

## НАУЧНЫЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

### ВНУТРИПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ И ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА

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#### **SINO-VIETNAMESE BORDER WAR IN 1979 AND POST-WAR GEOPOLITICAL ADJUSTMENTS OF VIETNAM**

**Abstract.** There have been many explanation for the China –Vietnam war in 1979. The approaches are various and multi-faceted concerning the reasons, process and consequences of the war. However, the corollaries in ideational and ideological changes in Vietnamese and in general thinking have not yet been noticed. This research aims to fill that gap.

Corollary 1 in general geopolitical context is the formation of a short-term US – China – ASEAN – NATO – Japan alliance to deal with the Soviet-Vietnamese and the socialist bloc in general, until the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, causing heavy damage to Vietnam. Corollary 2 is that the Vietnam – China 1979 war brought extremely harsh post-war time for Vietnam due to the delay of normalization in US – Vietnam and other countries relations such as with Japan, Europe, ASEAN. Corollary 3 is that the war transformed the perception by Vietnamese leaders and people of the enemy category, independence, sovereignty and socialism ideals. Last but not least, there are solutions from new insights and perceptions in Vietnam policy makers.

**Keywords.** China, Soviet Union, DRV, CPV, Party Program, Party Congress.

#### **Introduction**

Natural neighbors as they are, Vietnam and China’s collision and peace building repeated from time immemorial. There have been bloody wars affecting normal life of generations thus the two parties need to consider carefully and clearly geopolitical balance to avoid being drawn into, or plunging into conflicts and devastating wars. Vietnam holds at high esteem independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity for national construction and development. This study describes the consequences of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war in terms of ideological change resulting in Vietnam foreign policy diverting. Such diversification in understanding policy helps Vietnam avoid wars and reshape new geo-political context. The study implication is for a long-lasting peace, development in dignity for Vietnam.

## Literature review

There are different explanations and analyses from media and studies on the reasons of the 1979 war. Vũ Dương Ninh with the title on Vietnam – China – Soviet Union – USA relations [2014] gives a vast and thorough view on contemporary approaches of Vietnam government to deal with the powers. Phạm Xuyên and Đình Lai with their writings of Truth about Vietnam – China relations in the recent 30 years [1979] explores not only these relations development but the behind-the-scene movements too. Chen Jian [1995] describes in concrete numbers Chinese aids to Vietnam during the first and second Indochina wars. King C. Chen [1987] also presents his views on thought process and changes in the mindsets of related countries' leaders. Trần Trung Đạo [2014] delivers another view of Vietnamese observer on historical aspect. Michael Pillsbury, Thomas Crump, Jack S Levy, Lee Kwan Yew, Odd Arne Westad and Zbigniew Brzeziński, Carl Thayer, Xiaoming Zhang are important writers with different and rational angles of views.

Thus, these studies and my own chronological analyses of CPV documents helped me to explore the corollaries and following actions that transformed geopolitical understanding. Methods of comparison and generalizing are applied, both in related nations' foreign policy and domestic behaviors. The theoretical framework relies on the chronology and diversification of lenses of viewpoints.

### 1. Major approaches and explanations of the border war in 1979

#### *Core issues*

In 1979 China attacked Vietnam to prove the definitive cut with the Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese alliance and the start of economic reform towards the pro-American side, also to assist the Democratic Cambodia — Pol Pot – Ieng Sary team, who were engaging in a guerrilla war in Cambodia against Hun Sen and Vietnam forces. The Sino-American relations were now thawing but they were not yet becoming allies. *“From January 29 to February 5, 1979, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping visited the US to discuss the strengthening of Sino-US relations, and to explore US attitude if China attacked Vietnam. President Carter was silent, but White House advisor Brzezinski advised Deng to finish the fight and withdraw immediately. Two weeks later, on February 17, Chinese troops simultaneously attacked six provinces of the northern border of Vietnam [Vũ Dương Ninh 2014: 269].*

The military attack on Vietnam in 1979 was carefully considered by China, calculating all diplomacy, military and politics pros and cons, even giving in mind the ability of war prolonging. China forecasted three possibilities of the events namely (1) the Soviet Union to engage in a large-scale attack including Beijing, (2) an incitement of ethnic rebels in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, and (3) wars harassing along the Sino-Soviet border [Xiaoming Zhang 2015: 53]. Vietnam is thought to suffer a lot in the war because of its poorer preparation than China [Xiaoming Zhang 2015: 103]. Hanoi fell into a double-sided situation of taking the enemy while China improved its strategy, relying heavily on the United States to renew the country. In particular, this war is partly to relieve the conflicts within the Chinese military: after attacking Vietnam in 1979 the Chinese military factions have erased the tension among themselves, reported by the expanded meeting of the Central Military Commission from December 20, 1978 to January 3, 1979 [Xiaoming Zhang 2015: 58].

The US war in Vietnam had been simmering for a long time when the Sino-Soviet relations broke down in 1969 when the Chinese influencing for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) remained unchanged due to its attacks to Republic of Vietnam. There are also many other reasons for this break-down, mainly that DRV was not so "close" to China in comparison with the Soviet–DRV ties. China has gradually withdrawn experts from the DRV.

### ***Other explanations for the events***

According to the document *"The truth about Vietnam – China relations over the past 30 years"*, there were other reasons too:

*"In order to increase pressure on Vietnam, Chinese leaders also instruct their embassy in Hanoi to instigate Chinese Vietnamese organizations to disrupt and oppose the DRV. Along with tens of thousands of Chinese "logistics soldiers" to come and help Vietnam build roads in northern provinces from 1965 to 1968, Chinese reactionaries propagated "Mao Zedong thought" and "revolution culture", misrepresenting the Vietnamese way, organizing spy nets. Beijing's rulers also allowed "revolutionary refugees" to infiltrate the northern border provinces of Vietnam for intelligence and "underground troops organization" (In Sino–Viet high level talks in September 1970 Chairman Mao Zedong acknowledged China's responsibility for the non-friendly activities, and in November 1977 President Hua Guofeng once again acknowledged similarly)" [Phạm Xuyên, Đình Lai 1979: 76].*

At the same stage Beijing asked Hanoi to give supports for Pol Pot – Ieng Sary in order to stand outside and shove Viet-Cambodian relation into a whirlwind:

*"They rejected the proposal of Pol Pot – Ieng Sary team for supplying weapons but asked Vietnam to lend the weapons in advance to Pol Pot – Ieng Sary and China would pay Vietnam later. This is a trick by Beijing that would please the Cambodian henchmen, avoid collisions with the United States, and at the same time trap Vietnam into difficulty while Vietnam was conducting a general offensive and rebellion in the spring of 1975" [Phạm Xuyên, Đình Lai 1979: 105].*

### ***Aid from China: views of many twists in Vietnam–China relations***

*"If the 1960s and 1970s, Chinese leaders reduced aid to Vietnam because they did not approve Vietnam's negotiating with the US to deescalate the war ladder, and if during 1971–1972 they increased assistance to Vietnam to the highest as compared to the previous years, that is because they wanted to take advantage of Vietnam's negotiations with the US. Then in 1975, because of the failure in Republic of Vietnam, they used aid to cause pressure on DRV. .... It is clear that Chinese leaders' aid is not "impartial" as they often boast, but rather a tool of national expansionism and great country hegemony. Beijing's aid is just "sticks and carrots" [Phạm Xuyên, Đình Lai 1979: 124]*

In this same alliance, Mao used the contradicts in Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese relation to rectify the internal situation of China Communist Party [Chen Jian 1995: 381]. As Tran Trung Dao once mentioned, Mao interacted with high handling skill to use "peaceful evolution" to purge internal affairs [Trần Trung Đạo 2014: 111]. Mao purged Liu and Deng before and after Miyamoto's visit, an occasion for internal revision.

***Vietnam – China – Russia triangle***

Chinese scholar King C. Chen's idea is noteworthy: In Russia – China relations "Hanoi conducted an alliance without understanding the importance of new alliance with Moscow... greater than Hanoi had ever contemplated" [King 1987: 28]. In Vietnam – China 1979 war, in the vigilant eye at the Soviet Union and observing the evolution of the Second Indochina War, China was afraid of bogging in Cambodia like the US in Vietnam, so it did not deploy troops [King 1987: 37]. Moreover, it aimed at letting war occur outside China, letting other peoples to fight each other. That is a Chinese strategy from the time of Mao's conferring with four marshals [Pillsbury 2015: 54]. Thomas Crump agreed that Mao did not want to provide human power but only weapons and supplies to the DRV [Crump 2007: 32, 33].

There are many assumptions about the fact that the Soviet Union had limited its support of Vietnam in the 1979 Indochina War due to the Afghanistan problem and economic collapse. According to Chinese scholar, the Soviet Union limited its involvement because the Soviet Union also had to respect a treaty with China [Mân Lực 1993: 247]. Thus, the small countries' benefit here had once again been set aside by the big countries. According to Z. Bzrezinski, China has won this war because it has both forced Vietnam to restrict its activities in Cambodia and has proved that the Soviet Union could not extend its range of power [Mân Lực, 1993: 279]. Still there are other ideas by Xiaoming Zhang and Carl Thayer on these issues.

***War of inheritance (Death-watch wars)***

When a change in power position occurs in a country with many secrets, it can also lead to war as the following: "*This is reflected in the historical phenomenon of inheritance war (Death-watch wars)* [Blainey 1973: 68-70], *in which the deaths of kings would lead to a crisis of succession, disintegration and weakness of relationship alliances based on personal system and a general transition in balance of power ... often lead to war*" [Levy 1989: 259-288]. The Vietnam – China war beginning to tense since 1978 partly had this color after the death of Mao Zedong, when Deng Xiaoping was in full control. Changing internal politics, the central kingdom's foreign direction leads to the need to attack a certain neighbor.

At the crisis at Taiwan's strait in 1958 China attacked Jinmen and Mazu in an effort to test face of the Soviet Union; China attacked India in 1960 in order to discourage the intention to protect the refugee Dalai Lama; China attacked Vietnam in 1979 in order to set up the status quo – to implement its anti-Soviet commitment showing to the Western world and prove that the Soviet Union could not support allies [Westad 2012: 341, 351].

Global and regional politics in particular rated Vietnam as the most worried country about China's expansion of power. When China attacked Vietnam in 1979, Li Kwanyew sensed that the Vietnamese government might have sought to establish long-term security relationships with Americans [Lý Quang Diệu 2017: 69].

Concerning the outcome of the war, China's casualties estimated 21,000 deaths and 63,000 injuries [Doan Xuan Loc: 26.02.2017]. According to the Chinese Report from Kunming Military Region, in the period of February 17, 1979 to March 16, 1979 there were 6,954 Chinese soldiers killed and 14,800 wounded. The Vietnamese side lost 15,000 soldiers from February 17 to February 27, 1979 and another 37,000 people from February 28 to March 16, 1979 [Declassification: 15.03.2019].

For physical and material losses, each party have different way of calculating, depending on different purposes, so we might wait until the material archive to be published in the coming years to have more accurate view. But pictures from the battle field are notorious (Figures 1-3).



**Figure 1:** Chinese anti-tank guns, B41 bullets, mid-range guns and machine guns captured by Vietnamese  
*Source:* Hải Vy, 14.02.2019.

## **2. Cooperation and struggle in Sino-Vietnamese relations after the 3rd Indochina war**

In essence, the war lasted until 1990 with many smaller range collisions and has been resulted in three main corollaries.

*First corollary* of the general geopolitical context is the formation after the war of a short-term US – China – ASEAN– NATO – Japan camp to deal with the Soviet-Vietnamese and the socialist bloc in general, until the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. This link was too strong, causing many losses for Vietnamese (and the Soviet Union itself) in an impasse with more than

two enemies and a rickety economy on shoulder. This consequence is the most important lesson in macro management and geopolitics.

*Second corollary:* 4 years after the 2nd Indochina war following by the 3rd Indochina war caused extremely harsh post-war time for Vietnam. The US believed China was separated from the communist bloc and energized China and, of course, postponed the peace roadmap with Vietnam even though in 1978 Vietnam – America ties have progressed strongly in normalization through Thach – Hien – Holbrooke contacts. Since then other warm relations such as with Japan, Europe and ASEAN has been followed. The US – China embargo has seriously affected the Vietnamese economy until the 6th Congress (1986). The Soviet Union also reevaluated the loss of its strength in the war in Afghanistan, Vietnam and Cambodia, it was true that Deng Xiaoping did "make Vietnam bleed".

Since then, Vietnam has had many specific changes to reduce ideological dogma in geopolitics towards the non-communist world that started with ASEAN (before and after 1989).

*Third corollary* belongs to the perception issues. Vietnam has its obvious righteousness in the fatherland-protecting war and China wanted to teach Vietnam a certain lesson. But what important is that China's action has contributed to transforming the perception of Vietnamese leaders and people about the enemy category, independence and sovereignty and socialism ideals. From the event of January 19, 1974, Vietnamese leaders learned to abolish the wrong trust that China might return Vietnam-sovereigned Paracels which China had invaded and seized from Vietnam (notably, in 1979 war, China prepared one navy full force attack to Vietnam initiated from Paracels) [Mân Lực 1993: 279]. Although the DRV cleverly recaptured Spratly to the united Vietnam in May 1975, but until the 1979 war, their awareness of ideology and independence of sovereignty changed profoundly. This is a positive foundation for later decisions.



**Figure 2:** Confronting the army 12 times more numerous and supported by strong firepower, military of ethnic groups in the northern border provinces actively organized fighting on the spot to hold Chinese troops while waiting for the main army. *Source:* Hải Vy, 14.02.2019



**Figure 3:** Many buildings were badly destroyed  
*Source:* Hải Vy, 14.02.2019

Vietnam has still kept warm relation with Soviet Union and later on with Russia inspite of China's will to separate them. According to Carl Thayer, Soviet Union has also supported Vietnam side during the course of war [Hải Vy: 14.02.2019]. Also it was the Soviet Union deployment of navy fleet outside Tonkin Gulf that hindered a Chinese attack from the sea. Xiaoming Zhang also revealed the participation of Soviet officers in the war. The Soviet sent military advisers to assist the PAVN General Staff. Colonel General Gennadi I. Obaturov took charge of twenty officers on 19 February 1979. Per Obaturov's recommendation, the Vietnamese rushed a rocket artillery division with the newly received BM-21 Grad Russian rocket launchers to the border area to help relieve the division under the Chinese siege. One regiment of the PAVN 327th Division, which had been held as a reserve in the area south of Lang Son, moved up to join the 3rd Division to defend the city.

The PAVN's 308th, 312th, and 390th Divisions were deployed along the roads between Hanoi and Lang Son. Due to the return of the 304th, 306th, and 325th Divisions from Cambodia in early March and the reinforcement of its troupes, the General Staff in Hanoi allegedly planned to conduct a massive counterattack against the Chinese occupation forces at Lang Son. Soviet advisers were dispatched to the Vietnamese front units. One Soviet signal company was airlifted

to Hanoi for working with the PAVN General Staff. On 5 March, Beijing, however, declared its withdrawal from Vietnam [Xiaoming Zhang 2015: 105].

### *Solving — cooperating and struggling*

From the second and the third corollaries (the reality of the national economic construction and the perception on broader geopolitics), the Vietnamese politics have made enormous changes, ridding previous thoughts and actions, thereby trying to resolve the holistic and long-term geopolitical stance withdrawn from the first corollary. Although recently, in the decade of 2010's, Vietnam has had shortage of vigilance in the protection of sovereignty, mainly because it could not control successfully interest groups associated with corrupt officials. Above all, after 1979 there took place the highly important 6th Party Congress (1986), the 7th Party Congress (1991) with Party Program 1991, the 8th Party Congress (1996), the 11th Party Congress (2011) with Party Program 2011. These forums were marked by decisions to correct the mistakes of predecessors and keep consistent to multilateral diplomacy and accompanying policies.

Compared to rather general 1930 Party Program and the 1951 Party Program (inaccurate assessment of China in Chapter 2, Article 2, Point 5), which were far different from the actual struggle of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the 1991 Party Program had better summaries in point 1 (national independence) and point 4 (international strength), paving the way for specific extrovert geopolitical documents and activities. In particular, the 1991 Party Program acknowledged that "the Party has also committed serious mistakes in the socialist revolution" [Văn kiện Đảng: 09.02.2019] with a sense of error accepting more than previous documents. The 1991 Party Congress emphasized multilateralism. The 1991 Party Program with its fourth point was somewhat suitable as a new outward direction when the Soviet Union collapsed. The 2011 Party Program also emphasized "positive international integration, creating a favorable environment for the country's development".

Domestic democratic and institutional reforms and shifts often have not been kept up with the progressive outward actions of Vietnamese policy-makers.

Vietnam's 'three no' strategy also came into being and didn't let any country to be suspicious of Hanoi's foreign policy. However, since then definitions can be interpreted in the right direction. For example, what is a military ally, what is a military base?

Note the timeline: in 1995 US and Vietnam normalized their relations, in 1991 China and Vietnam normalized relations. Vietnam joined the WTO in 2007, China joined the WTO in 2001. Vietnam always performed some years backward to the international integration as compared with China.

As of 2019, Vietnam has a total of 16 countries as strategic partners with 5 key partners namely ASEAN and Russia (2001), India (2007), China (2008), Japan, Korea and Spain (2009), Britain (2010), Germany and Italy (2011), Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and France (2013), Malaysia and the Philippines (2015), Australia (2018). Among them 3 countries established comprehensive strategic partnerships with Vietnam: China (2008), Russia (2012) and India (2016).

The steps backward in the struggle with China was that Vietnam has allowed Chinese partners to exploit higher watershed forests, explore bauxite in the Central Highlands for many years with repeated losses, which many Vietnamese military generals have spoken up [Thu Hà:



27.02.2010]. Vietnam could not hinder China to invade the Gac Ma underwater shoal in March 14, 1988, could not solve the China's torture of Vietnamese fishermen especially from 2005 to 2019, could not protect oil partners like Mobile and Repsol to cooperate with Vietnam to explore oil in the EEZ of Vietnam. In addition, Hanoi indirectly agreed for China to enter the three Vietnamese special administrative zones that are under construction while correspondent law not yet passed. It was also a disadvantage for Vietnam because it had to deal with the land speculation of interest groups and revealed the conflict between a part of pro-Chinese mandarins and Vietnamese people.

The tug-of-war steps that brought about advantages for Vietnam were the Chinese cable cutting of exploration ships Viking II (June 9, 2011) and Binh Minh 2 (November 30, 2012), the Chinese HY981 rig stationing illegally in the EEZ of Vietnam in May 1, 2014. The fact that Chinese strongly confirmed sovereignty along with U-shaped line also apported advantages to Vietnam because China's actions were protested by almost all international community and it lost to the Philippines at the PDA court on July 12, 2016. China has failed in using the soft power in the race for Vietnam and ASEAN against other powers such as the US, Russia, India, Japan, Australia.

In economic terms Vietnam has created a stable development, though it still heavily depends in GDP growth on FDI (more than 20%) and overseas Vietnamese remittances (nearly 20 billion USD per year). Vietnam has signed FTAs (Free Trade Agreement) with many partners such as ASEAN (1993), Japan (2009), Chile, South Korea (2014), EAEU (2016), CPTPP (2018). Together with other ASEAN members Vietnam builds FTAs with China (2003), Korea (2007), Japan (2008), India (2010), Australia and New Zealand (2010). The problem is that in order to increase trade exchange, it is necessary to reduce logistics and other hidden costs. This is still a problem for macroeconomic management.

As for military, Vietnam maintains good relations with Russia, India and better relations with the US, Japan and recently Australia. Vietnam has begun sending military personnel to attend peacekeeping activities and MOOTW [Tia sang, 20.11.2013] that is a form of serious and effective field training.

The US-organized RIMPAC 2014 was executed with China participating, but at RIMPAC 2018 China was withdrawn (disinvited), while Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Israel joined it for the first time. Vietnam also participates as observer in the largest Asia Pacific exercises Cobra Gold, held annually by the US and Thailand. Vietnam is in top 10 country using Russian weapons [Business Insider: 7.02.2019] along with a rather close traditional relationship. Vietnam's seaports have welcomed warships from countries such as the US, India, France, England and Australia with stable frequencies since 2011, of which Russia is considered as familiar country for Cam Ranh Port.

## **Conclusion**

China and Vietnam are natural neighbors. Collision and peace reconstruction have been common jobs since ancient times. The problem is that the parties need to consider carefully and clearly the power and the geopolitical balance with respect to each other to avoid being drawn into, or actively making war capital decisions that will harm many aspects including the psychology of generations. Vietnam, more than any other nation, understands independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity to be the highest priority for national survival.

China had a lot of internal changes but had often attacked Vietnam on holidays, Tet or confusing times of transferring the regime. This is a common occurrence. The Vietnamese ought to pay attention and act correctly.

From February 17, 1979 until now 40 years passing, the Vietnamese have increased their awareness with the way of living and cooperating with China. This is what the Chinese side can also openly acknowledge. But in the long run, the struggle and cooperation will be more difficult for Vietnam, because Vietnam's economic potential is weaker than China due to the scope of corruption and brain drain, which affect the roots and elements of Vietnam's synergy.

Considering Vietnam's new perception of China since 1969 to have been discussed, it is in a better form than it was 40 years ago. Vietnam has expanded cooperation with all countries in the world, and also keeps good traditional relations with Russia in the fields of economy, military and tourism. Talking about the Vietnam-China war in 1979, it is also an occasion to recall a close relationship with the Soviet Union and nowadays Russia. However, in the world of new technology, economy and drastic changes, the cooperation with Russia will need to rely on one's own strength. It is quite unlike the second Indochina war and the Vietnam – China 1979 clash, when ideological allies' spirit overwhelmed many things, invisibly and accidentally creating a burden for the partners and lack of self-help, leading to non-positive consequences, as analyzed above. Just like all old enemies, China now is treated as a force for cooperation and struggle at the same time, looking ahead for a new and bright future with the modern and civilized world.

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## ВЬЕТНАМО-КИТАЙСКАЯ ПОГРАНИЧНАЯ ВОЙНА 1979 ГОДА И ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИЗМЕНЕНИЯ В ПОЛИТИКЕ ВЬЕТНАМЕ

**Аннотация.** Существует много объяснений причин, течения и результатов вьетнамо-китайской пограничной войны 1979 г. Однако ее влияние на идеологию и мышление вьетнамцев еще никем не рассматривалось. Данное исследование имеет целью восполнить этот пробел.

Первым следствием войны в общем геополитическом контексте является формирование краткосрочного объединения США – Китай – АСЕАН – НАТО – Япония для борьбы с советско-вьетнамским и социалистическим блоками в целом до распада Советского Союза в 1991 г., тяжело отразившегося на Вьетнаме. Вторым следствием стало чрезвычайно трудное послевоенное время и задержка нормализации отношений Вьетнама с США, Японией, Европой, АСЕАН. Третье следствие заключается в том, что война изменила представление вьетнамских лидеров и народа о врагах, независимости и суверенитете и социалистических идеалах. И последнее, но не менее важное: решения, принятые на основе новых взглядов и представлений вьетнамских политиков.

**Ключевые слова:** Китай, Советский Союз, ДРВ, КПВ, программа Партии, съезд Партии.

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