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## **Vietnam treads delicate line on China relations;** *Hiccups in run-up to Apec summit in Hanoi underline testiness in ties*

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HANOI - VIETNAM'S relations with China have often been troubled and testy.

That was illustrated last Wednesday at a lunch for the ambassadors of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) countries.

This year's Apec summit will be held in Hanoi in November, and the Vietnamese authorities have been working overtime to ensure it is a success.

But there have already been several hiccups, and another occurred at the lunch when Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam Hu Qian Wen was seated near his nemesis, Taiwan Trade Representative Huang Nan-huei.

Vietnam recognises China, not Taiwan, but, like other countries, it allows Taipei to have an economic and cultural office to facilitate booming bilateral trade.

Mr Huang heads the office, but he is not an ambassador. China, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province, takes exception to its presence at international gatherings and has never been happy about its inclusion in Apec.

That unhappiness became manifest at the luncheon when Mr Huang was mistakenly introduced as the ambassador of Taiwan.

Chinese Ambassador Hu reacted as if he had been struck by lightning.

He rattled his chopsticks in the air and berated the hapless woman reading the introductions.

She apologised and stepped down from the stage as Mr Hu stormed out.

He returned to read a written statement in Chinese and English saying there was only one China, and he represented it.

A Vietnamese deputy minister then took to the stage and offered profuse apologies for the diplomatic gaffe.

But many observers thought Mr Hu's histrionic protest was a bit over the top, and that Hanoi's Apec organisers had made an innocent error.

Mr Ralph Cossa, president of the Hawaii-based Pacific Forum CSIS, said: 'All Apec members are drawn into the cross-strait 'Cold War'. China cannot resist rubbing it into Taiwan's face that it is not a country, and it tries to marginalise Taiwan whenever possible.'

The incident highlighted not only the depth of China's sensitivity over Taiwan, but also its long and testy ties with Vietnam.

Clearly, Beijing will be unafraid to embarrass its Vietnamese hosts at the Apec summit if any more blunders occur.

Said Professor Carlyle Thayer, a Vietnam expert at the Australian Defence Force Academy: 'The nature of Taiwan's representation at Apec meetings is always an occasion for heartburn in Beijing. The heat on Hanoi as Apec host is nothing new.'

Diplomatic sources say Vietnam felt heat earlier when Beijing urged it not to invite Taiwan to the Apec summit.

Vietnam stood firm, saying it was now established practice for Taiwan to attend and that Hanoi would not change that arrangement.

Earlier, Vietnam had resisted Chinese pressure to reverse its decision to back Japan's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

It was well-known that China did not want its position as the sole Asian power on the council diluted by the addition of Japan.

But Vietnam's largest single source of foreign aid is Japan, so it again rebuffed Chinese pressure and maintained its support for Tokyo's ultimately unsuccessful bid - although it did decline to co-sponsor the resolution for Japan.

Said Mr David Koh, a Vietnam expert at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: 'Vietnam toes the line on the Taiwan issue and adroitly stays on the middle path between Japan and China.'

Vietnam does have a long history of having to resist the Chinese in all spheres, including militarily.

The two countries have clashed many times, most recently in a 1979 border war which resulted in a large death toll on both sides.

In an attempt to prevent the sovereignty issues and historical animosity from exacerbating their often fractious ties, the leaders of both countries pay regular visits to each other and celebrate the fact that both are led by communist regimes.

Their ideological ties, however, do not seem to diminish what some regard as a 'love-hate' attitude many Vietnamese have towards China.