

BROTHERS IN ARMS: NO MORE? PARTY TO PARTY RELATIONS IN SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

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SUMMARY

The paper takes a closer look at the relations between Communist Parties in China-Vietnam relations. Both governments follow the same model of a Leninist structure of government; however, despite the cultural and geographical proximity, this does not translate into close, cordial relations formed as a strategic ideological community. Following the aforementioned assumption, the paper investigates party-to-party relations. These are understood in the contexts of ideological community, a strategic channel for communication, as a means of penetrating and forming the opinions of party members, and as a crisis and public opinion management mechanism. Discussing the local party-to-party relations the paper argues that the major factor behind the relations is the international one of the Chinese currency RMB through cross-border trade.

INTRODUCTION

The current stage of Vietnam's relationship with China began with the full normalization of relations in November 1991, which put an end to over a decade of animosity following the dramatic deterioration of bilateral relations in the late 1970s, which culminated in the 1979 border war. Taking this historical perspective as the starting point we can discuss the basic rationale of party-to-party relations at two levels: central and local. In order to address the complexity of the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of Vietnam the paper discusses the basic features of both sides' relations. The first part characterizes the central level party-to-party relations in the contexts of ideological

community, a strategic channel for communication, as a means of penetrating and forming parties' members' opinions, and as a crisis and public opinion management mechanism. Discussing the local party-to-party relations the paper argues that the major factor behind the relations is the international one of the Chinese currency RMB through cross-border trade.

THE MEANING OF PARTY-TO-PARTY RELATIONS SINCE NORMALIZATION

In September 1991, the leadership of the CPV flew to Chengdu to reconcile with the Chinese leadership. Shockingly, Beijing turned down the Vietnamese proposition for a socialist alliance, as, according to Carlyle A. Thayer, it no longer considered ideology "*the defining factor of its foreign policy*" and had no desire to re-fight the Cold War. The CCP officials told their Vietnamese counterparts that they regarded the two states "comrades but not allies". Still, the Vietnamese heavyweights believed that comradeship mattered in Sino-Vietnamese relations due to the shared threat of 'velvet revolutions'. The meeting led to talks about Cambodia, which culminated in the Paris Peace Agreement in October 1991. More importantly, in November 1991, the two governments re-established diplomatic ties.

The Normalisation led to establishing party-to-party dialogues and increased exchanges of delegation at all levels, becoming a unique feature of Vietnam's relations with China. The first decade since the Normalisation saw at least 18 meetings between senior Vietnamese and Chinese party and state leaders, aimed at fostering cooperation and resolving "*historical differences*". During the February 1999 summit of the parties in Beijing, the two Party general secretaries, Le Kha Phieu and Jiang Zemin, adopted the 16-word guideline calling for "*long-term, stable, future-orientated, good-neighbourly and all-round cooperative relations*". In December 2000, when Zemin visited Hanoi, both sides adopted a Joint Statement for Comprehensive Cooperation. On his second visit in 2002, Zemin called Vietnam and China '*good neighbours, good friends, good comrades, and good partners*'. Six years later the visit of the CPV's General Secretary Nong Duc Manh to Beijing at the invitation of Hu Jintao, raised bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. It was also at the invitation of the CC of the CPV, that in 2011 Xi Jinping, then a vice-president and member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, visited Vietnam for the first

time. Furthermore, the CPV-CCP relationship developed beyond the leaders' level with the creation of a dense network between their respective Central Committee departments and other party institutions. For instance, in 2005, the CPV and CCP inaugurated an annual series of seminars on party ideology. What should be noted the party-to-party relations also relate to military exchanges, as both parties maintain political control over their armed forces, creating an avenue of defence cooperation through their respective political departments. Overall, according to the International Department of the CCP (IDCCP), there were 121 contacts between the CPV and its Chinese counterpart in 2002-2017, making Vietnamese communists the CCP's top foreign partner.

There are several reasons behind the establishment of such robust party-to-party relations between Vietnam and China. Firstly, the frequent contacts are simply reflections of the history of inter-party relations, a shared political system and values. The CCP and CPV are in a similar situation vis-à-vis their domestic and international environment. In both China and Vietnam, the party controls state administration, the army and mass organisation, penetrating each of these institutions through party cell and committees. Their ideology is built on a commitment to a mix of communist principles and nationalist rhetoric.

Both parties base their legitimacy on promoting economic growth, achieved through "opening and integration" with the global economy, and prioritise the betterment of their citizens' lives over political reforms.

In fact, the number one priority of the CCP and CPV is preserving domestic stability and their one-party rule. Furthermore, the conservative elements of both the CCP and the CPV have viewed the U.S. and other Western powers as sources of ideological sedition and threats to Party rule. Given their history of past solidarity, they consider themselves allies against domestic and international subversion. Thus, despite the Vietnamese embracement of the foreign policy of multilateral agreements and diversification, China is accorded by many CPV apparatchiks the status of the most important partner, and the party-to-party network is seen as the most important venue for pursuing this relationship.

Secondly, the party-to-party meetings form a part of Vietnam's direct engagement strategy, aimed at growing various bilateral mechanisms to build mutual trust and nurture cooperation, thus shaping China's behaviour. The high-level meetings led to the adoption of guidelines to manage bilateral relations and deadlines for lower officials to settle particular disputes. In essence, the CPV's leadership sought to neutralise disputes by "*containing them within specific channels of dialogue*". For instance, by emphasising common interests in securing a stable and safe land border, such as the growth of cross-border trade, Hanoi obtained a Chinese agreement to relegate the issue to technical working groups with a deadline set for the end of the decade. As a result, Vietnam and China were able to settle their long-standing disputes over the land and maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1999 and 2000.

Thirdly, party-to-party contact is a traditional foreign policy tool used by the CCP to extend its influence. Historically, the IDCCP has been the key but often overlooked actor in China's foreign policy since the 1950s.

Over decades it has built a broad network of contacts with more than 400 parties in over 160 countries, holding inter-party meetings, providing training, and sponsoring party schools abroad.

Its activities served to promote Beijing's interests, project a positive image of China and share experiences of China's party-based regime in the context of economic reforms. This venue provides several advantages over state-to-state contact, as it allows engagement with influential political actors outside traditional diplomacy, and its usage increased drastically under Xi Jinping. While in the post-Cold War period, CCP's party diplomacy expanded to movements of all ideological stripes and geographical locations, it is still primarily focused on the single-party Communist regimes in Asia, such as Vietnam, Laos and North Korea. As mentioned above, the CPV is the IDCCP's top partner, with cadre training taking place regularly since 2010 under an established cooperative framework. Through the relationship, China is regularly kept abreast of the latest political developments in Vietnam. For instance, immediately following its 11th National Congress, the CPV sent a special envoy to Beijing to report on the event and invite General Secretary Hu Jintao to visit Vietnam. Similarly, in April 2021 Song Tao, the head of the IDCCP, held a

videoconference with his Vietnamese counterpart Li Waizhong on the outcome of the 13th CPV National Congress. Ideologically, it allows Beijing to popularise its policy model, as Vietnam's development trajectory borrows heavily, though not exclusively, from China's "reform and opening-up". In fact, in June 2000, 16 senior Vietnamese officials travelled to China to receive unpublicised lessons on reforming a socialist economy without losing party control.

Fourthly, the Party-to-Party channel operates as a crisis and public opinion management mechanism.

The bumps in Sino-Vietnamese relations, especially those involving security issues and heightened public opinion, are often handled through party lines rather than governmental contacts.

It is not a coincidence that it took a delegation of the CPV leadership in 1991 to end a decade-long crisis in relations after months of diplomatic talks failed to bring a breakthrough. In 2011, when the cutting of seismic cables of Vietnamese ships by Chinese boats in the disputed part of the South China Sea caused months-long protests on the streets of Hanoi, the tensions eased as a result of the high-level visit by CPV's General Secretary to Beijing, which produced a bilateral agreement on handling maritime disputes. Finally, following the 2014 oil rig incident, the most significant crisis since the Normalisation, Sino-Vietnamese relations were restarted by the visit of the CPV's special envoy, standing secretary of the Secretariat of the Party's CC and member of the pro-China faction, Lê Hồng Anh, to Beijing. His meeting with Xi Jinping began a robust series of high-level party-to-party exchanges aimed at rebuilding political trust based on a shared communist legacy. The party diplomacy culminated in Xi Jinping's November 2015 trip to Hanoi, the first visit of the CCP's General Secretary to Vietnam in a decade, during which a consensus on regional affairs and deepening of the Sino-Vietnamese partnership was reached. Moreover, as noted by Bill Hayton, the crisis was immediately followed by the 10th CCP-CPV "theory seminar", held in Vietnam and attended by Politburo members responsible for ideology and propaganda on both sides, which points to the use of such events for "managing" public opinion over the dispute.

LOCAL PARTY-TO-PARTY RELATIONS

In the context of cross border, party-to-party relations Guangxi Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province's governments are responsible for organizing specialized training for local organizations from Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, providing knowledge on China's political system and China's model, RMB currency and banking system, supporting scientific bodies dedicated to studying the development in cross-border areas as well as promoting Chinese culture. The governments and party structures from Kunming and Nanning are establishing a model that widens cooperation between China and ASEAN.

The relations between Guangxi AR and the four Vietnamese provinces of Cao Binh, Lang Son, Quang Ninh and Ha Giang provide an example of this cooperation's management and navigation by the upper level - not from the governmental cycles but from the International Departments of both communist parties. As argued by the Chinese, this formula allows both sides to reach consensus and build relations based on mutual non-interference principles and a consultative form of policy-making. Party cooperation is seen as the precondition for further economic and strategic engagements. Going further, the cooperation between local party schools - e.g. the party school of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Baise City Cadre Academy in Guangxi¹ which is responsible for providing special training for officials in the four border provinces of Vietnam - was a sign of the growing role of party-to-party relations. This resulted in the signing of the official party-to-party cooperation known as the "Agreement on Carrying out Cadre Training Cooperation" signed by the four border provinces of Guangxi and Vietnam, and strengthening the exchanges between party committees at all levels, especially between the Departments of Discipline and Inspection, Organization and Propaganda.

Apart from the official cooperation, Chinese local party leaders are in charge of one-side actions mainly organized by local propaganda departments from provincial to the county level. Beginning in 1980, a number of broadcast stations and broadcasting points along the border between China and Vietnam have been established in Guangxi. They broadcast two to three times a day in Vietnamese and Zhuang dialects for 30 to 60

¹ Baise Cadre College is located in Baise City, Guangxi, an old revolutionary area, on the banks of the Youjiang River and Sixian Lake.

minutes each time. The content of radio broadcasts has changed over time and official slogans and policies. Nevertheless, once the State Council approved Guangxi Radio in 1984 the main purpose of enhancing the friendship between the people of China and Vietnam remains unchanged.

The aforementioned local interactions result in more practical consideration, from the Chinese side of course.

The internationalization of RMB plays a critical role in shaping local to local relations. The local banks and the PBOC branch in the two provinces steered trade policy towards transaction settlements in RMB, with 95 per cent of border trade being settled in the Chinese currency.

As indicated by the Chinese side, the domination of RMB facilitates trade but also infiltrates the markets of partner countries. RMB has become somewhat of a de facto currency in the border areas of Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. The RMB circulation area generally covers 70 – 180 km inside the countries' borders but in some cases can extend as far as 300 kilometres. In Shan state the RMB has actually become the de facto currency, replacing the Burmese official currency, the Kyat. The Chinese currency may bring stability to the border regions and minimize anti-Chinese sentiment on the micro-scale, as well as controversies over sovereignty with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. Cross-border trade between Vietnam, Laos and China is settled in RMB and in a very organic way, rearranges national borders and creates space for Chinese domination. In 2018 the State Bank of Vietnam announced that all those engaged in cross-border trade were authorized to use the yuan, or the Vietnamese dong, to settle transactions. But the RMB dominates the market. This process will deepen further with the digitalization of the Chinese currency in foreign areas, and constitute a threat to neighbouring countries' sovereignty.

CONCLUSIONS

As the paper has indicated, the Vietnamese side, especially at the local level, needs to closely monitor China's activities. The party-to-party channels serve as the vehicle for strengthening informal relations (known in China as *guanxi*) and influence the

Vietnamese approach towards China. In other words, the Communist Party of Vietnam faces the dilemma of having close relations and being economically dependent on China and securing the country's sovereignty. This sovereignty might be threatened by step-by-step dependency on the Chinese currency especially in the cross-border areas and promoting of China model through contacts between International Departments of the communist parties. The situation with China and the need for balancing the growing party-to-party relations will push the government in Hanoi towards closer engagement with the United States, and Vietnam might informally join American initiatives in Southeast Asia.

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