

VIETNAM'S SELF IMAGE AND STRATEGIC CULTURE

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Geography and history are two most important determinants of Vietnam's self-image and strategic culture. Geography is unchanged. History evolves and with it the significance of geography.

VIETNAM'S SELF IMAGE

Geographical roots of Vietnam's self-image

Vietnam is a country located next to China, a huge country in the north, and surrounded by weaker neighbors to the West and South. As a result, throughout history, Vietnam constantly had to fight against Chinese expansionism but, when opportunities arose, moved to absorb smaller neighbors, such as the Champa Kingdom and part of the Khmer Kingdom and, until recently, exercised considerable influence over Laos and Cambodia.

Being located next to China is, to Vietnam, both a curse and a challenge. Vietnam was under Chinese rule for a thousand years, from 111 BC to 938 AD and, after independence, was victim of repeated Chinese invasions from the Song dynasty in 1076 to the Ming dynasty in 1406, and most recently in 1979. Only resilient and fierce Vietnamese nationalism could help Vietnam survive efforts of Sinicization and maintain its distinct identity and sovereignty.

This fierce nationalism against a much bigger neighbor and the determination to be considered as separated from and equally sovereign to China were encapsulated in the following poem dictated to be read aloud before and during battles to boost troop morale when Vietnam under General Lý Thường Kiệt fought against the first invasion of the Song dynasty in 1076. It is considered "Vietnam's first declaration of independence."

Nam quốc sơn hà Nam Đế cư

Vietnam's rivers and mountains belong to the Vietnamese emperor.

Tiết nhiên định phân tại thiên thư

That is clearly prescribed in Heaven's book

Như hà nghịch lỗ lai xâm phạm

How dare these bandits invade our land?

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Nhữ đấng hành khan thủ bại hư
They will be resolutely defeated. ¹

Again, four centuries later, after a ten-year long rebellion to overthrow Chinese domination under the Ming, in 1428, advisor Nguyễn Trãi penned for Emperor Lê Lợi the *Bình Ngô Đại Cáo* (Great Proclamation Upon the Pacification of the Ming) which solemnly asserted:

Như nước Đại Việt ta từ trước
Now think of Đại Việt land of ours

Vốn xưng nền văn hiến đã lâu
Truly is a cultured nation

Núi sông bờ cõi đã chia
As mountain and river make for various lands

Phong tục Bắc Nam cũng khác
So, our Southern way must differ from the North

Từ Triệu, Đinh, Lý, Trần bao đời xây nền độc lập
It was the Triệu, the Đinh, the Lý and Trần who in succession built up our independence

Cùng Hán, Đường, Tống, Nguyên mỗi bên hùng cứ một phương
Even as the Han, the T'ang, and Sung and Yuan each was sovereign in its own domain

Tuy mạnh yếu có lúc khác nhau
Sometimes strong, sometimes weak

Song hào kiệt thời nào cũng có.
Yet never lacking heroes. ²

Note that the proclamation used for the first time the word Đại Việt (Greater Vietnam) to refer to a powerful country with its identity and tradition of fighting against Chinese dynasties for the purpose of independence and equal position as China. *Bình Ngô Đại Cáo* is considered the second declaration of independence of Vietnam after the poem *Nam quốc sơn hà* written in the early Lý Dynasty. The proclamation is highly appreciated not only for its value of propaganda and history but also for its fine literary quality which is praised as the "incomparably powerful writing document" (*Thiên cổ hùng văn*) in the history of Vietnam. Today, it is taught in both secondary school (grades 6–9) and high school (grades 10–12) in Vietnam. ³

More than three hundred years later, mobilizing his troops before the battle of Ngọc Hoi against Chinese invaders in January 1789, Emperor Quang Trung inspired his soldiers with an epic address stressing the determination to protect Vietnam's separate identity.

Fight to keep our hair long!

Fight to keep our teeth black!
Fight so that our enemies will not have a single wheel to come home!
Fight so that our enemies will not have a single armor to come home!
Fight so that history knows this heroic Southern country is its own master!⁴

This proud tradition of a resilient and indomitable people fighting against foreign invaders, particularly against Chinese hegemony, was repeated in modern time after Vietnam had successfully repelled the 1979 Chinese invasion. The preamble of the 1980 Constitution of Vietnam began, "Throughout four thousand years of history, the diligent Vietnamese people has courageously fought to build and protect the country. This long and indefatigable struggle for independence and liberty has molded a tradition of resiliency and indomitability of our people."⁵

While being situated next to the northern colossus exposes Vietnam to the constant threat of Chinese encroachment, its elongated S-shaped land hugging the Pacific Ocean opens Vietnam to the richness of the sea and to the world beyond the Chinese wall. This country is not only on a par with China, but special compared to other countries. A song written by composer Hùng Lĩnh in 1944 in the waning years of French colonization and was made the anti-colonial Đại Việt (Greater Vietnam) party's anthem hailed:

Việt Nam minh châu trời đông
Vietnam the gem of the Orient

Việt Nam nước thiêng tiên rồng
Vietnam the sacred land of the Fairy Queen and the Dragon Lord ⁶

Nón song như gấm hoa uy linh một phương
This sublimely beautiful land standing majestically in one corner of the earth

Xây vinh quang sáng trưng bên Thái Bình Dương
Is the shining and glorious country hugging the Pacific Ocean.⁷

During the Cold War, the location of Vietnam next to China was considered by western strategists as a key country in the containment policy against communist expansion. Eisenhower's domino theory regarded Vietnam the most important country whose collapse would lead to the fall of all other countries in Southeast Asia. Kennedy declared in 1956 that "Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike." These pronouncements and this kind of thinking led many people in South Vietnam believe in the importance of Vietnam to U.S. strategy and therefore were unprepared for U.S. eventual abandonment.⁸

After reunification in 1976, Vietnam emerged as a dominant country in Southeast Asia. When it invaded Cambodia, China labeled Vietnam the “Cuba of the East” and joined forces with the United States to stop Soviet expansion in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam, on the other hand, accused China of an unrelenting attempt to conquer Vietnam as a step to extend its control over all of Southeast Asia. A White Paper titled “Border Issues between Vietnam and China” published in 1979 cited evidence to show that China had step-by-step encroached upon Vietnamese borders and took land from Vietnam “since 1949 to the present.” An appeal to “all fellow-countrymen and soldiers” to rally to fight Chinese aggression by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) on March 4, 1979 accused “the reactionary rulers in Beijing” of “carrying out a wicked scheme to take over our country, [and] step-by-step pursuing Greater Han expansionism and big power hegemony in the Indochinese peninsula and Southeast Asian region.”⁹

Chu Đình Xương, the first director of Public Security of Vietnam after the Viet Minh’s August Revolution, in a letter addressed to the Central Committee of the CPV in February 1983 explaining “How Mao’s deceitful hands have reached into Vietnam?” went further and warned that “Mao’s goal and ambition are to be the master of China first, followed by Southeast Asia and eventually the entire world. Today, Deng Xiaoping continued to pursue that goal.”¹⁰

More recently, Dr. Đinh Công Tuấn, head of the Institute of European Studies, in an article titled “Vietnam in Current Chinese Strategy” on June 16, 2020, explained clearly why Vietnam was crucial to China’s regional strategy:

Vietnam, a country with abundant natural resources, the third largest young population in Southeast Asia, the most battle-hardened army in Asia, occupying a critical strategic location in the region, is considered by China as an obstacle on the road of China’s southern expansion both on land and at sea; therefore, it has always regarded Vietnam as a rival in the competition with and containing Chinese influence.¹¹

To Vietnamese strategists today, not only is Vietnam important to China’s strategy, but it is also crucial to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Dr. Phạm Cao Cường, Deputy Director of the Institute of American Studies at Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences pointed out:

Obviously, Vietnam plays a significant role in this [Indo-Pacific] strategy. Because Vietnam occupied a special strategic location in the center of the Indo-Pacific region. Vietnam also lies on the world’s busiest sea lane and the transfer route of U.S. forces from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.¹²

In the current period of U.S.-China competition and confrontation, Vietnamese strategists believe their country plays an important strategic role for both the U.S. and China, particularly U.S. efforts to contain China.

In a talk to leading cadres of the Ministry of Public Security on the “Situation in the South China Sea -Strategies of the U.S. and China in Asia-Pacific,” Dr. Trần Việt Thái, Deputy Director General of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, declared Vietnam was the “center of all strategic locations” (*Tiêu điểm của tiêu điểm*) in the competition between the United States and China, the “target of courtship by big nations,” and one of the most, if not the “most important factor in the strategic chess game of major powers.”¹³

Earlier, Public Security Major general, Dr. Đỗ Lê Chi, in an interview with *VietTimes* on September 16, 2020, explained Vietnam’s image of its own importance at great length. He said,

In the context of China’s rise challenging the leading position of the United States, Southeast Asia becomes a top strategic location in the competition of big powers. As a country with a large territory and population in Southeast Asia, and a long cultural and historical tradition, Vietnam is the focus of attention in big powers foreign policy.

While China pays special attention to Vietnam due to its compatibility in terms of political system and cultural tradition with Vietnam, China wants to, through Vietnam, extend its influence over other ASEAN countries; the United States, Japan, and India also want to attract Vietnam and exploit the advantage of Vietnam geopolitical position to contain Chinese ambitions in the region.

This new situation and the intense competition for power and influence between the big powers have made Vietnam’s geopolitical position increasingly important. In addition, as a country with a long record of dealing successfully with big power encroachments, particular China and the United States, Vietnam commands the respect of, and makes an impression on other Southeast Asian nations in particular and of middle and small nations in the Asia-Pacific in general.”¹⁴

The 2019 Vietnam National Defense White Paper officially asserts the importance of Vietnam both on land and at sea, both strategic and economic in these terms: “Vietnam is situated in an important geo-strategic location in the region and the world, serving as a bridge between Asia and Southeast Asia. Vietnam straddles vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) connecting the Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean and is a gateway to trade for regional and global economies.”

This image of self-importance to major powers was validated most recently by Japan’s Prime minister Yoshihide Suga when, on October 19, he chose Vietnam as the first foreign country to visit where he signed with his counterpart agreements on strengthening economic and security cooperation. Ten days later, on October 29, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made an “unplanned” stop in Vietnam to “celebrate the 25th anniversary of Vietnam-U.S. diplomatic relations” after completing his anti-China tour of four Indo-Pacific countries (India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Indonesia). The next day, Russian media reported a telephone conversation

between Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu with his Vietnamese counterpart Ngo Xuan Lich in which Shoigu expressed Russia's desire to deepen defense cooperation with Vietnam.

However, while a country can take advantage of its strategic location to leverage its power and influence if that country's government has a firm control of its sovereignty, strategic location may also be a curse. During the cold war, great powers competition has turned many third world countries into "shattered zones" where peace and development were impossible. Vietnamese are well aware of the proverb "When buffaloes fight, the flies get trampled" (*Trâu bò húc nhau ruồi muỗi chết*) which explains why Vietnam is extremely wary of being trapped in the struggle for power between the United States and China.

Historical Roots of Vietnam's Self Image

Vietnam's location exerts influence on Vietnamese history which, in turn, helps shape Vietnam's image and strategic culture, particularly its view of the China challenge. In good times when bilateral relations are warm and friendly, leaders stress the geographic bonds of two countries "sharing mountains and rivers" (*núi liền núi, sông liền sông*). In bad times, Vietnam regards China as a neighboring hegemonistic and expansionist power, the "hereditary and long-term enemy" of Vietnam.¹⁵

Throughout history, Vietnam-China relations are a relationship of love and hate – more hate than love. Vietnam learns from and is heavily influenced by Chinese culture, but it fiercely resists attempts of Sinicization and insists on establishing its own separate identity. For many years, Vietnam adopted Chinese as its written language, but at the same time tried to create its own –the demotic script (*chữ nôm*) -- by adding a high number of new characters to the Chinese characters (Han characters) to make it fit the Vietnamese language. This writing system was first used for the general populace but was raised to official status under the Hồ dynasty (1400-1407) and the Tây Sơn (1788-1792).

The golden age of Vietnam-China relations started in the mid-forties with the establishment of the Democratic Socialist Vietnam in 1945 and the People's Republic of China in 1949 when two countries shared the same ideology and the commitment to carry out the task of making world revolution. The second period of warm relations took place after 1990 when they faced the same threat of "peaceful evolution" believed to be instigated by imperialists seeking to overthrow the remaining communist regimes. The Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and the oil rig incident in 2014 practically ended this trusting friendship.¹⁶ In fact, suspicion of Chinese intention is deeply embedded in Vietnamese consciousness.

During the negotiation to normalize relations with China, while some top Vietnamese leaders wanted to push for a Sino-Vietnamese socialist alliance against Western encroachment, in Politburo meeting on May 30, 1990, adviser to the Central Committee and former Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng counseled extreme caution in dealing with China. He said, "For thousands of years, China has always been China, we should not trust them blindly."¹⁷ Later, in a Politburo meeting on June 19 to assess the progress in negotiations with China, Đồng

commented, “The Chinese always think in term of their Greater Han concept, and the result is they coerce us into accepting their position.”¹⁸

Even as they prepared to seek normalization of relations with China, Vietnamese leaders were still ambivalent about Chinese design. Politburo resolution number 13 on May 20, 1988 cautioned:

Normalization of relations with China is a difficult and complicated process and needs time to work out. After the relations between the two countries return to where they were in the fifties and sixties ... we must prevent and overcome the distorted view seeing China only as a *bá* (hegemonistic) power, but not a socialist country; or seeing China as only a socialist country, but not as an expansionist *bá* power.

Outside the official circle, views of China and Chinese are more negative. An expert in Hanoi complained that “Chinese top leaders talk about thinking of the big picture (*đại cục*), but lower-level Chinese officials behave like “small-minded men” (*tiểu nhân*)¹⁹

Another scholar offered a more detailed explanation. He said: 1) Chinese foreign policies are practical and “Machiavellian” (*gian hùng*). China has a great civilization, but the strategy of the “great renaissance of the Chinese nation” is based on a “depraved character.” As a result, Chinese “soft power” has failed in Africa, Myanmar, and Vietnam; and 2) The so-called “big picture” based on “sixteen golden words” [friendly neighbor, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future orientation] is the opium for Vietnam.²⁰

Even Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh, an instructor at the Ministry of Defense’s Institute of Politics, who was infamous for his suggestion that Vietnam must be grateful to China for her assistance in hard times, had this to say about China’s perfidy: “Chinese leaders repeatedly said China and Vietnam share mountains and rivers, similar ideology, a common culture, and interrelated destinies. In practice, while they shake our hands, they are kicking us with their feet.”²¹

Two historical experiences left an indelible mark on Vietnamese strategic culture: Chinese hegemonism (the Greater Han concept), and Chinese betrayal exposing Vietnam as a victim of great power politics. At the Geneva conference in 1954, North Vietnam was forced by China and the Soviet Union to accept less territory than its military victory warranted. In 1973, South Vietnam was forced to accept the Paris Peace Accords negotiated between U.S National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese chief negotiator Lê Đức Thọ. In 1974, China took over the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam after a naval battle, but the United States refused to come to the rescue of its ally. In 1988, China took the Johnson South Reef from Vietnam but the Soviet navy at Cam Ranh Bay did not make a move.

More recently, on August 21, 2011, thirty-six Overseas Vietnamese intellectuals sent an “Open Letter to Vietnamese Leaders on Foreign Threat and National Power” calling upon them to carry

out policies that could mobilize all Vietnamese at home and abroad in an effort to resist Chinese aggression. They reminded them that:

... A consistent strategy of China in the last almost 60 years is to employ appropriate tactics depending on the time and circumstances [to harm Vietnam]: betraying Vietnam at the Geneva conference in 1954, preventing Vietnam from negotiating with the United States in 1968, using force to take over all of the Paracel Islands in 1974, invading Vietnam in 1979, using force to occupy part of the Spratly Islands in 1988; and after normalization of relations between the two countries in 1991, step-by-step subverting Vietnam's economy, depleting its resources, implementing a scheme to assimilate Vietnam, violating Vietnamese territory, and cruelly treating Vietnamese fishermen in the East Sea.²²

On the positive side, the history of successfully defeating three major world powers --France, the United States, and China—gave Vietnam the pride and belief in its capability to manage foreign encroachment, protect its independence, and enhance its role in the region and among countries of the Third World.

Cultural and Ideological Roots of Vietnam's Self Image

Vietnamese do not see themselves as a backward country, but an old civilization with “four thousand years of history” on a par with China.²³ This self-image impacts the way Vietnamese react to Western pressure in the past and China in the present. First, a civilized kingdom of Vietnam with an established political order found it hard to accept France's *mission civilisatrice*. Unlike feudal Japan, in the 19th century Vietnamese emperors rejected many suggestions to modernize the country and adopt Western model of development. Second, Vietnamese think they understand and can handle China better than anyone else. In the summer of 2014, during my research trip to Vietnam, I brought a Chinese American colleague to the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences to meet with Dr. Nguyễn Tiến Sâm, former director of its Institute of Chinese studies. Before we began our conversation, Dr. Sâm greeted us with this statement: “We Vietnamese have dealt with China for a thousand years, we know them more than anybody else.”

Vietnam is also very proud of being the first socialist country in Southeast Asia and associates itself closely with the communist movement. It values the assistance of China and the Soviet Union in its struggle against the French during the First Indochina War, and against the Americans and its South Vietnamese ally during the Second Indochina War.

Hồ Chí Minh was quoted as saying that Vietnam and China shared the “same culture and the same race;” that both were “exploited” [by colonialism] and shared “a common noble goal which is to struggle for national independence and socialism.”²⁴

After the Second Indochina War, Vietnam allowed the Soviet Union to use the Cam Ranh Bay as a naval base for the Soviet Pacific Fleet, and with Soviet support, moved against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in 1978.

In 1990, facing with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the gradual disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the threat of “The End of History,” Vietnam wanted to form a socialist alliance with China to fight against Western plots of “peaceful evolution.” Now that the Soviet Union, the bastion of communism, no longer existed, China became the largest surviving communist country, the only source of meaningful support for the communist regime in Vietnam. Vietnam counted on China as the leader of the movement to protect and renovate socialism.

Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh told the Chinese ambassador in Hanoi on June 5, 1990 that he was eager to visit China to discuss with Chinese leaders the issue of “protecting socialism” because “the imperialists are trying to eliminate socialism ... they are carrying out the plot of “peaceful evolution;” and that while the Soviet Union was the bastion of socialism, it was burdened with many problems, and “we want to meet true communists to discuss how to protect communism”²⁵ An ardent supporter of Linh’s position was Defense Minister Lê Đức Anh who argued during a politburo meeting on September 9, 1990 that “The United States and the West want to seize this opportunity to eliminate communism. They are eradicating it in Eastern Europe. They say they will eradicate communism all over the world. Clearly, they are our direct and dangerous enemies. We must seek allies. China is our ally”²⁶

To cultivate friendship with China, in 1992, Vietnam promulgated a new constitution, dropping criticism of China as an expansionist *bá* power from its introduction, and stipulated in article 4: “The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of Vietnam’s working class, the loyal representative of the interests of the workers, working people and the entire Vietnamese people, adhered to Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought, is the force leading the State and society.” This formulation is a clear imitation of the Chinese term, “Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought.”

Since 1989 Vietnamese leaders have mostly counted on China as a protector of communism and a leader of reform to save remaining communist regimes against Western plots of “peaceful evolution.” The special relationship between the two countries was conducted at several levels. State-to-state relations were reinforced by exchanges between parties, regions, provinces, and mass organizations. Leaders of both countries have agreed to conducted bilateral relations based on “sixteen golden words,” namely friendly neighbors, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future-oriented; and “four goods,” namely, good neighbors, good friends, good comrades, good partners.

Vietnamese leaders believed that cooperation with China will “*aid in maintaining national security and defending and building socialism in both countries.*”²⁷ Party intellectuals argued that

the “compatibility of cultural tradition and political regime” between Vietnam and China not only served as a solid foundation for their cooperation but also, according to Nguyễn Huy Quý, editor of *Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Trung Quốc* (Journal of Chinese Studies),

In the context of international politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the solidarity and political cooperation between Vietnam and China is not only *very important to the political conditions of both countries*, but also a *practical contribution to the socialist movement in the world* and to the common struggle of progressive humanity.”²⁸

While socialist identity draws Vietnam closer to China in the post-Cold War world, Chinese hegemonism separate them apart. The trusting relationship between two communist neighbors began to strain when China, in 2009, drew a nine-dashed line claiming 80 percent of the South China Sea and began to enforce its claims encroaching on Vietnam’s territorial integrity; and almost reached a breaking point in May 2014 when the former placed its huge HD 981 oil rig for exploration work in the sea area within Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.

The old disagreement among Vietnamese top leaders on how to deal with China in 1989-1990 surfaced again and split them between “liberationists” who are fed up with China’s constant pressure and want to find way to escape from its orbit, and “accommodationists” who hope to appeal to socialist solidarity and traditional friendship to cajole China into finding a compromise solution for the conflict.²⁹

Frustration with Chinese aggressive behavior and disappointment with the benefits of socialist brotherhood prompted Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng to complain, in an interview with the Associate Press and Reuters, in Manila on May 22, 2014, that “What China said was far different from what it did;” and vowed that Vietnam will not exchange its national sovereignty and territorial integrity for “any kind of illusionary peace based on friendship and dependence.”³⁰ Dũng’s statement was a public rebuttal to those who still harbored the illusion of China’s as a benevolent big neighbor and supporter of Vietnamese socialism.

Reactions against the oil rig crisis by Vietnamese intellectuals and other party members are blunter and more passionate. An unprecedented public forum on the topic of “Thoát Trung” (escaping from China’s orbit) was held in Hanoi in June 2014. The following month, 61 party members signed an open letter addressed to the party and its Central Committee in particular warning of the danger of Vietnam becoming a “new type of China’s vassal,” and calling for drastic reforms to reduce the country’s dependence on China.³¹ Many party theoreticians whose mission is to shape the narrative of party policy have begun to question the wisdom of relying on socialist brotherhood and ideological affinity to protect Vietnam’s sovereignty and maintain communist rule. Chinese behavior has forced Vietnam to revise its view of China. For many Vietnamese, the view of China as a protector of communism and a pillar against Western plots of peaceful evolution has lost its credibility. From being seen as a benevolent big socialist brother, and a

reliable friend, China has become a threat to Vietnam's territorial integrity and to the legitimacy of Vietnamese communist regime.

Vietnam's self-image as a socialist country has to compete with Vietnam's self-image as an independent country facing with the China challenge.

VIETNAM'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

The Foundations of Vietnam's Strategic Culture

Strategic culture, according to Ashley Tellis, is about "ideas and the impact that ideas have on the choices of countries with respect to competitive international politics."³² If strategic culture is understood simply as the habit of thinking and acting in the politics among nations, Vietnam's strategic culture is shaped by three elements: the influence of Chinese strategy and tactics applied during the inter-state struggle for power in ancient China; indigenous proverbs and age-old wisdoms passed down from generation to generation; and contemporary experience and lessons learned from engaging in international politics.

Many Vietnamese are familiar with Chinese strategic thought and concepts by reading translations of Chinese popular books like *Tam Quốc Chí* (The Three Kingdoms) and *Đông Chu Liệt Quốc* (Romance of the Eastern Zhou). The strategies, tactics, plots, schemes, and tricks used by princes and strategists in their struggle for power during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period in China, from 770 BC to 221 BC can be found in more recent work, such as "The Great Classics of Chinese Mystical Culture," by Zhao Guo Hua and Liu Jian Guo translated into Vietnamese under the title *Quyền Mưu Thần Bí*.³³ The book makes a distinction between *wang dao* 王道 (kingly way or rule by morality) and *ba dao* 霸道 (hegemonic way or rule by force). It highlights the practice of alliance formation and balance of power pitting the *lianheng* 橫 (forming horizontal alliances) against the *hezong* 合纵 (forming vertical alliances), and the strategy of *yuanjiao jingong* 遠交近攻 (making alliance with distant states, while attacking the ones that are nearby), etc ... These familiar tactics and practices are also mentioned in a more recent discussion by Yongjin Zhang.³⁴

Notably, on December 19, 2012, in a talk on the East Sea (South China Sea) to an audience of deans and professors drawn from Hanoi's many universities, Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh, an instructor at the Ministry of Defense's Institute of Politics suggested to his audience that if they wanted to understand Chinese behavior, they must study the practice of six "extra-ordinary" Chinese strategists, namely Jiang Zi Ya, Sun Zi, Cao, Sun Yatsen, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping. In addition to China's old practices, Colonel Thanh also explained current Chinese strategy, such

as hiding oneself, biding for time, peaceful rise, and applying the tactic of “shaking the tree to scare the monkey” to encroach on the East Sea.³⁵ Vietnamese leaders also learned from Mao’s negotiating tactic of fight-fight talk-talk when they dealt with the U.S. during the Paris peace negotiations, 1968-1973, and his writing on three-staged guerrilla warfare. In 1947, Trường Chinh, then secretary general of the Communist Party of Vietnam had penned *The Resistance Will Win* (1947), to provide set of directives for protracted conflict and guerrilla warfare.

Native proverbial wisdoms such as “*Nước xa không cứu được lửa gần*” (distant water cannot put out neighborhood fire) “*Bán bà con xa mua láng giềng gần*” (Trading faraway relatives for friends in the neighborhood) are used to explain why Vietnam views skeptically the possibility of forming an alliance with the U.S. to stop China encroachment in the South China Sea. Another example, “*Trâu bò húc nhau ruồi muỗi chết*,” (When buffaloes fight, the flies get trampled) can be used to explain why Vietnam looks apprehensively on the possibility of U.S.-China conflict in the region and its wish to avoid being entrapped in big power rivalry.

Contemporary experiences and lessons may include Võ Nguyên Giáp’s concept of staging set-piece battle to shorten the war (such as the Điện Biên Phủ battle at the end of the French Indochina War), the fear of being made a pawn in big-power politics (The Geneva Accords of 1954, The Paris Peace Agreement 1973), the danger of being drawn into a big-power conflict, and the need to cope with China’s “tree-war concept” on the South China Sea, namely opinion/propaganda warfare, psychological warfare, and lawfare.

Collective leadership, the need to form consensus among contending factions within the highest leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) on major strategic decisions is the *modus operandi* of Vietnam’s strategic culture. Since Vietnam launched the *đổi mới* (renovation) process to move toward a market economy under socialist orientation by opening up to the West for aid and investment to save the country from economic collapse and extricate itself from diplomatic isolation, CPV leadership, particularly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, can be divided, in the most simplistic model, into reformers who want to speed up the process of reform and conservatives who resist change; between the ideologues who believe in socialism and close association with China and are wary of Western plots of peaceful evolution and the pragmatists who tend to make decision based on national interest and not on ideological affinity; and between state officials who have to operate in the real world and the party officials who operate in the ideological realm. As a result, all important decisions have been the result of a painstaking process of negotiation and compromise expressed in party’s resolutions.

A series of party resolutions laid out the major steps and key concepts of Vietnam’ strategy to deal with the changing world, from isolation to open up then integration to the global economy, from economic integration to cooperation “in other domains” then strategic partnership, from leaning to one side to multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations, from struggle against the United States to struggle and cooperation with it then comprehensive partnership.

Politburo No 13 in May 1988 laid the foundation for Vietnam's multi-directional foreign policy. Its objectives were to break out from economic and political isolation by a campaign to "gain the support of friendly countries and world public opinion at the same time to divide the enemies who plot to isolate us economically and politically, to proactively move our struggle from confrontation to struggle and cooperation."³⁶

To follow up, the Political Report approved by the Seventh National Congress of the CPV in 1991 asserted that Vietnam would "diversify and multilateralize economic relations with all countries and economic organizations."

The CPV Eighth National Congress, held in 1996, affirmed a foreign policy of openness, multilateralization, and diversification of relations in the spirit of "Vietnam wishes to be a friend, a trusty partner of all countries in the global community."³⁷

Justification for moving closer to the United States was approved by resolution of the CPV Central Committee's Eighth Plenum in mid-2003 in a document entitled *Chiến lược bảo vệ tổ quốc trong tình hình mới* (Strategy for Defending the Homeland in the New Situation). It made a distinction between *đối tác* (partner of cooperation) and *đối tượng* (object of struggle) and stressed that "In each object of struggle, there can be areas where we can cooperate, and in each partner of cooperation, there may be areas which conflict with our national interests."³⁸

Resolution of the 10th National Party Congress in April 2006 highlighted a policy of "proactive and active integration into the international economy while expanding international cooperation in other domains." It resolved to "consistently follow the foreign policy line of independence, sovereignty, peace, cooperation and development, the foreign policy of openness, multilateralization, and diversification of international relations. Vietnam is a friend and trusted partner of countries in the international community, actively participating in the process of international and regional cooperation."³⁹

VIETNAM'S STRATEGIC CULTURE IN ACTION

Two most important challenges to Vietnam's national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity are Chinese hegemonism and big power rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. The first challenge is an old and perennial problem. The second challenge is a new issue.

To deal with Chinese hegemonism, Vietnam resorts a combination of fierce resistance, accommodation, and balance of power. To avoid abandonment and entrapment in big power conflict, Vietnam resorts to balance of power, multidirectional foreign policy, regional and global engagement, and the three-no's military policy. A variety of tactics and measures are carried out to implement this general approach.

All-people war: Compared to China, Vietnam is like David versus Goliath. In order to resist Chinese encroachment, Vietnamese leaders must mobilize all sources of national power particularly the united determination of the people to fight and risk their life for the country. This usually takes the form of a political mobilization campaign. The *Diên Hồng* Assembly in 1284 is the first example of such campaign. Faced with the Mongol invasion, the Regent King Trần Thánh Tông called for a meeting of elders from all over the country to the Diên Hồng palace in the capital to seek their advice on the issue of war or peace, fighting or appeasement. Moved by such a royal gesture, the assembly gave him a resounding “yes” for war and an all-nation commitment to fight against the invaders. The necessity to fight a people’s war or an all-people war against overwhelming force was explained by General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the victor of Điện Biên Phủ: “The war of liberation of the Vietnamese people proves that, in the face of an enemy as powerful as he is cruel, victory is possible only by *uniting the whole people* within the bosom of a *firm and wide national united front* based on the worker-peasant alliance.”⁴⁰

Avoiding head-on confrontation: In battle, Vietnam never confronted China head-on. In the past, Vietnam’s defense strategy relied on the country’s elongated shape to organize defense in depth. At the beginning of war, Vietnamese troops always retreated to the south and waited for a suitable time to counter-attack.

Protracted struggle: For a small country such as Vietnam, it would be foolish to fight head-on with a much larger force. It must resort to patient defense, harassment, and protracted struggle to wear out the enemies. It took Lê Lợi ten year, from 1418 to 1428, to defeat the large and well-organized Ming (Chinese) army through guerrilla warfare to regain independence for Vietnam. Protracted struggle and guerrilla warfare were practiced by Hồ Chí Minh against the French in 1946-1954, and against the U.S. and its allies for most of the 1959-1975 period. Rules and guides for guerrilla warfare were elaborated by Trường Chinh, former General Secretary of the Indochinese Communist Party, in his book, *Kháng chiến nhất định thắng* (The Resistance Will Win), published in 1947 at the beginning of the French Indochina War. According to him the war of resistance must pass through three stages: strategic defense, mobile warfare, and general offensive. He emphasized, “the resistance of our people is an *all-people and total struggle requiring sustained efforts and sacrifices over a prolonged period time*.”⁴¹

During the 2014 crisis in the South China Sea when China sent the Haiyang Shiyou 981 (HYSY 981) oil rig protected by its Coast Guards, civilian fishing vessels, and navy ships to conduct exploration surveys within Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone, Vietnam reacted by using Vietnamese Coast Guards and Fisheries Resources Surveillance forces and civilian fishing vessels to harass and disrupt its operation. Together with a campaign to gain the support of world public opinion and ASEAN, Vietnam successfully forced China to withdraw the HYSY 981 one month earlier than schedule.⁴²

Ambush and surprised attack: Vietnam’s traditional strategy emphasized ambushes, timing, and surprise attack.

Ambush and surprised attack were the key to Vietnam’s victory at the Battle of Bạch Đằng River in 938 against the invading forces of the Southern Han state of China which put an end to centuries of Chinese imperial domination in Vietnam. To fight against a much larger Chinese

fleet, General Ngô Quyền had his men plant a barrier of large poles in the bed of the river. The tops of the poles reached just below the water level at high tide and were sharpened and tipped with iron. When Chinese fleet appeared off the mouth of the river, Quyen sent out small, shallow-draft boats at high tide to provoke a fight and then retreat upriver, drawing the Chinese fleet in pursuit. As the tide fell, the heavy Chinese warships were caught on the poles and lay trapped in the middle of the river, whereupon they were attacked by Ngô Quyền's forces from both sides of the river.

In 1288, General Trần Hưng Đạo used the same tactic successfully to defeat the second invasion of the Mongol army.

One of the greatest victories in Vietnamese military history, the battle of Ngọc Hồi-Đống Đa, depended on the element of surprise. In 1789 Tây Sơn troops led by Nguyễn Huệ mounted a massive and surprised attack on Chinese troops of the Qing dynasty while they were celebrating Tet (the Chinese New Year) in Vietnam's capital.⁴³

This pattern was repeated again during the 1968 Tet offensive when communist troops launched a coordinated attack on U.S. and allied forces throughout South Vietnam during the unofficial cease-fire period to allow for Tet celebration.

The strategic unity of Indochina: During both the first and second Indochina Wars, Vietnamese communist strategists as well as French and American generals had considered Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as a "strategic unit."⁴⁴ The so-called Vietnam Wars were fought in all three countries. For Vietnam, it is obvious for both historical and geographical reasons. Vietnam had ruled Cambodia and Laos briefly during the Ming Mang's rule (1820-1841). The Indochinese Communist Party was formed in 1930 under the leadership of Vietnam which provided support and guidance to communist forces in Laos and Cambodia.

In addition, Vietnamese proverb "*môi hở răng lạnh*" (translate as when the lips are open, the teeth feel cold, or when your neighbor suffers, you are bound to suffer) explains why Vietnam wants to have friendly regimes in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. In general, Vietnam maintains four levels of partnership with foreign countries, from comprehensive partnership, strategic partnership, to comprehensive strategic partnership and comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. But relations with Laos and Cambodia are raised to the level of "special strategic partnerships." Vietnam has everything to be concerned when these special strategic partnerships are threatened by Chinese increasing influence over Laos and Cambodia through its "one belt one road initiative" (BRI) pulling them away from supporting Vietnam and ASEAN in their collective stand against China over the South China Sea conflict.⁴⁵

On the other hand, this very concept of "lips and teeth" also explains the reasons behind Vietnam's attempt to form a socialist alliance with China in 1990 to protect Asian communism from the democratization wind sweeping through East and Central Europe and, unlike the wish of many Vietnamese both inside and outside of Vietnam to see the collapse of Communist China, this scenario is not in the interest of Vietnamese Communist leaders.

Fight-fight, talk-talk (Vừa đánh vừa đàm): Vietnamese learn this practice from Mao Zedong. Fighting does not stop when negotiation begins. To the Vietnamese, diplomacy is war by other means. It is regarded as a different kind of battle front --the diplomatic front. The late foreign

minister Nguyễn Duy Trinh, Vietnam's "chief architect of Vietnamese foreign policy during the war against the United States" was hailed for having successfully "combine the diplomatic front together with the political and military fronts to form an integrated national strength which contributing the great victory of 1975."⁴⁶

Struggle and cooperation: These are the key concept of Vietnam's strategy to deal with the United States and China. In 2003, the VCP Central Committee's Eighth Plenum adopted a resolution which directed Vietnam to "cooperate" with adversaries for mutual benefit when interests converge" and to "struggle" with partners when they challenge Vietnam's national interests.

No gloating after victory: One of the important tasks of Vietnam's diplomacy is to manage China's sensitivity and pride. China is too big, and Vietnam cannot afford to be in a constant state of war with China. To avoid humiliating China and provoking its anger, immediately after each victorious war, Vietnamese emperors always sent a delegation bearing gifts to China to seek peace, pledge allegiance, and pretend to accept the status of a vassal in a relationship of suzerainty.

Tactical accommodation: Being a small country facing pressure from a much larger country, Vietnam prefers diplomacy and accommodation to the inevitable than the use of force. There is a saying in Vietnam that "*Một sự nhịn là chín sự lành* (A little concession spares you a lot of headaches) and *Tránh voi chẳng xấu mặt nào* (There is no shame in avoiding a charging elephant). The way Vietnam handles the South China Sea conflict with China is an illustration of this pattern of behavior "fight if one may, concede if one must" with regards to issues that are less critical than independence sovereignty.

In 2014 Vietnam resolutely resisted the stationing of China's Haiyang Shyiu 891 oil rig to conduct surveys in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone though a campaign of harassment and disruption. But, to avoid war, Vietnam sometimes has found it necessary to back down from Chinese intimidation and pressure. Under Chinese political pressure and reported threats of force, Vietnam twice terminated oil exploration operations in the Vanguard Bank area by Repsol of Spain, the first in mid-2017 and the second in March 2018. Again, Vietnam suspended exploration activities in Bloc 06-01 by Russia's Rosneft in July 2019, then by the Noble Clyde Boudreaux of Britain in the same bloc in July 2020.

Balancing: Vietnamese strategists were familiar with the practice of alliance formation in the interstate struggle during China's Warring States period (475-221 B.C.), but the option was not open to Vietnam in ancient time when in Asia was not connected to other parts of the world and China stood as the "center of the world" surrounded by "barbarians."

The division of the world into two camps during the Cold War gave Vietnam an opportunity to seek outside help to protect itself. Geographical proximity and ideological affinity dictated that Vietnam sided with China and the Soviet bloc to get support for its wars against France and then the United States. This policy is called "leaning to one side." When the Sino-Soviet split took place in the early 1960's Vietnamese leaders tried to walk a tight rope between the two communist giants in order to get assistance from both. Balancing of power as a defense strategy was new to Vietnam in the post-Cold War world when China rose to become the sole

rival of the United States and began to flex its muscle in the Asia-Pacific region, threatening Vietnam's sovereignty, and territorial integrity, particularly in the South China Sea. The China threat forced Vietnam to move closer to the United States in its balancing act. But many factors steeped in Vietnam's self-image, ideological inclination, and experience with major powers make its balancing of power act a more subtle approach.⁴⁷

The search for a counterbalance without antagonizing China requires that Vietnamese leaders look deep into history to find the appropriate tools to deal with China.

Geographic location and the power asymmetry between China and Vietnam require that the latter must make the necessary accommodation to China and at the same time seek outside support to minimize the need for concession. Self-image as a major power in Southeast Asia and political orientation (non-democratic) make it more comfortable for Vietnam to form a coalition with small countries in the region. The proverbial wisdom "*bán anh em xa mua láng giềng gần*" (trading faraway relatives for nearby neighbors) points Vietnam to the direction of rallying support of, and forming coalition, with countries in the region. Its self-image as a "shining gem in the East," with Saigon in colonial era as the "Paris of the Orient," and its historical role as leader of Indochina under the Indochinese Communist Party in the 1930's suggests that Vietnam would want to play a significant regional role. Therefore, to gain support against Chinese pressures, Vietnam seeks to integrate with countries in Southeast Asia, and promote the concept of ASEAN unity and centrality. Vietnam's role as ASEAN chair has reaped regional and international praise and helped it to be elected twice to be non-permanent member of the United Nation Security Council and recently as a vice-president of the 77th United Nations General Assembly.

Beyond ASEAN, Vietnam also tried to improve relations and form strategic partnerships with great powers in the region and in the world, such as Japan, India, Australia, the European Union, and all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

However, as a credible counterbalance to China, other countries pale in comparison with the United States. Vietnam considers the U.S. a stabilizing force in Asia and the South China Sea. The benefits of an alliance with the United States have to be balanced by the following considerations:

1. Due to the history of war and the tradition of anti-Western imperialism, Vietnam does not trust the United States. Furthermore, she is wary of U.S. promotion of "peaceful evolution" and "color revolution" through its pressure on human rights. This trust is further undermined by the unpredictability of the Trump administration foreign policy.
2. Vietnam must pay attention to China's sensitivity. While the U.S. is theoretically the most credible counterforce to China, it is faraway. Distant water cannot stop neighborhood fire (*nước xa không cứu được lửa gần*).
3. As the United and China face off each other in the South China Sea, Vietnam neither wants to be pulled to one side and entrapped in big-power conflict nor it wants to be a pawn and a bargaining chip for the great powers in what Xi Jinping suggested as a "new type of great-power relations."

To solve this dilemma, Vietnamese leaders propose a strategy of self-defense, no use of force, and no military alliance combined with a foreign policy of multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations which includes:

1. Building an all-people defense strategy. The 2019 Vietnam National Defense White Paper states, “Vietnam builds its defense power on the basis of the overall strength of the whole nation, of the great solidarity of the masses, and the whole political system.”
2. Vietnam’s national defense strategy is peaceful and self-defensive in nature. It is no threat to any country, particularly to China.
3. Vietnam seeks to be a friend and a trusty partner of all countries and a good citizen of the world; it embraces global integration through a multi-directional foreign policy.
4. Improving relations with the US while remaining cautious of U.S. intention, capability, and commitment. Maintaining traditional friendship with China without losing sight of Han hegemonism and its ambition to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”
5. Practicing a cautious, soft balancing act: Improving relations with U.S. without antagonizing China and cultivating friendship with China while resisting its encroachment on Vietnam’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Vietnam strengthens its defense relations with the United States while resisting its efforts to undermine the regime through alleged plots of peaceful evolution.
6. Avoiding entrapment in big power conflict based on a purely defensive strategy, non-alignment, and a three-no’s principle (no foreign base, no military alliance, no siding with one country against another).⁴⁸ Drawing on Vietnam’s history, Dr. Phạm Cao Cường, Vice Director of the European Studies Institute, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, explained why Vietnam should not take side in big-power rivalry. He said,

Our country has a history of having to fight many wars which were hugely influenced by big-power relations. Therefore, we have learned many lessons in managing our relations with big countries. One of those lessons is to have to multilateralize and diversify our international relations. Vietnam has to pursue an independent foreign policy not dependent on any foreign country...

In the context of the increasing rivalry between the big powers in the region, Vietnam must seize the opportunities to protect our national interests. In terms of policy, Vietnam does not take side, maintain a balance between big powers and does not lean to one side. Furthermore, Vietnam must concentrate in developing its economy which should be its utmost priority.”⁴⁹

7. Focusing on lawfare: As a weak country dealing with big power pressure, Vietnam prefers diplomacy and lawfare to the use of force and military alliance. In this context, Vietnam proactively participates in the legal process and seeks to enhance its role in the implementation of international law, especially the law of the sea. It has prepared documents to sue China before the Hague's Arbitral Tribunal for violation of Vietnam's territorial sovereignty, if necessary, and nominated four of its lawyers to serve as mediators and arbiters of the 1982 United Nations Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As ASEAN Chair in 2020 Vietnam has successfully persuaded other members of the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Hanoi last September to unanimously accept the principle of resolving disputes in the South China Sea based on UNCLOS.

The most recent and authoritative confirmation of this policy is the message to the High-level General Debate of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2020, by the Secretary General of the CPV and Vietnam State President in which he asserted:

Together with countries within and outside the region, we are committed to the maintenance and promotion of peace, stability, maritime security and safety and freedom of navigation in the East Sea (South China Sea), *in accordance with international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. We call on all concerned parties to exercise restraint, avoid unilateral acts that would complicate the situation, and *settle disputes and differences through peaceful means with due respect for diplomatic and legal processes.*"⁵⁰

December 2020

NOTES:

¹ Translation courtesy of Nguyễn Ngọc Bích for Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, *Vietnam and the Evolving Regional Structure*, California: Tu Luc, 2020, p. 121-122.

² *Bình Ngô Đại Cáo* was written in Classical Chinese, translated into Vietnamese by Ngô Tất Tố and into English by Stephen O'Harrow. For detailed explanation, see Stephen O'Harrow, "Nguyen Trai's Binh Ngo Dai Cao of 1428: The Development of Vietnamese National Identity," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10:1 (March 1979):159-174.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B%C3%ACnh_Ng%C3%B4_%C4%91%E1%BA%A1i_c%C3%A1o

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Ng%E1%BB%8Dc_H%E1%BB%93i-%C4%90%E1%BB%91ng_%C4%90a

⁵ Translation mine

⁶ Legend has it that Vietnamese are descendants of the Fairy Queen from the mountain who married to the Dragon Lord of the sea and gave birth to one hundred children. Afterward, the couple separated; the Dragon Lord took 50 children toward the sea who inhabited the low land, the Fairy Queen 50 children to the mountains who represented highlanders.

⁷ Translation mine.

⁸ For a full explanation of Vietnam's relative strategic importance, see Nguyen Manh Hung, "The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century," *Trends in Southeast Asia 2015*, #21 (Singapore: Yusof-Ishak Institute 2015) p. 1.

⁹ *Tạp Chí Dân Tộc Học*, No 1, 1979. Translation mine

¹⁰ Photos of the original pages of the letter made public by Professor Ngo Vinh Long on September 9, 2020, at the following address: <https://www.facebook.com/ngovinhlong>. Translation mine.

¹¹ <https://thongtinphapluatdansu.edu.vn/2020/06/16/viet-nam-trong-chien-luoc-cua-trung-quoc-hien-nay/> Translation mine.

¹² "Chuyên gia chỉ ra điểm nhấn quan trọng nhất 25 năm quan hệ Việt-Mỹ," *VTC News*, December 7, 2020. <https://vtc.vn/chuyen-gia-chi-ra-diem-nhan-quan-trong-nhat-25-nam-quan-he-viet-my-ar556848.html>. Translation mine

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/hohaibd/videos/162674835421305/> Translation mine

¹⁴ *VietTimes*, September 26, 2020. <https://viettimes.vn/vi-the-chien-luoc-cua-dong-nam-a-va-viet-nam-trong-cau-truc-an-ninh-tai-chau-a-thai-binh-duong-493168.html>. Translation mine.

¹⁵ Huy Duc, Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc I: Giải Phóng* (California: Osin Book, 2012), 385. Translation mine.

¹⁶ For detailed discussion, see Nguyen Manh Hung, "Vietnamese Thought on Chinese International Theory and Practice," in Nguyen Manh Hung, *Vietnam and the Evolving Regional Structure*, California, Tu Luc, 2020.

¹⁷ Trần Quang Cơ, *Hồi ức và Suy Nghĩ* (Memoirs and Thought) (Hanoi: 2003), 65. Circulated over the internet only. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8qHbRAzdVH7ZTgyMDYxN2MtMjVjZS00MTJjLTg5MjQ0OGM5NDUyNmIxOjGM0/edit?hl=vi> (Hereafter HUVSN), p.64. Translation mine.

¹⁸ *HUVSN*, p.77

¹⁹ Notes of author's interview in Hanoi, December 13, 2012

²⁰ Notes of author's interview in Hanoi, December 2, 2012

²¹ "Đại Tá Trần Đăng Thanh giảng về Biển Đông cho lãnh đạo các trường đại học" (Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh lectures university leaders on the East Sea), *Dân Làm Báo* 19/12/2012. Translation mine.

²² Thư ngỏ gửi các nhà lãnh đạo về hiểm họa ngoại bang và sức mạnh dân tộc (Open Letter to Vietnamese Leaders on Foreign Threat and National Power). <http://danlambaovn.blogspot.com/2011/08/thu-ngo-gui-cac-nha-lanh-ao-viet-nam-ve.html>. Translation mine.

²³ The song "Hùng Vương" composed by Thẩm Oánh, circa 1949-1952, begins with the words, "Bốn ngàn năm vẫn hiển, nước Nam khang cường là nhờ công đức Hùng Vương," (Having four thousand years of civilized history, Vietnam is safe and strong thanks to the endowment and blessing of our founder King Hung). Translation mine.

²⁴ Đỗ Tiên Sâm, "Hồ Chí Minh với Trung Quốc: Tư Tưởng và Văn Hóa Ứng Xử," (Ho Chi Minh and China: Thought and Conduct," in Đỗ Tiên Sâm and M. L. Titarenko, eds., *Trung Quốc Những Năm Đầu Thế Kỷ Hai Mươi Một* (China: *The Early Years in the Twenty-First Century*) (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Từ Điển Bách Khoa, 2009), 10

²⁵ Trần Quang Cơ, *Hồi ức và Suy Nghĩ* (Memoirs and Thought) (Hanoi: 2003), 65. Circulated over the internet only. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8qHbRAzdVH7ZTgyMDYxN2MtMjVjZS00MTJjLTg5MjQ0OGM5NDUyNmIxOjGM0/edit?hl=vi> (Hereafter HUVSN). Translation mine. Italics added.

²⁶ *HUVSN*, p.88

²⁷ President Tran Duc Luong told visiting Chinese Minister of State Security Xy Yongyein Hanoi on March 21, 2005 (*Vietnam News Agency*, March 22, 2005). Italics mine.

²⁸ Nguyễn Huy Quý, "55 năm quan hệ Việt-Trung: Nhìn lại quá khứ và hướng tới tương lai," (55 years of Vietnam-China relations: Looking backward and forward), *TCCS*, no. 75 (January 2005). Translation and italics mine

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of this conflict, see Nguyen Manh Hung, "Drawing a Line in the South China Sea: Why Beijing Needs to Show Restraint," *Global Asia*, Winter 2012; and "Chinese Oil Rig and Vietnamese Politics: Business as Usual?" *CogitAsia*, August 25, 2014. <http://cogitasia.com/chinese-oil-rig-and-vietnamese-politics-business-as-usual/>

³⁰ *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), May 23, 2014. Translation mine.

³¹ <http://anhbasam.wordpress.com/2014/07/29/thu-ngo-gui-bch-trung-uong-va-toan-the-dang-vien-dang-csvn/>

³² “Strategic Culture, National Strategy, and Policymaking in the Asia-Pacific,” Interview with Ashley J. Tellis, October 27, 2016. Kerry Longhurst, in her doctoral thesis on “Strategic Culture: the key to understanding German security policy?” defines strategic culture as “a distinctive body of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, which are held by a collective and arise over time, through a unique protracted historical process.”

³³ The original Chinese book was published in 1996 by the Guangxi People’s Publishing House. Its Vietnamese translation, *Quyền Mưu Thân Bí* were done by Nguyễn Lạc and Hoàng Việt Thắng, (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2004)

³⁴ Yongjin Zhang, “System, empire and state in Chinese international relations,” *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001), 49.

³⁵ “Đại Tá Trần Đăng Thanh giảng về Biển Đông cho lãnh đạo các trường đại học” (Colonel Trần Đăng Thanh lectures university leaders on the East Sea), *Dân làm báo* 19/12/2012 (http://danlambaovn.blogspot.com/2012/12/ai-ta-tran-dang-thanh-giang-ve-bien-ong.html#.UWxq_KfD8dV). Also

<http://anhbasam.wordpress.com/2012/12/19/1481-dai-ta-tran-dang-thanh-giang-ve-bien-dong-cho-lanh-dao-cac-truong-dai-hoc/>. A YouTube version can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEQkyp-UUQ>

³⁶ “Thực hiện nhất quán đường lối đối ngoại độc lập, tự chủ, hòa bình, hợp tác và phát triển,” (Consistently implement the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation, and development) *Báo Điện tử Đảng Công Sản Việt Nam*, September 26, 2015. Translation and italics mine. <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/van-kien-tu-lieu-ve-dang/gioi-thieu-van-kien-dang/thuc-hien-nhat-quan-duong-loi-doi-ngoai-doc-lap-tu-chu-hoa-binh-hop-tac-va-phat-trien-911>

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ The Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee’s Political report to the tenth National Congress (April 18-25, 2006)

⁴⁰ Giap, Vo Nguyen and Russell Stetler, *The Military Art of People’s War: Selected Writings of Vo Nguyen Giap*. Monthly Review Press, 1970: 98. Italics mine

⁴¹ “Tổng Bí thư Trường Chinh viết tác phẩm Kháng chiến nhất định thắng lợi,” (Báo điện tử Đảng CS VN, October 8, 2019. <https://dangcongsan.vn/tu-lieu-tham-khao-cuoc-thi-trac-nghiem-tim-hieu-90-nam-lich-su-ve-vang-cua-dang-cong-san-viet-nam/tu-lieu-90-nam-lich-su-dang/tong-bi-thau-truong-chinh-viet-tac-pham-khang-chien-nhat-dinh-thang-loi-538524.html>. Translation mine. Italics added.

⁴² For a detailed analysis, see Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, “Counter Coercion Series: China-Vietnam Oil Rig Standoff,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, June 12, 2017. <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-oil-rig-standoff/>

⁴³ <https://www.historynet.com/the-first-tet-offensive-of-1789.htm>

⁴⁴ For a detailed analysis, see Melvin Gurtov, *Indochina in North Vietnam Strategy*, RAND Corporation, 1971. <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P4605.pdf>

⁴⁵ Derek Grossman, “Vietnam is Losing its Best Friends to China,” *The Diplomat*, November 2, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/vietnam-is-losing-its-best-friends-to-china/>

⁴⁶ Minister of Foreign Affairs Phạm Bình Minh’s Opening remarks at the conference reviewing the contributions of comrade Nguyen Duy Trinh to Vietnam’s Foreign Policy,” *Báo Nghệ An*, July 15, 2020; Trần Việt Thái, “Comrade Nguyen Duy Trinh –The Chief Architect of Vietnamese Foreign Policy during the war against the United States,” *Thế Giới Việt Nam*, July 16, 2020. Translation mine.

⁴⁷ For detailed analysis of Vietnam and the balance of power game, see Nguyen Manh Hung, “The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century,” *Trends in Southeast Asia* #21. Singapore: ISEAS- Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015.

⁴⁸ Vietnam Defense White Paper in 2019 stated, “Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliance, siding with one country against another, giving any other countries permission to set up

military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries nor using force or threatening to use force in international relations.”

⁴⁹ “Viet Nam không chọn bên, Viet Nam chọn thương tôn luật biển 1982,” *Báo Mới*, October 8, 2020. <https://baomoi.com/viet-nam-khong-chon-ben-viet-nam-chon-thuong-ton-luat-bien-1982/c/36622536.epi>). Translation mine.

⁵⁰ Italics mine.