

Vietnam' s China dilemma : steering in new strategic environment

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Vietnam's China Dilemma: Steering in New Strategic Environment

By Marvin Ott

Synopsis

Vietnam's relationship with China is a test of the strategic challenge it faces against a long historical backdrop. Hanoi's rapprochement with the US and its joining ASEAN are manifestations of its diplomatic adroitness.

Commentary

THE ASCENDANCE of the United States as the world's "sole superpower" and the rapid emergence of China as East Asia's preeminent regional power have presented Vietnam with a dilemma. The rise of China has posed a potentially existential threat whereas the pivot of the US to Asia has offered a potential solution.

While China's challenge has tested the strategic acumen of officials in Hanoi, the Vietnamese response has been multifaceted and follows nine apparent guidelines.

Nine Guidelines

The first is to work through Party-to-Party channels to cultivate improved relations with China. The signature accomplishment in this effort has been a settlement of the border dispute on land and in most of the Tonkin Gulf – but not the South China Sea. The second is to build Vietnam's strength by reforming and opening the economy - doi moi - and upgrading the armed forces with an emphasis on maritime denial capabilities. The third is to join and bond with ASEAN so that any threat to Vietnam is increasingly seen as a threat to all. The fourth is to use every opportunity through official presence, public statements, military exercises, and "facts on the ground" to assert Vietnam's "sovereign rights" in the South China Sea.

The fifth is to facilitate negotiations designed to ease territorial disputes among ASEAN states in the South China Sea so as to present a united front to China. The sixth is to draw international oil companies (including Indian) into the South China Sea by offering attractive concessions for leases. The seventh is to develop closer relations with Japan and upgraded military-to-military ties with Russia and India – including possible naval access to a refurbished Cam Ranh Bay. The eighth is to inform Beijing frequently and explicitly that Vietnam "can never accept" China's maritime claims. Finally, cultivate an increasingly close relationship with the US including economic, diplomatic, and military dimensions.

The growth of military ties with the US has been particularly noteworthy. Beginning with cautious cooperation in resolving MIA/POW cases in the 1980s, actual military-to-military contacts began in the mid-1990s. These have

blossomed into regular US naval visits to Vietnamese ports, a structured “strategic dialogue” between the two defence establishments, and regular references by senior Vietnamese officials to a “strategic partnership” with the US. The largely unspoken but unmistakable driver for this relationship is a shared concern about China.

Vietnam’s Strategic environment

China’s expanding power creates a radically asymmetric strategic environment for Vietnam. Today there could be no repeat of Vietnam’s 1979 military success against China – and Hanoi knows it. If China is determined to assert itself - such as by excluding Vietnamese fishermen from parts of the South China Sea - there is probably nothing Vietnam can do to stop them. Nevertheless, certain trends in the region work to Vietnam’s advantage.

Firstly, there is the US strategic refocus (“pivot”) toward Southeast Asia and the South China Sea. Hanoi is well aware that American military power is ultimately the only effective counter to China’s growing assertiveness. Secondly, there is a palpable and growing uneasiness in Southeast Asia regarding China’s intentions. The result has been an increasing willingness among ASEAN governments to express their shared concerns to Beijing – and the US. China has long sought to have the South China Sea disputes with Southeast Asia handled on a bilateral basis out of the spotlight. Vietnam has sought the opposite – to internationalise and publicise. In this particular instance the advantage lies with Vietnam, not China.

Historically, Vietnam’s relationship with China is an epic struggle to gain and preserve national independence free of Chinese control. Compared to this the more recent wars against French and American interventions are secondary themes. Roughly a thousand years ago, the Viet people achieved autonomy vis-à-vis China and have maintained it (at no little cost) since. From this perspective the era of French colonial rule, World War II, and the Cold War stand out as historical aberrations.

During this period Chinese-Vietnamese animosity was tempered by other overriding threats and demands. During the “American War” the two Marxist-Leninist regimes in Beijing and Hanoi worked together as allies. But that collaboration quickly dissolved after 1975 when a triumphant and unified Vietnam sided with Moscow and against Beijing in what had become a bitter Sino-Soviet confrontation. Matters came to a dramatic head in 1979 when China reacted to Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia (in response to Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese villages) by sending 30 PLA divisions across the Vietnamese border to teach Hanoi a “lesson.”

Vietnam’s new game

The principal lesson learned was that the PLA did not perform well by modern military standards. Vietnam’s autonomy survived intact. During the next two decades the China-Vietnam relationship settled into a period of strategic quiescence. Both countries were absorbed with colossal tasks of economic reconstruction and development. The collapse of the Soviet Empire by the beginning of the 1990s was unnerving for both.

For Hanoi it meant the loss of a crucial benefactor that provided it with security and economic assistance. It also marked the advent of an entirely new strategic landscape dominated by the two realities of the US’ pre-eminent position as the “sole superpower” and China’s growing strength in the region where Vietnamese interests lie. Vietnam’s joining ASEAN and its growing stature in the bloc is testament to Hanoi’s ability to steer a middle course between the US and China. Hanoi’s growing rapprochement with the US, its former adversary, is the most significant manifestation of Hanoi’s adroitness in reconciling its strategic dilemma.

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