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LOOKING BACK ON VIETNAM — CHINA RELATIONS SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF STRATEGIC COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIP¹

Abstract. In 2008, Vietnam and China established a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, the highest and the most comprehensive diplomatic relations of both countries, and it was also the first time when two countries established this cooperation framework. Vietnam — China relations are seen as ‘wearing new clothes’ or having a new form. However, whether has the actual development or the nature of the relations changed accordingly to fit ‘the new clothes’? Does Vietnam — China strategic cooperative partnership have any key characteristics of a typical strategic partnership, such as mutual trust, strengthened cooperation and mutual benefits?

The paper consists of three parts with the first part discussing the concept of partnership and applying it to the Sino-Vietnamese relationship to explain the reasons why China decided to build this relationship with Vietnam. The second part looks back on the development of Vietnam — China relationship since 2008 by comparing it with that of the previous periods in some areas, including political diplomacy, trade and economy, and national security and defense. On the basis of Vietnam — China comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership and comparing it with China’s relationship with Laos, a country located on the Indochinese peninsula, the third part provides an analysis and evaluation of Vietnam — China relationship development in this period.

Keywords: Vietnam — China relations, comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, Vietnam — China political relations, Vietnam — China economic and trade relations.

Introduction

During the visit of General Secretary of Vietnam’s Communist Party Nong Duc Manh to China in 2008, Vietnam and China agreed to develop a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, which is considered to be the highest and the most comprehensive of all in foreign relations of each country in order to assert the importance of the relationship, as well as the importance of

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one country to another. Vietnam is the first country in Southeast Asia to establish a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with China, followed by Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. China is also the first of the three countries, including Russia and India, that Vietnam established this cooperation framework. That bilateral relationship was upgraded to the highest level indicates that Vietnam — China relationship has made important changes in form, but whether has the nature of the relationship changed accordingly; has the relationship ever had any key characteristics of a typical strategic partnership?

Vietnamese scholars have so far done some research focusing on general assessment of Vietnam — China relations, especially, in recent years, there have been many works on the impacts of China's rise on Vietnam and Sino-Vietnamese relations. The basis of the bilateral relations is similarities in political regime, culture and history, mutual understanding, and being each other's neighbor, however, 'substantial positive relations and mutual trust' only account for a third of 65 years, while the remaining is "disagreement, criticism, and even war" [Vu Cao Phan 2014: 73]. 'The East Sea issue is the biggest obstacle, or, in other words, the key factor in Vietnam — China relations' [Truong Luu 2016: 54, 55]. The incident of Haiyang Shiyou 981 shows 'the gap between China's words and its actions'.

Recently, there have been a number of research papers by international scholars analyzing the Sino-Vietnamese relations from different perspectives. G. Lokshin discusses the cause of Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 and its consequences. This war and other historical issues are among obstacles to trust building between Vietnam and China, and this is an important topic in my research [Lokshin 2019]. Benoit de Treglode evaluates China — Vietnam relations since the establishment of strategic partnership, however, he mostly focuses on the impacts of China on Vietnam regarding political and economic reforms, anti-corruption practices, as well as cooperation in national defense and security, and his research suggests interesting implications for China — Vietnam relations from the perspective of an international observer (e.g. comments on Chinese and Vietnamese political elites), which Vietnamese scholars cannot explicitly discuss [Treglode 2019]. M. Pietrasiak and K. Pieczara discuss the East Sea conflict in the second decade of the 21st century, China's position on the East Sea and difficulties facing Vietnam from regional perspective (ASEAN countries) and international perspective (major countries, such as the U.S. and Russia), and their viewpoints are quite similar to those of Vietnamese scholars [Pietrasiak, Pieczara 2019]. On the basis of literature review of Vietnamese-Sino relations, we see the establishment of the comprehensive cooperative partnership as an essential point in assessment of the development of Vietnam China relations since 2008.

To answer these research questions, using observations and research from the perspective of Vietnamese scholars, the paper provides an overview of the concept of 'partnership', explains the reason why China decided to establish this cooperation framework with Vietnam, and looks back on the development of Vietnam — China relationship since 2008 by comparing the relationship with that of previous periods in some areas.

Overview of strategic partnerships

Scholars around the world have so far not completely agreed on the connotation of 'partnership', 'strategic partnerships' but some definitions are widely accepted. Thomas S. Wilkins argues that 'the strategic partnership is therefore emblematic of the new, Twenty-First Century alignment archetype' [Wilkins 2012: 68], 'structured collaboration between states (or other 'actors') to take joint advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation' [Wilkins 2008: 363]. The nature of 'strategic partnership' is based on common interests, and does not identify a country as a common enemy; it tends to be informal

and offers greater degree of flexibility than alliance does; it puts special emphasis on economic cooperation and traditional security [Wilkins 2012: 68]. Georg Struver believes that ‘the building of strategic partnerships offers one possibility for entering into such flexible interstate ties intended to serve the pursuit of political, security, and economic objectives in a globalised world’ [Struver 2016: 5—6]. Chinese scholars argue that ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ indicates cooperation in macro-level strategic areas, in which the depth and breadth of cooperation are developed from the existing relations. It can be said that basically, this type of relationship must be a long-term mutually beneficial and supportive one, which promotes a deep and comprehensive cooperation in all areas, and the two sides must build high-level mutual trust.

The comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership is a new development in Vietnam — China relations built on the basis of the ‘16 word guideline’ (1999) and ‘four good’ motto (2002), after the bilateral relations have gained some certain achievements, such as removing some barriers regarding territorial boundaries (the Land Border Treaty in 1999 and the Agreement on the Delimitation of the Tonkin Gulf and the Vietnam — China Fisheries Cooperation in 2000, completing 99 % of the delimitation work on the Vietnam — China border line in 2008).

Building a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership demonstrates the importance of one country to another, and the importance of this relationship to both countries. The reason why Vietnam attaches importance to and prioritizes its relations with China is very clear, so it is not necessary to discuss further. We, therefore, focus only on analyzing China’s intentions.

Chinese scholars posit that the most important motivations of China in building a partnership are as follows: the need to secure energy and commodity resources, to search for new markets for Chinese exports and investment, to isolate Taiwan internationally, to project China’s image as a responsible and peaceful power, and to pursue economic interests [Struver 2016: 10]. We believe that in China’s relations with Vietnam, geostrategic factor is the most important one. As China is expanding its influence from the region to the world, Vietnam has an important role in Beijing’s strategy of regional connection and influence expansion. Chinese scholars evaluate the role of Vietnam by analyzing General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s official visit to Vietnam and Singapore in November 2015 as follows: *Firstly*, Vietnam and Singapore are important countries in the Belt and Road Initiative, and the implementation of this strategy needs the two countries’ support and coordination. *Secondly*, the two countries play important roles in ASEAN and regional affairs. *Thirdly*, the two countries are of importance for Beijing to maintain China’s high economic growth as both of them joined the TPP. *Fourthly*, the two countries are of immense importance to maintaining China’s border stability and national security [杜继锋 4.11.2015].

Developing relations with Vietnam, a country having many similarities with China will be beneficial for Beijing to secure its ‘core interests’. *Firstly*, maintaining a similar social regime under the leadership of communist party, keeping Vietnam within the sphere of China’s influence. That means China’s security in the southern border is ensured. *Secondly*, forming a close tie, or even creating a dependent relationship if necessary, especially in politics and economy, to keep Vietnam under Chinese influence and make it difficult for Vietnam to join other countries against China. *Thirdly*, leading Vietnam to resolve the East Sea dispute in the way that China wants to be, use it as a model to resolve disputes with other countries in a beneficial way to Beijing.

Vietnam — China relations since the establishment of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership

In this part, the paper looks back on Vietnam — China relations since the establishment of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnerships in three key areas, including political diplo-

macy, trade and economy, national security and defense. In our discussion of each area, we attempt to clarify the progress and development, and point out the main shortcomings and limitations, thereby providing deeper explanation of the Vietnam — China comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.

In political diplomacy, the two countries maintain close diplomatic and political relations through all channels, including diplomacy between the two ruling parties, state-to-state diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy. Diplomacy between the two Parties is still considered a major diplomatic channel with 6 visits, of which the General Secretary of Vietnamese Communist Party visited China 4 times, while the General Secretary and State President of China visited Vietnam twice since 2008. China is the country that the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam visits the most with the highest frequency (every 2.5 years). Since 2008, there have been new and flexible forms of contact between leaders of the two countries' ruling parties, such as phone conversation between General Secretaries (the first phone conversation in 2013), sending special envoys of the general secretary (since 2014) and conducting meetings with representatives of the two countries' politburos (since 2016), etc. Regarding state-to-state diplomacy, the high-ranking leaders of the two sides visited and attended important meetings of each other a total of 11 times, most of which were from the Vietnamese side. During high-level visits, the two sides signed 85 documents and agreements and formed different cooperation mechanisms at all levels, including many important documents related to cooperation between the two ruling parties, economic cooperation, and principles guiding the settlement of sea-related issues.

Diplomacy and people-to-people exchange between the two countries are bolstered through expanding previous cooperation mechanisms, such as the Vietnam — China Youth Friendship Meeting or opening new forums, including Vietnam — China People's Forum, Vietnam — China Scholars Forum, etc. China also started paying attention to building symbolic works (speeding up the construction of Vietnam-China Friendship Palace started in 2004, launching the China Cultural Center in Hanoi), realizing and promoting cooperation between local areas of the two countries, such as supporting the construction of some of civil works in border areas. China has also put more effort in 'people-to-people connections'.

On the surface, the establishment of the comprehensive cooperative partnership clearly indicates strengthened diplomatic and political relations, and the two countries' wishes and efforts in building trust. However, the Vietnam — China relationship, in fact, is unstable with many ups and downs, characterized by some serious or unprecedented incidents. Since the diplomatic normalization of the two countries (in 1991), high-ranking leaders of both sides did not officially visit each other in 6 years (in 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2019), and all of these years are in that period.

The period after the establishment of the Vietnam — China comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership is the one with the most serious incidents in the East Sea caused by China, which resulted in negative impacts on bilateral relations in a comprehensive manner, and the Haiyang Shiyou 981 standoff in 2014 is a typical example. This incident made the bilateral relations hit the bottom since normalization, and Chinese scholar Gu Xiaosong describes that the relationship between the two countries followed a V-shape pattern and it 'hit the bottom of this V' in 2014 [古小松 2016]. The fact that Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission of China Fan Changlong unexpectedly cut short his trip to Vietnam and canceled carefully prepared defense exchanges in 2017 was also an unprecedented incident, which indicates that Vietnam — China relations were still potentially unstable.

In economic and trade relations, cooperation is strongly promoted, which can be seen through a number of signed documents and actual statistics. Over the period of 11 years (2008—2019), Vietnam — China bilateral trade turnover increased 5 times, from about 20 billion USD to 116 billion USD, and in 2018, Vietnam surpassed Malaysia to become the largest trading partner of China

in the Southeast Asia. China's direct investment in Vietnam increased by 6 times, from 628 projects with a total registered capital of about 2.197 billion USD, ranked 16/84 countries and territories investing in Vietnam in 2008 [MOFA Vietnam: 25.12.2009] to 2,807 projects with a total investment capital of 16.264 billion USD, ranked 7/135 countries and territories investing in Vietnam in 2019 [Foreign Investment Agency: 7.01.2020]. Vietnam — China economic and trade cooperation has been deepened with Chinese enterprises winning major projects in key areas of Vietnam, such as mining, thermal power and metallurgy, and that increases Vietnam's economic and trade dependence on China.

The number of tourists between the two countries has witnessed a strong growth in recent years. China is the largest source of international tourists of Vietnam and also one of the main tourist markets for Vietnamese people. In 2018, the number of international visitors to Vietnam was estimated at more than 15.4 million, of which Chinese tourists reached nearly 6 million (5,806,425), accounting for a third of international visitors to Vietnam [Vietnam National Administration of Tourism: 19.02.2020], while Vietnam is China's second largest source of tourists. In recent years, many new and direct flights from Vietnam's tourist cities to China and vice versa have been opened, which opened up various tourist and passenger routes, and self-drive cross-border tours, etc. Those routes make tourists from China to Vietnam and vice versa continue to increase rapidly.

However, the limitations and problems in Vietnam's cooperation with China are becoming increasingly bigger and have not been effectively addressed, and the real reason for that is the two countries' interests, especially those of the Vietnamese side. In fact, Vietnam's large trade deficit with China implies the country's high economic dependence on China, which poses high risk to Vietnam as China previously used economic measures to retaliate or put pressure on other countries when tensions arose due to territorial disputes. China's contracted projects have given rise to a range of problems in Vietnam, such as slow work progress resulting in excessive capital expansion and increasing debt burden (as for Cat Linh — Ha Dong Railway Project, since January 2016, Vietnam has to make annual payment of principal and interest of 28.8 million USD to China Eximbank for the additional loan of 250 million USD, not to mention the annual payment for the initial loan of 419 million USD) [Kiều Linh: 22.01.2018].

As for national defense and security, there have been many new forms of defense and security cooperation between the two countries, such as Vietnam — China border defense and friendship exchange (starting from 2014), border meetings between Defense Ministers of the two countries (starting from 2015), 3-level border guard coordination mechanism (Central, Military Zone and provincial levels). The security forces of the two countries have effectively cooperated in preventing a number of non-traditional security issues, such as human and drug trafficking.

However, the East Sea issue is becoming more complicated. In 2011, the two sides reached a very important agreement — the *Agreement on basic principles guiding the settlement of sea-related issues*, however, after the establishment of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, China is responsible for causing the most serious incidents in the East Sea, such as in 2011, 2012, 2014... Apart from militarization, China also puts huge pressure on Vietnam's oil and gas exploitation activities and hinders fishing activity in the East Sea. The fact that Vietnam had to stop exploration activities with its foreign partners has resulted in economic losses, negative impacts on foreign investment in Vietnam's oil and gas sector, and difficulties in attracting foreign investment in oil and gas exploitation in the future.

Due to the impacts of the East Sea dispute and the economic cooperation problems as mentioned above, anti-China sentiment has been quite popular in Vietnamese society in recent years. Therefore, apart from the East Sea dispute, Vietnam's current cooperation with China might create strong social effects, which in turn could lead to social instability.

Analysis

The process of building and developing strategic cooperative partnership with Vietnam roughly happened in parallel with China becoming the world's second largest economy (in 2010), rapidly strengthened and boosted its influence in the region and the world through economic instruments, while other major countries were in trouble due to the global financial crisis.

More than 10 years of building strategic cooperative partnerships with Vietnam are mainly in the period of China's fifth generation of leaders. As for domestic affairs, China has entered a period of 'strengthening' after taking the leap of 'standing up' and 'growing rich', realizing 'Chinese dream', and 'achieving the great revival of the Chinese nation' through a detailed roadmap to 2050. Regarding foreign affairs, China is moving closer to 'the world's center stage', ending the foreign policy slogan 'hide our capacities and bide our time' in the previous decades.

China that possesses the power which needed to be shown off to the world, and China that wants to strengthen its influence with soft power to gain a more deserve position might result in seemingly contradicting expressions or actions, but the real intention is to assert China's power to the world and use this power to 'protect the interests' of China, and attain the demand of rising nationalism in this country. For China's neighboring countries, it is the contradiction between a China being 'friendly to neighbors' in many charismatic words and a China ready to violate territorial sovereignty and have tough behavior towards its neighbors. Vietnam — China strategic cooperative partnership over the past 10 years has been developed in that context. The above-mentioned contradiction and expression are the main causes that make Vietnam — China relations frequently go 'up' and 'down', and unstable as mentioned above.

Since the establishment of Vietnam — China comprehensive cooperative partnership, Vietnamese-Sino relations continue to develop comprehensively and rapidly. Political trust building efforts reflect in high-level visits and important agreements. Important areas of cooperation also witness rapid development. Chinese scholar Wang Zheng argues that the establishment of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership is 'a new height in bilateral relations, and also a new form of transformation in the relationship between the two countries' [王 峥 2018: 112]. However, the above-mentioned incidents and problems regarding diplomatic relations between the two countries show that political trust building efforts have not yielded expected results.

Despite having new form of relationship, Vietnam — China relations over the past 10 years have not yet developed into a true strategic partnership with strategic trust, which has always been highlighted by senior leaders of the two countries in their meetings. Both joint statements in 2011 and in 2013 mentioned the need to enhance 'strategic trust'. However, in reality, the mutual trust, the stability and sustainability of the bilateral relationship is still weak and easily affected by internal and external factors, and the strategic trust between Vietnam and China is still at low level. Due to the East Sea dispute, diplomatic relations between the two countries sometimes become 'cold political relations', and that the dispute is becoming more and more serious worsens the bilateral relations [Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa, Nguyen Xuan Cuong 2017: 33]. Moreover, problems between the two countries have not been resolved and tend to be on the rise.

Sino-Vietnamese relationship is said to be an equal one, but it is, in fact, an asymmetrical relationship due to the great disparity between the two countries in all aspects. China tends to be relatively proactive in regulating the bilateral relations by using its power and composite national strength. The asymmetry is even more apparent in economic cooperation as Vietnam's dependence on Chinese economy is increasing, while there have been many arising problems in bilateral cooperation and these problems are, in fact, related to Vietnam's interests.

Existing problems, such as historical legacy, the East Sea dispute, etc., make it difficult for the two countries to build trust. The comparison between Vietnam — China relationship and Chi-

na's relationship with Laos, a country forging comprehensive cooperative partnership with China one year after the establishment of Vietnamese-Sino comprehensive partnership (in 2009), would shed more light on the above problem. Although high-level visits by Laos and China are fewer than those of Vietnam and China, Sino-Laos relations have developed rapidly, especially since 2016. As for political diplomacy, in November 2017, high-ranking leaders of China and Laos agreed to build the 'Community of common destiny', which demonstrates high consensus and strategic trust. The General Secretary and President of Laos' visit to China in May 2016 was called 'a friendly official visit' by the Chinese side. So far, Laos has more consulates in China than Vietnam. As for economy, trade relation between China and Laos is more balanced than that of China and Vietnam as China tends to have trade deficit with Laos. According to the Ministry of Commerce of China, in 2018 China exported 1.45 billion USD and imported 2.02 billion USD [MOFA China 12.11.2019]. China provides aid to Laos, such as grant aid, interest-free loans and loans with preferential rates in many areas. Argues that of all ASEAN countries, 'political, economic and security relations between Laos, Cambodia and China are still the best' [王雷 3.02.2019]. The development of Vietnam — China relations indicates that the strategic trust is low, which in turn will negatively affect the cooperation between the two countries.

Conclusion

The upgrading of Vietnam — China relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership is seen as 'wearing new clothes', but the development of the bilateral relationship over the past 10 years shows that the 'new clothes' have not changed the form and the nature of this relationship. Vietnam — China strategic cooperative partnership has continued to develop on the basis of the framework and agreements reached between the two countries' leaders, and important areas of cooperation, such as trade and commerce, have developed in depth, while China has made good use of its advantages. However, building a strategic cooperative partnership has not contributed to the effective resolving of existing problems in bilateral relations, especially territorial disputes.

The evolution of Vietnam — China relations over the past 10 years shows that the bilateral relations are unstable and still have the nature of an asymmetric relationship. The ideology and similarities are always emphasized, but they are not decisive factors, which could help resolve interest conflict or territorial dispute between the two countries. It is worth mentioning that although both sides have taken many concrete measures and actions, the strategic and social basis of Vietnam-China relationship is still low and fragile. The key point is that Vietnam-China relations over the past 10 years still have not had any key characteristics of a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership and this is the biggest obstacle to the bilateral relations in the time to come.

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ВЬЕТНАМО-КИТАЙСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ ПОСЛЕ УСТАНОВЛЕНИЯ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОГО ПАРТНЁРСТВА: ВЗГЛЯД ИЗ ВЬЕТНАМА

Аннотация. В 2008 г. Вьетнам и Китай установили всеобъемлющее стратегическое партнёрство. Впервые две страны достигли такого высокого уровня и такого всеобъемлющего характера сотрудничества. Стратегическое партнёрство рассматривается как новая форма взаимодействия. Авторы выясняют, изменились ли фактическое развитие и характер отношений в соответствии с этой новой формой. Также показано, обладает ли стратегическое партнёрство Вьетнама и Китая основными чертами, свойственными этому типу отношений, такими как взаимное доверие, укрепление сотрудничества и взаимная выгода.

Статья состоит из трёх частей. В первой обсуждается концепция партнёрства в применении к китайско-вьетнамским отношениям с целью выяснения причин, побудивших Китай установить данный тип отношений. Во второй части развитие вьетнамо-китайских отношений сравнивается в периоды до и после 2008 г. в отдельных областях, таких как политика и дипломатия, экономика и торговля, а также национальная безопасность и оборона. В третьей части даётся анализ всеобъемлющего стратегического партнёрства между СРВ и КНР в настоящее время, приводится сравнение с отношениями Китая с Лаосом — страной — соседкой Вьетнама на Индокитайском полуострове.

Ключевые слова: вьетнамо-китайские отношения, всеобъемлющее стратегическое партнёрство, вьетнамо-китайские политические отношения, вьетнамо-китайские торгово-экономические отношения.

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