Research article

"Firm in principles, flexible in strategy and tactics": Understanding the logic of Vietnam's China policy

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Abstract
Since 1991, Vietnam has adopted a dual strategic position towards China: it sees China as an indispensable economic and security partner and simultaneously it seeks to hedge against China's possible territorial encroachment by gradually beefing up its military and cautiously forging strategic ties with other powers. The making of Vietnam's current China policy is predominantly shaped by the interplay of two constants (geography and history) and two variables (China's policy and changing big power relations). Among these factors, geography and history serve as the basis for understanding Vietnam's hedging policy vis-a-vis China and explain why thus far Hanoi remains very reluctant to enter an alliance to counter China's rise. While being firm on its independent policy, Vietnam has become more "flexible in strategy and tactics" in rebalancing itself from China's orbit towards the West's as the result of China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes.

Keywords
escape China's orbit, hedging, Sino-Vietnamese relations, South China Sea disputes, tyranny of geography, Vietnam's China policy

Among China's neighbours, Vietnam is arguably the country which has undergone the most complicated history with it. On the one hand, no East Asian countries are more culturally and ideologically similar to China than Vietnam. On the other hand, few other countries have been as defiant as Vietnam in resisting Chinese bullying to preserve their own independence. Andrew Forbes (2007) once described Vietnam's perspective vis-a-vis China with a love-hate metaphor.

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It is this contradiction that has contributed to shaping Vietnamese identity and worldview over time and explaining the fluctuations of the bilateral relationship in the past decades. During the Cold War, Sino-Vietnamese relations dramatically shifted from one spectrum to another: from "lip-and-teeth allies" in the 1950s to "arch enemies" in the late 1970s. Since the normalization of ties in 1991, Vietnam has adopted a dual strategic position towards China: it sees China as an indispensable economic and security partner and simultaneously it seeks to hedge against China's possible territorial encroachment by gradually beefing up its military and cautiously forging strategic ties with other powers.

This strategic ambivalence faced a litmus test in early May 2014 when Hanoi saw the worst crisis in its relations with China in the post-Cold War era. The placement of China's giant HD-981 oil rig in Vietnam's claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the tense vessel confrontation between the two coast guards for almost 10 weeks not only sparked large anti-China protests throughout Vietnam but also precipitated a heated internal discussion on the need to rethink Vietnam's China policy—how to escape China's orbit. At the height of the crisis, some of the most radical elements within the Vietnamese intelligentsia suggested that the country should build strategic alliances with the US and its partners as a counter-measure to China's possible territorial encroachment. Some scholars even suggested that the oil rig incident was "a game changer in Sino-Vietnamese relations" whereby the bilateral relationship had passed "the point of no return" (Vuving, 2015). Despite such pessimism about Sino-Vietnamese relations and optimism for rapprochement with the US and the West, Hanoi thus far remains very keen on its independent foreign policy and is very reluctant to choose sides between China and the US. How can we explain the logic behind Hanoi's strategic thinking?

When answering this puzzle, existing literature tends to adopt the realist lenses of balance of power and/or the liberal lenses of economic interdependence and Vietnam's domestic politics. Vietnam desires to counter China's rise and its increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea but its concerns about ideology and regime legitimacy make it hard for Hanoi to make bold moves towards a US embrace (see, for example, Liu and Sun, 2015). The political struggle among various factions within the Vietnamese government further complicates the making of its China policy (Vuving, 2010).[1] Some other Vietnam experts meanwhile argue that understanding Vietnam's strategy vis-a-vis China requires an eclectic paradigm or calibrated mixture of realist, liberal, idealist, and cultural components (e.g. Le, 2013; Vuving, 2006). While not dismissing the impact of these various factors in shaping Vietnam's China policy, this article posits that Hanoi's strategic calculations are more coherent and future-oriented thinking than one may think. Nearly two decades ago, Carl Thayer and Ramses Amer (1999: 219) concluded in their important volume *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* that "Vietnam has lost its ideological paradigm but not found another". I argue in this article that Vietnam has managed to find a direction for its foreign policy. A general consensus has been forged among Vietnamese policy-makers regarding the direction of Vietnam's foreign policy overall and its China policy in particular. Given Vietnam's proximity to and complicated history with China, an autonomous and independent foreign policy centering on the principle of "firm in objectives, flexible in strategies and tactics" (dĩ bất biến, ứng vạn biến) in the eyes of Vietnamese policy-makers best serves the country's interests, amid the changing geopolitical landscape in Asia stemming from China's rapid rise and its increased assertiveness in territorial disputes.

To ascertain why that is the case, this article proceeds as follows. It will first identify the constants and variables which shape Vietnam's current China policy. Vietnam's strategic thinking vis-a-vis China has its roots in the self-evaluation of the country's geopolitics as well as historical

learning from past mistakes in its China policy. The parameters of Vietnam's China policy, meanwhile, are influenced by China's policy and the dynamics of big power relations. The interplay of these factors results in Hanoi's strategic ambivalence towards China. The author will then discuss how this strategy worked in the past decades, how it stood the litmus test of the 2014 rig debacle, and how it will evolve in the time to come. The article concludes by arguing that unless there are sea changes in China's policy and/or big power relations, Vietnam's China policy will see a continuation and adaptation centered on the logic of "firm in principle, flexible in strategy and tactics", rather than radical change.

The factors shaping Vietnam's China policy

Sino-Vietnamese relations represent the logic of big neighbour-small neighbour ties. As one of the countries having the most profound experience in dealing with China, Vietnam has learnt from its own success and failure in the past to design its current foreign and China policy. As Hung Nguyen (2011) has noted, the making of Vietnam's China policy is predominantly shaped by the interplay of two constants (geography and history) and two variables (China's policy and changing big power relations). Among these factors, geography and history serve as the basis for understanding Vietnam's contemporary perspective vis-a-vis China and explain why thus far Hanoi remains very reluctant to enter an alliance to counter China's assertiveness. China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes and the growing strategic competition among big powers, meanwhile, have increasingly pushed Vietnam's China policy to tipping point.

The tyranny of geography and the lessons of history

For more than 2000 years since Vietnam's emergence as a nation, it has had to contend with "the tyranny of geography", argues Carlyle A Thayer (2011: 349). The term refers to Vietnam's geographical traits—a small country living under the shadow of a giant Northern neighbour. Once annexed to Chinese territory for nearly 10 centuries, and being naturally adjacent to this big power with a 1400 km long land border and a vast maritime boundary, Vietnam has been struggling to preserve its territorial sovereignty and political autonomy. Throughout history, China constantly sought influence over Vietnam through various attempts at invasion and assimilation. Vietnam, in its turn, relentlessly fought to resist such Sinicizing efforts by Chinese empires so as to preserve its own independence and identity. Territorial issues, therefore, have always been a sensitive issue and a source of conflict in the bilateral relationship. In 1974 when the two countries were still "defacto allies", China took the opportunity when the Vietnam War was near its end to take over the Western part of the Paracel islands which was then controlled by Southern Vietnamese troops. The two countries subsequently fought a border war in 1979 and clashed again over the Spratly islands in 1988. At the height of their 1979 border war, Hanoi published a document revealing "the truth" about the three times China had betrayed the Vietnamese people since their establishment of ties in 1950 (Bo Ngoai giao, 1979; see also Khoo, 2011: 66–77). For these geographical and historical reasons, "Vietnam's mistrust of China has become an underlying factor in bilateral relations" (Nguyen, 2011).

Not only fated to coexist with China, Vietnam also suffers from disparities in power and capacities in the bilateral relationship. Given the differences in size, population, and economic strength, China is a greater concern to Vietnam than vice versa because "proportionally the weaker side is more exposed to its risks and opportunities" (Womack, 2006: 2). Moreover, this asymmetry

often leads the two countries to have "systemic differences in interests and perspectives" (Womack, 2006: 17; see also Thayer, 2011: 349). Looking at Vietnam's diplomacy over the years, it can be seen that China often occupies the central place in Hanoi's worldview. The success and/or failure of Vietnam's diplomacy, more often than not, relies on the handling of its China policy. During the early Cold War, Vietnam managed to expand on its brotherhood with China and thus mobilized Beijing's support for its struggle against the French and the Americans. In the latter half of the Cold War, however, the bilateral relationship deteriorated sharply, culminating in a decade of open hostility (1979–1989) that plunged Vietnam's diplomacy into its worst crisis since the establishment of the country in 1945.

Geography also places Vietnam at the crossroads of civilizations and as a venue for great powers' competition for sphere of influence. There have been many times when Vietnam has been a victim of great power politics, particularly when it came to the issue of entering a military bloc aimed at counter-balancing China. In the course of this, Vietnam has learnt precious lessons as to how to manage relations with China amid great power rivalry. In the 1950s, Vietnam retained a fine balance between its two major allies—the Soviet Union and China—and thus managed to mobilize the material and ideological support of both powers for its wars against French and American imperialism. During the late 1960s and 1970s when these two powers were at odds, Hanoi faced a tough choice and increasingly lost this sense of balance in favour of the Soviet Union. Its decision to formally enter a military alliance with the Soviet Union in 1978 and its subsequent intervention in Cambodia in early 1979 prompted China to launch a border attack to "teach Vietnam a lesson". Although Vietnam managed to stall the attacks from both ends (China in the North and the pro-China alliance against Vietnamese occupation in Cambodia in the South), it came at the price of a decade-long economic embargo and international isolation from China, the US, and the ASEAN countries, not to mention another military attack by China in 1988 to take over a number of islets controlled by Vietnam in the South China Sea.[2] And all these incidents happened without any substantial action from Vietnam's then most important ally —the Soviet Union.

These incidents have taught Vietnam a bitter yet important lesson about alliance politics—that it should not be over-reliant on a big power's willingness to defend Vietnam's interests and that it should not go with one power against the other. That "distant water won't help put out a fire close at hand" (nước xa không cứu được lửa gần) is something Vietnam drew on in its experience dealing with its two former allies—China and the Soviet Union—during this period of the Sino-Soviet split. Vietnam, therefore, has been deeply distrustful ever since of alliance politics allegedly designed to balance or counter Chinese power. Moreover, haunted by big powers' dealings in the past, such as their compromises during the 1954 Geneva Conference on Restoring Peace in Indochina, as well as those between Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon in 1972 regarding peace and unification in Vietnam, Vietnamese leaders are always concerned that a similar agreement could take place in the South China Sea which could harm Vietnam's interests. As a result, since the end of the Cold War Vietnam has geared towards an autonomous, non-aligned, and omnidirectional foreign policy based on the central "three nos" defense policy: no military alliances with foreign countries, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil, and no collusion against a third country—an assertion largely seen as a reassurance to China.

In designing their post-Cold War China policy, Vietnam's policy-makers understand that for Vietnam to preserve stability and development, it ought to handle well the "China factor" in its relations with other powers. As learnt from the past, China is not just a neighbour but also a great power with significant impacts on Vietnam's future development. A workable, if not good,

relationship with China has thus been considered a priority for Hanoi. Therefore, even before the end of the Cold War, Vietnam has proactively sought normalization with China. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the European socialist bloc in 1991 further deepened the sense of insecurity and sparked fear of a "peaceful evolution" promoted by the West to undermine socialism in Vietnam. In this context, Hanoi requested to re-establish the alliance with China. Beijing rejected such proposals and declared instead that post-Cold War China and Vietnam are "comrades but not allies"—a relationship that can be described as "intimate but not so close, distant but not so far, and having disputes but no conflicts" (Do, 2008: 3).

Bilateral relations since the normalization of ties in 1991 have been quite vibrant and multi-faceted. Given the logic of the "tyranny of geography", Vietnamese leaders "judiciously apply the levers of cooperation and struggle through various party, state, military and multilateral structures in order to better manage its relations with China" (Thayer, 2011: 349). These include rituals (high-level meetings and cooperation at all levels), enmeshment (promoting multilateral efforts to enmesh China in a web of cooperative relations), and self-help (developing its own self-sufficient military capacity to deter China from using force). Politically, reciprocal visits by top-ranking leaders have been frequent. Apart from annual leadership visits, there have been numerous exchanges between governmental and non-governmental officials on an almost daily basis—a unique feature of Sino-Vietnamese relations seldom seen in the bilateral ties of other nations. Hanoi and Beijing have also established a high-level hotline for consultations on major issues—the first of its kind between a Vietnamese leader and a foreign counterpart. During the visit by Vietnamese Secretary General Nong Duc Manh to China in June 2008, the two countries agreed to lift their relations to the level of a "comprehensive strategic partnership"—the highest level of bilateral relationship, which so far Vietnam has only had with China and Russia. This partnership is governed by the symbolic "16-word guideline" of "friendly neighbourliness, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and future orientation" and the "four good guiding spirits" of "good neighbours, good friends, good comrades, and good partners". Clearly, ideology matters here. The statement by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in his reception for Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in April 2008 that "the mountains and rivers of Vietnam and China are adjacent, cultures similar, ideologies shared, and destinies interrelated" has profound implications in this regard. Particularly, the last point, "destinies are interrelated" (*vận mệnh tương quan*), implies mutual national survival. As William Duiker (1986: 1) has well noted: "the historical relationship between China and Vietnam has had an almost symbiotic character". This is true, even now.

Economically, China has been Vietnam's leading trading partner for the past 10 years, serving as its most important import market and second largest export market (after the US). Since the normalization of ties, two-way trade has grown by more than 1500 times, from US$32 million in 1991 to US$60 billion in 2014. China is also an important foreign investor (ranking ninth among the largest foreign investors in Vietnam) and a frequent provider of loans and aids for Vietnam in the fields of industry, mining, railways, energy, textiles, and chemical products (*Vietnamnet*, 2015a). It can thus be said without any doubt that although the Sino-Vietnamese relationship can hardly come back to the "lip-and-teeth" alliance of the 1950s, neither does Hanoi want to let it fall to the level of "arch enemies" of the late 1970s–early 1980s. Vietnam recognizes the importance of maintaining an effective and stable relationship with China, and hence "it doesn't want to antagonize China unnecessarily" (Nguyen, 2011).

Territorial disputes, however, remain the most serious source of tension in the bilateral relations. This was reflected during arduous negotiations on the settlement of the land border treaty and the

delimitation of the Tonkin Gulf which were eventually concluded in 1999 and 2000 respectively (Do, 2009). Since these negotiations, the South China Sea disputes have become a thorn in the side of Sino-Vietnamese relations and the biggest source of tension. China's intention to turn the South China Sea into a Chinese lake presents a great security threat for Vietnam. Whilst maintaining that security challenges in the South China Sea, caused by China's assertive policies, are the greatest security threat, Vietnam has few strategic options vis-a-vis China. In the past, Hanoi has both allied and opposed Beijing, but neither strategy seems to work nowadays. A bandwagoning strategy is undesirable given Vietnam's strong determination to preserve its independence and territorial sovereignty, as well as the anti-China sentiment among the public. But a counter-balancing strategy is also unwise, as it would worsen relations with China and bring Hanoi great economic hardship and insecurity—possibly disrupting overall foreign relations, as happened during the decade following the 1979 border war. Therefore, Hanoi has employed a "soft balancing" strategy in the South China Sea dispute—seeking to internalize the issue through ASEAN and to bring in non-claimant powers, while still leaving the door open for a bilateral settlement with Beijing (Do, 2014a). Until early 2014, this strategy seemed to be working, as Beijing agreed to set up a number of conflict management mechanisms, including the establishment of a fishery hotline between the two agricultural ministries, a direct phone line between their defense ministries, and joint maritime development in waters off the mouth of the Tonkin Gulf. But the changing geopolitical landscape in Asia stemming from China's increased assertiveness and the new dynamics in big power relations increasingly created pressure on Hanoi to rethink its China policy.

China's policy and changing big power relations

Although Vietnam's China policy is made in Hanoi, it is influenced to a large extent by China's policy and big power relations. China's rapid rise and its escalating assertiveness in the South China Sea since 2009 have raised a common concern among regional states. With US announcement of its pivot or rebalance to Asia, Japan's recent efforts to increase its political role in Asia under the Abe administration, and the Indian Act East policy, the region has witnessed heightened strategic competition for sphere of influence among these powers. These new dynamics in big power relations on the one hand help increase the leverage power of smaller states. On the other hand, however, they also spark off fears of a new era of great power rivalry at the expense of smaller states' interests and forcing them into a daunting balancing act.

Thailand offers a good example of how a small country should manage its relations with big powers, with its skilful "bamboo diplomacy"—always solidly rooted but flexible enough to bend whichever way the wind blows to survive. The Vietnamese, through their historical learning, have found another diplomatic philosophy to engage great powers—an independent, self-reliant, omnidirectional, and balanced diplomacy. The aim is to forge as many equidistant and mutually dependent relations with all major powers without leaning too much on any one side. The logic, as former Deputy Prime Minister and senior Vietnamese diplomat Vu Khoan succinctly puts it, is that "the more interdependent ties we can cultivate, the easier we can maintain our independence and self-reliance, like an ivory bamboo that will easily fall by standing alone but grow firmly in clumps" (*Vietnamnet*, 2013). This "clumping bamboo" philosophy looms large in Vietnam's arrangement of its strategic partnerships. Post-Cold War Vietnam has no formal allies but has so far secured a dozen strategic partnerships with major world powers and important ASEAN neighbours including Russia (2001); India (2007); China (2008); Japan (2006); South Korea and Spain (2009); the United Kingdom (2010); Germany (2011); Italy, France, Indonesia, Singapore,

and Thailand (2013); and two 'comprehensive partnerships', including with Australia (2009) and America (2013). This makes it one of the few countries in the world, and the only ASEAN country, that is either a "strategic" or "comprehensive" partner to all five UN permanent members. It is Hanoi's hope that forging interdependent ties with major powers, particularly in economic and security domains, will help broaden the common denominators of interests between Vietnam and other powers, thus deepening mutual trust and enmeshing these powers in defending their common intererests with Vietnam.

This finely balanced diplomatic philosophy has functioned relatively well in the past two decades, but China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea has deteriorated Sino-Vietnamese relations and drawn Vietnam closer strategically to the US and its allies in recent years. Mutual concerns about China's assertiveness in maritime issues have recently brought Washington, Tokyo, and Hanoi together. Given Vietnam's historical experience in resisting China's bullying, its relatively sizable military, and its strategic location right at the heart of the trade route passing the South China Sea, Vietnam has become the focus of increased attention in these big powers' Asian policy. Tokyo and Washington have courted Hanoi in a number of ways: boosting economic ties to help it be less reliant on the Chinese import market; including Vietnam (the only poor and non-capitalist country) in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations; offering equipment including patrol vessels, know-how, and capacity building to strengthen its coast guard and military; and calling for Hanoi to play a more active and constructive role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. Both Washington and Tokyo have also openly expressed their interest in using Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay for military purposes—a move that must have startled Beijing. Understandably, China was not happy about these developments and in summer 2014 Beijing gave a warning to Hanoi by creating the oil rig incident—the most serious crisis in Sino-Vietnamese relations in the post-Cold War era.

The sudden deployment of China's giant oil rig HD 981—and about 80 naval and surveillance ships to protect it—into Vietnam's claimed exclusive economic zone in early May 2014 sent shockwaves through Vietnam. Images of Chinese vessels ramming and firing water cannons at Vietnamese boats flooded Vietnamese media, triggering a wave of unprecedented anti-China protests across the country and overseas. Some of these protests turned into violence, killing a number of Chinese citizens, and the government had to intervene and call for restraint. During the 10 weeks of fierce confrontation at sea, the bilateral relationship fell to the lowest level since the normalization of ties. For the first time since 1991, top-ranking Vietnamese leaders made very bold statements in denouncing China's assertiveness. State President Truong Tan Sang, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and even Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong (who is believed to be a pro-China leader) made it clear that while exercising restraints, Vietnam would not back down in the defense of its territory. More straightforwardly, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, after what he saw as a blatant violation of Vietnam's sovereignty and legitimate interests, clearly stated that "Vietnam never barters sovereignty for an unrealizable or conditional peace and friendship" (*Voice of Vietnam*, 2014). Hanoi even threatened to review all possible options including bringing China to a domestic or international court. Vietnamese diplomats also engaged in regular consultations with Washington, Tokyo, and its ASEAN partners on how to react to the crisis. Several countries in Vietnam's dense network of "strategic partnerships" such as the US, Japan, the Philippines, India, and Australia have joined Hanoi in denouncing China's growing unilateralism and aggressiveness. Most radically, some intellectuals have even suggested that the country build strategic allies with the US and its partners as a counter-measure against China's possible territorial encroachment (see, for example,

Kurlantzick, 2014; Le, 2015: 10–21; Tuong Lai, 2014). While all these developments have stirred up predictions about a shift in Vietnam's strategic thinking vis-a-vis China (Do, 2014b), Hanoi's strategy for resolving the oil rig incident and the ongoing South China Sea disputes thus far has been moderate: seeking to mend fences with China and reiterating its longstanding "three nos" defense policy. Why?

First and foremost, this nuanced reaction reflects the historical roots of Vietnam's strategic thinking, one that views a workable relationship with China as vital to ensure Vietnam's stability and security. While other regional countries (e.g. Japan and the Philippines) have adopted a hard balancing strategy in their territorial disputes with China, Hanoi's interactions with Beijing are more complicated and its response to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea is also more sophisticated. As a small country that shares both land and maritime borders with China, relies on Chinese imports, and has a significant power gap with the country, Vietnam attaches critical importance to preserving a friendly and stable relationship with China. While seeing the South China Sea disputes as the country's most serious security concern, Vietnamese leaders also believe that these challenges can be resolved by engagement with China through diplomatic channels. Following China's removal of the oil rig on 15 July 2014, Hanoi sent two high-ranking delegations to China (Politburo member Le Hong Anh in August and Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh in October 2014), during which the two sides agreed to repair ties and to establish a military hotline to forestall incidents like the oil-rig dispute in the future. Relations were further improved in 2015—the year commemorating the 65th anniversary of their establishment of ties—with two important reciprocal visits by the two countries' top leaders (Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to China in April 2015 and President Xi Jinping's first state visit to Vietnam in November 2015).

During these meetings, the two countries' leaders acknowledged that their disputes in the South China Sea had substantially undermined their strategic trust and that both countries need to exercise restraint in order to keep the disputes under control. During his visit in November 2015, President Xi also initiated the four-point proposal for boosting cooperation with Vietnam. This includes enhancing high-ranking visits and strategic exchange, strengthening cooperation along the land border, managing maritime disputes, and promoting coordination at multilateral forums (*Vnexpress*, 2015a). Following this line, the two Defense Ministers held their meetings and conducted bilateral defense exchanges along the land border in May 2015 and again in March 2016. Vietnam has also sent a number of lower-ranking delegations to China to discuss the delimitation of the mouth of the Tonkin Gulf and the prospect for "demilitization" in the South China Sea. The guiding principle for managing disputes, they agreed, is to look at the big picture of overall bilateral relations and the future development of the two countries (*Vietnamnet*, 2015a). Both countries still attach importance to keeping their relations on track.

Second, the management of the oil rig crisis, from a Vietnamese perspective, was a success (Do, 2015). Reportedly, during the two-month confrontation at sea, Hanoi requested around 40 contacts at all levels and through all means (including party-to-party channels and hotline exchanges) with China in order to settle the crisis. Obviously, having such a dispute settlement mechanism with China is an asset for Vietnam as compared to other countries which engage in territorial disputes with China (e.g. Japan and the Philippines). The two factors that have contributed to the peaceful resolution of the tensions, according to Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, are Vietnam's experience in dealing with China and the support it received from the international community. Minh further asserts that, "other countries, for example the Philippines may not predict [China's

behavior] but we do, we know China" (Pham, 2014). This reflects Hanoi's confidence in its China policy, particularly its understanding of the parameters of strategic maneuvers that China can accept. Vietnam's policy-makers understand that strengthening relations with other powers facilitates Hanoi's goal of internalizing the disputes so as to restrain China's unilateral actions. The downside of this, however, is that Vietnam risks becoming a proxy for other powers to contain China's assertiveness in maritime disputes. If Hanoi moved too close to Washington or Tokyo, it would be easy for Beijing to interpret these further enhanced interactions as a strategic encirclement of China, for which they would certainly enact countermeasures. And this would only worsen the security dilemma in the region. That said, the "China factor" will have both a push and pull effect in Vietnam's relations with other powers and Hanoi will need to walk the tightrope more carefully (Do, 2014a).

Third, economic benefits matter. The country's economic slowdown and heightened tensions with China in the South China Sea in recent years have created pressure for Vietnam to reduce its economic dependence on China. Despite the rhetoric of "escaping China's orbit" and its recent "economic pivot" to Japan and the US, however, Vietnam's trade deficit with China hit new records of US$27 billion in 2014 and US$32.3 in 2015 (*Vnexpress*, 2015b). As a result, Vietnam is now the Southeast Asian country most reliant on Chinese goods (*Vnexpress*, 2015c). Given that China remains the key market and raw materials supplier for Vietnamese products and an increasingly important investor, Vietnam should tread carefully. John Lee (2014: 13–50) has rightly noted that this state of "economic asymmetry" will have significant strategic implications for Vietnam's China policy and that only domestic reforms could help reduce Vietnam's dependence on China. Hanoi also cannot ignore the "carrots" Beijing is offering, including the Maritime Silk Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiatives. Under the AIIB initiative, port facilities, highways, and other infrastructure connecting the two countries with the wider region will be constructed. Vietnam is also a key part of Chinese plans for the Maritime Silk Road as it controls a number of key military strongpoints and supply stations, such as Cam Ranh Bay. Therefore, "China must foster a stable relationship with Vietnam to maintain its regional clout" (Abe and Tomiyama, 2015).

Arguably, the logic of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" applies in Vietnam's strategic thinking with respect to China. Yet Hanoi may find it increasingly difficult to maintain this approach should China continue crossing red lines. Most recently, China's continued flexing of its muscles in the South China Sea through various reclamation activities and the deployment of anti-ship cruise missiles and an advanced surface-to-air missile system in the disputed Paracel Islands is causing a big security concern for Vietnam. It can therefore be argued that the extent to which Hanoi may further enhance its security and defense cooperation with other powers in its hedge against China's possible territorial encroachment largely depends on two factors: the dynamics in big power relations and the degree of assertiveness China exercises in the South China Sea. In an effort to hedge its bets against China, Vietnam has tried to beef up its armed forces (including the procurement of six kilo-class submarines from Russia) as well as to continue fostering ties with other powers—particularly the US and Japan. On 11 December 2014, Vietnam also joined the Philippines and the US in rejecting China's nine-dash line in the South China Sea in its statement of interests submitted to the Permanent Court of Arbitration which is handling the Philippines-China case. If anything, all these moves have engendered a bolder approach in Hanoi's stance. It can therefore be argued that, while Hanoi will not change its "three-nos" policy to enter a military bloc any time soon, the "balancing" dimension in Hanoi's China policy will become more evident if Beijing persists to push Hanoi into a corner.

Escaping China's orbit? On Vietnam's domestic debate about its future China policy

While China's recent assertive behavior in the South China Sea has not substantially changed the direction of Vietnam's diplomacy, it did leave an everlasting imprint on Vietnam-China relations and Vietnam's foreign policy overall. Such implications are at least threefold: lessening state control on public and intellectual discussions about China, repositioning Vietnam's foreign policy towards a truly balanced one, and stimulating a heated domestic debate on Vietnam's future development in the era of China's rise and heightened great power rivalry.

Since the normalization of bilateral relations in 1991, China policy has been seen as a sensitive issue in Vietnam. In an effort to maintain friendly relations with Beijing, Hanoi has tried to restrict anti-China protests as well as negative discussions about China among the public. Until recently, bad memories in the bilateral relationship, e.g. the 1979 border war and 1988 clashes in the South China Sea, were rarely mentioned in history textbooks and state-controlled media. Things have started to change in the past few years, with the 2014 oil rig incident marking a turning point. Hanoi now allows the media to publish more open-minded pieces about China. Public and media discussions on China in the past two years have been dominated by denouncement of "China's aggressiveness" and the narrative of "escaping China's orbit". In February 2016, on the 37th anniversary of the Vietnam-China land border war, Vietnamese media ranging from state television (VTV) to leading newspapers all ran headline stories on what is now acknowledged as the "just war against the Chinese invaders". Similarly, reports and analysis on the 1988 naval clashes with China in the South China Sea were covered in the media in March 2016. There have been calls from well-respected historians and intellectuals such as Vu Duong Ninh, Duong Trung Quoc, and Le Ma Luong for Vietnam to face the history of Vietnam-China relations squarely, particularly through the addition of detailed information about the conflicts with China in the country's history textbooks.

This new development on the one hand is the by-product of the growing nationalism and widespread anti-China sentiment among the public following China's heightened assertiveness in the South China Sea.[3] On the other hand, the slow but encouraging democratization of Vietnam with the development of civil society, non-governmental organizations, and various web-based social networks has also facilitated relatively free and open discussions about China and Vietnam's foreign policy overall.[4] The establishment of independent research institutions and online research platforms such as the Center for Strategic Studies and International Development (CSSD) and Nghiencuu-quocte.net, whose members are well-known former government officials/diplomats and young intellectuals, also contributes to the socialization of foreign policy and strategic studies in Vietnam.[5]

Translating to foreign policy, this strong negative public sentiment vis-a-vis China will make it hard for any Vietnamese policy-makers to adopt a deference or "band-wagoning" policy towards China. Any compromise on territorial issues will be interpreted as the weakness of the Vietnamese government. Nguyen Quang A, a prominent Vietnamese economist, believes that the anti-Chinese nationalist sentiment in Vietnam, while perhaps not posing a big threat to the government, could "undermine the foundations of this system" (Browne, 2015). As Vuving (2008: 390) has pointed out, the anti-China movement presents Hanoi with a dilemma:

> if the state chooses confrontation rather than cooptation, it will lose its last legitimacy. But if it sides with the patriotic protesters, it will risk antagonizing China. The Communist Party draws legitimacy and its image as the protector of the country from its leadership role in past wars against foreign invaders.

Hanoi's lessened restriction on freedom of speech about China shows the weakened role of ideology in Vietnam's decision-making. As the result of China's recent behavior in the South China Sea, even communist stalwarts in Hanoi are alarmed. If anything, the oil rig incident has disillusioned Hanoi about the prospect of relying on "socialist friendship" with China for preserving Vietnam's territories. It has also repositioned Vietnam's foreign policy to a truly balanced one now. Previously, Vietnam still leaned a bit closer on the China side, while being skeptical of the US and the West for ideological reasons. Now, there are signs that Hanoi is starting to depart from the China end towards an equidistant point between China and the West (the US). Its pivot to the West in recent years has been conducted in a cautious but steady manner. Following the oil rig incident, Hanoi has accepted Tokyo and Washington's offer to provide patrol vessels for Vietnamese coast guards. Within more than a year (from 2 October 2014 to 23 May 2016), the US decided to partially and then completely lift its 50-year ban on lethal arms sales to Vietnam, paving the way for Hanoi to purchase high-end equipment to enhance its maritime capacity. Interestingly, because the US views Vietnam as "the most strategic-thinking of all ASEAN countries", rapprochement has now progressed to the point where strategic concerns outweigh ideological differences and Vietnam's human rights record. The invitation and cordial reception granted to Vietnamese Party Chief Nguyen Phu Trong on his first ever visit to the US in July 2015, and the recent visit to Vietnam by President Obama in May 2016, both signify such encouraging rapprochement between the two former enemies.[6] It is important to note, however, that moving closer to the US does not necessarily mean sacrificing ties with China in zero-sum terms. Rather, Vietnam's departure from China's orbit towards the West will lead it to a truly balanced point, as Vuving has succintly put it: "closer, but not too close to the US, a bit further, but not too far, from China" (Vuving in Kwok, 2016).

This truly balanced policy, in the eyes of Vietnamese policy-makers, better serves their country's interests than an alliance strategy. Nguyen Chi Vinh, the Deputy Minister of Defense and a senior defense diplomat, observes that entering a military bloc can only serve Vietnam's short-term interests. History, however, has shown that there will be no stability and peace should Vietnam decide to lean on one side. Vietnam, therefore, is keen on its foreign policy guidelines of independence, self-reliance, and multilateralization of ties "so as not to be affected by big powers' relations at the expense of our interests" (Nguyen in *Dantri*, 2015). Similarly, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh stated that Vietnam's strategic choice is twofold: not to go with one power against the other and simultaneously not to allow big powers to have dealings at the expense of Vietnam's interests in the South China Sea. Towards that end, it is necessary for Vietnam to be "firm in principles, flexible in strategies and tactics". The "principles" refer to the preservation of Vietnam's independence, sovereignty, and national interests, whilst "flexible strategies and tactics" are employed to deal with the "various changes" of the evolving regional geopolitics. When being questioned on how Vietnam could protect its independence and sovereignty in the South China Sea without relying on an alliance with a big power, Minh replied: "In so doing, it is necessary to forge strategic trusts with big powers. On the basis of developing economic, trade, and investment with big powers, they will have an interest in protecting their own interests in Vietnam" (Hoang, 2015).

This nuanced and shrewd foreign policy has been hailed by Western-based Vietnam specialists. Professor Carl Thayer, for example, shares in an interview with journalists from Vietnam's Ministry of Defense that the "three nos" tenet is "perfect". In his view:

> in order to preserve its independence, Vietnam at times needs to have adaptation at some aspect or other. Nonetheless, the overarching guideline is not to fall into any country's orbit so as not to be dependent, and not to ally with any country so as not to create enemies. (Bao and Lam, 2015)

Speaking at an international conference in Vietnam in June 2015, Murray Heibert, Deputy Director of the Chair for Southeast Asia Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, also warned that Hanoi should not naively rely on US commitment to defend Vietnam's interests given the lack of an alliance treaty with the US. Again, history has taught Vietnam a bitter lesson. In 1974, the South Vietnamese government had a formal alliance with the US but the Seventh Fleet did nothing when China took over the Western part of the Paracels from South Vietnamese troops. Similarly, there is no hope that the US would intervene if there were a clash between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea (Heibert in Hong, 2015). Only by adopting an independent and self-reliant foreign policy can Vietnam avoid becoming a victim of great power politics once again.

Given this logic, Hanoi has rejected repeated requests by external powers to gain military access to its key strategic outpost, the Cam Ranh Bay. Instead, it has resolved to turn Cam Ranh into a logistic and service provider for ships (including military ships) passing through the South China Sea. The inauguration of the Cam Ranh International Port on 8 March 2016 was the first step towards that end. Thus far, Cam Ranh Port has received visits from Singaporean naval ship *RSS Endurance* (on March 17, 2016), two Japanese destroyers (on 12 April 2016), and French amphibious assault ship *Tonnerre* (in early May 2016). Within October 2016, Hanoi also allowed two portcalls to Cam Ranh by American and Chinese warships. From a geopolitical standpoint, Vietnam has a strategic location connecting maritime and continental Asia and, hence, it can serve as an interchange between the two subregions. In particular, Vietnam's contribution in maintaining the stability and effectiveness of the strategic trade route passing through the South China Sea may be its biggest competitive advantage (Le, 2016). This also has significant strategic implications for Vietnam's future development. If exploiting that competitive advantage to the fullest, Vietnam can resolve the curse of the "tyranny of geography" and "power asymmetry" in its relations with China. By turning Cam Ranh into an international maritime interchange, Hanoi does not break its long-standing "three nos" policy; yet it can still involve external powers in preserving peace and stability in the South China Sea for common interests, thus further "internalizing" the disputes and deterring China from using force. Beijing, in its turn, also acknowledges Vietnam's important role in trade between China and ASEAN countries, and is courting Vietnam with its infrastructure diplomacy (Abe and Tomiyama, 2015).

More importantly, Vietnam should strive to strengthen its internal strength. As Le Xuan Sang, Deputy Director of Vietnam's Institute of Economics, argues, "escaping China's orbit" is not a move to escape China towards another country but an endeavour to "escape the self". This means "to escape the inherent weaknesses of Vietnam's economy in order to lessen its dependence on China and to proactively adopt appropriate measures to deal with China's rise" (Vu, 2016). In this light, Vietnam's conclusion of a series of new multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements, most importantly the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), is expected to give new impetus for the rebalancing of Vietnam's economy, particularly facilitating the development of home-grown industry so as to reduce its reliance on Chinese imports. Integrating in width and depth into the global manufacturing network, however, has set Vietnam the difficult task of adopting painful institutional and structural reforms at home. It is at this critical juncture that Vietnam should make a choice.

Conclusion

Unlike other bilateral relationships, one can hardly understand the dynamics of contemporary Vietnam-China relations without going back to their thousand-year long history of uneasy

co-existence. As this article has pointed out, understanding the logic of Vietnam's China policy requires the appreciation of two things—the Vietnamese dual strategic thinking vis-a-vis China and the accumulation of historical lessons it has learnt in the dealings with China and other powers in the past. Given Vietnam's complex history, its leaders have chosen to pursue an independent and self-reliant foreign policy to avoid being caught between China and other powers once again. If anything, the experience of living next to China for 2000 years has taught Vietnam that nurturing Sinophobia and engaging in military alliances to balance China will not serve its long-term interests. Therefore, while being skeptical of China's escalating assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes for historical reasons, Vietnam has not adopted a hard balancing policy to counter China's escalating assertiveness. Instead, Hanoi has tried to engage with China and simultaneously employed various internal and external "soft balancing" measures to hedge its bets against China's possible territorial encroachment. Internally, Vietnam has tried to beef up its military to keep a minimum deterrence to China. Externally, it has been cautiously but steadily forging economic and strategic ties with various strategic partners with the hope that they will take actions when their common interests with Vietnam are endangered.

Such a nuanced and balanced strategy has been effective thus far; hence, there are grounds to believe that Vietnam's current China policy will be continued into the future, despite the leadership change following the recently concluded Twelfth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). Post-Cold War Vietnam lacks a strong leader who can dictate Vietnam's diplomacy on their own. Instead, Vietnam's foreign policy is made on a collective basis with the Politburo as its core. The impact of an individual leader and leadership change on Vietnam's foreign policy-making, therefore, should not be exaggerated. Furthermore, the fact that Nguyen Phu Trong remains in power as General Secretary, and the election of leading diplomat Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh to the Politburo, will ensure that the current direction of Vietnam's diplomacy and China policy will see a continuation and adaptation rather than dramatic change. In fact, as Carl Thayer (2015: 19) has observed:

> of all the goals and objectives set by the VCP's Eleventh National Congress in 2011, the conduct of Vietnam's foreign policy is arguably the most successful. Vietnam has utilized foreign policy to maintain its independence and sovereignty, and promote regional security.

While Vietnam's moderate diplomacy has successfully navigated difficult water, the 2014 rig debacle has made the Vietnamese think about the future development of their country in the era of China's geopolitical rise and heightened strategic competition among big powers. In a speech at the Asia Society in New York on September 24, 2014, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh stated that in order to secure a favorable place in the evolving world order, Vietnam needs to deepen economic reforms, to further its open and self-reliant foreign policy, to act as a responsible player in world affairs, and to promote an ASEAN-led regional order (Pham, 2014). It is on these crucial points that Vietnam should reposition itself better in order to catch up with new developments in an unceasingly changing world.

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Notes

1. Alexander Vuving argues that the Vietnamese government "is caught primarily between regime conservatives, modernizers, rent-seekers, and China. Each of these players is a bloc of diverse actors that share an ultimate strategic goal or inclination" (Vuving, 2010: 367).
2. For an excellent review of Sino-Vietnamese relations during this period, see Khoo (2011); Roberts (2006).
3. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in April 2014 showed that 84% of Vietnamese had a negative view of China's assertiveness in territorial disputes and feared that it could lead to war.
4. For details on recent developments towards 'new politics' in contemporary Vietnam, see London (2014).
5. The CSSD was established in 2014 and is governed by a number of retired senior diplomats such as Ambassador Nguyen Ngoc Truong, Pham Van Que, Ho Sy Tue, and Nguyen Dinh Luan. The online platform Nghiencuuquocte.net was established by an Australian graduate, Le Hong Hiep, in 2014 and attracts scholarly contributions from young Vietnamese intellectuals (many of whom are studying overseas) debating whether or not Vietnam should abandon its "three-nos" defense tenet on building alliance with a foreign power.
6. Trong informed Vietnamese media that President Obama had been inviting him to visit the US since July 2012. The Vietnamese leaders, however, had pondered cautiously as to whether or not he would go. Trong's visits to the US and his prior visit to China were all strategic calculations in accordance with Vietnam's balanced foreign policy (*Vietnamnet*, 2015b).

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