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Vietnam's Tale of Two Anthems

Hanoi's delicate ballet between favoring Beijing or Taipei

Our Correspondent

A year ago on October 27, Vietnam's Under 23 national football team faced off against their Taiwanese counterpart in Kyrgyzstan in the Asian Cup qualifiers, the second oldest continental football championship in the world. Vietnam's state TV network was on hand to relay this first-round Asian U-23 contest to fans back home. It was a welcome respite from the country's bout with Covid-19.

Although the Taiwanese squad – nominally "Chinese Taipei" in deference to Beijing's sensitivities – put up a good fight, Vietnam won as expected, taking its first step toward qualifying for the next tournament in Tashkent. However, it wasn't Lê Văn Xuân's winning goal in the 82nd minute that fans were talking about the next morning; it was the eerie sight of the Taiwanese team standing to attention on Vietnam's state-owned television during several minutes of silence. The Taiwanese anthem, Zhōnghuá Mínguó Guóqígē (中華民國國旗歌), was completely muted, although no technical error was announced.

The "glitch" wasn't covered in the domestic news outlets, yet it triggered heated discussion on social media. The flag salute ceremony at the beginning of the match was removed from the screen as well.

Politically savvy netizens were quick to explain why: the Vietnamese government had once again dodged a situation that might offend China. The word anthem or Guóqígē in Mandarin is often translated into Vietnamese language as "quốc ca", or the national song. Playing the Taiwanese national song would imply recognition of Taiwan, Vietnam's 6th largest trading partner, as a nation.

Two months later, the Vietnamese national anthem was muted on the broadcast of the Vietnam-Laos match in the same tournament. This time, VTV 1, Vietnam's hard-news channel, went to great lengths in its primetime show to explain the incident as a copyright infringement by the event agency in-charge. The message was clear enough: even the Vietnamese anthem was muted, let alone that of a foreign counterpart. Again, perceptive netizens deemed this lengthy explanation as a face-saving act of the Communist government. Neither of the state-owned channels VTV 5 or VTV 6 responded to requests for comment on the incidents.

Party favors PRC, people fancy Taiwan

While the cause of the silence remained up in the air, the former incident highlighted the struggle Vietnam has had in maintaining relations with both Taiwan and China.

Although the Hanoi regime prioritizes state and party relations with mainland China, its top trading partner, the public vastly prefer Taiwan, ranking 6th in trade volume with Vietnam. Only 10 percent of the Vietnamese asked by pollsters to rate foreign nations in 2017 expressed a

positive view of the PRC. Many Facebookers, who referred to Taiwan as “a great friend of Vietnam,” castigated state TV for disrespecting the Taiwan squad by refusing to play the anthem. Many speculated it had buckled under pressure by Beijing.

“There was so much fear of the Trung Cộng (Chinese Communists),” wrote one Facebook user regarding the incident.

Like most governments, Hanoi adheres to One China policy. President Tsai Ing-wen can only be referred to as ‘top leader of Taiwan’ in the domestic media. References to the head of the Taipei Representative Office in Vietnam have been inconsistent across domestic outlets, sometimes “chief of office, “sometimes “Ambassador.”

According to a senior Vietnamese journalist on political affairs at the mouthpiece of Chinese Taipei, other outlets can be more flexible in alluding to the self-ruled island.

“If we write ‘Taiwanese president’ instead of the ‘leader of Chinese Taipei’, the Chinese Embassy will give us a call and complain. We will be subject to a heavy fine,” said the anonymous journalist.

Historic friendly ties

Vietnam’s historical memory centers on resistance to Chinese hegemony. Young students are taught that their country was occupied for almost a thousand years by the Chinese. No single Vietnamese dynasty did not have a fight with the Chinese, despite being their vassal state. The Sino-Vietnamese war is not officially mentioned. In this regard, Vietnam has something in common with Taiwan: pluckily standing up to Chinese power.

Sun Yat-sen, considered the father of the nation in both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, visited Vietnam many times between 1900 and 1908 and inspired Vietnamese nationalists and revolutionaries such as Phan Bội Châu, a prominent intellectual, and Hồ Chí Minh, top Communist leader and North Vietnam's first president. The government of South Vietnam, led by Ngô Đình Diệm, established official relations with Taiwan in 1955 and had very close ties due to their common anti-communist stance. Taiwanese forces constituted the third largest foreign contingent in South Vietnam in 1965. The Nationalists (Kuomintang) provided the South Vietnamese government with technical, financial and moral support. In addition, the Kuomintang was committed to building an anti-communist alliance that involved the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and South Vietnam.

Madame Chiang Kai-shek or Song Meiling, the First Lady of Taiwan, also led the Taiwanese initiative to support victims of 1968 Tet offensive, while her older sister, Song Qingling, Sun Yat-sen’s widow and Honorary President of the PRC, endorsed Hồ Chí Minh, the supreme leader of the Communist movement. President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu paid a visit to Taiwan after his trip to South Korea and before his trip to visit President Richard Nixon and learned that he would not be left alone in the fight for freedom. In addition, President Thiệu, himself a general, received full military honors at Taipei airport and reviewed the Republic of China's crack honor guard.

Pragmatic partnership

Yet the Taiwanese government was pragmatic and quick enough to befriend the Communist government after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Even though Taiwan and Vietnam had no links from

the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, both sides have improved their political and economic relations since the early 1990s. By 1998, Taiwan had always been the largest investor in Vietnam.

Vietnam's economic ties with Taiwan are generally positive. For the past decades, Taiwan has always been among Vietnam's top investors, while only in recent years did China's foreign direct investment leap sharply. Taiwanese businesses are perceived favorably as deployers of smart technologies, while the lack of confidence is rampant in Chinese investments in the eyes of the Vietnamese public.

Vietnam's pragmatic diplomacy with Taiwan continues to thrive. In 2021, the Vietnam Innovation Network was established in Taiwan, with a view to boosting intelligence, capacity, and more contributions of young people to development. Thus, Taiwan became the 6th sub-network after Germany, Japan, Australia, South Korea, and Europe.

Taiwan's soft power in Vietnam

It is not so difficult to understand why the Taiwan regime is the popular favorite. Like South Korea, it deploys prodigious soft power. The Taiwanese wave (台流) was hugely successful in Vietnam in the early 2000s. Taiwanese Idol dramas (偶像剧) enjoy a huge fan base. Taiwanese bubble tea has long been a favorite drink, with youths aged 18 to 30 accounting for almost 25 percent of the population.

Taiwan has been more positively perceived by the Vietnamese than either the US or South Korea.

China's FDI inflows to Vietnam in recent years have largely been concentrated in high-risk industries such as thermal power, steel, chemicals, and cement. China was least favorably viewed of all countries surveyed in 2017, with only 10 percent of respondents favorable. In 2019, an agreement on mutual recognition of tertiary degrees and training certificates was concluded between Vietnam and Taiwan. In 2021, Vietnam became the top country sending international students to Taiwan.

Taiwan has always been top investors in Vietnam, and also a popular destination for Vietnamese immigrants, with more than 320,000 Vietnamese migrant workers and new immigrants living in Taiwan. In 2021, Taiwan was the largest importer of Vietnamese labor. Stories of Vietnamese women marrying Taiwanese men have been given a more positive light, compared to rampant coverage of domestic abuse facing Vietnamese wives by their Taiwanese husbands in the early 2000s.

While the Chinese Embassy doesn't bother with outreach to common Vietnamese, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City has long actively promoted Taiwanese culture.

Taiwan's aid to Vietnam has been more sophisticated, with efforts to engage Vietnamese civil society actors, while there has been no such Chinese presence. Taiwan donated US\$400,000 of disaster relief aid to Vietnam in 2020, while mainland China came up with half the amount.

Although Chinese-owned factories are regularly denounced as polluters, Formosa Plastics barely got its knuckles rapped when an accidental release of toxic effluent decimated coastal fisheries in May 2016. The public applauded when the Taiwan-based multinational agreed to pay out US\$500,000 in compensation to fishing families. Whereas Vietnam has loudly protested

China's step-by-step extension of its now formidable presence in the South China Sea and its incursions into the Vietnamese EEZ, complaints about Taiwan's outpost on Itu Aba, the largest of the Spratly island group, are perfunctory.

Between a rock and a hard place

Vietnam has been struggling to reap the benefit of the wave of investment by Taiwan's businesses while not ruffling China's feathers of China. At times, Vietnam has limited the presence of Taiwanese officials at international events at the behest of the PRC. In public statements between 2008 and 2016, Vietnam reiterated its one-China stance.

However, it has not given in to all of China's demands. In 2006, despite China's pressure, Vietnam invited Taiwan to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), one of the most important forums for Taiwan, which resulted in China's withdrawal of aid for Vietnam in 2007. In 2018, Taiwanese company Kaiser 1 Furniture Industry was granted permission to fly the Taiwanese flag at its factory near Ho Chi Minh City in order to differentiate itself from mainland China and to avoid anti-China sentiment.

On July 30, 2018, the spokesman of China's Foreign Ministry, Geng Shuang said during his regular press conference that the Communist Party of China had brought the issue up with Vietnam and "instructed the relevant companies to correct their wrong practices."

Bones of contention

In 2004, when Vietnam condemned Taiwan for constructing a tower in the Spratlys ostensibly for observing birds. Taiwan insisted on seeking a peaceful resolution and not a military response. In 2007 and 2008, Vietnam made several protests against Taiwan for drill exercises, construction activities, and inspection tours around the areas of the Spratly Islands. However, these protests did not cause any public uproar. Despite disputes over the Spratlys during the 2000s, the overall situation was relatively peaceful and did not give rise to public outcry.

In early 2022, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned Taiwan for holding military drills off the Spratly Archipelago over which Vietnam claims sovereignty. Itu Aba, the largest naturally occurring island, has been occupied by Taiwan since 2012.

However, while Vietnam publicly expressed concerns about Taiwan's overlapping claims over the South China Sea, known in Vietnamese as the East Sea, it doesn't consider Taiwan a threat. Vietnamese domestic media coverage of Taiwan's assertiveness pales in comparison with that of the PRC. Both are in the same boat amid the PRC's rising territorial ambitions.