

China-US rivalry: how Vietnam's deft balancing act keeps it from having to pick sides

- Hanoi has shunned overreliance on any foreign power and enhanced its defensive capabilities by developing a global network of strategic partnerships
- Thanks to its 'omnibalancing' strategy, a self-reliant Vietnam is neither too dependent on, nor fully vulnerable to, any superpower

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

The Vietnamese national hero Ho Chi Minh once famously described his country's relations with China as "as close as lips and teeth", openly acknowledging the special significance of the Communist victory in China for the Vietnamese people.

Maoist China was a supporter of Vietnam during the latter's early anti-colonial struggle against France and, later, the United States. Ho's very name was a local transliteration of Hu Zhiming.

During his exile years in China throughout the early 20th century, where he forged an alliance with local communists, Ho was even married to a Chinese woman named Zeng Xueming, also known as Tang Tuyet Minh.

Cold-War-era geopolitical rivalry with Beijing across Indochina and the festering maritime disputes in the South China Sea in recent years have pushed Hanoi closer to the West's embrace.

Far from fully aligning with the US against its fellow communists to the north, though, Vietnam's leaders have embraced an "omnibalancing" strategy which emphasises the cultivation of good strategic relations with a diverse set of powers.

Accordingly, Vietnam has maintained robust communication channels with China, shunned overreliance on any foreign power and enhanced its defensive capabilities by developing a global network of strategic partnerships from Brussels to Moscow, New Delhi and Tokyo.

If anything, Vietnam's exclusion from the Biden administration's recent Summit for Democracy showed the wisdom of Hanoi's diversified strategic relations.

What makes Vietnam unique in the region is that it has been shaped by centuries of struggle against and resistance to various Chinese imperial dynasties. The Vietnamese people have resisted various empires, including the Mongolians, French and Americans, but it is China that has always loomed large over their collective imagination.

The fusion of communism and anti-colonial struggles in Asia provided a rare moment of unity among Chinese and Vietnamese nationalists in the early 20th century. The upshot was the alliance between Maoist China and Ho Chi Ming's communist forces, who successfully drove the French out of Indochina following the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

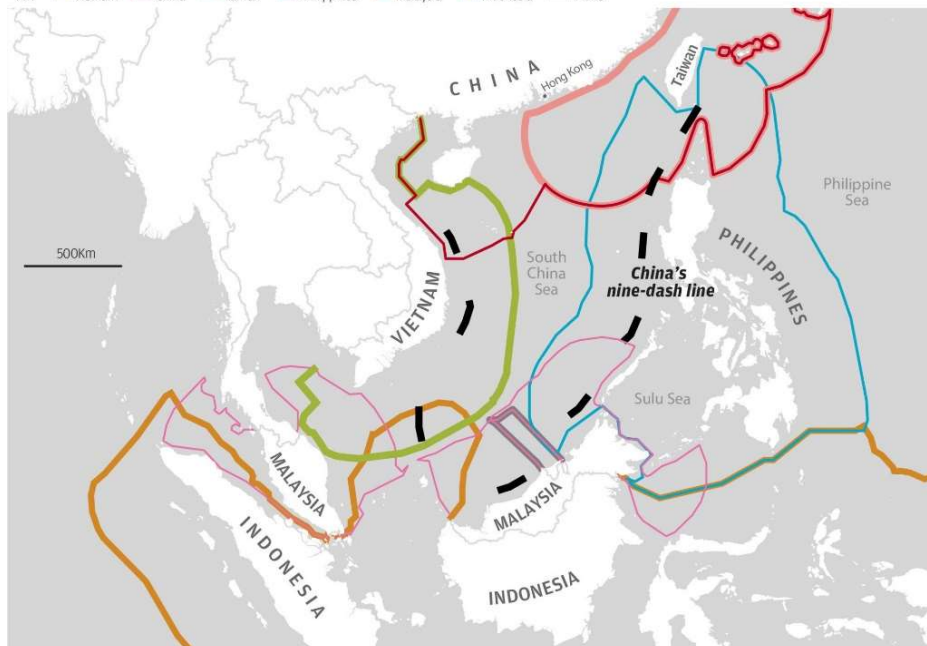
It did not take long, however, before ancient enmities drove a wedge between the two sides as both Beijing and Hanoi competed for influence across Indochina. When Mao decided to pursue detente with Washington to outflank the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap expressed his outrage by stating, "We felt that we had been stabbed in the back."

Although the end of the Cold War provided a temporary respite for the two communist rivals, which began pursuing rapid economic development after decades of conflict, the South China Sea disputes have continued to haunt Sino-Vietnamese relations.

Maritime claims in the South China Sea

Exclusive economic zones and China's nine-dash line

KEY — Vietnam — China — Taiwan — Philippines — Malaysia — Indonesia — Brunei



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

SCMP

Confronted with a resurgent China, Vietnam began warming to the US, which in turn welcomed new strategic partnerships amid growing doubts over the reliability of traditional allies such as the Philippines.

US-Vietnam rapprochement reached its zenith in 2018, when Washington sent an aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, to a Vietnamese port for the first time in more than four decades. Amid its own competition against China, the Trump administration identified Vietnam as a strategic partner in Asia in its 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.

The Biden administration has largely built on its predecessor's policy by pursuing close strategic ties with Vietnam, which successively hosted two US cabinet-level officials earlier this year. To please Hanoi, the US has even decided to drop Vietnam from a list of potential currency manipulators amid surging bilateral trade.

Instead of forging an alliance with Washington, however, Hanoi has adopted a balancing strategy based on three key elements. First, Vietnam is committed to its "Three Nos" national security doctrine – no hosting foreign military forces on its soil, no military alliance with a foreign power, and no alignment with one superpower against another.

This self-consciously non-aligned foreign policy is based on a realistic recognition of the need to maintain stable diplomatic relations with China as well as the structural limitations of any partnership with the US.

Given lingering differences over human rights and democracy issues, the US Congress has yet to clear any major defence deal with Vietnam. For the most part, Vietnamese-US security cooperation is more about symbolism and semantics than an actual military partnership, which denotes massive, regularised drills as well as high-end defence deals.

Second, Hanoi has pursued a proactive trade and industrial policy which places Western investors and markets at the centre of its long-term national development strategy.

Eager to reduce its trade dependence on China, Vietnam has pursued free-trade agreements with the US, Europe, Australia, South Korea and Japan through bilateral or multilateral initiatives, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Finally, Vietnam has enhanced its defensive capabilities through large-scale arms purchases from and defence deals with alternative powers. It has purchased state-of-the-art Russian military hardware, including submarines and fighter jets.

Hanoi has also sought strategic weapons from the likes of India, which has offered the prized BrahMos anti-ship cruise missiles as well as warships, while forging a defence cooperation pact with the European Union.

Interestingly, Vietnam has adopted a similar strategy in developing its offshore hydrocarbon resources. It is exploring the contested waters of the South China Sea by inviting investments from Russian, Indian, and Western energy companies.

Overall, Vietnam has simultaneously enhanced its defensive capabilities and deepened economic autonomy by developing a diverse network of strategic partnerships. Thanks to its omnibalancing strategy, a self-reliant Vietnam is neither too dependent on any superpower nor fully vulnerable to a resurgent China in the South China Sea.

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