

Obstinate Dragon: A Strategic Assessment of Vietnam in Southeast Asia

by

Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey A. Vandaveer
United States Marine Corps



United States Army War College
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Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey A. Vandaveer
United States Marine Corps

Dr. Michael A. Spangler
Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Abstract

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Vietnam re-enters contemporary American military consciousness as a key player in Southeast Asia power dynamics relative to US rebalance to the Pacific. Vietnam's historical ability to complicate Chinese aspirational calculations is a unique quality that has direct implications for US strategic interests in the Pacific. This paper examines the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) strategic "status quo" in the region and analyzes Hanoi's ability to respond to perceived security challenges against Chinese ascendancy. Finally, the paper posits opportunities and limits to which US security interests in Southeast Asia may align with Vietnam's for future potential collaboration.

Obstinate Dragon: A Strategic Assessment of Vietnam in Southeast Asia

We are the Prussian's of Southeast Asia. We are a people of greater zeal, greater energy, greater intelligence than our neighbors, and we don't have to take military action to expand our sphere of influence.

—Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham
Van Ding to US Secretary of State
Henry Kissinger in 1975¹

Where Past is Prologue

For the contemporary American military professional, Vietnam provides an example where tactics divorced from national objectives win battles but fail to achieve strategic victory. Col Harry Summers introduced the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz to modern military thought by drawing on his ideas to make this point.² Moreover, after Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces on 30 April 1975, Vietnam seared into the American military consciousness. Societally, Vietnam serves as a reminder that the US is subject to defeat in a violent contest of wills.

National roles can change substantially in response to geopolitics. Since reunification in 1975, the US perspective on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) transitioned dramatically. From initial regard as a cunning victor in a localized insurgency, Vietnam quickly became an agitator in Indochina leading to concentrated international isolation. However, in the 21st century, Vietnam emerges anew as a viable partner in an expanding Asian economic market. While tensions between the SRV and the People's Republic of China (PRC) existed for centuries, these tensions have steadily escalated since 1979 as the relationship between the two states has become increasingly competitive. Vietnam offers a distinctive vantage point on regional security

issues as China's ascendancy and interests in the South China Seas aggravate Southeast Asian tensions.

As such, Vietnam re-enters into US military consciousness as a key player in Southeast Asia power dynamics worth study and strategic contemplation, especially in the context of the US's rebalance to the Pacific. Vietnam's ability to complicate Chinese aspirational calculations is a unique quality as historically it wields more influence on China than conventional geopolitical power metrics suggest. This relationship has direct implications for US strategic interests in the Pacific. Part I of this paper examines the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) strategic *status quo* in the region by analyzing its geographic, cultural, and historical role in Southeast Asia. Part II analyzes Hanoi's ability to ascertain and meet its security challenges, emphasizing its national military expenditures, defense posture, and offers two scenarios whereby Hanoi may respond militarily to Chinese assertiveness. Finally, Part III posits limits to which US security interests in Southeast Asia may align with Vietnam's and proposes potential means for collaborative US-Vietnamese engagement.

Part 1

Earth and Blood

Vietnam's geographic position ensures its importance in Southeast Asia power contests. Nestled on the eastern side of the Indochina peninsula with Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, four distinct national cultures emerged in close proximity. Despite a river-based geography and cohesive ethnic identity, none of the four nations has consolidated enough power to dominate Indochina. However, Vietnam's contiguity and long, estranged relationship with China suits it best among its brethren to resist Chinese attempts to dominate the peninsula. The epigraph of this essay is more than an analogy

to Vietnam's geographic position to China. It is a national affirmation and imperative to resist its larger, dominant neighbor. As Prussia was anathema to Russian dominance in Europe, so has Vietnam been to Chinese strategic efforts to dominate Indochina.

At over 330,000 square kilometers, Vietnam coils around the eastern peninsular coast anchored on China's southern border and wrapping southwesterly towards the Gulf of Thailand. Vietnam's landward features present a dichotomy defining its regional status: promise beset by austerity. Blessed with two large, fertile river deltas; the Red River in the north and Mekong River in the south, Vietnam is hampered by rugged, jungle highlands in its northern and central regions inhibiting access to its lowland coastal plains. Vietnam is at its narrowest in the central *Quang Binh* province with less than 50 km separating eastern Laos from the South China Sea (SCS). This narrow midriff denies Vietnam strategic depth and creates a furrow between northern and southern cultural populations frustrating the development of a fully unitary national identity.

What strategic-depth *terra firma* does not provide Vietnam is attained by unfettered access to the SCS. Its long coastline affords Vietnam the *hinterland* it lacks, providing access to abundant natural resources and foreign trade opportunities.³ Vietnam's "S"-shaped coastline facing both the Gulf of Tonkin and the SCS is Indochina's longest at 3,444 km.⁴ Additionally, Vietnam boasts seven major seaports capable of supporting significant seaborne trade that have been the envy of various external actors.⁵ French, American, and Soviet powers coveted Vietnam's harbors as umbilicals into its rugged interior and as a foothold to establish and extend regional power. Today, Vietnam's coastline and deep-water anchorages are lucrative points of

departure to access the riches of its adjoining seas for domestic, regional, and global economies.

In light of its geographical limitations, Vietnam traditionally placed a high premium on maintaining strict control of its landward territory. In contrast, its easy access to the sea and relative absence of sea-borne threats encouraged a sense of sanctuary regarding its maritime territory. It is not until very recently that Vietnamese focus has shifted from its land towards the maritime horizon. Increasingly, activities at sea directly underpin Hanoi's ability to achieve its national objectives of attaining regional prominence. As such, Vietnam's ability to secure its territory at sea is gaining heightened national interest. China, Vietnam's chief and traditional rival, shares the same perspective.

Southeast Asia is a hybrid outgrowth of two distinct and competing cultures, India and China. However, China's immediate proximity to the region and traditional fear of encirclement demanded an assertive, heavy-handed approach towards Indochina. In many ways, the recent competition in the SCS is an extension of a long, troubled relationship between the two. Thus, the contested SCS territory is a potential flashpoint for discord among old opponents. China's self-perception as the Middle Kingdom and exemplar of Asian culture often creates anxiety among its proximate neighbors. Vietnam, however, is an exception. It possesses an ageless obstinacy towards China that has confounded Beijing's regional aims over centuries. Arguably, China's overwhelming presence and continuous antagonism forged Vietnamese culture, sharpening its national identity in opposition to China's desired dominance of the region.

A History of Resistance

The name *Viet* originates from an initial wave of non-Chinese, Mongolian migrants that arrived in the Red River region in approximately 500 and 300 BC.⁶ There they consolidated power establishing the *Au Lac* dynasty. Initially, the *Au Lac* kingdom coexisted, if not peaceably, with the Austro-Indonesian *Champa* tribe residing in Vietnam's southern Mekong delta.⁷

The Chinese Han dynasty's ascension in 200 BC resulted in "Sinicization" efforts in Indochina. A longstanding Chinese stratagem is to ensure compliance, if not dominance, of its periphery in order to establish a buffer against foreign incursions. The basis of this security calculus centers on a concept of dual encirclement analogous to China's traditional game, *wei qi*.⁸ The aim of *wei qi* is to surround enough area to protect oneself while encircling your opponent restraining his ability to move against you. Metaphorically, Vietnam is tantamount to a pivotal open space required for Chinese victory in a grand game of Asian encirclement. However, despite China's best attempts to hold that vital area, Vietnam is the stone that defies capture.

In 111 BC, the Han officially annexed the Red River valley establishing the prefectures of Giao Chi and Cuu Chan, regarding the Viet as savages who showed a lack of cultural development.⁹ Vietnam remained under tacit Chinese military rule for the next one thousand years, although the Viet openly resisted Han control. Over time, and as armed coercion continued to fail, China employed a cultural immersion strategy astride its military rule to obtain Viet complicity. This method also failed to deliver the Chinese objective of attaining an amenable regional client. In a Zen-like dualism, the more energy and effort China exerted in Vietnam, the stronger and more capable the Viet became to resist its demands. As Henry Kissinger notes, Vietnamese national

identity reflects a legacy of two somewhat contradictory forces; the absorption of Chinese culture and the opposition of Chinese military and political domination. Resistance to China produced a passionate pride in Vietnamese independence and a formidable military tradition.¹⁰

While Viet resistance was continuous, securing a lasting victory and independence from China remained elusive for a millennium. When the Viet finally achieved independence by defeating the Chinese at Bach Dang River in 938 AD, it did not equate to peace or security. Between the 11th and 14th centuries, the Viet repelled attacks from the Chinese Ming Empire, three Mongol invasions, as well as assaults by the Cambodian Khmer and the Champa from the south. In the 14th and 18th centuries, successive Viet dynasties expanded southward along the coast, conquering the Champa kingdom in the Mekong and ousting a Khmer population from within the central highlands. Finally, in 1802 and after almost 900 years of continuous bloodshed, the Nguyen dynasty unified the country within the present day political boundaries of Vietnam.

The advent of the 18th century ushered Western European colonialism into Indochina, catapulting Southeast Asia, and Vietnam headlong into the arena of global geopolitics. The tectonic collision of disparate civilizations significantly modified the calculus of all Asian stakeholders regarding power. Formerly, to rule Asian territory required a ruthless, persistent ability to dominate an area's indigenous people. In the late 18th century, the equation demanded alignment with powerful, Western polities to tip the balance of domestic and regional power.

French colonists arrived in Vietnam in early 18th century eroding Nguyen dynastic rule. By 1862, southern Vietnam was the French colony of Cochinchina with power localized in Saigon among the marginalized ethnic Champa. By 1885, French colonial rule encompassed all Vietnamese territory. Unsurprisingly, initial Vietnamese resistance to French power began in the 1870's in the concentrated Viet areas of the Red River delta.

From 1941 to 1975, Vietnam represented a microcosm of the collision between global geopolitical interests. In 1941, Ho Chi Minh initiated a guerilla war for independence against French colonial influence and occupying imperial Japanese power. The end of World War II in 1945 saw France exhausted and Japan defeated. With ideological and material support from Communist China and the Soviet Union, the Viet Minh consolidated power in Hanoi and defeated French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The Viet Minh victory ushered in US assistance in the wake of France's defeat and the establishment of a Communist North and a pro-western South Vietnam along the 17th parallel.

The United States considered Vietnam a crucial link in America's grand strategy to halt Communist advance in Southeast Asia as an evaporating colonial presence invited monolithic Communist aggression and expansion. Accordingly, all US Presidents from Truman to Johnson ascribed to the prevention of Communist victory in Vietnam as a vital American interest within the context of National Security Council Report 68.¹¹ Despite significant political, military, and economic support to a myriad of South Vietnamese leaders from 1955 to 1973, the US objective of thwarting a Communist

advance in Vietnam never materialized, scarring the American political, military, and social psyche for a generation.

However, the American loss in Vietnam did not equate to unilateral Communist victory as a Sino-Soviet ideological split over differences in Marxist-Leninist ideology appeared in the late 1960's. The rift widened when Beijing admonished Hanoi for the timing and context of North Vietnam's Tet Offensive. Despite the mutual aim to expand Communism in Southeast Asia, Chinese meddlesomeness in Vietnamese affairs reopened old cultural wounds in Hanoi. In response, Hanoi turned its back on Beijing and aligned with Moscow fulfilling China's anxiety of encirclement by a capable enemy.

Today, Vietnam resides at a nexus where divergent Chinese, Russian, and US interests overlap. It remains positioned to provide advantage to one while complicating the strategies of the others. The nation that can best realize its own aims without sacrificing Vietnam's aspirations may forge a partnership with Vietnam that can shape SCS and significantly influence Southeast Asia. However, Vietnam historically eschews direct foreign influence over any aspect of its sovereignty. As such, a US approach of a security relationship with Hanoi requires a clear-eyed analysis of each party's self-interest.

Part II: The South China Sea as Crucible

The defense of national independence, freedom, unification, and territorial integrity requires a far-sighted vision, firm acumen, unswerving principle, but sound, flexible and clever tactics, and using the unchangeable to cope with the changeable.

— Vietnamese President Truong¹²

Pressures and Responses

President Sang's remarks during the 69th anniversary of the 1945 Revolution commemoration reveal Vietnam's national interests through a security environment optic by broadly defining Hanoi's "ends" and associated "ways." Equally revealing was President Sang's omission of a specific external challenger to Vietnam's "territorial integrity" while identifying corruption within the Vietnamese Socialist Party as "internal invaders."¹³

The focus on domestic security over external pressures shows the premium Vietnam places on internal matters and dictates its association of risk in strategic calculations. As Stein Tonneson posits, "the SRV is a security-conscious state with an acute sense of vulnerability due to its long coast, a difficulty of keeping the north and south together, a history of national independence struggles, and a lack of hinterland."¹⁴ A summation of President Sang's speech and Tonneson's perceptions highlights the SRV's challenge in addressing competing, interrelated pressures that interfere with Hanoi's desire to meet its aspirations of becoming a "more prosperous and beautiful country" on par with other global nations.¹⁵

Clearly, China's well-documented, blossoming growth in all facets of national power creates external pressures on Vietnam that increasingly restrict Hanoi's freedom of action. In fact, China's contemporary waxing of power corresponds with the abrupt waning of Vietnamese prestige. Following Vietnam's Socialist unification in 1975, China geopolitically outmaneuvered Hanoi by creating conditions that directed SRV attention inward into Indochina. The PRC's diversion obfuscated the SRV's ability to act in a larger geopolitical context. This precipitated Vietnam's international isolation and, when

coupled with the Soviet Union's unforeseen dissolution, set conditions for China's relatively unchallenged rise in Southeast Asia.¹⁶

In the corresponding three decades since unification, Hanoi's military efficacy attained narrow national ends that yielded little tangible, strategic dividends. As Vietnam focused on bending Indochinese behavior towards its interests, it concurrently dismissed Chinese assertiveness. This helped permit China to reverse a downward trajectory and realize substantial strategic gains in power and influence. So, in today's context does the SRV ascertain and respond to security challenges better than in the past and which set of pressures, external or internal, hold a higher priority?

Culturally, the Vietnamese respond to challenges with a distinctive, zealous resistance across the breadth of its society. Generally, as an adversary increases pressure, the Vietnamese demonstrate little qualms about retaliation or escalation as their cultural algebra defaults to imposing societal austerity and risk management while addressing national challenges.

A historical pattern reveals a risk prioritization rubric that shapes the Vietnamese decision to use force. The overarching national interest centers in the government's ability to control its domestic population. The next ascendant priority is to protect its traditional landmass from hostile neighbors. Based on Vietnam's arduous history, matters of societal control and territorial protection register the highest levels of intensity as both involve issues of national survival. Additionally, the combined interests of the Vietnamese people and their strategic culture fuse internal and external pressures that invoke an intensity of national interest, revealing a special purity of purpose for Vietnamese resistance.

However, while their history is marked with near-continuous conflict, the Vietnamese decision to go to war is a very deliberate societal action akin to a Boyd cycle (Observe-Orient-Decide-Act) writ large.¹⁷ History demonstrates slight, temporary pauses where the Viet people observe and orient towards an external influence to ascertain its intentions and impacts on Vietnamese interests. Once an external actor disturbs the Vietnamese tenets of societal harmony or territorial sovereignty, the Viet determine the actor to be an existential adversary and demonstrate a proclivity to launch popular resistance.

By contrast, a Vietnamese calculus to influence territory or actors outside its traditional boundaries occurs only after the first two mandates of internal security and territorial sovereignty are secure. Correspondingly, the acquisition of new or disputed territory is not a premium in traditional Vietnamese grand designs. For example, it took the Viet almost 500 years to expand from the Red River delta to conquer the Champa and advance southward for a strip of land the length of Florida.¹⁸ Additionally, the Vietnamese' response to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia serves as a more recent example of both a lack of desire to attain additional territory and a willingness to use force to counter influences that can potentially disrupt internal Vietnamese affairs.¹⁹

Security and Defense

While cultural and historical analyses are useful in providing an anchor to understand past behavior, they do not predict the future regarding political reactions in an anarchic, globally competitive environment. A review of the SRV's military expenditures and defense posture demonstrates the PRC's recent expansion in the SCS is intensifying Hanoi's level of interest regarding its territory at sea. An issue exacerbated by Hanoi's lack of strategic depth on terra firma.

Vietnam's current strategic environment requires greater emphasis on protection of its offshore claims and future economic interests in the Gulf of Tonkin and SCS. However, Hanoi's efforts to realize air and naval-based requirements compete against other domestic priorities limiting an already constrained Vietnamese economy.²⁰

Defense analysts assess Vietnamese leaders have placed importance on preventing the deterioration of current military stocks and obtaining relevant modern military technology. The SRV's dual-path strategy of maintenance and modernization is constrained by cost, compatibility, and US-initiated trade restrictions.²¹ Until recently, Vietnam kept its defense budget a state secret, which complicates annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) percentage comparisons for the last decade.²² However, from 2004-2012, analysts assess Vietnam's military spending significantly increased upwards of 75 percent, with military expenditures averaging 2.25 percent of its GDP over the eight-year period.²³ For 2012, Hanoi's military spending constituted 2.37 percent of its \$359 billion GDP or just above \$3 billion for the year.²⁴

In response to PRC military advances in the SCS, Vietnam concentrated its defense acquisitions in improvements in its maritime defense portfolios. Recently, Hanoi purchased six Russian Kilo-class diesel submarines, seven new Gepard Class frigates from India, and four Dutch-built Sigma Class corvettes to augment the Vietnam People's Navy (VPN) aging Soviet-era naval fleet. Additionally, Vietnamese People's Air Force (VPAF) received several new squadrons of advanced Russian jet fighters configured for maritime operations. Vietnam's robust tactical missile force constitutes its primary deterrent.²⁵ Its arsenal includes Yakhont shore-to-ship cruise missiles, French-built Exocet air-launched anti-ship missiles, and Russian-built, sub-launched, anti-ship

“Sizzler” missiles. Hanoi also negotiated the licenses for domestic production of three types of ship-to-ship missiles for its navy.²⁶ By Southeast Asian standards, Vietnam’s effort towards military modernization, despite limitations, is impressive. Comparatively, no other country in the region has brought as much capability online as quickly as Vietnam.²⁷

Analyses of the SRV’s current defense expenditures and projected capabilities confirm Hanoi’s desire to narrow the military gap in the maritime domain and offer challenge to Beijing’s increased naval presence in the SCS. However, the breadth of expectant capabilities demonstrates a modest attempt to employ weaponry within Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) precepts in the manner China has arrayed on its coasts with stunning efficacy. Hanoi’s defensive capabilities reside more in the latter vice the former as the SRV’s arsenal seeks to limit China’s freedom of action within the air and maritime domains vice preventing the PRC’s ability to enter a contested environment.²⁸

The SRV’s purchase of ships, submarines, and tactical aircraft represents a symmetrical, traditional approach to maritime defense that lacks the efficiency, innovation, and cunning expected of Hanoi. In the context of Area Denial, the SRV’s array of capabilities portend a direct “force-on-force” contest, as none of their current or planned capability sets provides a clear tactical advantage or pose an asymmetric threat to similar Chinese platforms. Where certainly Beijing maintains an obvious lead in technological quality and quantity, Hanoi may be increasing materially where it can while relying on traditional fighting zeal to carry the day. However, the SRV’s over-reliance on intangibles is problematic especially since the “battle-tested” Vietnamese military has not seen combat for over a generation.²⁹

Hanoi's purchase of military capabilities remains congruent with its diplomatic overtures proclaiming its inherent right to defend its national territory. Unquestionably, Hanoi's recent military purchases have the ability to defend its landward territory while contesting an attack within Vietnamese air and sea space. However, Vietnam lacks air and maritime capabilities to project power adequately to reclaim disputed or lost territories. As of 2013, military analysts note the VPN possess eight amphibious ships and thirty landing craft, supporting a capability to land military personnel to retain or obtain small islands in the SCS.³⁰ However, according to US Naval registries, all the identified hulls were previous American naval vessels purchased or provided to the Republic of Vietnam in the mid 1950's.³¹ Due to the age of the ships and the shaky credibility of VPN intent to use them, Hanoi's actual capability to seize and hold territory at sea is in question.

The absence of military capability to seize or retake sovereign territory at sea offers a range of strategic interpretations. First, it could reveal a lack of talent and foresight in VPN leadership to recognize or realize defense requirements to support SRV national strategy. This is an unsurprising aspect since the VPN has neither required nor accrued the experience and prestige to the degree its sister services have. Another explanation is it reflects Hanoi's reticence to invest in military power projection capabilities. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia bore a harsh lesson in international isolation; a consequence the SRV cannot endure today. A third interpretation reinforces a logic wherein the Vietnamese intensity of rational interests lessens the farther removed an issue is from its people and the land they live on. From this criterion, the SCS's waters and small-uninhabited islets do not equate to a matter of existential

threat. If such is the case, other instruments of power, short of Vietnamese blood and treasure, must secure dominion at sea.

Scenarios and Responses

Vietnam's muscular approach to increasing its military arsenal is a deliberate message to China. The SRV's increase in maritime defense capabilities, along with its continuing legal arguments in international fora, substantiates the SRV's unease with PRC assertiveness in the SCS. Vietnamese discomfort is both expected and warranted based on the historically tense Viet-Sino relationship. However, from a Vietnamese perspective, the locus of unease appears to be less about a competition of maritime real estate and more about retaining a modicum of power parity between Vietnam and the Middle Kingdom.

Fundamentally, Hanoi and Beijing know China as an entity is much larger and more powerful than Vietnam. Additionally, both nations realize that even a strong and emboldened Vietnam can never solely deny Chinese attainment of their objectives. However, history demonstrates that Vietnam, when threatened, has been willing to inject enough risk into Chinese ambitions and try to check Beijing's strategic objectives. Based on this relative-power paradigm, a twofold question emerges; is Beijing's ascendant power generating a hubris that discounts Hanoi and under what circumstances will Chinese actions provoke Vietnamese action? From these questions, two plausible scenarios emerge where Chinese assertiveness in the region could elicit a Vietnamese military response.

The first scenario is predicated on localized miscommunication and short-term escalation between the VPN and Chinese merchant ships. Increasingly, Chinese commercial vessels position, contend, and collide with Vietnamese ships in disputed

waters, raising tensions between Hanoi and Beijing.³² In several instances, Vietnamese Coast Guard ships rescued Vietnamese merchants whose ships sunk due to ramming by Chinese vessels. The relatively fresh memories of SCS naval skirmishes in 1974 and 1988 discourage both countries' from coming into close enough contact to each other to provoke open military action.³³

However, a scenario exists where Vietnamese naval vessels could engage Chinese merchant shipping while attempting to respond to an at-sea emergency. A measured, albeit forceful, Vietnamese military response against Chinese citizens could also invite a limited response by the Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) which has the potential to elicit escalation by both parties in a short time span. Foreseeing this very scenario after the HS-981 Chinese Oil rig crisis of May 2014, the Chinese and Vietnamese defense ministers signed a memorandum that October to establish direct communications between the respective ministries as a means to reduce miscalculation in the SCS.³⁴

A second scenario exists where unilateral Vietnamese military action occurs after Hanoi successfully gains international support for its demarcation of territorial sovereignty and Economic Exclusive Zones (EEZ). Hanoi has learnt firsthand the effects of international isolation due to naked regional aggression. As such, Vietnam is adeptly using regional and international fora and their legal mechanisms as its chief method to limit Chinese expansion in the SCS. An exercise in patience and diplomacy, Hanoi is hedging its national future that a favorable United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ruling on the Philippines' behalf will also strength Vietnam's position to compel China to cede its extra-legal claims in Vietnam's territorial waters.

With a successful UNCLOS decision to back it up, Vietnam can demand China depart Vietnamese waters and return island claims back to Hanoi in a clear timeline. Should the PRC refuse the UNCLOS decisions or not honor Vietnam's timeframe, Hanoi will be emboldened to remove Chinese presence from its legitimate territories by military force. Militarily, Hanoi will focus its air and naval capabilities to strike a wide array of Chinese targets within its sovereign waters while defending its critical infrastructure. The Vietnamese gambit is to impose a rapid and steep cost that significantly alters Beijing's risk-benefit calculus against a protracted battle. An objective, if successful, would thwart PRC ambitions in the region and would presage a rise in SRV's prestige. However, should the UNCLOS decision either not favor Hanoi, nor see resolution, Vietnam will not openly challenge China in disputed areas at sea unless the PLAN initiates hostile action.

In either scenario, and perhaps as its strategy writ large, Vietnam will not seek to challenge China directly in disputed waters unless reinforced by a legitimate requirement to expend its energy externally. However, this perspective does not necessarily yield the SCS to Beijing outright. Rather, it offers Hanoi the time and context to assess its rival's intentions and preserve its finite capabilities while waiting for an opportunity, alone or with other nations, to complicate or challenge Chinese expansion.

Part III: Opportunity and Risk

An alliance with Corcyra was decided on, with certain reservations. It was to be a defensive, not an offensive, alliance. For it began to be felt that the coming Peloponnesian War was only a question of time.

— Thucydides³⁵

Old Foes; New Friends?

Dialogue between Washington DC and Hanoi greatly improved in the past two decades with both countries normalizing diplomatic relations in 1995. Twenty years prior, the US Embassy closed in Saigon as North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam in 1975.³⁶ In 1995, under the context of a post-Glasnost Russia, initial US-Vietnamese discussions centered on rapprochement and the establishment of mutual trade agreements as Hanoi's economy transitioned via its *Doi Moi* market reforms.³⁷ The pace and progress of diplomatic dialogue between Washington and Hanoi remained gradual but encouraging as the countries entered into the new 21st millennium. However, China's recent military assertiveness appears to have accelerated the US-Vietnam discourse, increasing the level of nation-to-nation interaction.

In July 2013, Presidents Obama and Sang launched the US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership, an overarching framework that advances the bilateral relationship and reinforces America's rebalance to the Pacific region.³⁸ Additionally, in October 2014, after the HS-981 Chinese Oil Rig incident, the US State Department took steps to ease the ban of lethal weapons sales to Vietnam to improve its maritime security capabilities.³⁹ Most recently, the US 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) identifies the disputed territories in the SCS as an area of concern to American security interests. Additionally, the 2015 NSS specifically cites Vietnam among America's *Asian security partners*.⁴⁰

The US's notable increase in dialogue with Vietnam is unsurprising. It conforms to a traditional geopolitical approach where two dissimilar nations identify an opportunity to join efforts to address a mutual concern. However, apart from a shared desire to curtail China's military ascendancy, the sharing of other significant interests between

Washington and Hanoi is sparse. Accordingly, the pertinence and alignment of mutual US-Vietnamese interests require thorough and thoughtful examination in order to avoid a “Thucydides’ Trap” whereby the US could unwittingly fall into a conflict with China.⁴¹ If the US does not desire to enter into a war with China, what limits should it self-impose regarding a security relationship with Vietnam in order not to over-extend itself or provoke an increasing capable rising global power?

Since normalizing relations in 1995, the bulk of US-Vietnamese cooperation centered on important national interests such as establishing economic trade, addressing human rights, and repatriating US service members’ remains.⁴² The limited scope of issues reflected a gradual renewal of a relationship that ended violently in 1975. Moreover, the SRV is a communist state that restricts political pluralism and represses its non-Viet ethnic populations: key issues that directly conflict with enduring US interests and underscore the rationale for limiting, if not terminating the relationship with Hanoi in the first place.⁴³

Principally, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam espouse values that are diametrically opposed to each other. Ultimately, this fundamental issue heightens a contrast between Washington and Hanoi’s identification of interests and the determination of their intensity. In addition, the juxtaposition of interests portend a dissimilarity in risk assessment requiring critical thought before crafting policy and strategy in order to avoid a Peloponnesian disaster.

History is rife with examples of nations with incongruent core beliefs still finding opportunities for cooperation with each other. Often, the surfacing of a common threat made such arrangements unavoidable. In that theme, it is important to stress that from

both the US and Vietnamese perspectives, the impetus for security collaboration is to restrict a common threat, China, vice to expand each other's influence. Principally, each arrangement aims to negate Beijing's regional aspirations and little else. While this principle does not prohibit cooperation between Washington and Hanoi, adjustments in either nation's core beliefs may need to occur to build a resilient and lasting security relationship that will solicit resistance from Beijing.

Similar to the lack of congruity in national values, Washington and Hanoi ascribe different levels of intensity to the shared interest. For the US, the level of intensity to China's ascension is ambiguous and fluid. The NSS 2015 echoes both optimism and concern by stating, "the US welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China, remains wary of its military modernization, and seeks to reduce risk miscommunication."⁴⁴ The mix of hope and caution connotes US desire to shape Chinese ambitions to a mutually agreeable and collectively beneficial path. It also seeks to discern Beijing's true intentions and assess whether their intentions directly oppose Washington's interests. If they should, the US must determine if the intrusion of those interests is tolerable or inviolable.

Generally, matters of territorial sovereignty and societal defense are vital, if not utterly survival-level, interests. As the intensity of national interests' increases, the prevailing logic is that a nation's values undergird those interests and reinforce the necessity to employ force on their behalf. While Beijing's advancement in all areas of national power is impressive and worrisome, for the near future China does not represent an existential threat to the United States' as a nation, culture, or ideological system. From Hanoi's perspective, however, the PRC's rise constitutes a vital threat

with potentially survival-level implications should Beijing's activities at sea restrict Hanoi's ability to control its own citizenry.

Perspectives and Choices

For Vietnam, a growing, militarized, and regionally aggressive China holds potential to threaten its existence. However, through the lenses of history and culture, both countries acknowledge that the endeavor would expend considerable energy without the promise of meaningful gain, resulting in an end state deleterious for both. Similarly, Vietnam recognizes China can expend a relatively small amount of energy to frustrate Hanoi's objectives. Accordingly, Vietnam's worldview and internal risk calculation stem from its conjoined origin and persistently combative relationship with the Middle Kingdom. From Vietnam's vantage point, it is only a question of "when will China threaten it" and its derivative "how must Vietnam react" leading to the formative question of "why" remaining obvious and constant.

As such, Hanoi's calculus to respond to Beijing's forays in the SCS is markedly different from an American determination of national interests and the demarcation of when to use force in support of those interests. The SRV's decision-making gradation between national passivity and societal resistance is more distinct and abrupt in contrast to the US approach.

The US maintains political, defense, and societal institutions that require collective debate and deliberation regarding the use of military action. Correspondingly, the US national decision to employ force requires a malleable plan that allows for the scaling of the military ambition based on risk and benefit prior to and during an armed conflict. This dynamic serves as a rheostat to adjust methods and resources, and sometimes, the objectives themselves. This method allows for great flexibility in the

interpretation of intensity of national interests ranging from immutable existential threats to a panoply of peripheral matters.

In contrast to the US's interpretive flexibility on national security matters, the Vietnamese decision-making rubric is a binary black-or-white modality, exceedingly rigid, and naturally escalatory; all characteristics shaped by Viet culture and history. During its two-thousand year existence under China's oppressive shadow, the Vietnamese hold an acute sense of when to tolerate Beijing's influence and when Chinese assertiveness requires a forceful response. Additionally, the Viet demonstrate that an armed conflict they undertake requires unwavering social commitment and national willingness to exceed the opponent's risk threshold in order to accomplish its objectives. A deviation from or lack of fortitude to realize Vietnamese ends could result in national defeat and cultural assimilation.

The wide range of differences in core values, ascribed intensity, and use-of-force determination for a common security issue signifies a fundamental divergence in Vietnamese and US perspectives. In addition, the risk-to-benefit calculations and correspondent aspect of flexibility are equally distinct between Hanoi and Washington.

From the Vietnamese perspective, Beijing is enacting a maritime version of the "Melian Dialogue" due to their superiority in naval capability and capacity in the SCS.⁴⁵ Already, Hanoi is assuming risk and is realizing losses to its naval and merchant fleets due to Chinese belligerence at sea.⁴⁶ A US-Vietnamese security collaboration holds the promise to modify Chinese behavior to Hanoi's advantage. Primarily, it signals US support to Vietnam that will limit PLAN activities in the near term and frustrate Chinese regional ambitions in future. Second, Hanoi potentially gains an influential and

permanent voting member of the UNSC to advance its potential UNCLOS agenda as a legal argument may constitute Hanoi's best current option. Leveraging US diplomatic support astride Hanoi's collaboration with other Association Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members would also provide invaluable assistance in advancing Vietnam's case regarding disputed waters. Third, US security cooperation could stimulate more energy and acquiescence from Russia for increased military sales at lower cost. Geopolitically and ideologically, Vietnam would much prefer an ascendant Moscow as its military benefactor and regional collaborator to counter Chinese ambitions. However, Russia's unsteady economy and revanchist bent towards its former states requires Vietnam to diversify its approach to national defense. In sum, Vietnam's potential benefits outweigh assessed risks of diversification. In addition, it provides Hanoi a degree of flexibility in its approach to Beijing by offering a broad array of options to achieve its objectives. So much so, a sufficient accrual of indirect power may enable the SRV to bargain with the PRC for accommodations in the SCS. A realization of this direct-indirect power parity may call for realignment and coexistence in an imposing Sino-Viet pact that coalesces a greater sharing of values and interests than with the US.

By contrast, the US would not realize benefits or flexibility to the degree Hanoi would from a security arrangement. If the military definition of security entails the requirement to "establish and maintain protective measures to ensure a state of inviolability from hostile acts," the use of force is an implied and essential function.⁴⁷ However, the relatively narrow commonality of interests, and the expectation to employ force, does not compensate for the mismatch in national ideals and intensity of interests between Hanoi and Washington. Certainly, the prospect of an amenable Vietnam offers

eye-watering proximity for US military capabilities to survey, shape, and if required, strike Chinese strategic bases. However, this prospect, despite the tactical advantage it would afford the US, is illusory in pursuit of its strategic ends. The proposition of US forces on Vietnamese soil as a facet of a security arrangement entails more internal and societal risk for Hanoi's Politburo than the actual probability of Chinese military action against Vietnam without a US force presence. In fact, posturing US forces on Vietnamese territory may exceed Beijing's threshold for tolerance of "nefarious" American containment activities compelling the PRC to respond in a decidedly non-constructive fashion.

The placing of an inordinate weight on benefit without a correspondent balance in risk is a hallmark of an optimism and enthusiasm that defines US culture and our global perspective. However, it also precariously generates a significant forward momentum and tunnel vision that obfuscates the strategic perception of potential negative consequences.

With that in mind, a continuation of US-Vietnamese security collaboration discussions should proceed cautiously in order not to provoke a negative Chinese response. As mentioned, the US should resist the temptation to posture military forces in Vietnamese territory, even within the context of a military exercise. Admittedly, US access to Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang International Airport offer incredible operational potential and a nod to nostalgia. However, even in the context of deliberative planning activities, such a signal received in Beijing would cause alarm and set conditions for follow-on strategic miscommunication and miscalculation.

Additionally, providing Hanoi advanced lethal weaponry, or “prestige” defensive capabilities, via US Foreign Military Sales (FMS), is a highly provocative action that reinforces a perception of an emergent US threat to Beijing. While China has amassed its own advanced arsenal, notable US military hardware such as the armed MQ-1 Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air missile (SAM) system would provide a distinct Vietnamese tactical and operational advantage against current and projected Chinese military forces operating in proximity to Vietnam. Additionally, exporting such capabilities serves as a distinctive indicator of a high level of tangible US military investment and intangible American political support to the receiving nation.

A nuanced approach to FMS calls for demonstrating support to a partner without creating alarm in a potential ally, while still sending a clear message. A method of expressing a shared concern towards Hanoi’s security interest, and complicating Beijing’s calculations requires providing Vietnam an asymmetric capability with dual-use applications. Offering a small, non-weaponized UAS (such as the RQ-7 Shadow or RQ-21 Blackjack) provides the SRV a non-lethal Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platform to gain and maintain situational awareness of its disputed waters consistent with current US policy. Such a capability can fulfill a variety of Vietnamese national missions besides maritime surveillance, such as search and rescue operations, and counter-narcotic activities. Additionally, it also has potential to enhance the SRV’s extant area denial weapons systems. Regardless, the addition of such a capability would require the PRC to modify its activities at tactical and operational levels.

Military-to-military cooperation and engagement between the US and Vietnam must remain limited in scale and scope to not alarm Beijing. Since 2012, the US Department of Defense (DOD) quickened the pace of military cooperation with Hanoi to open dialogue and signal concern to the PRC. The DOD extended invitations to Vietnam's military officers to participate in US War College exchange programs and hosted Vietnamese military observers at several US Pacific Command (USPACOM) military exercises.⁴⁸ While a small scale, bilateral non-combat naval exercise occurred in the SCS in April 2014, formal Vietnamese participation in major US-led defense exercises has yet to occur.⁴⁹ The increasing frequency and breadth of cooperative defense establishment activities were appropriate in providing a message to China. However, an expansion of military-to-military exercises with Vietnam risks distorting the intent of the US message. Based on its paranoia over the security of its periphery, China's default interpretation of such exchanges might accelerate Beijing's provocative activities, originally intended as defensive responses, towards activities of distinctly malign intent.

Summary

Using national power requires a fundamental, unblinking assessment of national interests to assist prioritizing actions during a given circumstance. Seldom are there clear scenarios that elicit simple answers. Often they are ambiguous, complex, and dynamic, offering little clarity to divine a solution. Ultimately, the US and Vietnam appear to maintain similarities in "ways" of assessing a common concern. However, Washington and Hanoi appear divergent in the determination of "ends" for a strategy to address China's rise. The crux of the issue for a collaborative strategy resides in the incongruity in ascribed intensity of a common interest. While worrisome, China's rise is

currently not a survival-level concern for the US. For the SRV, however, it represents another iteration of Sino-ascendancy that historically limits Vietnamese aspirations and holds potential to threaten its national existence. Until the Washington and Hanoi reconcile fundamental disparity of intensity of their shared objectives, the US is wise to limit military involvement with the SRV until rectified.

China's ascendancy represents a classic security dilemma for the US. For Washington, the challenge is to shape Beijing's growth on the regional scene responsibly and without inadvertently creating a spiral of escalating tensions. Vietnam, due to its proximity, history, and relationship with China, has significant potential to alter Beijing's regional ambitions. Certainly, the continuance of US dialogue with Vietnam will gain Chinese attention and elicit a response.

The oft-mentioned "Thucydides' Trap" reemerges in context to the US's security dilemma in Southeast Asia. The term recalls how Athenian demise began with its fateful alliance with Corcyra; a decision where the appeal for regional hegemony outweighed strategic prudence and an allure of immediate gains obscured timeless perspectives of fear, honor, and interest. Athens could foresee its Corcyran alliance as a catalyst to upset Sparta's balance of power. However, it could not predict the expanse of the Peloponnesian War that harkened Athenian ruin. Certainly, history is not predictive of future events. It can only provide a context of past successes and failures to assist us in decisions we make today. Ultimately, to avert Athens' fate, the US must continually assess the risks and benefits of its relationship with Vietnam as it will invariably inform our relationship with China.

Endnotes

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¹¹ Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 27.

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¹⁴ Stein Tonneson, "Vietnam's Objective in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 22, no. 1 (April 2000): 201-202.

¹⁵ Sang, "The Communist Review, Tap chi cong san."

¹⁶ Primarily, the SRV's exploits in Laos and Cambodia exhausted its, Laotian, and Cambodian power potential weakening the entire pro-Soviet satellite system in Indochina. This indirectly addressed China's historical imperative for a compliant periphery. Secondly, Hanoi's exertion in Indochina sapped focus and resources away the South China Sea to which Beijing exploited by seizing the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974. Finally, an isolated and militarily constrained Vietnam offered no challenge to counterbalance Chinese regional aspirations. As long as Vietnam could not forestall Chinese expansion, Beijing's path towards Southeast Asia dominance would remain unfettered

¹⁷ Developed by US Air Force Colonel John Boyd, the Boyd Cycle is more readily known as the "OODA" loop; a four part decision cycle consisting of Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act. Mindtools, "OODA Loops," http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_78.htm (accessed March 16, 2015).

¹⁸ Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, 8

¹⁹ The SRV's endstate for its 1978 invasion into Cambodia was to replace a regime that exacerbated Vietnamese-internal tensions. After shattering the Khmer Rouge military and deposing Pol Pot, the SRV did not formally annex any territory although it occupied and controlled it for years.

²⁰ Carlyle A. Thayer, *Vietnam People's Army: Development and Modernization* (Brunei: Sultan Haji Bolkiah Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, August 23, 2009), 5, <https://www.american.edu/sis/aseanstudiescenter/upload/17313967-Thayer-Vietnam-Peoples-Army-Modernization-and-Development.pdf> (accessed February 16, 2015).

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⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁵ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, 353. The apt Athenian quote pertains: “the strong do what they can and they weak suffer what they must.”

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