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VIETNAMESE PUBLIC OPINION AND SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

Waldemar Jaszczyk

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SUMMARY

The study examines the influence of new actors in Vietnamese domestic politics on Hanoi's relations with China. It traces the emergence of the Vietnamese political society in the aftermath of the Doi Moi reforms that came to challenge the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) 's grip on power, and the foundations of the mono-organisational socialist system that the Party had established. Taking this as a starting point, the paper examines the impact of the new actors' pressure on the CPV's decision-making in relation to the most domestically controversial issues in Sino-Vietnamese relations: Chinese economic presence in Vietnam and the South China Sea Dispute. It finds that, while in the former, the political society succeeded in pressuring Hanoi to limit opportunities for Chinese investments in the country, it failed to compel the CPV to adopt a more aggressive stance vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea dispute.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, Sino-Vietnamese relations have become a prime case study of the influence that the nationalistic public has over the state's foreign policy in authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, the Vietnamese authorities are acutely aware of the asymmetrical nature of its relationship with China. While Vietnam's population of 96 million is the 15th largest globally, it is only roughly the size of two adjacent Chinese provinces, Guangxi and Yunnan. Despite an average growth of over 6% since 1991, its GDP accounts for only 3% of China's GDP. Moreover, Vietnam's commerce with its northern neighbour stands for 22% of its total trade, making it Vietnam's biggest trading partner, whereas, for Beijing, Hanoi is a significant but not major trading partner at 2.4%

of total trade, the same as Malaysia. Lastly, notwithstanding spending more than twice as much of its GDP on the military than China on a per capita basis, Vietnam's military budget is estimated at less than 1% of China's.

Thus, Vietnam is structurally far more exposed to China, both in terms of risk and opportunity, than China is to Vietnam. Hanoi learned this the hard way during the Cold War, when its northern neighbour turned from its biggest benefactor during the Vietnam War to its greatest enemy following the 1979 conflict, leading to a decade of border clashes, economic devastation and international isolation. Following the Normalisation, the CPV has conducted Vietnam's foreign policy accordingly, carefully navigating the contentious points in the bilateral relationship. While there have been many tensions between China and Vietnam since 1991, especially over the islands in the South China Sea, Hanoi did not allow them to sour the overall relationship. Instead, it sought to engage with Beijing in several ways, establishing party-to-party channels, defence focused-dialogues and a hotline between the two countries' top leaderships. By compartmentalising the contentious issues, the Southeast Asian nation, for a time, successfully cooperated with China on other fronts, from economic development and infrastructure to education and political dialogues.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese public, emboldened by the socio-political changes associated with Doi Moi liberalisation, has become a driving anti-Chinese force. In the last three decades, political society has become a significant player in Vietnamese domestic politics, often challenging the CPV's decisions and its grip on power. The upsurge of organisational activities, the popularisation of social media, the shift in the base of CPV's legitimacy and open elite factionalism have weakened the foundations of the mono-organisational socialist system established in the Cold War period. These developments, in turn, provided an outlet for increasing anti-China nationalism, fuelled by recent Chinese efforts to solidify sovereignty over its South China Sea claims and perceived attempt to dominate Vietnam economically. Beijing's behaviour reaffirmed Vietnamese citizens' perception of China as an assertive and expansionist northern neighbour, leading to frequent and widespread protests and public campaigns to press the CPV's decision-making vis-à-vis China.

To examine whether anti-China protests have shifted Vietnamese foreign policy towards China, this article traces the emergence of the Vietnamese political society in the aftermath of the Doi Moi reforms that came to challenge the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) 's grip on power and the foundations of the mono-organisational socialist system that the Party had established. Taking this as a starting point, the paper examines the impact of the new actors' pressure on the CPV's decision-making in relation to the most domestically controversial issues in Sino-Vietnamese relations: Chinese economic presence in Vietnam and the South China Sea Dispute.

POST-1986 DEVELOPMENTS IN VIETNAMESE DOMESTIC POLITICS

Prior to its economic opening in 1986, the CPV had absolute control over the domestic situation, which had no significant impact on Hanoi's foreign relations. An independent civil society was virtually non-existent, as all mass and people's organisations, from the central to the village levels, were state-controlled and state-funded. They existed under the framework of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, with their leaders serving on the CPV's Central Committee.

The Party took advantage of its tight grip on people's mobilisation to control and suppress social sentiments such as popular nationalism.

The Vietnamese communists during the Cold War indeed used it to shore up their domestic legitimacy and popularity by shaping public imagination to identify the nation with the CPV. However, while pursuing the double mission of national liberation and socialist revolution, the Party always emphasised the latter and was willing to suppress nationalist sentiment when necessary. This met anti-China feeling, encouraged in the aftermath of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War when the CPV decided to reconcile with Beijing in 1991. Immediately following the Normalisation, it was suppressed by the state and party apparatus.

The Doi Moi reforms had a transformational impact on state-society relations, weakening the VCP's political grip on society. Firstly, the economic opening led to an upsurge of organisational activities at all levels of Vietnamese society, undermining the mono-organisational socialist system. While Hanoi sought development assistance from his new

partners and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in order to modernise, the bottom-up approach adopted by the foreign aid agencies created a breathing space for civil society by privileging domestic NGOs. The resulting growth of community-based organisations far outpaced the government's ability to develop a regulatory framework, with many allowed to operate semi-independently of the state as long as their activities did not touch on political issues. The number of registered NGOs surged from fewer than 200 in the late 1990s to over 1,700 in 2014, with many more informal social groups and networks active in public life.

By the mid-2000s, the social ferment associated with the rapid economic progress and the popularisation of social media fueled political activism that challenged the Party's power. An unprecedented number of illegal political associations appeared in Vietnam, focusing on democracy, human rights, religious freedom and labour rights. They were assisted by the internet, which penetrated the country, overcoming geographical isolation and facilitating the emergence of virtual political networks. Early activists consisted primarily of teachers, priests and white-collar workers in the cities of central and southern provinces, who stood behind, for instance, Block 8406. In 2006 the group published a manifesto denouncing communism and calling for multi-party democracy in Vietnam, gathering thousands of signatures from across all three regions of Vietnam before being disbanded by the government. These politically dissatisfied groups were soon joined by retired party members, state cadres and military veterans, who became active in writing petitions and open letters to the CPV leadership on several sensitive issues.

The expansion of political activism was especially evident during the constitutional debate of 2013, sparked by the government's release of a draft of a revised Vietnamese Constitution for public consultations. The draft retained the core principles of the political system, guaranteeing the Party's power monopoly in Article 4 and leaving no role for civil society outside of the Fatherland Front. In response, a group of 72 intellectuals published an alternate draft constitution on the web, challenging the CPV's leading role in the state and society, and calling for widespread political liberalisation. By May 2013, the alternate draft was signed by over 14,000 people inside and outside Vietnam, including individuals

with strong Party-state connections, such as former vice-minister of justice, several prominent economists and former advisors to Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt. While the constitution draft remained essentially unchanged despite popular pressure, overall, these developments signaled the arrival of "a nascent political civil society with broad geographical spread and social links that challenge the CPV on a wide range of issues".

The second important consequence of economic reforms was the shift in the source of political legitimacy for the CPV regime, from a mix of nationalism and socialism to performance legitimacy. In the first three decades of the Cold War, the Party prided itself in successfully mobilising Vietnamese people to resist and defeat successive foreign interventions through appeals to nationalism. Following the unification in 1975, the emphasis was moved to ideology with Le Duan, party leader from 1960–86, declaring that "this nation and socialism are one." The Party began the process of developing "new Vietnam" based on a socialist model with the adoption of Vietnam's 2nd Five-Year Plan and a new state constitution in 1980. However, by the late 1980s, the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions resulting from failed policies, economic sanctions and conflict in Cambodia forced the Party to seek other pillars for its rule. Since the 6th National Congress in 1986, the Party began to rely on improving the country's socioeconomic performance as the most critical source of the CPV's political legitimacy. Vietnam's economic growth under Doi Moi averaged at 7% during the 1990s and 6,5% from 2000 until 2016, greatly benefiting citizens and securing CPV's domestic position. From now on, the ideological aspect of the regime became somewhat subdued, with significant implications for Vietnam's domestic politics and foreign affairs.

Thirdly, the post-Cold War period witnessed the emergence of party factionalism as a significant factor in Vietnamese foreign policy. One can recognise two factions within the CPV with regard to Hanoi's external relations: 1) the conservative faction, which considers shared socialist ideology as the prime means for managing foreign relations; 2) the reformist faction, which downplays ideological links, instead emphasisizing the importance of economic, political and security enmeshment. The prime example of party factionalism in actions was the CPV's 12th National Congress in 2016, which exposed a rift within the leadership on the issues of democratic centralism and collective leadership.

The reformist faction, led by Prime Minister and Politburo member Nguyen Tan Dung, over the last decade, pushed for the strengthening of the state apparatus at the expense of the Party domestically and pursued a more assertive approach towards China by enhancing ties with the US internationally. Dung's attempt to prolong his hold on the office by becoming a Secretary-General provoked an anti-Dung coalition centred around conservative incumbent party leader Nguyen Phu Trong. The latter's victory and Dung's forced retirement led to an adoption of a more cautious approach towards Washington to not antagonise China.

NEW ACTORS AND SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

The new domestic environment provided a venue for the growing anti-China nationalism. The Vietnamese public has a decisively negative image of its northern neighbour. According to the 2017 Pew Research Survey, only 19% of Vietnamese have a favourable view of the Middle Kingdom, with 74% having an unfavourable one. Just 26% of Vietnamese citizens believe that China's growing economy is good for Vietnam, with 64% seeing it as bad. Moreover, close to 90% of the public China's growing military power is a bad thing for their country. In fact, the Vietnamese even rate China's power and influence as the top threat facing the nation, widely outpacing concerns about the U.S.

Few in the country also express confidence in the Chinese leader Xi Jinping to do the right thing in relation to world affairs, with 74% of Vietnamese having no or not much trust in him.

Such negative views may be explained by the high level of concern about territorial disputes with Beijing, with 83% of Vietnamese being most troubled by these territorial frictions. Beijing's activities in the disputed South China Sea, namely the islands militarisation and repeated harassment and incursions of Chinese Coast Guard and fishing militias, fueled the "China Threat" narrative. At first, the outbursts of anti-China sentiments were restricted to the Vietnamese Diaspora, which, for instance, organised many protests in 2005 after Chinese Coast Guards killed nine Vietnamese fishermen and arrested several others in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 2007 Beijing's announcement about establishing a new district out of the Paracel and Spratly Islands provoked the first anti-China protests within Vietnam, with rallies taking place in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh

City. This burst of popular sentiment was fueled by the social media boom in the mid-2000s, offering activists a new tool for mobilising society. The 2011 cutting of seismic cables of Vietnamese survey vessels by Chinese fishing boats in the disputed waters led to eleven weeks of Sunday protests in Hanoi. The gatherings were joined by people from many social strata and age groups, including former government officials and public intellectuals. The anti-China sentiment reached its height during the HD 981 Crisis, when in response to China's deployment of an oil rig near the Paracels, violent anti-China riots took place in central and southern provinces, with 400 businesses damaged. Concurrently, 61 leading Vietnamese personalities published an open letter criticising the government's approach towards China and calling for international legal action and reducing Vietnam's dependence on the Middle Kingdom.

Another widespread concern about China was its economic presence in Vietnam. By the 2000s, the 2/3 drop in Japanese development aid, until then the primary source of Vietnam's infrastructure aid, on the one hand, and the settlement on the Sino-Vietnamese border disputes, on the other hand, convinced Hanoi to accept China's greater economic involvement in the country. Additionally, Chinese loans were considered an advantageous alternative due to the lack of political strings attached and the cost-competitiveness of Chinese contractors.

As a result, only six years since the signing of the first significant Sino-Vietnamese loan agreement in 2003, Vietnam became a top customer for Chinese infrastructure contractors and machinery exports in East Asia.

Vietnamese citizens became anxious about Chinese companies out-competing indigenous firms, importing thousands of Chinese workers, and threatening national sovereignty. Moreover, Chinese projects in Vietnam have been known for delays, cost overruns, poor construction quality and environmental devastation they cause, frequently gleefully highlighted in the local media. The chief example is the China-funded and China-built Cat Linh – Ha Dong metro line in Hanoi, which, despite being initially scheduled for completion in 2013 and the doubling of project costs, remains unfinished

to this day. Thus, Chinese projects became a frequent target of public resentment and protests.

In particular, China's investment in bauxite mining in the Central Highlands became a highly polarising affair in 2009 for environmental and national security reasons, becoming a watershed moment for Vietnamese political society. The widespread opposition to awarding the China Aluminum Company a tender for bauxite mining in that region was triggered by General Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander of Vietnam's anti-colonial struggle and a national hero. He wrote three public letters arguing that the investment "would ruin the environment, displace indigenous ethnic minorities, and most significantly, threaten national security". By April 2009, the "anti-bauxite group", composed of public intellectuals, former technocrats and environmentalists, grew into an organised national coalition. As noted by Thayer, the situation was unprecedented for two reasons: 1) the government's competency to decide on large-scale development projects was called into question; 2) the core of the criticism, going beyond purely environmental concerns, was a politically sensitive allegation that China's involvement posed a national security threat. Consequently, the bauxite campaign opened a rift between Hanoi's relationship with Beijing and the CPV's historical claim to represent Vietnamese nationalism.

This scenario was repeated in even greater force when the government attempted to pass the Special Zone Act in 2018. The law proposed establishing three special economic zones (SEZs) across Vietnam, where foreign investors would be given special preferences and allowed to lease land for up to 99 years. Hanoi hoped that SEZs would become magnets for investors, thus contributing to the country's economic development. While there was no specific mention of China in the law, many Vietnamese feared that the communist government would award Chinese investors leases in the SEZs and create a pretext for Chinese control over Vietnamese land in strategic locations. Anti-Chinese protests erupted over six provinces nationwide in June 2018 in an attempt to block the law. The government was able to suppress demonstrations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City quickly, but in Binh Thuan, where anti-China sentiment was fused with anger over industrial pollution and land disputes, the protestors burned local government

headquarters. The opposition gained support from many former officials and intellectuals, such as former advisor to the minister of planning and investment Le Dang Doanh, who signed a petition to the National Assembly, urging postponement of the Act. The split in party elites was also evident in then-president Tran Dai Quang's defence of protestors vis-à-vis security forces.

THE IMPACT ON VIETNAMESE DECISION-MAKING

The most compelling case of the political society's influence on Hanoi's decision-making can be made regarding China's economic presence in Vietnam. Initially, the bauxite movement did not force the authorities to reverse course. While CPV permitted the National Assembly, the government ministries and local authorities to regularly review the scheme's implementation, bauxite mining, as "a major policy of the party and the state", was allowed to proceed. Furthermore, in an attempt to suppress anti-China sentiment, Hanoi stopped disclosing its government-backed debt to China and tightened censorship of information related to Sino-Vietnamese economic relations. However, public criticism did convince the government to scale back bauxite mining actually being undertaken from the original plans, with only two mines constructed by 2015 rather than the nine. The 2018 SEZ Act protests proved to be a breakthrough, forcing the state for the first time to backtrack from its proposal completely. The country's leadership was caught off guard by the hostile public reaction, with Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong issuing statements acknowledging the concerns of the Vietnamese people. Eventually, the authorities yielded to public pressure and postponed voting on the law indefinitely.

Overall, in the face of growing nationalist discontent since the early 2010s, Vietnamese leaders have become more cautious about Chinese investments and loans, perceiving the political costs of such inducements as outweighing the economic benefits.

This cost-benefit analysis explains Hanoi's ambiguous attitude toward the Belt and Road Initiative, which it has endorsed but not actively participated in.

Instead, the Party seeks to pre-emptively remove the causes of widespread anger by, for instance, deciding to exclude foreign investors from bidding on the North-South

expressway project, meant to run almost the length of the country, after Chinese companies dominated the bidding in 2019. Another factor in Vietnam's pickiness on Chinese economic involvement is its growing attractiveness as an investment destination following the outbreak of the US-China trade war, which allows Hanoi to choose partners from a range of less domestically controversial alternatives.

However, Vietnam's handling of the escalations of the South China Sea in 2011 and 2014 proved that nationalist protests failed to compel the Vietnamese authoritarian regime to adopt a more aggressive stance vis-à-vis China. The 2011 cable-cutting incident and ensuring nationalist protests were clearly not pressing enough to change Hanoi's conciliatory approach towards China. Throughout the crisis, Vietnamese officials, acutely aware of their country's asymmetrical relationship with its northern neighbour, emphasised the need to communicate in order to prevent conflict, highlighted the two countries' friendship, and showed its continued willingness to cooperate with China even during a high-profile maritime incident. Thus, on 19 June, during the third wave of protests, the Vietnamese and Chinese navies conducted a joint patrol of the Gulf of Tolkin. On 26 June, the same day as the fourth wave of protests occurred in Hanoi, the high-level diplomatic discussions resulted in issuing a joint press release, in which Vietnam and China agreed to 'peacefully solving the two countries' disputes at sea. As soon as the preliminary agreement with Beijing was reached, Vietnamese security forces moved in to remove the protestors and journalists covering the demonstrations.

The second significant anti-China protest during the oil rig incident of 2014 proved that even violent demonstrations failed to impact Hanoi's approach towards China. While Vietnam did despatch maritime police and fishery protection vessels to hinder the rig's activities, it refrained from sending naval ships to prevent further escalation, and it continuously expressed a desire for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. For instance, during the May Shangri-La Dialogue, Phùng Quang Thanh, Vietnam's defence minister and the second-highest-ranking member of the Politburo, described China as "the friendly neighbouring country". Vietnam also did not cancel State Councillor Yang Jiechi's June visit to Hanoi for the annual meeting of the Joint Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation, during which he discussed the stand-off with General Secretary Nguyen Phu

Trong. The visit resulted in a special mission of Lê Hồng Anh, standing secretary of the Secretariat of the CPV Central Committee and a Politburo member to Beijing in August to put bilateral relations back on track. Lastly, Hanoi swiftly quelled nationalist demonstrations as soon as their violent turn proved a potential threat to negotiations with China.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, in the last three decades, political society has become a significant player in Vietnamese domestic politics, often challenging the CPV's decisions and grip on power. The post-Doi Moi developments, namely an upsurge in organisational activities, the popularisation of social media, the shift in the base of CPV's legitimacy and open elite factionalism, have weakened the foundations of the mono-organisational socialist system established in the Cold War period. These developments, in turn, provided an outlet for increasing anti-China nationalism, fuelled by the high level of concern about China's growing economic penetration of Vietnam and territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea. Those two controversial issues became the Vietnamese public's critical rallying cries, leading to frequent and widespread protests and public campaigns aimed at pressuring the CPV's decision-making vis-à-vis China. However, while in the former, the political society succeeded in pressuring Hanoi to adjust its economic policy and limit opportunities for Chinese investments in the country, the latter showed the limits of the society's influence on foreign policy. The case studies of the 2011 and 2014 Sino-Vietnamese crises on the South China Sea proved that nationalist protests, even violent ones, have no sway over the Vietnamese authoritarian regime.

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