Bien Gioi Quoc Gia, 2013).

The Hoang Sa Brigade ordinarily spent up to five months carrying out mapping, hydrographic surveys, erecting markers, fishing, planting trees and recovering the cargo from merchant ships that had run aground. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the Nguyen Lords also organized the North Sea Brigade

(*Doi Bac Hai*) to carry out the same mission in the Spratly islands.[1] The North Sea Brigade was under the command of the Hoang Sa Brigade (ibid.).

Vietnam was reunified in 1802 under the rule of the Nguyen Dynasty and was known as the Kingdom of An Nam. Emperor Gia Long (1802–1820) dispatched the Hoang Sa Brigade to the Paracels during the early years of his reign but this was suspended subsequently. In 1816, Emperor Gia Long formally took possession of the Paracels. His successor, Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1841), ordered the royal navy to conduct navigational surveys, plant stone stele and construct a temple in the Paracels in 1835 (ibid.).

Colonial Era

In 1884, the Kingdom of An Nam and France signed a treaty under which An Nam became a protectorate. France assumed responsibility for An Nam's external affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Boundary Commission, 2012, pp. 30–38). France respected and defended the kingdom's territorial integrity and claims to sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys. In 1925 and 1927, France conducted surveys and naval patrols in the Paracel Islands. In 1931 and 1932, France protested to the Government of China on behalf of the Kingdom of An Nam when authorities in Guangdong province called for bids to exploit guano in the Paracel islands. During the 1920s and 1930s, French Navy warships and customs vessels made frequent visits to the Paracels.

French forces were stationed in the Spratly Islands from 1930–1933. The French Institute of Oceanography in Nha Trang carried out scientific surveys in this period as well. In 1933, France incorporated the Spratly Islands into Ba Ria province for administrative purposes. In 1938, the Paracel Islands were declared an administrative unit of Thua Thien province. France constructed a lighthouse, a meteorological post and a radio station on Pattle Island in the Crescent group in the Paracels as well as similar facilities in the Spratlys.

French authority was eclipsed briefly during the Second World War when Japan occupied French Indochina including the Paracel and Spratly Islands.[2] In 1947, French authority was restored in Indochina and French armed forces returned to the Spratly islands and restored meteorological services in the Paracels.

In 1949, the Kingdom of Vietnam became the State of Vietnam and a member of the French Union. The following year France officially handed over administration of the Paracels to the State of Vietnam under Emperor Bao Dai. Also, in 1950, China occupied the Amphitrite group in the eastern Paracels following the withdrawal of the Republic of China (Nationalist China). In 1951, at the San Francisco Peace Conference, the head of the delegation from the State of Vietnam affirmed Vietnam's 'right to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, which have always belonged to Vietnam' (ibid.). No objections were recorded.

Post-Colonial Period

Between 1946 and 1954, Vietnamese communist forces fought a war for independence against France. A cease-fire and political settlement were reached

at the Geneva Conference held from May to July 1954. Vietnam was provisionally divided into two zones roughly along the 17th parallel. The North was known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The South, including the Paracel and Spratly islands, came under the administrative control of the State of Vietnam (renamed Republic of Vietnam or RVN in October 1955).

In 1956, the RVN replaced French forces and maintained a continuous presence on islets in the Crescent group until January 1974. In 1956, the RVN's Department of Mining, Technology and Small Industries conducted a survey of four features in the Crescent group. In 1956, the RVN protested the People's Republic of China (PRC's) occupation of the Amphitrite group.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Chinese fishermen began arriving in RVN waters and came ashore on islets in the Paracels. This led to a number of confrontations. By 1966, the RVN presence on Pattle Island had been reduced to a single garrison and a weather station. After the signing of the Paris Agreement on ending the Vietnam War in 1973, the RVN reduced its presence in the Paracels to a single platoon of soldiers.

This historical legacy is the basis of present day Vietnam's claim to sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys. Vietnamese leaders assert that they have effectively administered and occupied islands and features in the Paracel and Spratly islands since the seventeenth century under the Nguyen Lords and subsequently under the Kingdom of An Nam and its successors, the State of Vietnam (1949–1955) and the RVN (1955–1975). Vietnamese authorities claim that archival documents demonstrate that Vietnam undertook mapping and other surveys, exploited the marine resources, carried out meteorological services, erected lighthouses and garrisoned the islands and other features. Vietnamese officials today recount this history as evidence for Vietnam's claim to continuous effective occupation and administration.

Key Turning Points

Four key turning points have shaped Vietnam's current maritime strategy in the South China Sea.

The first turning point was China's armed attack and seizure of RVN-occupied Drummond, Duncan and Robert islands in the western Paracels in January 1974 (*Armed Forcers of the Republic of Vietnam*, 1974). China's seizure of these islands came a year after the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam and the withdrawal of all US armed forces from South Vietnam. China's actions spurred the DRV to dispatch naval units to take possession of Spratly Island (Truong Sa), Sand Cay, Nam Yit, Southwest Cay, Sin Cowe and Amboyna Cay before the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975.

The RVN issued public denunciations of China's actions and unsuccessfully tried to raise the matter at the United Nations (ibid.). China's actions were also condemned by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG) in statements issued on 16 January and 14 February 1974. The PRG was not only a signatory to the 1973 Paris Peace Agreements, but prior to the formal reunification of Vietnam in 1976 was an applicant (along with the DRV)

for membership in the United Nations. In July 1976, the DRV and the PRG formally merged to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The SRV, as the successor state, assumed the policy positions of the PRG on the South China Sea and issued white papers in 1979, 1981 and 1988 claiming Vietnamese sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea.

The second turning point was the clash between Chinese and Vietnamese naval forces at Johnson South Reef in March 1988 (Hayton, 2014, pp. 80–84). In late 1987, China dispatched scientific vessels accompanied by warships to carry out surveys of the Spratly islands. As a result of confrontations at sea between Chinese and Vietnamese naval ships, Vietnam dispatched soldiers to occupy Johnson South, Lansdowne and Collins Reefs in March 1988. This precipitated a clash on 14 March when armed Chinese forces confronted Vietnamese engineers on Johnson South Reef. In the ensuing skirmish, two Vietnamese transport vessels were sunk and 64 service personnel were killed.

The third turning point occurred in 1992 as a result of two interrelated developments. First, on 25 February, the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress adopted the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone that covered island features in the South China Sea. Second, in May, China signed a contract with the Crestone Energy Corporation of the United States to explore an area known as Wen'an Bei 21 (WAB 21) comprising 25,155 square kilometres in waters claimed by Vietnam (Thayer, 1994a, pp. 356–359).

These developments led to a number of incidents at sea and a rise in tensions between 1992 and 1996. For example, Vietnam awarded a contract to Norway's Nopec in May 1992 that overlapped with part of the area included in WAB 21. In May 1993, China dispatched a seismic vessel to WAB 21 in an area that Vietnam had leased to British Petroleum (BP) and Norway's Statoil. In October that year, Vietnam let out for bidding nine blocks near Crestone's concession.

During May–June 1994, a series of incidents took place in the waters around Vanguard Bank (Tu Chinh Reef) when Crestone and PetroVietnam both deployed seismic survey ships to waters where their claims overlapped. Both survey ships were subject to harassment by naval forces from the other side. At the same time, on May 19, PetroVietnam signed a production-sharing contract with Mobil for Block 5-1b (Blue Dragon); this was in an area where Crestone had planned to a conduct seismic survey.

The fourth major turning point came in late 1994/March 1995 when China occupied and constructed buildings on Mischief Reef, a feature claimed by the Philippines. This led the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to issue a statement of concern. Although Vietnam was not yet a member of ASEAN, it endorsed ASEAN's statement. By the end of the 1990s, Vietnam occupied 21 features in the South China Sea while China occupied eight.

Part 2. From Socialist Ideology to National Interest

This part examines changes in Vietnam's foreign policy orientation following the end of the Cold War and the conflict in Cambodia in 1989–1991.

National Interest in an Interdependent World

Throughout the 12-year conflict in Cambodia (1979–1991), Vietnam was subject to an aid and trade boycott by the United States, Japan, European states and Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam was forced into dependency on the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe. As long as China continued to support the Khmer Rouge and ASEAN kept up its diplomatic boycott, Vietnam appeared trapped in a never-ending war.

In 1987, Vietnam drew up plans to extricate itself. In May 1988, three months after Chinese and Vietnamese naval forces clashed in the Spratlys and while Vietnam was still engaged in Cambodia, the Politburo of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) adopted Resolution No. 13. This seminal policy document, called for a 'multidirectional foreign policy', gave priority to economic development and used the term national interest (*loi ich dan toc*) for the first time (Chu, 2004; Luu, 2004; Nguyen, 2005; Phan, 2006 & Thayer, 2008). Resolution No. 13 signalled the end of the Leninist view of the world as being divided into two camps—socialist and imperialist. Vietnam now embraced the view that the world was interdependent and began to shift its foreign policy from confrontation to accommodation with China and the United States in order to support economic development (Thayer, 1999, pp. 1–24). In order to achieve this objective, Vietnam unilaterally withdrew its military forces from Cambodia in September 1989.

In June 1991, following a secret summit between Vietnamese and Chinese leaders in southern China in September 1990, and in anticipation of a political settlement of the Cambodian conflict, Vietnam reaffirmed its multidirectional foreign policy at the VCP's Seventh National Congress. Foreign policy documents called for Vietnam to 'diversify and multilateralize economic relations with all countries and economic organizations . . . regardless of different socio-political systems' (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1991). Vietnam's open-door policy of diversifying and multilateralizing its economic relations was reaffirmed at all subsequent national party congresses up to the present.

In November 1991, a month after the formal settlement of the conflict in Cambodia was reached, Vietnam and China ended their estrangement and began the process of normalizing their relations. A major watershed was reached in March 1999, when a summit meeting between leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the VCP adopted a 16-character framework calling for 'long-term, stable, future-oriented, good-neighborly and all-round cooperative relations' (Thayer, 2011b, p. 350). A joint statement issued the following year established the framework for long-term state-to-state relations. During this period, China and Vietnam reached agreements demarcating their land border and delimiting their maritime boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin, including the establishment a joint fishery area.

Despite the growing congruence of interests between Hanoi and Beijing, such as reform of their socialist economies without undermining one-party and the need for a stable regional environment conducive to economic growth, Vietnam's policy of opening its doors to all states regardless of their socio-political systems led to a fundamental reassessment of the role of socialist ideology in external

relations (Thayer, 2008). In summary, Vietnam's South China Sea strategy emerged as a sub-set of its strategic objective of multilateralizing and diversifying external relations, promoting economic development and integration with the global economy, establishing comprehensive strategic relations with major powers and cooperating and struggling with the major powers on the basis of Vietnam's own national interests.

Part 3. Vietnam's New Defence Strategy

This part examines Vietnam's adoption of a new defence strategy—'all people's national defence'—comprising three components: force modernization, national defence industry self-help and international defence diplomacy. Vietnam's new defence strategy was designed to reinforce Vietnam's autonomy in relations with China.

All-People's National Defence

The South China Sea dispute weighed heavily on the development and articulation of Vietnam's national defence strategy as Hanoi looked beyond the conflict in Cambodia in the 1980s. Vietnam's national defence strategy also reflected changes in Vietnam's strategic environment following each of the four major turning points in the South China Sea discussed above.

During 1987–1990, Vietnam carried out a strategic readjustment of its standing army after the withdrawal of military forces from Cambodia and Laos (Thayer, 2008). Nearly half of Vietnam's standing force was demobilized. A new national defence strategy, known as 'people's war and all-people's national defence', took shape.

During the four-year period of strategic readjustment, Vietnam identified three main threats to its security: Chinese forces on its northern border, Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and 'peaceful evolution'. According to Vietnamese assessments, the first two 'hot spots' could erupt at any time and escalate into local armed conflict or even full-scale war. In response, Vietnam adopted a policy of 'ending and preventing armed conflicts from bursting into wars' by applying measures of maximum self-restraint so as to avoid intensifying and spreading hostile activities (Interview of Minister of National Defence General Le Duc Anh, Hanoi Domestic Service, 4 December 1989). According to Vietnam's *National Defence Tasks and Guidelines, 1991–95*:

> Since 1987, we have advocated the policy of self-restraint, intensified the propaganda campaign to motivate the Chinese people and troops to cease hostilities and restore normal relations, gradually reduced the scale of conflicts by not resorting to gun battles all the time, and made the Chinese people and troops clearly understand our good will and practical deeds, thus creating conditions for ending the war. This is, of course, a dangerous and difficult ideological struggle (quoted in Thayer, 1994b, p. 44).

In sum, in the period up to 1990, Vietnam identified low-level or limited conflict as the most likely threat to Vietnam's security. Such conflicts could arise from disputes along its land and sea borders or offshore territories in the South China Sea. In late 1989, according to General Le Duc Anh, the security situation in the two hot spots had become 'stable for the time being' (ibid.).

Vietnam now stressed the 'threat of peaceful evolution' by 'imperialist and reactionary forces' as the major threat to its national security (Thayer, 1999 & Thayer, 2008). In order to prepare for such contingencies, Vietnam assigned its best-trained and equipped regular forces and reserves to defend its most vital areas, including offshore islands and oil and gas exploration zones (Senior General Doan Khue, Hanoi Domestic Service, 28 June 1989). In addition, all military regions, provinces and districts set up special defence zones in each of their strategic areas. For example, Military Region 5 in central Vietnam designated the Paracel and Spratly islands as a special defence zone.

China's actions in the South China Sea in 1992 (discussed above) were the focus of discussions at the third plenary meeting of the VCP Central Committee held in June 1992. China's recent assertiveness posed the fundamental question: what were China's ultimate intentions? One of the major agenda items at the plenum concerned foreign relations. Party Secretary General Do Muoi, in his address to the meeting, generally presented an upbeat assessment. He noted, 'during the past year, our party and state have actively and positively expanded foreign affairs activities while strongly opposing the policy of economic blockade and isolation [the continuing United States aid and trade embargo] against Vietnam' (Voice of Vietnam, 7 July 1992).

The Central Committee plenum discussed the questions of what constituted Vietnam's national interests and whether or not proletarian internationalism contributed to the national interest. Central Committee members also debated whether or not China constituted a long-term threat to Vietnam's security. They were divided over whether to classify China as expansionist or not. According to one veteran journalist, 'Older party officials argued that China has continued on the road to socialism, so we should make allies with the Chinese and ignore small conflicts. But younger leaders said China has adopted a two-faced policy toward Vietnam and is using socialism as a rope to tie Vietnam's hands' (Hiebert, 1992, p. 20). The plenum's final communiqué endorsed continued efforts to broaden Vietnam's external relations. All discussions on relations with China were kept confidential.

Force Modernization

In response to South China Sea sovereignty disputes with China in the early and mid-1990s, Vietnam initiated a modest effort to modernize its naval and air forces. For example, in 1994, Vietnam and the Russian Federation signed an arms sale agreement. In May 1995, Secretary General Do Muoi called for the modernization of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) Navy so it could protect the country's territorial waters. According to Do Muoi, 'we must reinforce our

defence capacity to defend our sovereignty, national interests and natural marine resources, while at the same time building a maritime economy' (quoted in Thayer, 1997, p. 17).

In October 1998, Vietnam and Russia signed a major Defence Cooperation Agreement. Between 1994 and 1999, Vietnam purchased four modified *Tarantul* 2-type corvettes from Russia in its first step away from a purely coastal defence posture. These ships were armed with SS-N-2D STYX anti-ship missiles, Igla surface-to-air missiles and deck guns. In 1996, Russia and Vietnam also reached agreement to co-produce BPS 500-type missile patrol boats.[3]

A second and more determined phase in Vietnam's force modernization programme began in 2003–2004. In 2004, Vietnam took delivery of four Su-30MK multirole jet fighters that were ordered the previous year. Between 2009 and 2014, Vietnam purchased additional 32 Su-30MKs (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2016). These planes extended Vietnam's reach to cover all of the features that it occupied in the Spratly islands. In March 2004, Vietnam signed an agreement for 10 *Tarantul* V or *Molniya* (Project 1241) corvettes armed with SS-N-25 (Kh 35 Uran) missiles (ibid.). In December 2006, Vietnam reached agreement with Rosoboronexport (Russian Defence Exports) for the purchase of two *Gepard 3.9*-class guided missile frigates. This deal was estimated at US$300 million. The following year Vietnam contracted for six *Svetlyak*-class Fast Attack Craft armed with anti-ship missiles and the K-300 P Bastion coastal defence missile system. In 2009, in a major step towards power projection, Vietnam announced it would purchase six *Varshavyanka*-class diesel submarines from Russia (ibid.).

Vietnam's most recent Defence White Paper (Bo Quoc Phong, 2009), issued in December 2009, emphasized the gradual modernization of the regular armed forces. In January 2011, the VCP's 11th National Congress identified modernization of the armed forces and defence industry as one of key national objectives for the next five years (*85 Years of The Communist Party*, 2015, pp. 1254 and 1281). According to the political report, the major challenges affecting national defence included: 'hi-tech wars, disputes over seas, islands and sky areas sovereignty, "peaceful evolution", political unrest, terrorism, and hi-tech crimes, transnational crimes, etc' (ibid., p. 1218). In order to meet these challenges, the political report gave priority to ensuring 'that the armed forces are gradually equipped with modern facilities, firstly navy, air defence, air force, security forces, intelligence, and mobile public security forces' (ibid., p. 1304). Speaking on the sidelines of the party congress, General Phung Quang Thanh, Minister of National Defence, included electronic and technical reconnaissance among the priorities for defence intelligence (Thayer, 2015a, p. 1).

In summary, Vietnam's military modernization programme was clearly aimed at improving its capacity to monitor its territorial waters, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf, protect its offshore oil and gas platforms, defend occupied maritime features, develop anti-shipping, anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and mine counter-measure capabilities and project limited naval power into the South China Sea.

National Defence Industry Self-help

In addition to arms procurement from Russia, Vietnam also embarked on self-help modernization of its naval, air and missile forces to present a credible counter-intervention deterrent (Thayer, 2013). Vietnam's national defence industry developed the capacity for shipyard repairs, assembling navy patrol boats and constructing small surface combatants. For example, in November 2006, Vietnam announced the launch of the largest made-in-Vietnam rescue boat at the Danang military port. Utilizing technology transferred by the Damen Corporation of the Netherlands, the boat was built in 18 months (Karniol, 2008). Vietnam also assembled one BPS 500 missile corvette from a kit provided by Russia in a co-production agreement. This was Vietnam's first domestically produced missile corvette and it was armed with the Kh-35 Uran-E anti-ship missile. Between January 2012 and May 2014, the Hong Ha Shipbuilding Company handed over three TT 400 TP gunships to the VPA Navy.[4]

Vietnam's national defence industry has also entered into co-production arrangements. In November 2006, Russia and Vietnam drew up an agreement on technical assistance to co-produce the *Yakhont* ship-to-ship missiles. In early 2008, Vietnam and Russia signed a contract for the delivery of several ship-building kits and related weapons systems for domestic assembly in Vietnam. The kits contained a mix of vessels for the navy and coast guard. The contract was valued at US$670 million.

International Defence Diplomacy

Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea has spurred Vietnam to embark on international defence diplomacy in an effort to enlist support from major maritime powers to counter China. In 2010, for example, Vietnam as ASEAN Chair successfully lobbied the United States and other powers to intervene in the South China Sea dispute at the mid-year meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus held in Hanoi in October.

Vietnam has also played a delicate diplomatic hand with China. In April 2006, Vietnam and China initiated joint patrols in their overlapping fishing zone in the Gulf of Tonkin. These patrols have expanded to include night signalling exercises and anti-piracy drills. A hotline has been established between their respective coast guards. The 10th joint patrol between the Vietnam Coast Guard and Hainan Marine Police took place in April 2015 (VietNamNetBridge, 2015).

In November 2008, at Vietnam's invitation, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) resumed port visits to Vietnam after a hiatus of 17 years. In April 2012, a PLAN training ship visited the port of Saigon. The VPA Navy made its first port call to China in June 2009 and revisited in June 2011 and June 2013. In January 2013, two PLAN frigates and a replenishment ship paid a goodwill visit to Ho Chi Minh City after deployment in the Gulf of Aden. PLAN ships now visit Vietnam annually.

In 2010, Vietnam and China raised their Strategic Defence and Security Dialogue to deputy minister level. In August 2011, China and Vietnam held their

second Strategic Defence and Security Dialogue at deputy minister level. At this meeting, it was agreed that military exchanges would be increased and a hotline would be established between their defence ministries (*People's Army Newspaper Online*, 2011).

In September 2012, at the third China–Vietnam Strategic Defence and Security Dialogue, the two sides agreed to continue high-level visits and promote cooperation in the fields of personnel training, border exchanges, navy and multilateral security issues (VietNamNetBridge, 2012). China and Vietnam held their fourth Strategic Defence and Security Dialogue in Beijing in June 2013 and agreed to set up a naval hotline. The fifth Strategic and Defence and Security Dialogue was held in August 2015.

Part 4. Vietnam's Strategy on Relations with China

Cooperation and Struggle

In 2003, the VCP made the momentous decision to downgrade socialist ideology as the prime basis for conducting relations with China. This decision was made in part because of the persistence of maritime disputes in the South China Sea, and new opportunities in relations with the United States following normalization in 1995 and the conclusion of a bilateral trade agreement in 2001.

In July 2003, the VCP Central Committee issued Resolution No. 8 'On Defense of the Homeland in the New Situation'. This resolution adopted the twin concepts of 'objects or partners of cooperation' and 'objects of struggle', *doi tac* and *doi tuong*, respectively (Thayer, 2011b, p. 351). Prior to the adoption of Resolution No. 8, China was classified as a friendly country because it was socialist and the United States was viewed as an opponent. Resolution No. 8 noted that there were often instances of friction and disagreement with friendly countries and areas of cooperation and convergent interests with opposing countries. Resolution No. 8 sanctioned cooperation with both friendly and opposing countries and struggling against any country that harmed Vietnam's national interests. With respect to China, Vietnam sought to promote cooperation across the full spectrum of bilateral relations.

At the same time, Vietnam 'struggled' against China when its national interests were threatened. With respect to fishing disputes in the South China Sea, Vietnam 'struggled' against China in response to specific incidents, such as harassment of its fishermen and Chinese intrusions into its EEZ, by issuing diplomatic protests, deploying its maritime police to chase Chinese fishermen out of Vietnamese waters and, on occasion, to 'muscle' Chinese maritime enforcement ships operating in waters claimed by Vietnam.

Maritime Strategy to 2020

In January 2007, the VCP Central Committee's fourth plenum decreed that a maritime strategy should be drawn up. The result was a document entitled

'Vietnam's Maritime Strategy to 2020', Vietnam's first comprehensive maritime strategy that included economic, defence and security objectives.[5] This strategy laid out plans to integrate Vietnam's coastal economy with the marine and hydrocarbon resources in its EEZ, continental shelf and waters surrounding Vietnamese-occupied features in the South China Sea. Vietnamese economists estimated that by 2020 the maritime economy would contribute between 53–55 per cent of GDP and 55–60 per cent of exports (Vietnam Communist Party, 2007).

In 2007–2008, China responded to this strategy by putting pressure on foreign oil companies to pull out of any deals to assist Vietnam with its offshore oil and gas exploration activities (Torode, 2008). In mid-2011, Chinese paramilitary maritime enforcement vessels cut the cables of two ships carrying out seismic surveys in Vietnam's EEZ (Thayer, 2011a, p. 85).

In 2007, China extended its unilateral fishing ban from May–August in waters north of 12 degrees north latitude to include Vietnamese and other foreign fishing vessels. This resulted in Chinese harassment: seizure of fish catches, confiscation of navigational equipment, radios, tools and spares and physical violence against Vietnamese fishing crews. At the same time, Chinese authorities encouraged Chinese fishing boats to intrude into waters within Vietnam EEZ that overlapped with China's nine-dash line claim.

Vietnam viewed Chinese actions against its oil exploration as a direct threat to its national interests because they were perceived as deliberate attempts to disrupt Vietnam's national development plans. Chinese harassment of Vietnamese fishing boats, while not viewed as gravely, were nevertheless considered serious.

Cooperation with China

Vietnam responded by 'cooperating' or engaging China in government-to-government negotiations at various levels on maritime disputes in the South China Sea. A major breakthrough occurred in October 2011 when China and Vietnam signed an agreement on basic principles guiding the settlement of maritime-related issues. Both sides committed themselves 'to seek basic and long-standing solutions acceptable to both sides for sea-related disputes on the basis of international law' and to resolve their maritime disputes 'through friendly talks and negotiations' (Vietnam+, 12 October 2011).

Pending the settlement of their disputes, China and Vietnam also agreed to 'actively discuss transitional and temporary measures that do not affect the stances and policies of the two sides, including studies and discussions on cooperation for mutual development' (ibid.). In sum, it appeared that Hanoi and Beijing had succeeded in compartmentalizing their maritime territorial disputes from their larger bilateral relationship.

Success in Vietnam's policy of cooperating with China was demonstrated in October 2013 when China's Premier Le Keqing visited Vietnam. Premier Li and his Vietnamese host Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung discussed future cooperation across a wide number of areas and agreed to establish three working groups on on-shore cooperation, monetary cooperation and maritime cooperation. According

to the Chinese news media, a 'breakthrough in bilateral cooperation' had taken place (quoted in Thayer, 2013–2014).

Premier Li and Prime Minister Dung also agreed to 'stringently implement' the 2011 Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Maritime-related Issues and pursue maritime cooperation following the principles of 'step by step' and the 'easy-first, difficult-later' (ibid.). The two leaders reaffirmed the role of the existing government-level mechanisms on boundary and territory negotiations; and they reiterated the key point in the 2011 Agreement to pursue 'mutually acceptable fundamental solutions that do not affect each side's stance and policy'.

With respect to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the two leaders reaffirmed their existing agreement to implement the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and 'based on mutual consensus, both sides will do more for the adoption of a Code of Conduct (COC)' in the South China Sea. The two leaders further agreed 'to exercise tight control of maritime disputes and not to make any move that can further complicate or expand disputes'. In this regard, both sides vowed to make use of the hotlines that had been established between their ministries of foreign affairs and ministries of agriculture (ibid.).

Two months after Premier Li's visit, Vietnam and China held a plenary meeting of the government-level committee on border and territory issues. This meeting agreed to set up a working group to discuss cooperation for mutual development at sea that held its first session in 2014.

Struggling Against China

In early May 2014, China deployed the mega oil exploration platform the HYSY 981 in Vietnam's EEZ. This action was unexpected, provocative and precipitated the most severe crisis in bilateral relations since the 1979 border war. China's actions were unexpected because there was no palpable provocation by Vietnam that could justify China's actions. Vietnam and China already had adopted principles and mechanisms to deal with the most sensitive issue in their bilateral relations. China's actions were provocative because this was the first time China had placed an oil rig in the EEZ of another state without its prior permission. Further, an armada of PLAN warships, coast guard vessels, tugs boats and fishing trawlers accompanied the oil rig. The size of the armada rapidly increased from 50 to over 100 ships in a few days. China also dispatched military and other aircraft (Thayer, 2014c).

Over six weeks of the crisis, Vietnam sent its much smaller Coast Guard ships and Fishery Surveillance Force vessels to confront (struggle against) the Chinese and order them out of Vietnam's EEZ. China responded aggressively by ramming Vietnamese ships and vessels and used high-powered water cannons to de-mast radio communications antennae from the bridges of Vietnamese ships. Vietnam embedded foreign journalists on its ships and won a global propaganda war against China.

At the same time, as Vietnam 'struggled against' China, Vietnam also tried to keep its options open by being conciliatory. Vietnam kept its warships well out of the area. Vietnam called in vain for the activation of its hotline with China and for China to receive a special envoy to discuss how to manage if not resolve current tensions. Vietnam claims it made over 30 diplomatic overtures to China in May 2014 but received no reply (Thayer, 2014e). Eventually China set four preconditions to de-escalate this crisis: Vietnam must stop its harassment of the Chinese oil rig, Vietnam must drop its sovereignty claims over the Paracels, Vietnam must not pursue legal action against China (following the Philippines) and Vietnam must not involve third parties such as the United States.

On 18 June, in the midst of this crisis, China's State Councillor Yang Jiechi visited Hanoi ostensibly to attend the long-scheduled annual meeting of the Joint Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation (Thayer, 2014d). This later proved to be a diplomatic subterfuge because no formal meeting of the Joint Steering Committee took place. Yang 'berated his hosts for "hyping up" the situation' and warned 'bluntly that China would "take all necessary measures" to protect the rig' (Thayer, 2014e). Nevertheless, when Yang met VCP Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong, there was general agreement to 'continue discussing ways to ease tensions and solve sea-related issues' (quoted in Thayer, 2014b). After Yang's visit, the Chinese media portrayed the outcome in positive terms (Tiezzi, 2014).

On 15 July, China announced that it was withdrawing the HYSY 981 from Vietnamese waters and, in a separate statement, released 13 Vietnamese fishermen it had arrested earlier. This signalled the end of confrontation at sea and a shift to diplomacy (Thayer, 2014d). In August, China hosted a visit by a special envoy of the secretary general of the VCP, senior Politburo member Le Hong Anh. When Anh met with Xi Jinping, he handed over an invitation from Secretary General Trong for Xi to visit Vietnam. Anh's visit was followed soon after by a visit to China by a high-powered Vietnamese military delegation comprising 13 generals including the minister of National Defence (Thayer, 2014b). The following year, Secretary General Trong visited Beijing and President Xi Jinping paid a return visit to Hanoi in late 2015.

The 2014 oil rig crisis demonstrated that Vietnam was capable of 'struggling against' or standing up to China and showing resolve when its national interests were at stake and its autonomy threatened. However, Vietnam was equally concerned to prevent any maritime incident from escalating to the point of an armed clash with superior Chinese military forces and/or provoking China to seize a feature that Vietnam presently occupied. Vietnam's responses of 'cooperating and struggling' were carefully calibrated acts designed to underscore Vietnam's sovereignty without unduly provoking China.

Part 5. Vietnam's Counter-intervention Strategy

In December 2009, Vietnam and Russia signed a contract for the sale of six Project 636.1 *Varshavyanka*-class conventional fast attack submarines. The cost of the submarines was valued at US$2 billion.[6] Russian specialists were contracted to

provide training, outfitting and maintenance support. In March 2010, the Russian defence minister announced that his country would assist Vietnam build a submarine base at Cam Ranh Bay (Thayer, 2015b, p. 3). That same year, it was announced that Vietnam would pay an additional US$1 billion for armaments, local support infrastructure and other equipment. In 2012, India agreed to provide training in underwater warfare for Vietnam's submariners (Thayer, 2014a).

The *Varshavyanka*-class submarines have improved range, firepower, reliability, speed and sea endurance than earlier models. The US Navy has dubbed them the 'black hole' because they are one of the quietest diesel-electric submarine classes in the world. The *Varshavyanka*-class sub is equipped with six 533 millimetre forward tubes capable of firing torpedoes or missiles and/or laying mines. Depending on the mix of armament, the *Varshavyanka*-class sub can carry out anti-submarine warfare, anti-shipping, anti-surface ship missions, patrol and general reconnaissance. The *Varshavyanka*-class subs are capable of operating in relatively shallow waters (Thayer, 2015b, pp. 4–5).

According to a representative of Rosoboronexport, speaking in July 2011, Vietnam's *Varshavyanka*-class submarines will be equipped with the Novator Klub-S (SS-N 27) cruise missiles (ibid., p. 5).[7] These missiles can be launched underwater from torpedo tubes and have a range of 300 kilometres. Media reports confirmed that all of Vietnam's *Varshavyanka*-class submarines are armed with Klub-S missiles. In May 2015, it was reported that Vietnam had taken delivery of 28 of 50 anti-ship and land-attack missiles on order from Russia including the 3M-14E Klub (range 300 km) land attack precision strike missile.

Ever since Vietnam took delivery of its first *Varshavyanka*-class submarine, analysts have differed over how quickly Vietnam could absorb these weapons into its navy and create a credible deterrent force to China. For example, a former admiral in the Royal Australian Navy noted: '(t)he Vietnamese are trying to do something very quickly that no navy in recent times has managed successfully on such a scale from such a limited base … The new boats may have significant numbers of Russians on board for years to come' (Goldrick, 2013). The assessment of whether or not Vietnam can absorb submarines and create a credible deterrent is now becoming clearer with reports by diplomatic observers that Vietnam's submarines are undertaking patrols along Vietnam's coast. More recent press accounts indicate that the Vietnamese submarines have commenced patrols without their Russian advisers. In addition, Vietnamese crews are currently undergoing training at India's *INS Satavahana* submarine centre in undersea warfare doctrine and tactics under the terms on an agreement reached in 2012.

The views of defence analysts range from sceptical to cautiously optimistic about Vietnam's ability to develop an effective counter-intervention or area denial naval force to deter China in Vietnam's maritime domain. Lyle Goldstein, a professor at the US Naval War College, for example, has written an analysis of Chinese assessments of Vietnamese military capabilities. He notes that Chinese defence planners monitor Vietnam's modernization programmes 'extremely closely … [and have] ample respect … for Vietnam overall (Perlez, 5 July 2014). Goldstein argues that Vietnam's *Varshavyanka*-class submarines can 'deliver lethal blows with either torpedoes or anti-ship cruise missiles'.

Nonetheless, Goldstein reports that Chinese analysts have identified two major weaknesses: Vietnam's lack of major experience in operating complex weapons systems and 'surveillance, targeting and battle management'. These weaknesses have led Chinese defence officials to conclude, 'that China could prevail in any armed clash' with Vietnam. Goldstein concludes that, 'Vietnam's most promising strategy versus China is the hope that it might have sufficient forces for deterrence, while simultaneously pursuing diplomacy to resolve disputes'. Zhang Baohui, a security specialist at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, also reports that China's military planners are concerned about Vietnam's submarines. 'On a theoretical level', he notes, 'the Vietnamese are at the point where they could put them to combat use' (quoted in Torode, 2014).

Brian Benedictus offered a cautiously optimistic evaluation of Vietnam's counter-intervention strategy. After a detailed review of the capabilities of Vietnam's *Varshavyanka*-class submarines, Benedictus offered the assessment that these submarines 'potentially allows [Vietnam] more options in its power projection towards claims in the South China Sea'. In his view, Vietnam's submarines 'have the potential to disrupt enemy ships in a military conflict in a variety of ways', particularly as the PLAN is weak in anti-submarine warfare. Benedictus concluded by stressing the importance of the geographic factor:

> Vietnam is in close proximity to China's Hainan Province, the island which is harbor to the PLAN Southern Pacific Fleet [sic]. It is worrisome enough for Beijing to consider that harbored vessels could be easy prey to submarines off the island's shores, if conflict took place; the prospect of Vietnam someday having land-attack capabilities integrated into its submarine fleet would be a serious cause of concern (Benedictus, 11 February 2013).

Collin Koh, an analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, argues that Vietnam will use its submarines for area denial operations off its coast and in the Spratly islands once they become fully operational. According to Koh:

> Sea denial means creating a psychological deterrent by making sure a stronger naval rival never really knows where your subs might be. It is classic asymmetric warfare utilized by the weak against the strong and something I think the Vietnamese understand very well. The question is whether they can perfect it in the underwater dimension (Torode, 2014).

Siemon Wezeman, from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, goes further to argue that from the Chinese point of view, Vietnam's deterrence is already a reality. According to Wezeman:

> The Vietnamese have changed the whole scenario—they already have two submarines, they have the crews and they appear to have the weapons and their capabilities and experience will be growing from this point. From the point of view of Chinese assumptions, the Vietnamese deterrent is already at a point where it must be very real (quoted in Torode, 2014).

One Vietnamese strategic analyst interviewed by the author argued for a strategy of 'mutually assured destruction' (Thayer, 2014f). This strategy would only apply to a situation where relations between China and Vietnam deteriorated to the point of armed conflict. Under this strategy, if armed conflict broke out, Vietnam would give priority to targeting Chinese flagged merchant shipping and oil container ships operating in the southern extremity of the South China Sea. This Vietnamese strategist argued that the aim of this strategy is not to defeat China but to inflict sufficient damage and psychological uncertainty to cause Lloyd's insurance rates to skyrocket and for foreign investors to panic and take flight.

By the end of 2015, Vietnam had commissioned four *Varshavyanka*-class submarines into the VPA Navy and taken delivery of the fifth. This marks a major milestone in the development of Vietnam's national defence capabilities. Vietnam's military can now operate in three dimensions: on land, in the air and under the sea. In 2017, when all six submarines are operational, they will add a major capability in Vietnam's ability to develop anti-access/area denial capabilities against any country seeking to enter Vietnamese waters with hostile intent. In addition, the *Varshavyanka*-class submarines will add a potent strike capability with their anti-ship and land attack cruise missiles.

Part 6. Summary and Conclusions

This article set out various components of Vietnam's strategy to maintain its autonomy in the face of asymmetric relations with China. This article discussed the historical basis for Vietnam's claims to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly islands on the basis of nearly continuous occupation and administration stretching back to the seventeenth century. Four key turning points illustrated China's early use of military force and oil exploration activities to advance its sovereignty claims. Historical evidence does not make Vietnam's claims indisputable but historical evidence provides a crucial understanding of Vietnamese perspectives on their own sense of autonomy vis-à-vis China.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Vietnam began to re-conceptualize how it framed its foreign policy. Vietnam elevated the importance of national interests over socialist ideology in its relations with China. Further, Vietnam pursued a policy of 'multilateralizing and diversifying' its external relations with all the major powers.

After its withdrawal from Cambodia, Vietnam adopted a new national defence strategy of 'all people's national defence' that incorporated three elements: (a) the modernization of Vietnam's land-focused army to include enhanced naval and air capabilities particularly in the maritime domain, (b) self-help through development of a national defence industry capable of sustaining force modernization and (c) employing international defence diplomacy to leverage its external relations. Vietnam's adoption of a new foreign policy orientation coupled with the gradual modernization of its armed forces enabled Vietnam to protect its autonomy in relations with China. This took the form of a dialectic linking of 'cooperation and struggle'. Vietnam would cooperate with any country for mutual benefit and

Vietnam would struggle against any country that harmed or threatened Vietnam's national interests. The policy of cooperation and struggle was applied to both China and the United States.

As Vietnam modernized its armed forces, China became more assertive in enforcing its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. By way of response, Vietnam stepped up its efforts at force modernization most notably by acquiring six *Varshavyanka*-class submarines.

When all of Vietnam's current and future arms acquisitions are taken into account, it is evident that Vietnam has taken major steps to develop a robust capacity to resist maritime intervention by China. This has taken the form of developing a counter-intervention strategy that integrates shore-based artillery and missile systems, Su-30 multirole jet fighters, fast attack missile craft, corvettes and frigates armed with ship-to-ship missiles, drones and *Varshavyanka*-class submarines. These weapon systems should enable Vietnam to make it extremely costly for China to conduct maritime operations within a 200–300 nautical mile band of water along Vietnam's coast from the Vietnam–China border in the northeast to around Da Nang in central Vietnam if not further south (ibid.). Additionally, Vietnam also has the capacity to strike China's major naval base near Sanya on Hainan Island, military facilities on Woody Island and newly constructed airfields on three of China's artificial islands in the Spratlys.

Vietnam's force modernization and self-help development of a national defence industry provides the foundation for Vietnam to respond to Chinese assertiveness and intimidation in the South China Sea in a robust manner. In sum, Vietnam seeks to cooperate and struggle with China by acknowledging its primacy in the expectation that China will respect Vietnam's autonomy.

Notes

1. Vietnam was divided between the Trinh Lords in the North and the Nguyen Lords in the South from 1558–1783.
2. The French Vichy Government collaborated with Japan until March 1945.
3. Only one BPS-500 was produced because more modern missile boat designs became available. Vietnam opted for the *Molniya*-class.
4. TT, *tuan tra*, stands for patrol, while TP, *tau phao*, stands for gunship. These vessels displace approximately 480 tons. They are armed with 14.5 mm anti-aircraft guns, one AK-176 76mm automatic cannon and a six-barreled 30 milimetre AK-630 radar controlled gun. The gunboats are also equipped with the MANPAD SA-N-14 GROUSE anti-missile system.
5. 'Chien luoc bien Viet Nam den Nam 2020 (Vietnam's Maritime Strategy to 2020)', Resolution 09-NQ/TW, 9 February 2007. Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung later approved Decision 568, 28 April 2010, to develop Vietnam's sea and islands-based economy by 2020.
6. According to analysts, the cost indicates that the *Varshavyanka*-class submarines will not have the air independent propulsion (AIP) system.
7. The Klub-S (also Club-S) missile has a range of 300 km with a 400 kg warhead. The missile initially flies at subsonic speed but the warhead separates when it approaches its target flying at 5–10 m above the surface and accelerates to three times the speed of sound.

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