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# **Rapprochement or Resistance?**

A re-assessment of Vietnam's 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century management of Chinese  
territorial assertion in the South China Sea

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# List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zones
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party

# Chapter 1 Introduction

The People's Republic of China (hereon China) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (hereon Vietnam) share an inseparable history periodically coloured by collaboration and cordiality and by subjugation and hostility that stretches as far back as the first century BC. Armed conflict over territorial frontiers remains a stubborn feature of Sino-Vietnamese relations, with three long and bloody border wars fought in the latter century alone. It is no coincidence that the last skirmish to erupt between Hanoi and Beijing was sparked by conflicting rights in 1988 to a string of islets in the South China Sea (SCS). The resultant death of 64 Vietnamese servicemen and the Chinese capture of Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands is still considered a blow to the national pride.<sup>1</sup>

While China-Vietnam tensions at sea are hardly a novel phenomenon, in the post-war era, their overlapping declarations of territorial sovereignty in the SCS have become more than the sum of their parts. From the unification of Vietnam in 1975, they have succinctly captured the core and evolving national interests and identities; security dilemmas; domestic and economic pressures of both nations and of several other third parties at once, all within a permanent locale and without any obvious arbiter. Le Luong Minh, General-Secretary for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a former Vietnamese foreign minister was not exaggerating when he remarked that the SCS problematic is "not just about competing claims but about peace and stability in the region".<sup>2</sup>

This being the case, it seems appropriate that scholars of modern Vietnamese foreign policy and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) consistently (although not exclusively) view Vietnam's bilateral behaviour with China in the SCS as a proving ground for hypotheses seeking to explain and forecast the rationale of its foreign policy. Bouyed by the restoration of neighbourly ties with China throughout the 1990's and early 2000's many commentators in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century have been, and indeed still are, optimistic for Sino-Vietnamese relations. Evidenced by increasingly robust confrontations in the period after 2005, Vietnam's growing determination to challenge Chinese territorial affronts over the Paracel and Spratly islands has instead seen bilateral relations sour dramatically.

Many studies on SCS security to date have been preoccupied with assessing the behaviour and activity of the greater power - with some justification. But comprehending exactly why and the way in which Vietnam counters China's territorial assertiveness in the SCS now and whether it has done so peacefully can offer observers an accurate picture not simply of Vietnam's perception of itself but also of the prospects for wider regional security. Scholars must accept that to do so requires a relinquishing of certain IR narratives and orthodoxies that have worked for evaluating the conduct of other global powers in the past but are less suited to accommodate the unique domestic implications and elite-preferences behind Vietnam's foreign policy with China.

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<sup>1</sup> Staff writer. "[Vietnamese activists remember 1988 Spratly Islands clash with China](#)". *Agence France Press*, March 14, 2016. Retrieved 14.05.2016.

<sup>2</sup> Staff writer. "[ASEAN Upbeat on Progress on South China Sea](#)". *Global Times*, April 25, 2013. Retrieved 14.05.2016.

## Research objective and structure

Most realist and neo-liberalist narratives that traditionally have occupied the lion's share of literature concerning Sino-Vietnamese relations tacitly acknowledge that there have been few seismic changes to Vietnam's balance of power or material circumstance vis-à-vis China between 2000 and 2010. Undeniably though, the tense state of affairs that is obvious today, was not so at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The verdicts they reach on what appears to be a Vietnamese foreign policy in transition, converge around classical notions of dynamic hedging, and anti-China band-wagoning. These schools do not appear to satisfactorily explain the reality of Vietnam's new-found confidence to confront the longstanding Chinese presence in the SCS. One assumption that has been convenient to many such theories, as we will see, is the homogeneity and black boxing of Vietnam's single party system. Yet given the VCP's central function for Vietnamese statecraft, it seems a closer look at the impact of the political domestic landscape is warranted

This paper advocates, the uptick in SCS tensions in the mid-2000s are at least in part the outcome of a fluid construction of Vietnam's attitude towards China at the top echelons of VCP policy-making which are in turn sensitive to conflicting policy elite preferences; ideological sway; economic considerations and public sentiment.

That said, it is in addition rather than in lieu of known interests, that the complicated interplay between ideational factors and individual agents should be incorporated into the equation. To that end, this paper sets out to accomplish several things; in Chapter 3 - to offer an account of the issues at the heart of the SCS Sino-Vietnamese dispute. In Chapter 4, the purpose is to explore the VCP foreign policy process and layout evidence for a Vietnamese foreign policy in flux, outlining when and in what ways Vietnam has changed tack in its approach to China in the SCS. Finally, Chapter 5 offers an interpretive case for this transition by uncovering the conflicting perceptions and attitudes jostling to shape the country's SCS policy process with China.

## Research method

This study emphasises the causality link between factional struggle in the VCP and the strategies and of Vietnam's management of Chinese assertion in the SCS; the independent and dependent variables respectively. The time frame spans the experience of Vietnamese-Sino relations since 2000 honing in on the Vietnamese side alone. Although attention is paid primarily to events in the SCS, other realms of Vietnamese foreign affairs, for instance economic cooperation and defence spending patterns are also considered. The focus of study on this single unit adequately bound in time and space provides a clear and specific level of analysis for the research.<sup>3</sup>

On foreign policy analysis, a qualitative single case study approach is deployed primarily for its suitability in illustrating concisely the explanatory nature of events inherent in the research question and outlined in the research scope. The case study methodology also allows for direct observations

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<sup>3</sup> Klotz, A. 2009. 'Case Selection', In *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*, Klotz, A. and Prakash, D. Eds., Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, MacMillan, p. 43.

of the independent and dependent variables as well as room to build an in-depth picture of Vietnamese foreign policy “within its real-life context”<sup>4</sup>.

Both primary and secondary sources of Vietnam’s engagements with China in the SCS have been selected, the former comprising Government statements, VCP policy papers the latter comprising books and other academic works. Analysing these sources will necessitate some use of process tracing for which the single case study is also well matched.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the hypothesis hinges in short, on the expectation that infighting over priorities within the VCP is as big if not more a determinant of Vietnam’s approach to Chinese territorial aggression than rational cost benefit-seeking behaviour as seen through a rationalist lens. This statement might be falsified by the discovery of a consistent and static foreign policy that is more responsive to material self interests rather than qualitative factors like domestic pressure or and ideological values.<sup>6</sup> The theoretical thrust of the paper falls broadly under a constructivist-interpretive category of International Relations (IR) although assumptions that belong to the realist camp are too acknowledged.

Without the requirement for fieldwork, ethical considerations are unlikely to trouble the research. Secrecy in foreign policy and security affairs is endemic but doubly so in the closed communist state. Post-positivist understandings of Sino-Vietnamese relations are thus frustrated by the party’s rigid control and manipulation of information exchange. By necessity and with regret, inferences drawn from qualitative assessments of Vietnamese foreign policy are bound to contain some limitations, although not so much as to fundamentally undermine the data presented below.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

Conflicting SCS territorial claims and their impact on state-making and state strategies in Southeast Asia across the centuries has inspired a rich collection of intellectual material in Western and Asian libraries. Although the range and disposition of literature dealing with the politics of the SCS are exhaustive, many local and international (especially American) discourses share a common theme. Understanding the phenomenon of SCS disputes is very often equated to understanding - sometimes exclusively - the behaviour and status of the region’s predominant power - China. By contrast, it is not unusual for the foreign policies and sovereignty claims of smaller coastal nations, like Vietnam, to be dealt with in a chapter or two or bundled under a broad stroke ASEAN category. Whether or not this speaks more of the discipline of IR itself, theorists concerned with SCS security are much more likely to overlook the distinctive perspectives of Southeast Asian states to attend first to looming Sino-US relations. Unsurprisingly, a disproportionate volume of time and resources have been dedicated to evaluating interactions with other SCS territorial powers from the Chinese side rather than the other way around.

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<sup>4</sup> Yin, R. 2009. *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Van Evera, S. 1997. ‘What are Case Studies? How should they be performed?’ in *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a score of mainly American but also European and even fewer Vietnamese scholars and think-tank experts, many originating from government or policy fields have dominated the conversation on China and Vietnam's SCS policies. Below maps the standpoints of some of the most salient and specialised voices among their number.

One theory which has had a major influence on discussions of Sino-Vietnamese SCS friction was put forward by Virginia university's Brantly Womack in 2006, which posits that Vietnam's relationship with China has persistently been shaped by asymmetrical structures. Womack argues that "disparities in capacities create systemic differences in interests and perspectives between stronger and weaker sides"<sup>7</sup> where the greater power is by definition less likely to feel vulnerable to bilateral security threats but the inverse is true for the smaller state. Vietnam by consequence will always be more "prone to paranoia"<sup>8</sup> than its neighbour, so helping to crystallise divergent SCS threat perceptions and raise the chances for miscalculation. Normalcy in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship is as such incapable of fundamentally changing this rationale. Recalling a Waltzian world of international anarchy and relative gains, at best Vietnam is able to preserve peace and SCS stability through a combination of tried and tested coping techniques for instance delegating disputes to lower ranked officials or increasing party-to-party exchanges. Critics will note that the majority of Womack's prescriptions already exist and if anything have been fortified over time yet fail to deliver the promised affects during peaking tensions.

His interpretation was nevertheless endorsed by another realist and one of academia's most prolific Vietnam experts. U.S. policy analyst, Carlyle Thayer of the Australian Defence Force Academy believes that Vietnam has been able to ward off Chinese expansionism within its territorial claims through a paradoxical system of cooperation and struggle. Author of some of the most detailed studies on Vietnam's China-focused SCS policies to date, Thayer uses this model to explain how in the early 2000's Vietnam was able to balance and profit from warming friendships with both China and the U.S. simultaneously<sup>9</sup>. In a partial departure from Womack's theory of asymmetry, Thayer allows space for ideational politics and the domestic front albeit under the realist banner. In a 1994 paper Thayer claimed Vietnam's security dilemmas encountered in the SCS and the stability of the single-party regime are one and the same; "the ruling elites perceive the survival of their regime as being congruent with their own country's vital national security interests".<sup>10</sup> While Thayer's writings on state and VCP interests have taken a centre stage in the discourse, few peers have questioned his hypotheses or sought to thoroughly test out their assumption.<sup>11</sup> A contemporary and critical response cognisant of the ideational criteria and human agency that Thayer acknowledges is sorely needed.

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<sup>7</sup> Womack, B. 2006. *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Thayer, C. *The Tyranny of Geography*. p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Thayer, C. (1994). "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest". *Asian Survey*, 34(6), p. 524.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 525.

Founder of the Journal of Comparative Asian Development and Hong Kong based political scientist Joseph Cheng advocates what has long been a favourite realist interpretation of Vietnam's approach to China – that of “strategic hedging”<sup>12</sup>. Vietnam's desire to resist China's SCS expansionism must be calculated against its hard-won cooperative economic ties with Beijing, which ironically are supposed to act themselves as a restraining force on territorial disputes. Although Cheng is able to ontologically tell the state from the VCP, his argument, taken straight from the realist playbook, rests on the pre-eminence of regime interests<sup>13</sup>. A long and varied list of promising and alternative influencers, like historic animosity, anti-Chinese sentiment or elite preferences are overridden in Cheng's mind by the party's need to survive.

Professor at Upsalla University, Ramses Amer specialises in Southeast Asian conflict resolution and has published many insightful essays relating to Vietnam's SCS disputes with China. A 2004 and decidedly neo-liberal assessment of Sino-Vietnamese relations identified the absence of “mechanisms and principles regulating behaviour”, as the greatest incentive for Vietnam to behave more belligerently towards China. It is suspicious and contradictory that Amer negates the landmark 2002 SCS Joint Declaration on Conduct (DOC) to settle differences by negotiation<sup>14</sup> yet hails similar past affirmations as an “increasingly sophisticated and detailed conflict management scheme”.<sup>15</sup> A concurrent lull in serious SCS incidents from 2000 prompted Amer to conclude at the time that bilateral territorial disputes would subside as a security concern for Vietnam.

His optimism was shared by Ralf Emmers, Associate Dean of the S Rajaratnam School and former mentee of the late Michael Leifer, a pioneer of Southeast Asian security studies. In 2007, Emmers was responsible for an article prematurely claiming that Sino-Vietnamese institutionalised cooperation would lead to territorial contests in the SCS being “no longer perceived as a significant security flashpoint capable of undermining order in the region”.<sup>16</sup> These false hope predictions about Vietnam's actual foreign policy course with China, especially in the period after 2005 diverge from parallel developments visible at the VCP level and show the pitfalls of neglecting the impact of the domestic realm on foreign policy.

Quite the opposite and more closely attuned to events on the ground an article by Jessica Weiss and John Ciorciari at Yale University's Political Science Department, warned in 2011 that sovereignty conflicts in the SCS have caused Sino-Vietnamese tensions to escalate to their most dangerous levels since normalisation. They theorise that Vietnamese foreign policy has transitioned from strategic balancing - and the overreliance on enlisting US diplomatic support - to seek to “multilateralise” the dispute and band-wagon against China with other ASEAN partners.<sup>17</sup> Determination to make SCS territorial claims a regional rather than bilateral dispute at the 2011 East Asia Summit has been supposedly met with more success than China's contrary efforts to confine the contest. Although

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<sup>12</sup> Cheng, J. (2011). “Sino-Vietnamese Relations in the Early Twenty-first Century Economics in Command?”. *Asian Survey*, 51(2), p. 386.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 404.

<sup>14</sup> Amer, R. (2002). “The Sino-Vietnamese Approach to Managing Boundary Disputes”. *International Boundaries Research Unit: Maritime Briefing*, 3(5), p.46.

<sup>15</sup> Amer, R. (2004). “Assessing Sino-Vietnamese Relations through the management of Contentious Issues”. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 26(2), p. 334.

<sup>16</sup> Emmers, R. (2007). “The De-escalation of the Spratly Dispute in Sino-Southeast Asian Relations”. S. Rajaratnam School of International studies, Working paper series no. 129, Singapore, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Weiss, S. and Ciorciari J. (2012). “Sino Vietnamese stand off in the South China Sea”. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 13(1), p. 64.

this explanation can accommodate for adaptability in Hanoi's management of Beijing, it is an extension and circular reinforcement of what Thayer and Womack would characterise as a hard-nosed asymmetric strategy of hedging Chinese and U.S. ties.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps an accurate description of how, ultimately Weiss and Ciorari are unable to answer the more interesting question of why Vietnam has sought to expand its countering of China.

It is clear and worrying that the discourse of Vietnamese foreign policy is disproportionately dominated by American-school IR thought. So far the roster of academics offering hypotheses that can move the conversation past realist and neo-liberal perspectives is glaringly short.

One such attempt has been made unexpectedly by one of the VCP's own. Nguyen Vu Tung, former Deputy Chief at the Vietnamese Embassy in the US and current Professor at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Nguyen advocates for a constructivist re-examination of Vietnam's relation by observing its interactions with ASEAN. In a 2002 journal and again in 2007, he convincingly makes the case that Vietnam's foreign policy is crafted more than anything through, the remoulding of identities and leadership learning processes.<sup>1920</sup> His work in the Vietnamese-ASEAN field has already yielded novel information about foreign policy design inside the VCP but admittedly requires a steady flow of publicly available data that is not so forthcoming to the non-government scholar.

From David Dreyer's foreign policy analysis of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, some further innovative judgements that bridge the theoretical divide of Vietnam's orientation towards China can be drawn. His reasoning is firmly rooted in the conviction that interstate relations correlate not just with security interests but also in accordance with "issues spiral" - a dynamic and mutually iterative process in which tension increases as multiple issues accumulate.<sup>21</sup> Dreyer contends that once an initial issue disagreement is formed, an "image of the enemy".<sup>22</sup> Although it is not applied specifically to SCS tensions, his typology holds considerable value when examining Vietnam's modern sino-management policies as it is able to link separate factors such as public opinion, nationalist animosity and arms racing within one wider theory of Vietnamese foreign policy.

A 2010 paper focusing on the SCS disputes by Nguyen Nam Duong has also gone some way to addressing this gap. Vietnamese foreign policy vis-a-vis China in the SCS is not adequately characterised through the realist lens as a means of satisfying a static set of given, largely military, national interests but rather as a reflection of Vietnam's constantly remoulded national identity. Vietnamese sabre-rattling and defiance in the SCS - what scholars like Womack and Thayer might describe as part of a calculated balancing act - are better understood as the product of a cloudy mix of deep-seated ethno-cultural nationalism, pan-Southeast Asian solidarity and of resurgent socialism.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen, V. (2002). "Vietnam-ASEAN Co-operation after the Cold War and the Continued Search for a Theoretical Framework". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 24(1), pp. 113 - 115.

<sup>20</sup> Nguyen, V. (2007). "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN: A Constructivist Interpretation". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 29(3), p. 493.

<sup>21</sup> Dreyer, D. (2010). "One Issue Leads to Another: Issue Spirals and the Sino-Vietnamese War", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 6(4), p. 298.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 300.

<sup>23</sup> Nguyen, N. (2010). "Vietnamese Foreign Policy since Doi Moi: The Dialectic of Power and Identity". University of New South Wales, the Australian Defence Force Academy, pp. 94 - 125.

Absorbing the limitations of realist discourses, one concludes that what is patently missing in the Anglophone conversation on Vietnam are further alternative and current, narratives that can go beyond the strict theoretical confinements of rationalist perspectives. The urgency to do specifically for Vietnamese foreign policy what the likes of Amitav Acharya, Alexander Wendt and Barry Buzan have done for IR in the West and preeminent powers in the Far East is now great. To date only a very small collection of academics whose works are unfortunately more obscure, most perhaps not incoincidentally originating in Vietnam have responded to this call. Equipped with this pronouncement, we now push attention to the central subject of Vietnam-China affairs.

## Chapter 3 Vietnam, the South China Sea and China

### The South China Sea problem

The geography of the SCS ostensibly offers little practical utility, encompassing thousands of reefs, rocks, atolls and cays, many submerged at high tide and together comprising just 12.5 km<sup>2</sup> of naturally occurring land.<sup>24 25</sup> Perhaps it is surprising then that the heart of the SCS sovereignty dispute between China and Vietnam that in recent years has scarcely escaped monthly headlines, revolves specifically around rights to the sea's two major archipelagos; the Paracel (Hoàng Sa) Islands and Spratly (Trường Sa) Islands. These two sets of claims are highly complex, muddled by a spaghetti bowl of overlapping 3<sup>rd</sup> party claims, historical contingencies, and the elaborate provisions of the United Nations convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to which both nations are signed.

The unopposed legal or de facto control over many of the barely visible SCS islets and rocks guarantees a stake of what is a major commercial gateway and potentially rich natural resource hub. Almost 11bn barrels of unproven oil reserves are estimated to sit beneath the SCS of which up to half is thought to found off the northeast of the contested Spratly Islands.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in 2011, nearly a third of the world's crude oil and over half of all Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) passed through shipping lanes within the maritime boundaries of the Spratly Islands<sup>27</sup> along with a quarter of global trade volumes.<sup>28</sup> The littoral territories across the SCS are also abundant in fishing stocks, which contribute 8% gross value added to the Vietnamese economy every year<sup>29</sup> and account for as much

<sup>24</sup> cia.org World Factbook. "[Paracel Islands](#)". Retrieved 01.06.2016.

<sup>25</sup> See Hancox, D. and Prescott, V. (1995). "A Geographical Description of the Spratly Islands and an Account of Hydrographic Surveys Amongst Those Islands". *Maritime Briefing*. International Boundaries Research Unit. Special Issue.

<sup>26</sup> US Energy Information Administration (2013). "[Contested areas of South China Sea likely have few conventional oil and gas resources](#)".

<sup>27</sup> US Energy Information Administration (2013). "[The South China Sea is an important world energy trade route](#)".

<sup>28</sup> Glaser, B. "[Armed Clash in the South China Sea](#)". *Council on Foreign Relations*, Contingency Planning Memorandum, no. 14, April 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Vietnam Briefing. "[The Seafood Industry in Vietnam – Aquaculture, Five Year Plans, and the TPP](#)". November 4, 2015.

as one-tenth of the annual global catch.<sup>30</sup> Vietnam, China and Taiwan already claim Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and continental shelves along their SCS seabords, which according to UNCLOS permit special unilateral fishing and hydrocarbon exploration rights within and - dependent on the extent of shallow seabed - beyond 200 nautical miles (nm) from the coastal baseline. Reducing ambiguity over their claims through diplomacy, sabre-rattling tactics or in the extreme although not impossible case, by threat of brute force is therefore of critical strategic value to Vietnam and China.

It is noteworthy that the very first article of Vietnam's national constitution, revised in 2013, places special emphasis on the territorial integrity of Vietnamese coastal waters and islands.<sup>31</sup> Understanding the geopolitical dynamics and values behind this renewed commitment to advance and defend Vietnam's claims reveals clues to determining the moment and nature of Vietnam's 21<sup>st</sup> Century policy shift from rapprochement to resistance of China in the SCS.

### **The issue of claims**

Composed of 140 banks, shoals and islets about 230 nautical miles from the Vietnamese coast, Vietnam, China and Taiwan all lay claim to the entirety of the Spratly territories, although the smaller claims of three other ASEAN nations further complicate matters.<sup>32</sup> The Kalayan group of islands west of Palawan is subject to Philippine control claims while Malaysia and Brunei also assert an extended continental shelf and EEZ over Spratly features closest to their own coastal peripheries. As a result, over 40 geographical features in the Spratly Islands are reported to be occupied by five of the claimants, many staking their rights with military-purpose facilities and even an hotel.<sup>33</sup> Vietnam represents the greatest presence possessing 21 islets to China's 7.<sup>34</sup>

The Paracel islands lie 200 nautical miles equidistant between Vietnam and Chinese Hainan equalling 35 islets and shoals.<sup>35</sup> Although contested between Vietnam, China and Taiwan, they have been occupied solely by China since a short but deadly clash in 1974 saw PLAN forces repel a series of South Vietnamese troop landings. China's official stance denies the existence of there being a contest for sovereignty over the Paracels. In 2012 it upgraded Woody Island, the largest Paracel territory, to a prefecture-level municipality governed under Hainan Province.<sup>36</sup>

The completion in 1994 of Vietnam's ratification to UNCLOS and the international body's imposition of a deadline for consideration of requests for continental shelves allowed Vietnam to clarify and institutionalise its claims. In 2009, Vietnam elicited an angry response from China for submitting two requests to UNCLOS for additional continental shelves up to and beyond the Paracels and, jointly with Malaysia, for the Spratly Islands.<sup>37 38</sup> The initiative may be seen as mainly symbolic or possibly

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<sup>30</sup> Rogers, W. "The Role of Natural Resources in the South China Sea" in Cronin M., Ed., *Cooperation from Strength*, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Vietnamese Constitution 2013, Article I. English translation available at [http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/translation\\_of\\_vietnams\\_new\\_constitution\\_enuk\\_2.pdf](http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/translation_of_vietnams_new_constitution_enuk_2.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Hancox, D. and Prescott, V. "A Geographical Description of the Spratly Islands". pp. 3 – 30.

<sup>33</sup> Dzurek, D. (1995). "The Spratly Islands Dispute: Who's on First". *Maritime Briefing*, International Boundaries Research Unit, 2(1), pp. 56 – 57.

<sup>34</sup> Globalsecurity.org "[Territorial claims in the Spratly and Paracel Islands](#)". Retrieved 24.05.2016.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid at note 33.

<sup>36</sup> Staff writer, "[China establishes Sansha City](#)". *Xinhua News*, August 24, 2012

<sup>37</sup> un.org, "[Submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf](#)"

an attempt to gather international support for Vietnamese claims. This is because it is highly unlikely the collection of islands and atolls are capable of meeting the UNCLOS criteria for generating their own continental shelves or EEZs.<sup>39</sup> Yet in any case China's refusal to acknowledge the authority of the commission charged with looking at Vietnam's submissions has enabled Beijing to prolong the legally arbitrary but strategically advantageous status quo. Consequently, although never envisioned as a silver bullet, UNCLOS guidelines have had precious little impact on untangling the fundamentals of conflicting Sino-Vietnamese maritime claims.<sup>40</sup> If anything, the on-going poorly defined legal status of the islands has been a useful cover for provocative or otherwise illegal activity such as land reclamation and militarised local zones and the, particularly in the Spratly Islands.

In 2014, the Philippine Department for Foreign Affairs released imagery depicting China's now widespread endeavours to artificially enlarge its possessions in the Spratly Islands. The construction of military facilities, ports, and even a 3km air strip at Fiery Cross<sup>41</sup>, Subi and Mischief Reefs are calculated to fortify China's territorial claims rather than to secure natural resources or fishing grounds according to the Asia Maritime Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).<sup>42</sup> The US State department echoed a study by CSIS that showed that while Vietnam had too engaged in illegal island building, it gained 80 acres of new land compared to China's 3000 acres<sup>43</sup> having a much more negative effect on local marine ecosystems and the marine environment.

In the last two years, a flurry of Chinese military activity in the SCS, including the deployment of anti-ship missiles to the Paracels<sup>44</sup> and military PLAN patrols in the Spratlies has inspired a litany of increasingly intense protests from Vietnam. Their collective tone and move from multilateral legal vehicles like ASEAN or UNCLOS to unilateral threats suggest that Vietnam has reconsidered its tactics for managing Chinese territorial assertion.

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<sup>38</sup> un.org, "[Chinese response to joint submission made by Malaysia and Viet Nam to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf](#)". May 7, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Elferink, A. 2014. "*Do the coastal states in the South China Sea have a continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles?*" Roundtable South China Sea, International Law and UNCLOS, Institute for the Law of the Sea, Utrecht University

<sup>40</sup> Beckman, R. (2013). "UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea". *American Journal of International Law*, 107(1), p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> Hardy, J. and O'Conner, S., "[China completes runway on Fiery Cross Reef](#)". IHS Jane's Defence, September 25, 2015. Retrieved 13.06.16.

<sup>42</sup> Watkins, D. "[What China Has Been Building in the South China Sea](#)". New York Times, October 27, 2015. Retrieved 13.06.16.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Panda, A., "[South china Sea: China has deployed anti-ship missiles on Woody Island](#)". The Diplomat, March 26, 2016. Retrieved 13.06.16.

# The Vietnamese Communist Party and Foreign Policy Making in Vietnam

Decision-making in the communist state of Vietnam is famously opaque and intricate. For all the external and internal challenges launched against it, Vietnam is the seat of one of the most enduring and stable political regimes in Asia and one of only five remaining communist systems in the world. The orthodox assumption of many IR theorists that Vietnam can fit the single actor model has so far yielded largely one-sided and arguably out-moded interpretations for its remarkably flexible SCS policies with China. Yet since material concerns and territorial independence do undeniably sway Vietnamese strategy, an assessment searching for answers to Vietnam's changing conduct with China should look to synthesise these realist and ideational concerns. Any corresponding conclusions therefore are not complete without first lifting the lid on decision making in the Vietnamese state.

Entrenched by Article 4 of the constitution, the VCP "is the leading force of the State and society"<sup>45</sup> of Vietnam (the distinction between party and state is not made). Because all political competition is proscribed in Vietnam, the VCP proper holds absolute responsibility for guiding all national policy, foreign relations included. This does not mean however that the foreign policy process is a straightforward matter. Top decisions in Vietnam are populated, or more accurately, administered, to varying degrees and at different stages by four other main state bodies:

- The Government, serves as the executive branch of the state and is headed firstly by the President and secondly by the Prime Minister whom he appoints. It is made up of 22 ministries,<sup>46</sup> each led by a Minister of which the most important (usually the Ministers for National Defence, Public Security and Foreign Affairs) also sit on the Central Committee and an even more select few on the Politburo.
- The 498-strong National Assembly or legislature, on paper, is Vietnam's highest decision-making body, comprising elected party cadres from each of Vietnam's 64 provinces. They in turn represent and broker the full array of Vietnam's socio-economic and culturally differentiated political priorities. It holds the Prime Minister to account who in practice has final say on the day-to-day decisions of external affairs although anecdotal reports indicate this is heavily dependent on the holders' personality and leadership style<sup>47</sup>.
- At the top of the VCP, the 180-member Central Committee holds supreme power, inputting the party line in all major decisions of Vietnamese foreign policy. The Central Committee, through its various commissions oversees the practical work of government ministries, operating an executive veto power to ensure they comply with the party's official socialist ideology. The Central Committee also votes in the Politburo, an elite subunit, yet retains the right to override its decrees<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Vietnamese Constitution 2013, Article IV. English translation available at [http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/translation\\_of\\_vietnams\\_new\\_constitution\\_enuk\\_2.pdf](http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/translation_of_vietnams_new_constitution_enuk_2.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> chinhphu.vn, "[Ministries of the Vietnamese Government](#)"

<sup>47</sup> Lucius, C. 2009. *Vietnam's Political Process: How Education Shapes Political Decision Making*. Routledge, London and New York, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Abuza, Z. (2002). "The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu: Changing Rules in Vietnamese Politics".

- Observers place responsibility for executive decisions with an elite group of usually 10 – 15 high ranking party figures who make up the Politburo. Membership for the troika of Party General Secretary, President and Prime Minister is guaranteed but the overall composition, rank and size of the Politburo is determined by the Central Committee.<sup>49</sup> Following elections at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in January 2016, the Politburo comprises 19 members.<sup>50</sup> Nominally tied to the outward principle of collective decision making,<sup>51</sup> Vietnamese governance specialist Zachary Abuza claims Politburo decisions are internally reached in spite of factional infighting and ideological differences.<sup>52</sup>

An interview based study of the inner-workings of Vietnamese policy-making by Lucius Casey reported that even officials within government are not always certain as to how Vietnamese foreign policy is designed.<sup>53</sup> The constitution singles out the General Secretary, invariably expected to hold strong communist credentials, as the most powerful position. Despite serving as the nation's representative abroad, the President, ranked second, is said to hold few real powers while the pragmatic role of the Prime Minister is the third most important post.

Perhaps a technicality to foreign observers, for the Vietnamese public and National Assembly, the VCP hierarchical ranking system is highly symbolic of where power lies. Even so, the outward responsibilities and rating of Vietnam's leaders does not necessarily reflect the internal reality of foreign policy making in practice. The former and charismatic Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung for instance, a champion of liberal economic reforms and closer US ties was perceived as being a greater force than President Truong Tan Sang and was as a result, disposed of by the more stalwart VCP vanguard in 2016.<sup>54</sup> That this rating combination changes from one National Congress to the next could indicate that the VCP intermittently flit between prioritising the safeguarding of its socialist values and the prioritising of more practical economic or external security concerns.

Further detailed research would greatly benefit scholars of Vietnamese foreign policy. What this chapter aims to illustrate is simply that Vietnam's single-party system is anything but the unanimous decision-making entity so many academics have characterised it as. In light of the fact that decisions and power are concentrated within the VCP much more than in democratic systems, the nuances in Vietnam's 21<sup>st</sup> Century engagement with China from de facto ally to wary partner must be directly impinged by policy elites. The next section expounds on the changes that have occurred to make such a claim possible.

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*Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 24(1), pp. 121-145.

<sup>49</sup> Stern, L. (1993). "Renovating the Vietnamese Communist Party: Nguyen Van Linh and the Programme for Organizational Reform, 1987–91". Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 3 - 4.

<sup>50</sup> Tuoi Tre staff, "[19 members of the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress Politburo](http://tuoitre.vn)". [tuoitre.vn](http://tuoitre.vn), January 28, 2016. Retrieved 18.06.16.

<sup>51</sup> Joshi, V. "Vietnam's re-elected leader, a 71-year-old Communist Party ideologue, has made it clear that one-party rule was here to stay". USNews.com, January 27, 2016. Retrieved 15.06.16.

<sup>52</sup> Abuza, Z. "The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu".

<sup>53</sup> Lucius, C. Vietnam's Political Process, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Staff writer. "[Vietnam's prime minister looks set for exit as party leadership bid fails](http://www.reuters.com)". Reuters/The Guardian, January 26, 2016. Retrieved 15.06.16.

## From Rapprochement or Resistance

A series of smaller peaks and dives disguise a bigger curve of thawing then cooling Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Although the turn cannot perhaps be pinpointed on one event alone, below highlights how failure to resolve the SCS problematic has reversed initial predictions of economic and political cooperation. Within the last five years particularly, latent resistance and defiance in Vietnam's orientation towards China has bubbled to the surface, triggering increasingly aggressive territorial actions and reactions for both nations on the maritime frontier.

Three years after first being proposed, in November 2002 China alongside Vietnam and nine other ASEAN members signed the SCS (DOC). The DOC was a landmark multilateral agreement, in which China sacrificed its preference for bilateral frameworks for solving maritime disagreements. The DOC has never been legally binding but has been seen by politicians and scholars as a common reference point and reassuring political statement during periods of SCS Sino-ASEAN fallout.<sup>55</sup> Quick to press home the charm offensive, China and Vietnam accelerated talks of a long awaited maritime delimitation and fishing agreement in the Gulf of Tonkin, finally ratified in 2004.<sup>56</sup> In 2009 demarcations of a major land border pact on Vietnam's northern frontier were completed, closing for good, a 30 year old boundary dispute with China.<sup>57</sup>

These faith building measures taken just over a decade after official normalisation of relations in 1990, appeared to bolster what had been an incremental but sincere friendship between China and Vietnam. Within that time Vietnam had settled its war with Cambodia, removing a longstanding source of mutual mistrust, established official party-to-party meetings and succeeded in averting "extended periods of tension" in the SCS.<sup>58</sup> A joint summit in 1999 saw General Secretaries Le Kha Phieu and Jiang Zemin agreed to work towards "long-term, stable, future orientated, good-neighbourly and all-round cooperative relations".<sup>59</sup> Their words were reaffirmed again by President Tran Duc Luong in 2000 with the Joint Statement for Comprehensive Cooperation.

In 2000, China-Vietnam bilateral trade stood at \$2.5bn, already a remarkable leap from the \$32 million recorded in 1991, exploding from \$7.2bn in 2005 to \$50.1 in 2013.<sup>60</sup> This extraordinary spurt in trade volumes more than fulfilled a joint 2005 promise to double cross-border trade by 2010.<sup>61</sup> In 2004, Hanoi's active support for a milestone China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA), first advanced by China in 2002, was rewarded with Beijing's endorsement for Hanoi's accession to the

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<sup>55</sup> Buszynski, L. (2003). "ASEAN, the Declaration on Conduct, and the South China Sea". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 25(3), p. 344.

<sup>56</sup> Amer, R. and Jianwei, L. "[Maritime Delimitation in the Gulf of Tonkin is Too Important to be Ignored](#)". China US Focus, May 29, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Staff writer. "[China and Vietnam settle border dispute](#)". The New York Times, January 1, 2010. Retrieved 13.06.16.

<sup>58</sup> Amer, R. and Nguyen H. (2005). "The management of Vietnam's border disputes: What impact on its Sovereignty and Regional Integration". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 27(3), p. 433.

<sup>59</sup> Text of Joint Vietnam - China statement for comprehensive cooperation available at

<sup>60</sup> Staff writer. "[China, Vietnam find love](#)", Asia Times, July 21, 2005. Retrieved 13.06.16.

<sup>61</sup> People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "[Chinese President Hu Jintao Holds Talks with Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong](#)". July 19, 2005. Retrieved 22.06.16.

World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the mutual recognition of both countries as “market economies”.<sup>62</sup> In a clear indication of rejuvenated Sino-Vietnamese camaraderie, the same year, China expanded its ‘Early Harvest Programme’ to Vietnam. Economic initiatives for cooperation were boosted still in 2005 when \$1bn worth of Sino-Vietnamese commercial deals were signed on the back of President Luong’s second state visit to China.<sup>63</sup>

These stepping stones were justifiably taken as evidence that Vietnam was relegating its territorial disputes with China for the sake of diplomatic and economic cooperation by a handful of authoritative figures, including Ramses Amer, Carlyle Thayer and Stein Tønnesson. Outward amity however belied stirring disquiet inside and outside the party where internal suspicion of Beijing’s emboldened fishing activity in the Gulf of Tonkin and military gesturing in the Spratly and Paracel Islands remained high. From the point of normalisation, Vietnam’s commitment to its SCS claims has continued to be unwavering but with some exceptions, carefully checked so as not to derail the economic and party legitimacy rewards of cooperating with China. After 2005 however and despite the mounting collection of collaboration pacts and economic agreements, Vietnam in rhetoric and policy has gone out of its way much more to vocalise and push back on its territorial interests. By deliberate calibration or reactionary accident, Hanoi’s recent management of China in the SCS suggests a shift in strategic tack.

Even as Vietnamese officials busied themselves with delegation exchanges and diplomatic restoration with China, during talks of the boundary terms of the maritime delimitation in 2000, opinion that Vietnam was being too lenient were widespread in the national media. Angered by small-scale incidents at sea and deep seated mistrust, attacks were directed namely at then General Party Secretary Le Kha Phieu.<sup>64</sup> Although the precise terms of the Gulf of Tonkin Agreement have never been made public, a comprehensive spatial study of the agreement by academics at Durham University reveals China gained approximately 3200 nautical miles beyond the natural line of equidistance, for which the authors have no ready explanation.<sup>65</sup> Already seen as the architect of Vietnam’s rejuvenated pro-Beijing policies, rumours in Vietnam’s diplomatic circles that Phieu had instructed negotiators to concede territory in the Gulf of Tonkin prompted party delegates to hastily ditch him in the wake of the VCP’s ninth Congress in 2001.<sup>66</sup>

In 2005, the VCP Central Committee’s 4<sup>th</sup> plenum seized the initiative to restake its sovereignty rights in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, unveiling a plan for their economic development with the “Maritime Strategy Towards the Year 2020” a move guaranteed to provoke consternation from China.<sup>67</sup> Chinese pressure to sabotage the involvement of foreign companies in the project were publicly ignored by Vietnam but surely discussed in private.<sup>68</sup> Partners or not, Thayer believes from this point it became clear to Hanoi that any attempt it made to press home its claims would always

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<sup>62</sup> Kim, Y. 2010. *Chinese Global Production Networks in ASEAN*, Springer, p. 195.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. at note 62.

<sup>64</sup> Tønnesson, S. (2003). “Sino-Vietnamese Rapprochement and the South China Sea Irritant”. *Security Dialogue*, 34(1) p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> Hancox, D. and Prescott, V. “A Geographical Description of the Spratly Islands”, p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> Thayer, C. (2002). “Vietnam in 2001: The Ninth Party Congress and After”. *Asian Survey*, 42(1), p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> Dang, H. “[The East Sea and Vietnam’s maritime strategy towards 2020](#)”. VNeconomy.vn, January 29 2012. Retrieved 15.06.16.

<sup>68</sup> Staff writer. “[Vietnam Signals it Wants Exxonmobil Deal Despite China Warning](#)”. Agence France Press, July 24, 2008. Retrieved 17.06.16.

be “hostage to China's opposition”, but stopped short of spelling out what the implications on existing policy were.<sup>69</sup>

He need not have bothered for in 2007, a tally of China-instigated actions which compounded an already heightened sense of Vietnamese threat perception, jolted Vietnam to up the ante. The unilateral Chinese declaration that it would officially administer the Paracels and Spratlies via Hainan<sup>70</sup> was punctuated with several daring PLAN naval exercises in the vicinity and the proliferating harassment of Vietnamese fisherman allegedly within Vietnam's EEZ. Vietnam responded forcefully, announcing a wholesale refurbishing of its military forces. Between 2004 and 2013, Vietnam inflated its defence expenditure by 113%, the largest increase of any ASEAN member<sup>71</sup>. The Vietnam Ministry of Defence also closed a deal worth \$3.2bn with Russia in 2009 to take delivery of 6 Kilo-Class submarines by 2017, a big ticket programme to deter China's expeditionary naval capabilities.<sup>72</sup> From 2009, Hanoi has also openly courted military cooperation with Washington, inviting annual naval simulations with the U.S. Navy around the port of Danang and aligning strongly with anti-China US statements.<sup>73</sup>

In the run up to 2010 cooperation between Vietnam and China began to fade more evidently. Engagements in the DOC framework disintegrated (a China-ASEAN DOC working group were reported to have met only four times by this point)<sup>74</sup> while Vietnam used its 2010 Chairship of ASEAN to condemn China's SCS activities and drive the issue to the top of the agenda. In retaliation for China leaking that the SCS constituted one of its core national interests<sup>75</sup>, in 2011, Vietnam took the decision to formally call out Beijing's activity in the SCS archipelagos as a major national security threat.<sup>76</sup> The upgrade was commensurate with a Central Committee-issued maritime security document the same year, outlining concrete defence measures to protect Vietnam's territorial stakes in the SCS, unquestionably targeted at Beijing. In a sign of political cohesion, the National Assembly passed the Law of the Sea in 2012 to rebuff Chinese territorial claims. Viewed largely as a public relations exercise to appease escalating pressure at home, the move was immediately met with anger from China who responded by promptly raising the administrative status of the Spratly and Paracels from county to prefecture rank.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Thayer, C. (2010). “Vietnam and Rising China: The Structural Dynamics of Mature Asymmetry”. *Southeast Asian Affairs*, p. 402.

<sup>70</sup> Elleman, B. 2009. ‘Maritime territorial disputes and their impact on maritime strategy: A Historical Perspective’ In *Security and International Politics in the South China Sea: Towards a Cooperative Management regime*, Eds., Bateman, S. and Emmers, R., Routledge, London and New York, p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> Hiebert, M. and Nguyen, P. “[Vietnam ramps up defense spending but its challenges remain](#)”. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 18, 2015. Retrieved 18.05.2016.

<sup>72</sup> Staff writer. “[Vietnam's Restocking: Subs, Ships, Sukhois, and Now Perhaps F-16s and P-3s?](#)”. *Defense Industry Daily*, May 27, 2016. Retrieved 18.05.2016.

<sup>73</sup> Staff writer. “[US Vietnam naval exercises begun amid SE Asian tension](#)”. *Bloomberg News*, April 8, 2014. Retrieved 19.05.2016.

<sup>74</sup> England, V. “[Why are South China Sea tensions rising?](#)”. *BBC News*, September 3, 2010. Retrieved 20.05.2016.

<sup>75</sup> Yoshihara, T. and Holmes, J. (2011). “Can China Defend a “Core Interest” in the South China Sea?”. Center for Strategic and International Studies, *The Washington Quarterly*, 34(2), p. 45.

<sup>76</sup> Nguyen, V. (2010). “Asia Pacific Countries' Security Outlook and Its Implications for the Defense Sector”. *Japan National Institute for Defense Studies*, p. 113.

<sup>77</sup> Brown, M. “[Tension Mounts Between Vietnam, China](#)”. *Voanews.com*, June 28, 2012. Retrieved 20.05.2016.

The biggest break in Sino-Vietnamese friendship came in 2014 after China floated the state-owned, Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig into Vietnam's EEZ off the southern tip of the Paracels. The manoeuvre might have been part of a SCS grand strategy to intimidate Vietnam or possibly a cynical gambit to create friction ahead of the incoming CPV elections. Irrespective, a public backlash at home resulted in a string of government-approved and well publicised anti-China protests across the country. The ensuing riots around Saigon which led to the burning of Chinese-owned factories was an unusually violent outburst and almost definitely not sanctioned by Hanoi.<sup>78</sup> The additional gutting of Taiwanese and Singaporean factories caught in the cross-fire was an immense embarrassment for the Government and justified a furious reaction from Beijing.

## Chapter 5 Explaining Vietnam's management of China in the SCS

The PRC has expressed its rights to the Spratly Islands and particularly, the Paracels in a consistent manner since almost its very creation in 1949. It has held fast to an ambiguous but (for Vietnam) antagonising "9 dashed" map even throughout a period of relatively relaxed and even strengthening bilateral relations. Notwithstanding China's swift arrival on the global stage, and its growing levels of economic interdependence with Vietnam, there does not appear to have been any cataclysmic reorientation of the China-Vietnam balance of power. China for instance has and will remain for many decades to come, the vastly superior military and economic player and Vietnam the vastly inferior to this asymmetric relationship. How therefore are we to explain the renewed tendency displayed in the mid-2000s by Vietnam to confront China's sovereignty claims and risk destabilising what has been by in large a mutually beneficial system of cooperation for Vietnam.

The key lies, as this paper has argued in understanding the interplay between Vietnam's domestic and foreign policy sphere. Classical perspectives, as we have seen, have proven unable to properly incorporate the role of the VCP without first constructing a rigid and well-worn rationalist definition of ends that makes no distinction between the party's and the state's national interests. In *Kissing Cousins: Nationalism and Realism* for instance, John Mearsheimer is adamant that foreign policy elites do not have a say on the direction of foreign policy arguing the specific interests of individuals are outmatched by the power of 'national identity' and 'common destiny' to survive.<sup>79</sup> John Owen's celebrated 'ideas-power nexus' goes as far as to say that ideas and values like 'cultural autonomy' or the desire for 'self-government' are at play in international politics.<sup>80</sup> These are at best however either consciously or unconsciously accompanied by the inevitable hard or soft power interests of the state. Consequently, the aggregated preferences of decision-makers, expressed foremost via the

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<sup>78</sup> Staff writer. "Vietnam detains hundreds after riots targeting Chinese businesses". The Guardian, May 22, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Mearsheimer, J. (2011). "*Kissing Cousins: Nationalism and Realism*", unpublished essay, University of Chicago.

<sup>80</sup> Owen, J. (2012). "*The Ideas-Power Nexus*", Yale Journal of International Affairs, p. 18

“right to an independent statehood” only have political significance in the international not the domestic arena.<sup>81</sup>

When applied to the experience of Vietnam, these enduring realist interpretations of foreign policy making signal the triumph of *realpolitik* over the many components that make up the VCP making the exercise appear redundant. It is not surprising then that few scholars concerned with Vietnamese foreign policy have bothered to appropriate existing theory.

But if these theories were true, we might expect to see examples of Vietnam continuing to exhibit a cool but measured and unified commitment to balance or as Thayer reminds us, to cooperate and struggle rather than to doggedly pursue one priority with China above the other for long periods. We have already witnessed the intricacies and nuances of decision-making within the VCP and how assumptions of homogeneity are askew from the practical reality of Vietnamese politics. With that in mind, Vietnam’s recent turn of resistance to Chinese power in the maritime zone can ultimately, only be explained not as the result of a carefully calculated balancing act as classical schools would have it, but rather as an improvised product of a single party state system divided among itself. We now need to draw on alternative theories to infuse with and ground the observations on Vietnam’s SCS conduct we see occurring beneath the state level.

The importance of domestic factors for a state’s foreign policy has been expounded on by a long list of academics who identify political accountability, mass opinion and election cycles as implicating executive strategies. The VCP may not be worried by elections or political scrutiny in the same way Western democracies are, but as the sole representative of the state and its citizens, the VCP must still broker foreign policies that both enhance its international standing and consolidate legitimacy at home. This must be the case in the sight of both ideologically-vested party elites and the nations’ provincially elected lawmakers for the VCP to fulfil its obligations. Viewed this way, foreign policy need not simply be a blunt tool for capturing given national-interests but also a means of cementing governance at home and protecting national constructions of Vietnam’s socialist heritage.

Peter Katzenstein explains that investigating the identity and values of policy elites is critical because the state is inherently a social not rational actor – equally malleable by interactions in the domestic and international realm.<sup>82</sup> “Social rules and conventions”<sup>83</sup> govern self-interests and motivate actors at the sub-state level for which Vietnam’s reignited nationalism-oriented foreign policy towards China is a case in point. Jack Snyder and Karen Ballantine’s “marketplace of ideas” theory is too highly applicable to Sino-Vietnamese relations. The paradigm depicts a contest between opposing domestic groups to dominate the popular narrative. It holds valuable explanatory power for how and why factions within the VCP are simultaneously mobilised to embrace and confront China in the nation’s foreign policy direction.<sup>84</sup>

In 2015, in the wake of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 standoff, the Pew Research Centre found that Vietnamese public opinion of China at 19% was the lowest of all 10 Asian nations surveyed save for

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. pp. 16-22.

<sup>82</sup> Katzenstein, P. 1996. (Ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 12.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>84</sup> Snyder, J. and Ballentine, K. “Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas”. *International Security*, 21, p. 11.

Japan's 9% and well under the 57% average Asian approval ratings<sup>85</sup>. Due to a gap in historical data, these indicators do not, on their own allow us to draw out correlation patterns with China or Vietnam's behaviour over time. They are nevertheless proof of the domestic pressures under which VCP politicians operate.

An insightful article compiled by political intelligence firm Stratfor reported that growing anti-China sentiment has been mirrored among certain factions within the top of the VCP and Government. It claimed that since 2006 especially and the entry of Prime Minister Dung, Vietnam's senior leadership could be approximately divided into two broad camps.<sup>86</sup> On the one side, pro-Western and economic reformists (until his departure in 2016, led by PM Dung) have been against acquiescing to Beijing's flexing in the SCS. On the other side, a pro-China conservative grouping can be identified, generally thought of as preferring ideological solidarity with China and concerned more with VCP regime stability. This faction was represented by former General Secretary Nong Duc Manh (oft rumoured to be the son of Vietnam's founder Ho Chi Minh)<sup>87</sup> and since 2011 by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. To this characterisation can be added, a moderate wing of general improvers formerly overseen by ex-President Truong Tan Sang.

In 2011, a BBC article hinted at internal struggle within the VCP and rivalry between President Sang and Prime Minister Dung. Both are southerners and have been portrayed as being pitted against, General Secretary Trong, a northerner. This revelation coincided with Vietnam's heating confrontations of China and a surge of the reformist wing which Stratfor attributed to economic growth in the south and a spike in nationalist sentiment. It is widely believed that Trong's background as a loyal communist and party member for 50 years makes him at least ideologically sympathetic towards Beijing and has as a result led to perceptions of him being too soft amid SCS clashes.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, during his tenure, Prime Minister Dung enacted a series of economic reforms aimed at drawing EU and US finance and is credited with having championed Vietnam's inclusion in the U.S. Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Amid the Haiyang 981 incident, of all the VCP troika, Dung took the most nationalist stance, striking a chord with the the public. Dung's domestic popularity for his anti-China responses also helped him weather two VCP attempts to unseat him. His ideological angst at China could also explain the PM's ardent backing for Vietnam's military upgrade programme. The pro-West emphasis placed on statecraft over socialist ideology during the period of frayed relations with China was further believed to resound with the composition of the Central Committee.

Vietnamese leaders are torn between instinctively, almost by requirement, being sensitive to signs of Chinese expansionism across the seaboard but also paying homage to the ideological bondship and economic exchange with their communist neighbour. Although the exact ratios these factors hold over Vietnam's management of China may never be scientifically quantified, suffice it to say that together they have been key determinants for Vietnam's increasingly incensed responses to Chinese territorial assertiveness during the last decade.

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<sup>85</sup> Pew Research Center, "[How Asians Rate China, India, Pakistan, Japan and the U.S](#)", July 11, 2014

<sup>86</sup> Stratfor Intelligence, "Vietnam: Cautious, but Unpredictable in a Crisis", January 12, 2016

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, K. "[We don't want to keep secrets anymore](#)". TIME, January 22, 2002

<sup>88</sup> Tomiyama, A. and Nagai, O. "[China's Xi looks to ease territorial tension with Vietnam visit](#)", Asian Nikkie Review, November 16, 2015

## Conclusion

The “tyranny of geography”<sup>89</sup> and age-old cultural ties mean that for Vietnam and the VCP, appropriately dealing with its powerful and ascending neighbour has always and will continue to be a chief if not the primary foreign policy concern.

China and Vietnam began 2000 on friendly terms, raising hopes for the realisation of steadying bilateral ties and potentially the addressing or even resolution of longstanding overlapping SCS sovereignty claims. Yet by 2005 signs emerged that economic links and political goodwill were insufficient to prevent a downward spiral that has in recent years been at the same time symptomatic of and incentive for a defiant recalibration in Vietnam’s approach towards China.

Originally vested in collaborative foreign and economic policies, Vietnam has over time come to rely less on the security of China’s words, putting itself on the strategic front foot as it grapples to contain expanding perceived challenges to its territorial integrity. Conditioned by a long and carefully fashioned national memory of both Chinese aggression and assistance, the assurances of Sino-Vietnamese summits; regular state visits, and ACFTA have not been enough to dispel fears of a hegemon bent on regional domination during the last few years.

The relative dearth in up-to-date studies of Vietnam’s management of sovereignty issues with China and Vietnamese-centric SCS research may already be stemming valuable insights into appropriate and effective peace building measures.

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<sup>89</sup> Thayer, C. (2011). “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea”. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 33(3), p. 348.

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