

## **Do China and Vietnam Have Similar Alliance Policies?**

Despite obvious areas of friction between China and Vietnam, their alliance policies are more similar than is often acknowledged.

By Khang Vu

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Sino-Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. In July, China and North Korea will have to make a decision whether to extend it for another 20 years, as they did in 1981 and 2001. The treaty has had its ups and downs, but remarkably it still stands despite the end of the Cold War and considerable skepticism in the modern era. It has been China's only formal alliance treaty since the country adopted an "independent foreign policy" that shunned joining formal alliances in the early 1980s. The key question to ask is not whether the treaty is still relevant, but why it is the exception to China's foreign policy even under the most unfavorable circumstances.

Similar to China, Vietnam also has a formal alliance commitment to Laos that survived the end of the Cold War. Vietnam is famous for its "Three Nos" defense policy – no military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no reliance on any country to combat others – but its alliance with Laos is the exception to its alliance policies the same way North Korea is to China. Scholars often consider the Sino-Korean alliance to be a deviant case that go beyond the scope of existing alliance theories. However, the existence of another deviant Vietnam-Laos case implies that there is a pattern that is worth further research, especially so when Vietnam and China are communist countries that once fought a common U.S. enemy. Deviant cases are significant in the sense that they can be the exceptions that prove the rule. Ignoring them can risk selecting on the dependent variable, which could lead to biased results in studies of Chinese and Vietnamese alliance policies.

China and Vietnam, as single-party communist states, only ally with states that share both their national security interests and ideological values. This is because both countries have subjective control of their militaries, in which the military pledges allegiance first and foremost to the ruling communist party, not to the state. China's People's Liberation Army is the army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the Vietnam People's Army is under the sole discretion of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). Ideological loyalty is thus the most important requirement of a soldier. An alliance relationship entails close military collaboration between and among states, and states that have different ideological values tend not to be good allies. Autocratic states want to minimize their military cooperating with the ideological enemies because they are afraid of losing control and diluting the military's ideological loyalty. For the autocrats, internal security is as important as external security. Consequently, common national security interests are not enough to get Vietnam and China to ally with another state; that state must also share ideological values that are compatible with their subjective control of the military.

A brief sketch of China's and Vietnam's past and current allies shows such a pattern. Hanoi in its history has allied itself with four different states: the Soviet Union (1954-1991), China

(1954-1975), North Korea (1954-1975), and Laos (1977 to the present). North Vietnam allied with these states because they all shared communist values and faced a common security threat from the United States. China pledged to Hanoi that Beijing would send its military to fight the U.S. should Washington decide to march north. North Korea also sent its pilots to help defend North Vietnamese airspace. At the end of the Vietnam War, however, North Korea and China were aligned against Vietnam because the two countries disapproved of Hanoi's ambitions in Indochina, which took the common national security interests out of the alliance. It was inevitable that when China attacked Vietnam in 1979, North Korea kept silent and even supported the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam. Vietnam only improved relations with North Korea and China in the late 1980s when their national security interests no longer clashed. However, the end of the Cold War would shake the ideological bond of the three countries.

Hanoi also applied the same standard with regard to its alliance with the Soviet Union. Between 1954 and 1975, the two shared both a common U.S. enemy and ideological values. In the early 1970s, Hanoi and Moscow grew closer as China wanted to reduce Soviet influence in Asia with its proposal to form a "united front of the five revolutionary Asian countries" (China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). After the Vietnam War, Vietnam and the Soviet Union thus shared a common security interest in encircling China, which culminated in their 1978 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which would remain valid until 2003. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Vietnam decided to terminate the treaty in 1994 because it found itself no longer sharing ideological values with the new Russian government, even though their national security interests still arguably converged. With Laos being strategically important to Vietnam and sharing the same ideology, it is not a surprise that Hanoi keeps its 1977 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with Laos despite the treaty violating Hanoi's non-alignment policy.

China has used the same criteria with regard to its allies. China has formally allied with the Soviet Union (1950-1969), North Vietnam (1954-1975), and North Korea (1950 to the present). As in the above cases, Beijing decided to ally itself with the Soviet Union in 1950 both because the two powers shared a common U.S. enemy and also because of shared communist ideology. That common ideological commitment helped China develop itself on the basis of the Soviet model of development and agreed on the common goal of exporting communism, which largely defined Beijing's foreign security commitments. Unfortunately, the ideological roots of the Sino-Soviet Split in the early 1960s, coupled with the United States' efforts to undermine the alliance via the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, took ideological alignment out of the comradeship. China and the Soviet Union fought a border war in 1969, formally ending the alliance.

The China-North Korea alliance followed the same pattern. Beijing helped Pyongyang fight against the U.S.-led United Nations coalition in 1950. China withdrew its last troops from North Korea in 1958 but would soon ink an alliance treaty in 1961 to ensure that it did not lose North Korea to the Soviet Union. An interesting point to note is that despite the collapse of the Soviet Union as a rival and the growing costs of the Sino-North Korean alliance due to the North's nuclear program, China did not terminate the alliance – again, largely because the two nations still share national security interests and ideological values. At the height of the fierce exchanges between North Korea and the U.S. in 2017, Beijing still committed to come to North Korea's defense if it was attacked. While it is imperative to recognize that there is growing skepticism of the value of the alliance, it is more important to ask why the alliance continues despite such skepticism. This can be because the conditions that gave birth to the alliance are still extant, as in the case of the Vietnam-Laos alliance.

Remarkably, China and Vietnam have behaved similarly when it comes to cooperating with the U.S. to check the expansionism of their respective northern neighbors. The U.S. and China increased military cooperation in the 1980s to balance against the Soviet Union. However, at its 12th Party Congress in 1982, the CCP laid out its “independent foreign policy,” in which China would not attach itself to “any big power or groups of powers.” China’s independent and “self-reliance” foreign policy has an ideological basis, which stated that even though China shared security interests with the U.S., the latter was still an imperialist power and an ideological enemy. The lack of an ideological bond prevented Beijing and Washington from becoming full-fledged allies. Noticeably, this “independent foreign policy” came at a time when China was reforming and opening up and after it learned a hard lesson from its bitter alliance with the Soviet Union. Since then, China thus has shunned any military alliances, calling them “historical relics.” China’s 2013 defense white paper affirms the country’s “independent foreign policy of peace.”

Vietnam’s “Three Nos” couldn’t be more similar. The country began to open up after its withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and after learning that its alliance with the Soviet Union did not prevent China from attacking it in 1979 and annexing Vietnam-controlled Johnson South Reef in 1988. Non-alignment and an independent foreign policy thus became the new way for Hanoi to navigate its post-Cold War security environment. The U.S. has proven to be an important partner in checking Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Indeed, the bilateral relationship has never been better, and the U.S. considers Vietnam to be “one of the most important partners in the world.” There are even calls for the United States to ally itself with Vietnam. However, it will take more than just common security interests for Vietnam to break its non-alignment policy. The U.S. and Vietnam do not share the same ideology and Hanoi is still skeptical of potential Western-backed “color revolutions” seeking to transform its domestic politics. There is a popular saying in Vietnam that “allying with the United States and we lose the Party, allying with China and we lose the country.” The saying perfectly sums up Hanoi’s two criteria for potential allies: that they must share both national security interests and ideological values. Hence, Vietnam adopting a policy of non-alignment not only because it wants to hedge between the United States and China but also because no states can satisfy both criteria of an ally at the moment.

Even though China and Vietnam have major differences in the South China Sea and elsewhere, their alliance policies are more similar than is often acknowledged. The existence of the Sino-North Korean and Vietnam-Laos alliances are the exceptions that prove the rule of their long-standing alliance policies. If China and North Korea renew their alliance treaty this July, which is highly likely, it will only emphasize the important role that security interests and ideological values have played for more than half a century, despite the various ups and downs.

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