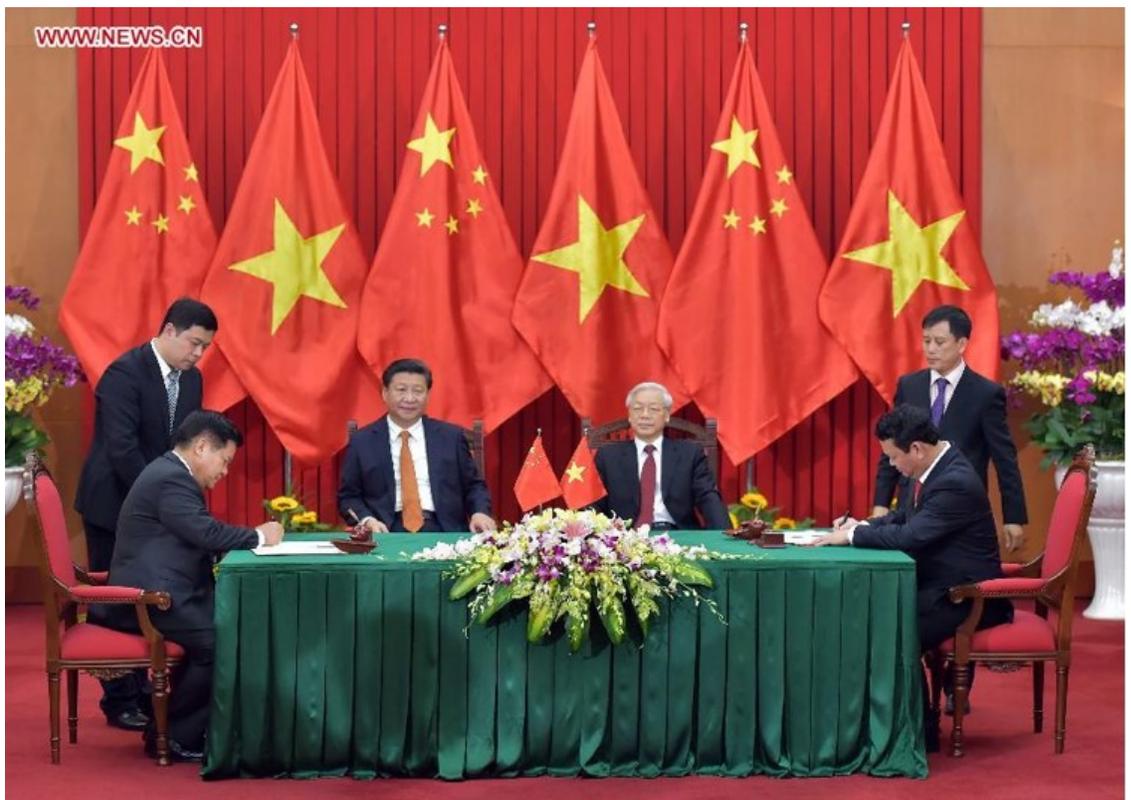


The Limits of CCP Liaison Work

Rift, Rapprochement, and Realpolitik in Sino-Vietnamese Relations



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The Project 2049 Institute seeks to guide decision makers toward a more secure Asia by the century's mid-point. Located in Arlington, Virginia, the organization fills a gap in the public policy realm through forward-looking, region-specific research on alternative security and policy solutions. Its interdisciplinary approach draws on rigorous analysis of socioeconomic, governance, military, environmental, technological and political trends, and input from key players in the region, with an eye toward educating the public and informing policy debate.

About the Authors

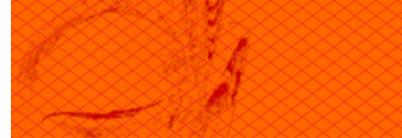
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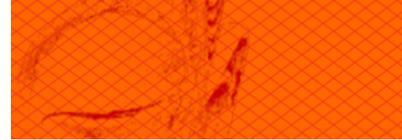


Introduction

In September 2016, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited China in his first official trip since taking office, which resulted in an agreement to handle maritime disputes in the South China Sea “properly” and advance bilateral cooperation. During this high-level exchange, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) top leaders received Prime Minister Phuc and his delegation and emphasized both countries’ communist party leadership as the basis for managing issues.¹ Although Sino-Vietnamese tensions in the South China Sea have not fully abated, the visit reflected a substantive improvement relative to the nadir in the relationship associated with the HD-981 oil rig incident in the summer of 2014.² That event severely damaged Vietnam’s trust in the notion that its interests could best be preserved through a foreign policy tilt towards China. Beijing’s actions at the time reflected its ongoing efforts to implement a strategy aimed at balancing “rights protection” and “stability maintenance” within this complex bilateral relationship.³ Sino-Vietnamese relations have since shown amicable signs of progression, with China hosting Vietnam’s Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong for his first foreign trip and their first foreign guest of 2017. The exchange resulted in a joint communiqué to uphold mutual political trust and strengthen their strategic cooperative partnership.⁴

This progress towards rapprochement reveals the sophistication of the Chinese leadership’s multidimensional approach, which has integrated coercive signaling, economic leverage, and extensive high-level party-to-party exchanges.⁵ The latter measure is often facilitated through the liaison work undertaken by the CCP Central Committee’s International Department (中共中央对外联络部). This party-centric dimension of diplomacy between China and Vietnam has received relatively scarce analytical attention thus far but remains active and are important elements of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) pursuit of its foreign policy interests.⁶ CCP diplomacy has focused on appealing to the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) shared revolutionary heritage and socialist ideology, emphasizing the need to protect the overall special relationship that both countries supposedly enjoy. This relationship is frequently described as a “community of common destiny,” to the exclusion of other regional powers such as the United States.

The above-mentioned dynamics in Sino-Vietnamese relations constitute a distinctive case that demonstrates the continued relevance and inherent limitations of these traditional efforts in contemporary Chinese diplomacy. This study concludes that although these CCP diplomatic efforts have been effective in managing tensions over the bilateral maritime dispute and preventing them from spiraling into conflict, this approach has not been effective in dissuading CPV leaders from bolstering Vietnam’s military capabilities and strengthening ties with China’s regional rivals. Given China’s



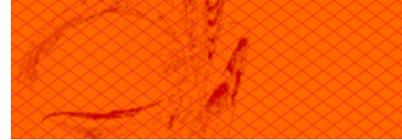
consistently assertive approach in the region, such as the continuing military buildups in the South China Sea, this focus on party-to-party diplomacy seems unlikely to restore Vietnam's trust in the wisdom that a China-oriented foreign policy best serves its domestic and foreign policy interests. Nonetheless, the current uncertainties regarding U.S. policy and priorities in Asia could support Beijing's attempts to advance cooperation in Sino-Vietnamese relations.

The Historical Context and Complexities

The complexity of Sino-Vietnamese relations must be perceived in the context of the long and complicated history that continues to influence the bilateral dynamics today. In party-to-party exchanges, CCP leaders have long referenced the “traditional friendship” and neighborly relations between the two countries, appealing to shared revolutionary experiences in the fight against foreign powers.⁷ Under the CCP's rule, China offered Vietnamese communists substantial assistance during the Vietnam War, contributing to their rise to power. As early as 1950—only a year after the PRC's establishment—the CCP was already engaged in sending advisers, weapons, and other supplies to Vietnam. This assistance continued through the Second Indochina War (the Vietnam War).⁸ However, Chinese records from that period reveal that Chinese advisers in Vietnam often complained their counterparts did not trust them and thus had trouble getting along with them. Even during this highpoint in bilateral communist ties, Vietnam's historical struggle against Chinese domination became a limiting factor on fraternal relations.⁹

The history of frictions between the two countries dates back to 111 BCE, with Chinese domination over Vietnam lasting until 938 CE. During that period the Vietnamese revolted numerous times. Other historical conflicts include a twenty-year Chinese invasion of Vietnam by Ming Dynasty forces from 1407 to 1428, and an unsuccessful 1788 Qing Dynasty invasion. Scholars rightfully specify that Vietnam had long been a part of the Sino-centric order that existed prior to colonial powers' arrival to the region. Nonetheless, supporters of the assertion that the Sino-centric order was peaceful and beneficial to tributary states have recognized Vietnam's attempts to emulate China can be attributed in part to its desire to preserve its own independence, by presenting itself to China as a similar political entity worthy of such autonomy.¹⁰

Not long after the Sino-Vietnamese partnership of the Second Indochina War, conflict between China and Vietnam reemerged, reinforcing long dormant tensions and mistrust. In 1974, in the Battle of the Paracel Islands, South Vietnam sought to expel the People's Liberation Army (PLA) naval vessels from the Paracel Islands, which both had claimed.¹¹ However, the skirmish resulted in the PRC's establishment of control. In 1979, China launched an invasion into Vietnam to punish the country for its growing



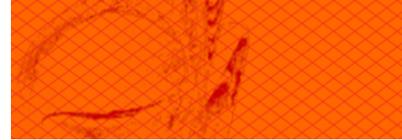
alignment with the Soviet Union and its toppling of the PRC-supported Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. During much of 1985, China shelled Vietnamese border regions with artillery and mortar rounds in response to Vietnam's continued occupation of Cambodia. In 1988, China and Vietnam fought a naval battle off the Spratly Islands, which resulted in 70 Vietnamese deaths.¹²

Evidently, the historical dimensions of Sino-Vietnamese relations do not provide a strong foundation for contemporary party-to-party diplomacy, despite their similar socialist experiences and ancient tributary ties. Indeed, this complex, often contentious, history at best has resulted in ambivalence—and at worst underlying animosity—on the part of Vietnam toward its northern neighbor.

Notwithstanding, it is worth noting a recent bilateral diplomatic success in the year 2000, when the PRC and Vietnam delimited a contested maritime boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin, in an agreement that involved significant Chinese compromise.¹³ This rare instance of the PRC resolving one of its many maritime territorial disputes through compromise appears to be a historical precedent for a future maritime deal with Vietnam.¹⁴ However, if the PRC persists in its current coercive tactics in the South China Sea (e.g. running cruise ships and deploying anti-aircraft missiles to the Paracels),¹⁵ Vietnam would likely remain equally constrained by nationalism, unlikely to accept a negotiated outcome where the PRC fails to meet Vietnam halfway. Due to these complex historical factors and contemporary domestic constraints, Vietnam has consistently been among the most willing and capable of the rival South China Sea claimants to challenge Chinese assertiveness.

The Rig Rift

As tensions in the South China Sea have intensified in recent years, the PRC and Vietnam have frequently clashed over their conflicting claims in the Paracels, with this struggle intensifying in the summer of 2014.¹⁶ That summer, Sino-Vietnamese relations reached a nadir with the HD-981 oil rig incident, in which the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) positioned a deep-sea drilling rig in waters within Vietnam's continental shelf.¹⁷ Vietnam's objection and resistance to the oil rig's presence resulted in maritime clashes between coast guard vessels, diplomatic contention, and the prospects of armed conflict.¹⁸ At the time, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong gravely declared, "Many have asked what if war comes. We have to prepare for all possibilities. But we don't want war and we'll try to prevent it."¹⁹ After violent protests directed against PRC citizens erupted, thousands of Chinese nationals were forced to be evacuated from Vietnam.²⁰



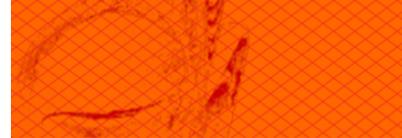
The standoff ended abruptly when on July 15th, a full month before its originally announced end date, oil industry officials announced commercial exploration activities had ended and the rig would be removed.²¹ That same day, China released thirteen Vietnamese fishermen who had previously been detained.²² This series of events were followed by a legal wrangling in December, when Vietnam submitted its position to the arbitration tribunal at The Hague initiated by the Philippines, in order to ensure attention for its own legal rights and interests in that case.²³

Although China's leadership was caught off guard by the intensity of Vietnamese backlash, this initial standoff has been followed by subsequent incidents involving the HD-981 rig, suggesting Beijing has remained undeterred, likely motivated not only by an interest in natural resources but also the desire for a maritime instrument of geopolitical pressure to assert its territorial claims. Less than a year later, in June 2015, the rig returned to the same area for further exploration, this time west of the Paracels and closer to Hainan Island.²⁴ Again, in January 2016, the rig was placed roughly in the same location as before.²⁵ Despite continued protests by Vietnam regarding the rig, tensions have been managed largely in the diplomatic realm.²⁶ Even so, Beijing's repeated decision to place the rig in contested waters seem to reflect a concerted effort to press its neighbor to handle disputes "properly." China's apparent ability to manage these disputes after the initial escalation of tensions has been bolstered by intensive party-to-party exchanges in the form of international liaison work.

CCP Liaison Work

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is one of the only remaining communist states in the world, and the PRC has fully leveraged its relative receptiveness to communist liaison work, carried out through CCP Central Committee's International Department (CCP/ID). With the aforementioned bilateral tensions in mind, party-to-party exchanges have provided a subtler channel for rapprochement, but will likely have only limited efficacy in addressing underlying conflicts of interest for several reasons discussed below.

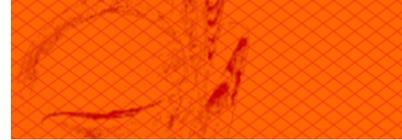
After Sino-Vietnamese relations had flared into clashes over the HD-981 oil rig crisis during the summer of 2014, the CCP sought to employ high-level party-to-party exchanges to alleviate tensions. The parties initiated special envoy diplomacy ("特使外交") mechanisms to strengthen linkages and emphasize larger interests at stake in the relationship. Such efforts began shortly after the rig crisis had started. In June, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) visited Vietnam to participate in a meeting of the Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation, likely raising the issue of the South China Sea dispute on the sidelines.²⁷ In August, Le Hong Anh, Standing Secretary of the Secretariat of the CPV, visited Beijing as an envoy of CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu



Trong, where he conveyed to CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) and Politburo Standing Committee Member Liu Yunshan (刘云山) the Vietnamese leadership's desire to improve bilateral relations.²⁸ In October, Yang Jiechi met with top Vietnamese leadership again in Vietnam, where he advocated properly handling maritime issues in the context of both nations' common development interests.²⁹

2015 began with a robust series of high-level party-to-party exchanges aimed at improving political trust based on shared communist heritage. Exchanges included the following:

- In April, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong led a high-level delegation to Beijing, where he was welcomed by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping with great fanfare. Both leaders reviewed the achievements of the jointly held CCP-CPV theoretical seminars.³⁰ Xi urged both countries to shelve differences and seek common ground.³¹
- In May, CCP International Department Assistant Minister Liu Hongcai (刘洪才) received a CPV-Government inspection delegation, where both sides discussed both countries' strategic partnership and the deepening party-to-party exchanges.³²
- In July, Secretary of the Politics and Law Commission Meng Jianzhu (孟建柱) met with a CPV Central Internal Affairs Commission delegation led by Nguyen Doan Khanh. Meng emphasized, the Politics and Law Commission was willing to strengthen communication with its Vietnamese counterpart in order to properly contribute to both countries' development of socialism.³³
- In July, CCP Politburo Standing Committee Member and Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli (张高丽) visited Vietnam, where he met with General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, President Truong Tan Sang, and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, among others. The stated purpose of Zhang's trip was to strengthen strategic communication, political trust, and practical cooperation.³⁴
- In early September, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang met with Xi Jinping in Beijing, where Xi stated China's desire to properly handle disputes through dialogue. Xi emphasized that both states are socialist countries led by communist parties; therefore, they must enhance strategic coordination to achieve each country's development goals.³⁵
- In late September, CCP International Department Assistant Minister Li Jun (李军) met with a CPV delegation led by Lam Phuong Thanh, vice minister of the CPV Central Committee's Central Propaganda Committee. Li stated China hoped to implement the consensus reached by both parties and countries to advance stable and healthy bilateral relations.³⁶



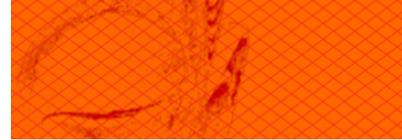
- In October, CCP International Department Minister Wang Jiarui (王家瑞) visited Vietnam and met with its leadership. CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong praised the high-level party-to-party and government exchanges following his April visit to China. Wang stated both parties and countries relations appeared to be on a favorable development track.³⁷

These rhetorical commitments to talks and cooperation culminated in November 2015, when Xi Jinping travelled to Vietnam and met with CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. The summit was said to have resulted in an important consensus on regional affairs and the deepening of the Sino-Vietnamese comprehensive strategic partnership.³⁸ The last time a Chinese president visited Vietnam was 10 years prior. Trong urged his counterpart to avoid escalating activities in the South China Sea, and Xi emphasized that their mutual revolutionary ties were strong enough to overcome disruptions.³⁹ Xi also offered millions in loans for the construction of a high-speed railway project and said China would address its large trade surplus with Vietnam.⁴⁰

The meeting resulted in a joint declaration, which advocated safeguarding the bilateral relationship's "overall situation" (大局) and peace in the South China Sea. Article Four of the declaration reiterated the importance placed on party-to-party exchanges and utilization of special envoys to improve political trust. Besides promoting regular diplomatic meetings, it is notable that the declaration advocated the use of special envoys and hotlines as unique diplomatic tools for managing the bilateral relationship:

*"Both sides believe that both parties' and countries' high-level maintenance of frequent contact has an important impact on enhancing political mutual trust, and promoting the development of the bilateral relationship; they agree to utilize bilateral exchange visits, mutually dispatched special envoys, hotlines, annual meetings, multilateral meetings, and other flexible and diverse methods to preserve high-level contact, and promptly exchange views on both parties' and countries' major problems."*⁴¹

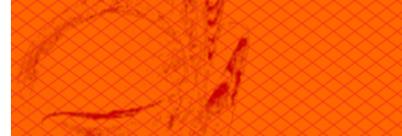
As evidenced above, throughout this process of attempted rapprochement, CCP liaison work carried out through the CCP/ID has constituted a critical facilitator and diplomatic channel for high-level exchanges. This practice has strong historical precedents. During the dark years of the Cultural Revolution, party-to-party relations with the CPV were among the CCP's remaining few relations, as the ID's subversive activities in international affairs severely damaged the ID's (and China's) foreign relations.⁴² Today, the ID has facilitated varied and frequent exchanges, from CCP and CPV general secretaries down to the grassroots level. ID exchanges filled the gap between high-profile exchanges such as the Xi-Trong meeting in November 2015 and Prime Minister Phuc's state visit to China in September 2016.⁴³ ID meetings during this period included:



- In January, Song Tao (宋涛), head of the International Department, visited Vietnam as a special envoy for CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, offering Xi's congratulations to CPV General Secretary Trong after his reelection to the party's top post. Song emphasized China's desire to focus on the overall situation and strengthen communication and coordination in regional affairs.⁴⁴
- In March, Song Tao met with Vietnam's ambassador to China, Dang Minh Khoi, to discuss the development of bilateral relations. Dang emphasized the two parties' relationship was the "cornerstone" of bilateral relations.⁴⁵
- In June, International Department Assistant Minister Li Jun met a CPV Organization Department cadre delegation in Beijing. Both sides exchanged views on bilateral relations and party-building.⁴⁶
- In July, Song Tao met in Beijing with a CPV cadre delegation led by Nguyen Quang Duong, Party Committee Secretary of the Central Agencies Block. Song emphasized China and Vietnam, as countries led by communist parties, were a "community of common destiny with strategic significance" and expressed the CCP's willingness to engage in mutual learning with the CPV from each other's party-building work.⁴⁷

The culmination of these sustained exchanges was Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit to China in September, during which he met five out of seven CCP Politburo Standing Committee members. This unusual honor was likely meant to demonstrate the special importance the Chinese leadership places on its communist ties with Vietnam. In addition to his meeting with Xi Jinping, Prime Minister Phuc met with Politburo Standing Committee Members Li Keqiang (李克强), Zhang Dejiang (张德江), Yu Zhengsheng (俞正声), and Zhang Gaoli (张高丽), respectively the State Council Premier, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), and State Council Vice Premier.⁴⁸ Phuc's meeting with PRC President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping focused on the management of maritime disputes and strengthening cooperation in multiple dimensions of the relationship. However, during his visit, Prime Minister Phuc's remarks highlighted the "extreme importance of strengthening political trust," thereby implicitly expressing concerns about the lack thereof.⁴⁹ At the time, Xi Jinping called for the resolution of the South China Sea dispute through bilateral "friendly consultations," while emphasizing: "It is in our greatest common strategic interests that China and Vietnam adhere to [the] Communist Party leadership and socialist system."⁵⁰

In summary, these frequent party-to-party meetings have shown a consistent CCP effort to appeal to both countries' shared revolutionary history, socialist ideology, and socialist development goals. Efforts to address Vietnam's lack of political trust toward China



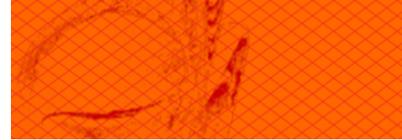
have centered on enhancing high-level communication channels between party leaders. Notably, CCP's call to view the bilateral relationship as part of an exclusive community and Xi's emphasis on protecting Vietnam's communist system, comes at a time when Vietnam has strengthened ties with China's great power rivals. Discussed below, apparent efforts to dissuade Vietnam from engaging in policies detrimental to CCP interests appear to have had a limited impact.

The Realpolitik Reality and Countervailing Factors

Despite flowery rhetoric and frequent exchanges, the persistent friction in Sino-Vietnamese relations reflects the limitations of this party-to-party approach in overcoming Vietnam's *realpolitik* concerns, the most pressing of which is how to defend Vietnam's interests in the face of Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. The deep-sea drilling rig saga is viewed as only one part of bold Chinese tactics, including extensive island-building and the employment of maritime militias, to assert China's territorial claims. Hanoi's relatively subdued official response to the July 2016 verdict of the South China Sea arbitration case at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, which rejected China's vast claims of historic rights over most of the South China Sea, might be attributed in part to the rapport built through aforementioned robust CCP-CPV exchanges.⁵¹ Notwithstanding, it likely also reflects a reluctance to instigate further Chinese assertiveness following Beijing's very visible diplomatic defeat.⁵²

Regardless of Beijing's attempted charm offensive, Hanoi has continued to advance its own military modernization.⁵³ This has included a 700% surge in its 2015 defense procurements and an increase in military spending to \$5 billion as of 2016, while procuring advanced weapons systems, including six Kilo-class submarines from Russia.⁵⁴ Beyond its focus on military modernization, Vietnam has also hedged through deepening military-to-military relations with the U.S. and India.⁵⁵

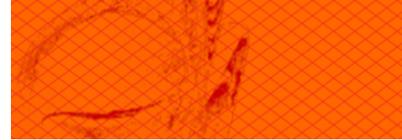
Another element constraining the effectiveness of party-to-party ties is ideological contention over the CPV's relative political reform. In the CCP's view, the CPV pursuit of an ambitious reform agenda has weakened the party's power and provided room for domestic opposition and U.S. exploitation. Although Chinese observers generally view Vietnam's economic reforms as deriving from China, Vietnam's bold political reforms in recent years have put some ill at ease in Beijing. Such reforms include: 1) allowing non-CPV candidates to stand for election to the National Assembly; the National Assembly's accrual of real political power to challenge government decisions, 2) a decentralization of power among the four senior posts of the president, prime minister, CPV general secretary, and National Assembly chairperson, 3) the CPV's self-imposed restraint from



interfering in the government's executive affairs and 4) a relative tolerance (compared to China) of civil society.⁵⁶ CCP observers continue to suspect Washington seeks color revolution in Vietnam, citing the U.S. promotion of human rights and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal standards (e.g. the establishment of independent labor unions). From the CCP's perspective, other recent signs of perceived ideological weakness might include Vietnam's decision to allow the establishment of the Fulbright University Vietnam, which will enjoy relative autonomy and adopt an American curriculum, and the decision to allow U.S. Peace Corps personnel to operate in the country.⁵⁷ Such initiatives were deemed by the CPV to be tools of the U.S. "peaceful evolution" plot less than ten years earlier.⁵⁸ With these trends in mind, it seems plausible that the CCP's professed willingness to engage in joint-learning with the CPV may in part stem from its desire to "teach" its counterpart to properly modify its current reform path.

In addition, Chinese appeals to socialist unity are stifled by an even stronger force that both nations' communist parties stoke yet fear: nationalism. Perceived encroachment on Vietnam's South China Sea maritime claims has stoked intense nationalism in the country, limiting the Vietnamese leadership's room for action. The reserved official response to the verdict of the South China Sea arbitration case has further left Vietnamese authorities open to sharp critique and comparison to the Philippines, which weathered years of Chinese indignation throughout the arbitration process.⁵⁹ Since General Secretary Trong has been cast by his political rivals as too accommodating of Beijing, he faces intense pressure to stand up to China in areas like the South China Sea. Should tensions boil over in a future maritime crisis, failure to defend Vietnamese interests may seriously undermine the CPV's legitimacy.⁶⁰

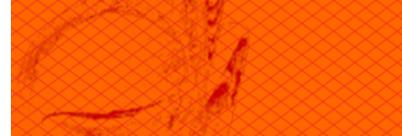
Finally, while amicable relations with China have become a liability for the CPV, relations with the U.S. have become an asset. In recent years, most Vietnamese citizens have favored strong ties with the United States, and converging interests in checking Chinese expansionism in Asia has led to stronger official ties. Notably, General Secretary Trong used his July 2015 meeting with President Obama in the Oval Office to signal a rebalance to China while boosting legitimacy at home. At the time, he declared, "It was a truly historic meeting," and noted "The White House acknowledged Vietnam's political structure and the Party's leadership."⁶¹ Ideological similarities appear to have taken a backseat to pragmatic diplomacy, somewhat reminiscent of the pragmatism the CCP once showed in its alignment with Washington against the former Soviet Union. For the CPV leadership, its continued legitimacy is, for the time being, best served by stronger ties with the U.S., and damaged by perceived compromise with China, particularly regarding the South China Sea dispute.



Perhaps most relevant to the maritime domain, the Obama administration lifted Washington's arms ban on lethal weapons sales to the country, which enables Hanoi to diversify its military hardware and lessen its reliance on Russia. The announcement came during President Obama's May 2016 visit to Hanoi, along with Obama's announcement that bilateral cooperation on regional security issues would be enhanced. Although the move was described as "largely a symbolic one" by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski, due to the strong linkage of improving Vietnam's human rights record with weapons purchases, it nevertheless paved the way for future collaboration.⁶² Planned bilateral cooperation includes the U.S. provision of patrol boats and training for Vietnam's coast guard, ostensibly geared toward humanitarian capacity building, not directed at China.⁶³ Tellingly, Obama's Vietnam visit was followed by that of Admiral Harry B. Harris, Jr., commander of U.S. Pacific Command, in October. Harris held meetings with Vietnam People's Army Chief of General Staff, Lt. Gen. Phan Van Giang, and other senior leaders, during which he reaffirmed Washington's commitment to enhancing Vietnam's capacity in areas such as maritime security and law enforcement.⁶⁴

In sum, Vietnam's relations with the U.S. improved markedly during the Obama administration, at a time when Beijing's expansionist policies in maritime Asia became more prominent; this pushed Washington and Hanoi to seek an enhanced "win-win" security partnership. Vietnam's visible shift towards the U.S. also served the purpose of allowing the CPV to dodge accusations of accommodating China, while concurrently bolstering its legitimacy with its pro-American populace. However, with the conclusion of the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump administration, U.S.-Vietnamese relations have entered a period of uncertainty. Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his proposed protectionist trade policies threaten Vietnam's export-driven economy. Thus, Vietnam may be compelled to seek closer relations with its neighbors to mitigate economic consequences.⁶⁵

Looking forward, the uncertainties to date regarding U.S. policies and priorities in East Asia, including with regard to the South China Sea dispute, could motivate Vietnam to strengthen cooperation with China. As of mid-2017, recent high-level China-Vietnam exchanges and joint initiatives may indicate the start of such a trend. In April 2017, China's State Councilor Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) met with Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Pham Binh Minh, for the tenth meeting of the China-Vietnam steering committee on cooperation, in which Yang's remarks highlighted the importance of "deepen[ing] pragmatic cooperation" ahead of state visits planned for this year. There was reportedly an agreement on Vietnam's engagement in advancing the "Belt and Road" initiative, as well as "maintaining maritime peace and stability."⁶⁶ In addition, during the visit to Beijing to attend Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in mid-May 2017, President Tran Dai Quang signed a joint communiqué with CCP



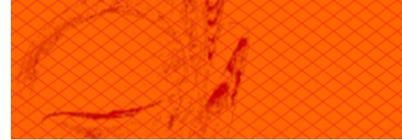
General Secretary Xi Jinping, agreeing to “manage and properly control their maritime disputes” and “not take any actions to complicate the situation or expand the dispute.” Furthermore, both sides agreed to utilize “existing mechanisms” to facilitate bilateral cooperation.⁶⁷ Despite these signs of growing rapprochement between the two countries, such cooperation will likely remain constrained by the underlying mistrust and conflicting interests.

Implications for the South China Sea Dispute

As Zhang Dejiang’s November 2016 meeting with General Secretary Trong and other top Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi suggests, the CPV will likely continue to partake in frequent high-level party-to-party diplomacy, as the party seems to genuinely place value on these exchanges as a means of communication and crisis management.⁶⁸ In turn, the CCP will likely continue its charm offensive, even as it integrates such diplomacy with attempted coercion. Party liaison work may bolster the relationship and allow for continued exchanges even as tensions in the South China Sea continue. Nevertheless, this instrument seems unlikely to overcome underlying strategic realities or the domestic concerns of the CPV leadership. CCP appeals to a foundational common history with Vietnam seem selective and self-serving, as many historical events continue to limit Vietnamese enthusiasm for unguarded interaction with its northern neighbor. Likewise, ideological disagreements continue to beget Chinese wariness toward Vietnam. On the other hand, warmer ties and developing security cooperation with the U.S. appear to offer Vietnam the leverage it needs to strengthen its hand against the growing Chinese power.

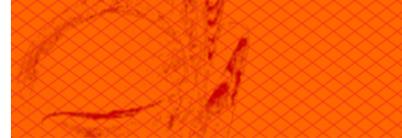
Looking forward, Vietnam seems prepared to continue its military modernization and defend its territorial claims, forcibly if necessary, in the South China Sea. This may include continued fortification of its islands, which reportedly have garnered additional mobile rocket launchers capable of striking China’s runways and military installations.⁶⁹ Vietnam may also purchase from India the Akash medium range surface-to-air missile defense system, which is capable of targeting aircraft, helicopters, and drones up to 25 kilometers away.⁷⁰ In addition, India has offered to sell Varunastra anti-submarine torpedoes to Vietnam, evidently in response to China’s militarization of the South China Sea. Thus it seems that even as the Philippines seeks greater reconciliation with Beijing under the leadership of President Duterte, Vietnam, on the other hand, will likely continue hedging via closer alignment with the U.S. and India, while enhancing its military capabilities.

Future Uncertainties



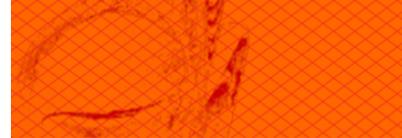
Naturally, additional uncertainty has been injected into the calculations of both Hanoi and Beijing with the election of U.S. President Donald Trump. As a TPP signatory, Vietnam is no doubt disappointed with Trump's strident opposition to the deal, as well as the Obama administration's decision not to pursue TPP further with Congress ahead of Trump's ascent to office.⁷¹ A recent East-West Center study suggests U.S. partners in the region will likely view Washington's rejection of the TPP as further evidence of its inability to maintain its commitments beyond the military realm.⁷² In the aftermath of the election, Vietnam decided to shelve ratification of the TPP.⁷³ Similarly, the relative lack of clarity regarding Trump's position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea leaves much to be desired by China and Vietnam. Vietnamese policymakers may have preferred a continuation of Obama's more predictable policies towards Vietnam under Hillary Clinton's leadership. Nevertheless, Trump's apparent willingness to work with any country toward shared goals, regardless of ideology, as well as his plan to strengthen U.S. military power, particularly through boosting the U.S. Navy to 350 ships, might offer Hanoi opportunities for continued strong security engagement with Washington.⁷⁴

Given these complex and evolving dynamics, the CCP's adroit liaison work may continue to ease tensions and enhance communication with Vietnam's leaders. However, it is unlikely to convince Hanoi to abandon its military modernization or moderate its ties with Washington, as these policy options may continue to constitute the CPV's best hope to defend both its territorial claims and domestic elites' political interests. Nonetheless, the impact of current uncertainties regarding the future trajectory of U.S. policy in Asia upon Vietnam's future foreign policy orientation remains to be seen.

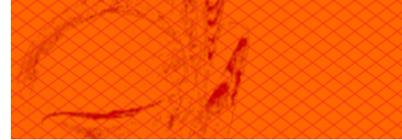


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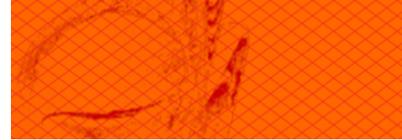
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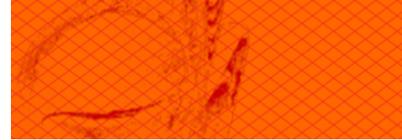
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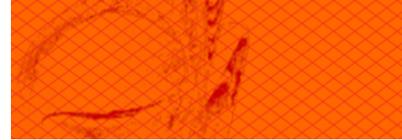
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