

ISSN 0219-3213

2015 #21

Trends in
Southeast Asia

THE POLITICS OF THE UNITED STATES-
CHINA-VIETNAM TRIANGLE IN THE
21ST CENTURY

NGUYEN MANH HUNG

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Nguyen, Manh Hung.

The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the
21st Century.

(Trends in Southeast Asia, 0219-3213 ; TRS 21/15)

1. Vietnam—Foreign relations—China.
2. China—Foreign relations—Vietnam.
3. Vietnam—Foreign relations—United States.
4. United States—Foreign relations—Vietnam.
5. China—Foreign relations—United States.
6. United States—Foreign relations—China.

I. Title.

II. Series: Trends in Southeast Asia ; TRS 21/15.

DS501 I59T no. 21(2015)

December 2015

ISBN 978-981-4459-65-5 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4695-72-5 (e-book, PDF)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Politics of the United States- China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century

By Nguyen Manh Hung

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam's balancing of power act, namely the policy of seeking a counterweight to the China threat, and the politics of the US-China-Vietnam triangle, may have taken shape in the early years of the 21st century, but it was deeply rooted in the changing relations between the big powers in the 1980s and Vietnam's need to adjust its policy to these changes.
- The fear of "peaceful evolution" in the post-European communism era had reoriented Vietnam towards close cooperation with China to protect communism against Western democratization pressures. But Chinese aggressive behaviour at the dawn of the 21st century encouraged Vietnam to turn increasingly to the West, particularly the United States, to balance against Chinese encroachment.
- A combination of factors – geographical proximity, ideological affinity, and the need for regime survival – tends to make Vietnamese leaders more comfortable with China than with the United States. Only the perception of China as a bullying neighbour would push Vietnam to opt for a different orientation and to adopt an antagonistic policy towards China.
- United States-Vietnam relations in turn are affected by two factors: Vietnam's sensitivity to China's concerns and its mistrust of U.S. intentions. Bilateral relations became warmer mainly after Vietnam took steps to overcome its mistrust of the United States. China's recent assertive behaviour in the South China Sea both worries Vietnam and threatens the U.S. position in the Asia-Pacific, and this has led to a convergence of strategic interests between the U.S. and Vietnam.

- The oil rig crisis in 2014, along with China's massive land reclamation and construction in 2015 and the visit of CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to the U.S. signalled a slight Vietnamese pivot toward the United States.
- Years of placating China have not spared Vietnam the prospect of further losses of territory and sovereignty, but seeking the U.S. as a counterweight to China means that Vietnam runs the risk of antagonizing China, heightens the danger of it going through a "peaceful evolution", and may make it a pawn in U.S.-China big power politics.
- China is faced with a dilemma. If it moves too aggressively, it pushes the small countries of Asia into the arms of the United States. But if it relents, the other Asian countries will become bolder in their cooperation with the U.S. to thwart Chinese ambitions over time. A tempting option would be to continue pressing for regional dominance before significant opposing forces emerge.
- The speed and magnitude of China's land reclamation and construction in the South China Sea push the U.S. closer to the "moment of truth." Inaction would mean recognition of China's sovereignty claims and its right to interpret international law in its own way, and undermine the credibility of the U.S. as a stabilizing force in Asia. Action, however, would provoke China.
- The U.S.-China-Vietnam triangular relations and the South China Sea disputes may be seen as manifestations of two sets of conflicting visions. At the local level, there is the vision of China dominating the South China Sea, which clashes with Vietnam's perennial dream of being a "balcony looking out to the Pacific Ocean". If this clash of visions cannot be reconciled, China will always have to face the discomfort of simmering resentment and opposition from a proud nation at its border. At the global and regional level is the vision of a rising China seeking a respected place in the world, and *de facto* control of the sea area within its nine-dash line. This clashes with U.S. determination to remain an uncontested naval power that is able to protect freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.

- Unless one or both of these visions are modified, a new cold war, not a new type of big power relations, in Asia Pacific is inevitable. The smaller countries in Southeast Asia will be forced to take sides or be chosen in the bargaining process between the two major powers.

The Politics of the United States- China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century

By Nguyen Manh Hung¹

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Many Vietnamese officials and experts tend to think that, because of its location, Vietnam has high strategic value to the major powers. In fact, to the major powers, particularly the United States, its strategic value is only derivative. Vietnam is seen as important only because of other reasons.

After the end of the First Indochina War in 1954, Vietnam was partitioned at the 17th parallel into two states. The United States saw the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south as the most important domino. If it were to have fallen to communism, it would have triggered the fall of all other countries in Southeast Asia.

Ten years later, when the war in Vietnam had escalated and America was concerned about the cost of the war while the unity of the communist bloc was weakened by the Sino-Soviet conflict, Vietnam began to lose its strategic value to the United States. Testifying before the U.S. Senate

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Foreign Relations Committee on February 16, 1966, George Kennan, the father of the containment doctrine, maintained that, “Vietnam is not a region of major military, industrial importance. It is difficult to believe that any decisive developments of the world situation would be determined ... by what happens on that territory.”²

For China, the significance of Vietnam also shifted according to changes in the regional and international environment. In the early years of their revolutions, the Democratic Socialist of Vietnam (DRV) was a close ally and comrade-in-arms of China in the common fight against Western imperialism. An ideological bond, not geographic location, was the key factor linking the two newly established regimes sharing the same communist ideology and anti-Western imperialist spirit.

In the 1960s when the Sino-Soviet split became public knowledge, China saw the DRV as a major factor in its competition with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of other communist countries and members of the non-aligned movement.

Then, at the end of the Second Indochina War, a reunified Vietnam emerged as the most powerful country in Southeast Asia and was admired by Third World countries; China thus saw Vietnam as a possible rival for influence in these groups of countries.

After Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1978, China launched a border war against Vietnam in 1979. Deng Xiaoping called Vietnam “the Cuba of the East” and China made common cause with the United States and ASEAN to fight Vietnam to prevent Soviet expansion into Southeast Asia.

VIETNAM AND THE BALANCE OF POWER GAME

Western scholars tend to talk glowingly of North Vietnam’s skill in balancing between the Soviet Union and China to gain support for its war against the United States and South Vietnam. If the balancing of

² Commodore Steven Jermy RN, *Strategy for Action: Using Force Wisely in the 21st Century*, London: Knightstone Publishing, 2011, p. 200.

power means seeking the support of one country against the threat from another country in order to deter attack or war, maintain peace, and protect national interests, Vietnam did not play this game in the Sino-Soviet conflict. Neither of the two communist powers was a threat to Vietnam. All Vietnam did was to stay neutral in the conflict. Ho Chi Minh even attempted to mediate between the two communist giants to restore the unity of the communist bloc. Officially, Vietnam adopted a neutral position in the Sino-Soviet conflict, but it actually implemented a pro-China policy both in terms of domestic policy (e.g. land reform with Chinese advisers) and foreign policy (e.g. protracted war against America).³

The balancing of power act, namely the policy of seeking a counterweight to the China threat and the politics of the US-China-Vietnam triangle took shape in the early years of the 21st century, but it was deeply rooted in the changing relations between the big powers in the 1980s and Vietnam's need to adjust its policy to these changes.

The Cambodian War was a manifestation of Sino-Vietnamese competition for power and rivalry in Southeast Asia. After Vietnam invaded Cambodia and put in place a pro-Vietnam government, China launched the border war against Vietnam and joined forces with the United States and ASEAN to support Cambodian resistance against the Phnom Penh government backed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

By 1982, the Soviet Union—Vietnam's main source of international support—had entered exploratory talks on the normalization of relations with China and begun to cooperate with China and the United States to end the war in Cambodia. Meanwhile, China sought to further isolate Vietnam by moving closer to Laos, Vietnam's smaller neighbour and protégé, and by seeking improved relations with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. Under these circumstances, Vietnam had to reconsider its policy in Cambodia and its attitude towards the United

³ Vietnam's opposition to Khrushchev's "revisionism" was so strong that it stopped importing and showing movies from the Soviet Union during that period (Nguyen Ngoc Tien, *Đi Dọc Hà Nội* [Along Hanoi]. Ho Chi Minh City: Chibooks, 2013, pp. 212–13.

States and China in order to extricate itself from diplomatic and economic isolation.

When Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985, his reform policy influenced Vietnam in two ways. Internally, he launched *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) and wanted better use of Russian aid by Vietnam. In the same year, Vietnam suffered a severe economic crisis that required dramatic reform. In 1986, Nguyen Van Linh became General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and launched a campaign of economic renovation (*doi moi*) and cultural liberalization (*coi troi van nghe*). The success of economic renovation depended on trade and aid from Western sources and the end of diplomatic and economic isolation.⁴ The Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) officially endorsed the policy of “preparing to enter talks with China at any time, any level, and anywhere to normalize relations between the two countries” while “continuing to negotiate with the United States to resolve the humanitarian issues and improve relations with the United States in the interest of peace and security in Southeast Asia.”⁵

Externally, Gorbachev’s Vladivostok speech in June 1986 signalled a desire to improve relations with the U.S. and China, and the intention to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan to facilitate a political settlement in Afghanistan and the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict. Gorbachev also promised to work towards a settlement of the Cambodian problem and the “establishment of mutually acceptable relations between the countries of Indochina and ASEAN.”⁶

⁴ For more details, see Nguyen Manh Hung, “Doi Moi: The Interplay between Economics and Politics,” in Ahmad Mahdzan, Ed., *Southeast Asia on the Growth Path*, Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan: Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, 1997, pp. 37–49.

⁵ Dang Cong San Viet Nam [DCSVN], Van Kien Dai Hoi Dang Thoi Ky Doi Moi –Dai Hoi VI, VII, VII, IX (Documents of the National Party Congresses in the Renovation Era), Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, pp. 114–15. My translation.

⁶ Kenneth Conboy, “After Vladivostok: Gorbachev’s Asian Inroads,” The Heritage Foundation, Asian Backgrounder #73, 25 January 1988 <<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1988/01/after-vladivostok-gorbachevs-asian-inroads>> (accessed on 10 December 2015).

Vietnam had no choice but to follow suit and to make concessions to end the Cambodian conflict. Accessing to Western and Chinese demands, Vietnam began to withdraw its troops from Cambodia in April 1989 and completed the process by September 1989. Vietnamese concessions made it possible to conclude the Paris Agreement in 1991 ending the war in Cambodia. These moves helped Vietnam to climb out of its diplomatic and economic isolation. ASEAN countries, particularly Thailand welcomed an opportunity to make peace and trade with Vietnam, followed by Europe, then China and the United States.

In 1989-1991, the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and eventually the disintegration of the Soviet Union deprived Vietnam of a major source of support in a world dominated by the United States and the “Washington consensus” (characterized by a market economy and democratization). In a major shift of foreign policy, Vietnamese leaders decided to reorient Vietnam’s foreign relations away from the defunct communist bloc toward ASEAN and the West, and away from international revolutionary duty towards more emphasis on regional cooperation. The Seventh National Congress of the CPV in 1991 thus endorsed the new line of “multidirectional foreign policy” within a framework of “independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification.”⁷

On one hand, Vietnam needed to open up to the West for trade and investment. On the other hand, its leaders were concerned about the so-called “peaceful evolution” aimed at overthrowing the remaining communist regimes. Vietnam looked to China as a possible saviour of communism in a drastically changed world. At the meeting between the two countries’ leaders in Chengdu in 1990, Vietnamese leaders proposed a “socialist alliance” to protect the remaining communist countries against Western plots of peaceful evolution. While Chinese leaders were lukewarm to the idea of an alliance, they were susceptible to the normalization of relations between China and Vietnam.

At the 1991 National Congress of the CPV, its leaders dropped Gorbachev’s reform model of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, and embraced the

⁷ DCSVN, *op. cit.*, p. 294. My translation.

Chinese model of reform: economic modernization without concurrent political reform.

The fear of peaceful evolution in the post-European communist world oriented Vietnam towards close cooperation with China to protect communism and the remaining communist countries against possible Western encroachment. In this case, Vietnam's balancing act dictated close cooperation with China against Western democratization pressure. However, Chinese behaviour at the dawn of the 21st century forced Vietnam to turn increasingly to the West, particularly the United States, to balance against Chinese encroachment.

VIETNAM BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

Vietnamese leaders are well aware of their country's disadvantage as a small country in the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangular relationship.⁸ It has suffered the bitter experience of being a pawn on the chessboard of big-power politics before. At the Geneva Conference in 1954, North Vietnam was prevented from extending its control below the 17th parallel, despite its military victory. After the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972, South Vietnam gradually lost its strategic importance in the American containment strategy and was eventually abandoned by its American ally. Again, in 1988, the Soviet Union which had signed a 25-year friendship treaty with Vietnam entitling it to a naval base at Cam Ranh Bay refused to intervene when Chinese forces overwhelmed Vietnamese troops and gained control of the Johnson South Reef. These experiences have a clear bearing on Vietnam's approach to the US-China-Vietnam triangular relationship.

⁸ In recognition of the asymmetrical power positions of the three players, Vietnamese experts call this strategic triangle an "odd-shaped triangle" or "uneven triangle" (tam giác lệch, tam giác vênh) and express a preference for a quadrangular relationship between Vietnam, China, the United States, and Japan, or a pentagonal relationship between these four countries plus ASEAN (Author's interviews in Hanoi, 10–17 October 2015).

Sino-Vietnam Relations: From Trust to Mistrust

Sino-Vietnamese relations go back thousands of years, longer than the relations each country has had with most other countries in the world, and much longer than the emerging “new type of big powers relations” between China and the United States. These relations entered a golden age with the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945 followed by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

In the early years of their respective revolutions, Sino-Vietnamese relations were firmly based on a shared ideology, a common struggle against Western imperialism, a sense of international revolutionary duty, and similar states of economic underdevelopment. These relations even outlasted the Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1960s on which Vietnam officially adopted a neutral position but, in practice, carried out a pro-China policy.

This golden age came to an end after Vietnam was reunified at the close of the Second Indochina War. The Cambodian War in 1978 and the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979 marked the beginning of a period of hostility between China and Vietnam which was further aggravated by the 1988 naval battle where Chinese forces attacked Vietnamese troops on the Johnson South Reef and took over the reef, establishing China’s first foothold in the Spratly Islands. It was a time when nationalism and national interests trumped ideological affinity. In addition to being aggrieved by Chinese encroachment, Vietnam, as a result of the Cambodian war, was faced with a China-U.S. led coalition to isolate it diplomatically and economically. This seriously weakened its regional position. Vietnam became a client state of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc.

By the early 1980s, relations between the major powers – China, the United States, and the Soviet Union – began to thaw, forcing Vietnam to reconsider its foreign policy to accommodate this change in the big powers relationship. The Soviet Union, the main backer of Vietnam in the Cambodian War, began to mend fences with China and the United States, making it impossible for Vietnam to continue the war in Cambodia alone. Vietnam acceded to international demands to withdraw its troops

from Cambodia and engage in negotiations to find a peaceful resolution to the Cambodian war. As this process took place, relations between Vietnam and other countries in the region, especially with China, began to improve.

The collapse of Eastern European communism in 1989 followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union gave a huge impetus to Sino-Vietnamese relations. Only a few communist regimes survived this historic movement, Vietnam and China being the biggest two. Vietnam's view of China began to change from that of an expansionist hegemon threatening its national sovereignty to that of a possible protector, a saviour of communism, and a bulwark against the wave of Western-style democratization.

At their 1990 Chengdu meeting, the Vietnamese proposed the formation of a socialist alliance against the danger of Western-instigated "peaceful evolution" to the Chinese leaders. While the Chinese leaders were cool to the concept of an alliance, they were open to the process of normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam. The latter took place in 1991, followed by a series of agreements to delineate land and sea borders which were widely seen to be in favour of China. The two countries agreed on a relationship based on "sixteen golden words" (friendly neighbours, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, future oriented) and four "goods" (good friends, good neighbours, good comrades, and good partners). Economically, Vietnam shifted from the Soviet model to the Chinese model of reform – a socialist-oriented market economy under a Leninist political system. An uneasy friendship began, leading to closer and more intimate relations between Vietnam and China.

As the 21st century began, China's economic, political, and military power grew substantially. Increased capability, a sense of big power entitlement, and the need for resources engineered an increasingly assertive Chinese policy on the South China Sea; Vietnam and the Philippines bore the brunt of this assertiveness. A study by the National Defense University of the United States found that, between 1995 and 2013, China was the most extensive user of tactics to reinforce its claims in the South China Sea. In terms of the sheer number of actions, China accounted for over 500 actions dating back to 1995 compared to the

Philippines (just over 300 actions) and Vietnam with about 150 actions. China was also the “most active user of both military and paramilitary actions” to protect its maritime territorial claims. It accounted for 55 per cent of the total incidents involving the use of military and paramilitary actions in support of maritime claims in the South China Sea.⁹ In May 2009, as the deadline for submitting claims over the outer continental shelf under UNCLOS approached, China submitted a map of the nine-dash line claiming close to 80 per cent of the South China Sea and all of the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Since then, China has intensified its activities on the fishing industry, exploration and oil exploration to enforce this claim.

In January 2014, China further restricted Vietnamese fishing activities and those of other countries by having Hainan Province enact new measures requiring all foreign ships to obtain approval from the Chinese government before entering “maritime areas” within Hainan’s claimed jurisdiction which covered approximately 770,000 square miles of the South China Sea, including the contested Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, Macclesfield Bank, and Scarborough Reef.¹⁰

A major escalation occurred when, in May 2014, China placed its huge exploratory oil rig, the Haiyang Shiyou 981 (HD 981), in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) – prompting protest and violence against Chinese businesses in Vietnam, and confrontation between Chinese ships and Vietnamese fishing vessels at sea, in the disputed area. Vietnamese leaders’ numerous attempts to talk to Chinese leaders were rebuffed. Most rankling to them was the fact that this “provocative” action was taken only seven months after the prime ministers of both

⁹ Christopher Yung and Patrick McNulty, “Claimants Tactics in the South China Sea: By the Numbers,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No 314, 16 June 2015.

¹⁰ Craig Murray and Kimberly Hsu, “China’s New Fishing Regulations Seek to Justify and Consolidate Control in the South China Sea”, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report*, 2014 <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/USCC%20Staff%20Report_China%27s%20New%20Fishing%20Regulations%20Seek%20to%20Justify%20and%20Consolidate%20Control%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea_01%2027%202014.pdf> (accessed on 10 December 2015).

countries had reached an “important consensus” on October 13, 2013 to “strive for innovative thinking in resolving the South China Sea issue,” and to establish a “working group for consultations on joint maritime development.”¹¹

After China withdrew its oil rig, a period of calm ensued, before another flare-up in 2015 when China sped up the process of building submerged reefs into man-made islands, with potential military implications, radically changing “facts on the ground” and the strategic balance in the South China Sea in favour of China.¹² Thus, China gradually became a threat to Vietnam’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Unsurprisingly, disputes in the South China Sea have become the major bone of contention between the two countries.

Vietnam-China relations have been influenced by three key factors: geographic proximity and power asymmetry; a complex history of a love-

¹¹ In my interviews in Hanoi, from 10 October through 17 October 2015, Vietnamese experts viewed the 2014 oil rig incident as a turning point in Sino-Vietnamese relations and felt bilateral relations will never return to the pre-oil rig level of trust.

¹² For detailed analysis of this game changing move, see Greg Polling, “Potential New Runways Present New Headaches,” *AMTI Brief*, 15 September 2015 <<http://amti.csis.org/new-imagery-release/>> (accessed on 10 December 2015). See also, Ian Storey, China’s Terratransforming in the Spratlys: A Game Changer in South China Sea,” *Eurasia Review*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 26 June 2015. Admiral Samuel Locklear, the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, warned that Chinese artificial islands could serve as “resupply bases for China’s large fleet of maritime security vessels.” <<http://news.yahoo.com/us-philippines-start-combat-drills-amid-china-reclamations-062929585.html>> (accessed on 10 December 2015). Richard Javad Heydarian pointed out, “China is establishing the skeleton of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) which will allow Beijing to dominate the skies over the South China Sea. Soon, China will be able to drive out other claimant states from features under their control by choking their supply lines and intimidating them with robust military presence.” *The National Interest*, 29 April 2015. Michael J. Green and Mira R. Hopper made clear that “Beijing has transformed a number of tiny reefs and rocks into six military bases, intimidating smaller countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam and fortifying an area through which a third of the world’s commercial container ships transit,” *The Washington Post*, 13 March 2015.

hate relationship and Vietnam's perception of the Greater Han concept; and ideological affinity and the need for regime stability.

As a small country living next to a big power, Vietnam obviously understands China's desire to have influence over a smaller neighbour or, at least, the absence of a hostile power or regime in its neighbourhood. In response to China's concern, Vietnam has proclaimed a 'three-no's' policy – no military alliances, no foreign bases, and no siding with one country against another. It is, Vietnamese leaders claim, basically a defensive policy of "independence and self-reliance."¹³

Historical experiences remind current Vietnamese leaders of the value of Chinese support and assistance to the communist regime during its war against France and the United States, but at the same time warn them of the threat of Chinese expansionism. China's increasingly assertive behaviour in the South China Sea since 2009 has highlighted this threat. According to Professor Vu Minh Giang, former member of the Party's Central Theoretical Council, Vietnamese leaders' view of China has undergone a clear-cut change in 2015 compared to 2014 before the oil rig incident. They no longer trust China's soothing words and are "united in their perception" of a China that has "strategic ambitions in the South China Sea."¹⁴

¹³ There is, however, a caveat to this basically defensive policy of "independence and self-reliance." Vietnam's Vice-Minister of Defense Nguyen Chi Vinh said, in an interview before his visit to the United States in March 2015, that while Vietnam does not engage in any balance of power "game," "We have to fight back if our country is invaded by a foreign country; otherwise we will maintain friendly relations with all other countries so long as our sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national interests are not violated." *Vietnamnet*, 26 March 2015. <<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/chinh-tri/227895/-viet-nam-khong-tham-gia-tro-choi-quyen-luc-nao-cua-nuoc-lon-html>>.

¹⁴ Interview by Quoc Phuong, 2 January 2015. BBC News, 1 March 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2015/01/150102_vn_2015_foreign_relation_views>. Giang's position is confirmed by my interviews with Vietnamese experts and officials during my recent visit to Vietnam between 10 October 2015 and 17 October 2015. They believe that: 1) The HD 981 was a turning point, a point of no return, in Sino-Vietnamese relations; 2) Sino-Vietnamese relations may improve but they will never be the same again; and 3) China's long-term ambitions in the South China Sea will never change.

While ideology has lost its attractiveness, for Vietnam it remains a critical requirement for regime survivability. This is perhaps one of the most important factors tying the two countries together today. On the other hand, the need for political legitimacy and regime survivability forces Vietnamese leaders to take into serious consideration popular concerns and resentment against Chinese encroachments in the South China Sea, and criticism of their weakness in standing up to China.

Today, Vietnam and China no longer live in a separate and exclusive region. Their relations must be put in the broader context of a globalized world where many big powers interact. As a result, both countries have more policy options, including the normal practice of balance of power. In this game of world politics, Vietnam can balance Chinese pressure with an external great power (e.g., the United States) or several major powers (the United States, Japan, India, and Russia) of which the United States provides the most credible counterweight to China.

United States-Vietnam Relations: From Enemies to Partners

United States-Vietnam relations have come a long way, from enmity to partnership. On the part of Vietnam, sensitivity to China's concerns and mistrust of the United States' intentions have been decisive. On top of this, disagreement and power struggles among its top leaders make it difficult for Vietnam to take decisive and timely actions to seize opportunities presented to it.¹⁵ Progress in bilateral relations mostly

¹⁵ Former Vietnam's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Tran Quang Co in his unpublished memoirs, *Hoi Uc va Suy Nghi* (Reminiscence and Reflection) complained of "extremely disastrous consequences" resulting from Vietnam's failure to normalize relations "without conditions" with the United States in 1978 and its failure to respond positively to the entreaties of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1976. Co's memoirs were completed on 23 January 2001 and revised on 22 May 2003. It was circulated on the Internet (<<http://hoangsa.org/tailieu/HoikyTranQuangCo.pdf>>), p. 5. My translation. A second missed opportunity took place in 1999 when Vietnam failed to sign a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the United States and waited to do it a year later after China had concluded the deal with the United States only one month after Vietnam's refusal. The result was it took Vietnam six years to be admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) compared to two years in the case of China, and under stiffer conditions.

took place after Vietnam had taken steps to overcome its mistrust of the United States. The rise of China and its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea worries Vietnam and threatens the U.S. position in the Pacific, leading to a convergence of strategic interests between the United States and Vietnam.

For the first seven years after the end of the Vietnam War, relations between Vietnam and the United States went from benign neglect to hostility as a result of Vietnam's demand of war reparations, the Cambodian War, and U.S. policy of containment of Soviet expansion into Southeast Asia.

The thaw in bilateral relations began in 1982, when Vietnam agreed to receive the first American official in Hanoi to start talks on the POW/MIA issue. The Reagan administration insisted that the "fullest possible" accounting of American servicemen be viewed as a humanitarian issue to be resolved on its own merits, apart from political issues. Washington also demanded that Vietnam withdraw its troops from Cambodia and contribute to a political solution to the Cambodian conflict before talks on normalization of diplomatic relations could take place.

By 1993, Vietnam had fulfilled the major conditions for normalization talks with the United States—complete troop withdrawal from Cambodia, conclusion of the Paris agreement ending the Cambodian conflict, and the establishment of a coalition government in Cambodia after a U.N.-supervised election. The U.S. reciprocated by relaxing travel restrictions to Vietnam, authorizing certain educational exchange programmes, and declaring its readiness to take "steps toward normalizing relations with Vietnam."

At the same time, the U.S. had a new administration favourably disposed to improve relations with Vietnam. President Clinton announced the lifting of the trade embargo in February 1994 and normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam in July 1995.

In July 2000, after four years of negotiations, Vietnam and the United States signed a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement (BTA). Six years later, the U.S. State Department removed Vietnam from the list of "countries of particular concerns" (CPC) over human rights violations. The U.S. Congress accorded Vietnam "permanent normal trade relations" status (PNTR), thus completing the normalization of economic relations between the two countries.

While economic relations between Vietnam and the United States have improved greatly, military relations have proceeded at a much slower pace. In this area, progress has depended rather heavily on calculations of Vietnamese leaders who were influenced by the historical legacy of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese distrust of U.S. intentions. These factors, however, have had to be balanced against Vietnam's perception of its 'China problem' and the danger of U.S.-China collusion at the expense of its interests.

In order to create a stable international environment to develop its economy and improve the living standards of its people, Vietnam had to accommodate China by signing two treaties on land and sea borders in 1999 and 2000 respectively, ceding chunks of land and territorial waters to China. Vietnamese leaders were aware of the unpopularity of the treaties with the Vietnamese people and were concerned about China's "peaceful rise" and increased cooperation between China and the United States in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States. They were also worried about Chinese intentions with regards to the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands and they certainly realized their disadvantaged position in the US-China-Vietnam triangle. Vietnam's foreign policy now had a threefold purpose: to promote economic development (by creating a stable international environment), defend socialism (against Western plots of peaceful evolution), and protect national sovereignty (against Chinese encroachment).

The Ninth Party Congress in April 2001 emphasized the need to develop relations with "big powers and major power centres." It introduced for the first time, the concept of "partnership" in Vietnam's foreign policy by stating that "Vietnam sought to become a 'trusted partner' (not just friend) of every country in the international community." The eighth plenum of the CPV in July 2003 developed this concept in its resolution on the "strategy to protect the nation in the new situation." It made clear the important distinction between partnership/target of cooperation (*doi tac*) which included "those who respected Vietnam's independence and sovereignty, established and expanded friendly relations with our country" and adversary/target of struggle (*doi tuong*), which included "any power who plotted to undermine our goals of building and protecting the nation" before concluding that it was possible

to find areas of cooperation even in an adversarial relationship.¹⁶ Nguyen Vu Tung pointed out that when the Ninth Party Congress addressed the issue of partnership, it was limited to economic partnership. The Eight Plenum indirectly admitted that every country could become Vietnam's partner, and "in every area of cooperation."¹⁷ This resolution provided the justification for moving closer to the United States to avoid being left out as China and the United States grew closer.

The first breakthrough in U.S.-Vietnam military relations came in November 2003 with the visit of the first top Vietnamese military leader to the United States since the end of the war. During his visit, Defence Minister General Pham Van Tra spoke of Vietnam's desire to form a "framework for stable and long-term partnership" with the United States. Another event that contributed to the breakthrough was the visit of the first U.S. warship (USS Vandegrift) to Ho Chi Minh City for peaceful purposes.

Since then, military relations between Vietnam and the United States have gradually expanded. Vietnam initially sent officers to the United States for language courses and then for post-graduate training at the U.S. National Defense University and the U.S. Army War College.¹⁸ Vietnamese officers were also invited to visit and exchange experiences with American officers on the nuclear carrier John C. Stennis in 2009 and an Aegis class warship in 2015. Visits to Vietnam by American commanders of the Pacific fleet have also become more frequent. American ships were allowed to search for American MIAs off the coast of Vietnam. USS Vandegrift led the way for an annual ship visit by the U.S. Navy, some of which were symbolically significant. USS Patriot

¹⁶ "Cai moi trong Du thao Bao cao chinh tri Dai Hoi IX," (What is new in the Political Report to the Ninth Party Congress), *Nhan Dan*, 12 October 2000; BTTVHTU, *op.cit.*, pp. 23–24; Nguyen Vu Tung, Ed., *Khuon kho quan he doi tac cua Viet Nam* (Framework of Vietnam's International Partnership). Hanoi: Hoc Vien Quan He Quoc Te, 2007, pp. 26–31. My translation.

¹⁷ Nguyen Vu Tung, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁸ It was explained to the author that Vietnam did not send officers to college level military academies in the U.S., such as West Point or the U.S. Naval Academy, because training programmes at these schools are for lower ranking officers. Vietnam wants to send officers already trained in Vietnamese military doctrine.

and USS Guardian were the first to visit Hai Phong, in North Vietnam in 2007 which had been mined heavily by the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Captain Le Ba Hung became the first Vietnamese-American to command an American destroyer – USS Lassen – to visit his country of birth in 2009. A group of three U.S. warships docked at Tien Sa port, Da Nang city in 2011, the first time that US warships were allowed near the former US naval base in Cam Ranh. Then in June 2012, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta made history by visiting USNS Richard Byrd moored in Cam Ranh harbour for repairs where he declared that access for U.S. naval ships into this facility would be a “key component” of U.S.-Vietnam relations and that he saw “tremendous potential” for the future of bilateral cooperation.¹⁹

Because of Vietnam’s suspicions of U.S. intentions and its concern for Chinese sensitivity, there are limits to bilateral military relations. Visits by U.S. warships to Vietnamese ports are limited to one per year while Russian ships enjoy more flexibility. Vietnam, together with Myanmar and land-locked Laos, are the only three ASEAN countries that do not participate in CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training) exercises conducted by the U.S. Pacific Fleet. On the other hand, the U.S. embargo of military sales to Vietnam has only been partially lifted due to human rights considerations.

However, Vietnam-United States relations have achieved a number of “firsts” since 2003. When Prime Minister Phan Van Khai made his historic visit to the United States in June 2006, it was to mark the tenth anniversary of U.S.-Vietnam relations, and he was received by U.S. President George W. Bush at the White House.

Vietnamese authorities stressed two important achievements of the visit. First, it marked a “new phase” in bilateral relations and the concept of “partnership” was mentioned for the first time in the joint communiqué. Second, President Bush reaffirmed “the support of the United States government for Vietnam’s security and territorial integrity.” The fact that this “U.S. support” was only mentioned in the Vietnamese-language

¹⁹ *The Washington Post*, 3 June 2012.

version of the communiqué but omitted in the U.S. official release indicated that Vietnam wanted some sort of U.S. support that the U.S., at the time, was unwilling to commit.²⁰ This was only given to Vietnam two years later, in 2008, during the visit of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to the United States when he agreed with President Bush to commit to “promoting and securing fundamental rights and liberties,” and endorsed the creation of “new political and policy planning talks, which allow for more frequent and in-depth discussions of security and strategic issues.” In return, President Bush reiterated the U.S. government’s “support for Vietnam’s national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity.”²¹ After Dung’s visit, the first U.S.-Vietnam political, security, and defence dialogue took place in October 2008 in Hanoi. The U.S. participated for the first time in the ADMM+1 chaired by Vietnam in 2010.

In July 2010, one month after the third annual U.S.-Vietnam political, military, and defence dialogue in Hanoi, both Vietnam and the U.S. raised the South China Sea issue at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi. Secretary Clinton caused tension and angered China by stating that “[t]he United States has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia’s maritime commons and respect for international law in the South China Sea.” Speaking with China in mind, she added that “[w]e oppose the use of force or threat of force by any claimant,” and that “legitimate claims to maritime space in the South China Sea should be derived solely from legitimate claims to land features.”²² This position was clearly in favour of ASEAN and particularly of Vietnam. Clinton

²⁰ Nguyen Vu Tung, *op. cit.*, pp. 117 and 127. Compare <<http://vietbao.vn/The-gioi/Tuyen-bo-chung-Viet-My/10914978/159/>> and <<http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2005/48443.htm>>.

²¹ Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 25 June 2008.

²² Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s press conference at the National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, 24 July 2010. <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145095.htm>> (accessed on 10 December 2015).

also reported that “[t]he partnership and cooperation with Vietnam is increasing day by day.”²³

President Truong Tan Sang’s visit to the United States in July 2013 was another landmark in U.S.-Vietnam relations where he declared the U.S. a “leading partner” in Vietnam’s foreign policy and welcomed enhanced U.S. cooperation with the Asia Pacific. In a joint statement issued on July 25, the leaders of both countries committed to “open a new phase” of bilateral relations and agreed to form a “U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership” to provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship.”²⁴

Immediately after Sang’s trip, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, David Shear, indicated to the local press in Hanoi that Vietnam had an interest in lifting U.S. restrictions on lethal weapons sales to Vietnam, and that “we will consider that request seriously.” But he also cautioned that “we will need to see some progress in human rights on Vietnam’s side.”²⁵ Congressional concern and lobbying efforts by human rights groups in the U.S. will ensure that human rights issues will always cast a shadow over further progress in United States-Vietnam military cooperation.

However, in October 2014, after the oil rig crisis and after a meeting in Washington, DC between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham

²³ Greg Torode, “Clinton stand on a Chinese ‘core interest’ causes tension at forum,” *South China Morning Post*, 24 July 2010; John Pomret, “U.S. takes a tougher tone with China,” *The Washington Post*, 30 July 2010. For more details on conflicting interests between the U.S. and China over the South China Sea issue, see Hung Nguyen, “Drawing the line in the South China Sea: Why Beijing Needs to Show Restraint,” *Global Asia*, Winter 2012. For details of the evolution of U.S.-Vietnam defence cooperation, see Carl Thayer, “Vietnam and the U.S.: Convergence but Not Confluence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea,” Paper to the 4th Engaging with Vietnam Interdisciplinary Dialogue Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, 8–9 November 2012.

²⁴ A month earlier, on 20 June, when General Do Ba Ty, Vietnam’s Chief of the General Staff visited the U.S. Defense Department, he had expressed his country’s desire to develop a comprehensive relationship with the U.S., including in defense ties (emphasis added).

²⁵ *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 August 2013.

Binh Minh, the State Department announced a partial lifting of the arms embargo to provide maritime security-related defence articles to Vietnam to “support its efforts to improve its maritime domain awareness and maritime security capabilities.”

In July 2015, General Secretary of the CPV Nguyen Phu Trong was the first top leader of the CPV to visit the United States and was received with the pomp and ceremony normally reserved for a state leader.²⁶ Also, by declaring the United States “the utmost important area of operation” of Vietnam’s foreign policy,²⁷ Trong publicly signalled a consensus between state and party leaders on deepening relations with the United States and a commitment to “carry out whatever reform necessary” to join the TPP. If President Sang initiated a “Comprehensive Partnership” with the United States, General Secretary Trong shared with President Obama a “joint vision” building on that Comprehensive Partnership to pursue a “deepened, sustained, and substantive relationship.” At the insistence of Vietnam, the commitment to “respect each other’s political system” previously made to State President Sang was repeated in the joint vision statement with CPV’s Party leader Trong.²⁸ This was tantamount to an official commitment by the U.S. to the top leader of the CPV not to overthrow the communist regime in Vietnam. It was a response to Vietnam’s repeated calls for establishing “strategic trust” between the two countries, and designed to weaken opposition by party hardliners and to clear the way for further improvement in US-Vietnam relations.

Vietnam between China and the United States

In the past, China provided generous support to the Vietnamese Communists during both the first and second Indochina Wars. However,

²⁶ The Trong-Obama Joint Vision Statement terms Trong’s visit “historic,” the first by a CPV’s General Secretary.

²⁷ Statement made at a meeting with Vietnamese diplomats and employees at the Embassy of Vietnam in the U.S. on 9 July 2015. <<http://vtc.vn/tong-bi-thu-hoa-ky-la-dia-ban-cuc-ky-quan-trong-ve-doi-ngoai.311.561795.htm>>.

²⁸ The previous commitment was made by U.S. President Obama, Vietnam’s President Sang, and the repeated commitment was in a joint statement signed by President Obama with CPV’s leader Trong.

it has recently become a threat to Vietnam's territorial integrity. China has continued to occupy the Paracel Islands which had belonged to Vietnam before 1974, and in August 2007 announced, against Vietnam's protest, plans to develop tourist facilities on them. Previously, in 1979, China sent troops across the borders "to teach Vietnam a lesson" for invading Cambodia. Chinese troops never completely withdrew from some key strategic and symbolic positions it had taken then. "Secret" or "unreported" wars continued between the two countries from 1984 to 1987. In 1988, China engaged Vietnam in a battle over the Johnson South Reef and occupied a number of islets.

In 1997, China set up a platform for oil exploration in waters near the Spratly Islands claimed by Vietnam. In 1998, it granted Atlantic Richfield Corp (ARCO) oil and gas exploration rights in waters Vietnam claimed between Hainan and the Vietnam coast. But it protested vehemently in 2007 when Vietnam and a British Petroleum (BP)-led consortium prepared to start a project to develop an offshore gas and oil field in the area near the Spratlys, about 370 km from the Vietnam coast, forcing BP to temporarily suspend the project. In 2008, China pressured Exxon/Mobil to withdraw from an exploration contract with Vietnam. At the same time, Chinese naval vessels began to capture Vietnamese fishing boats for operating in waters near the Spratlys.

Worse yet, in September 2008, "invasion plans" of Vietnam were allowed to be published on Sina.com and three other Chinese websites. The plans considered Vietnam "a major threat to the safety of Chinese territories, and the biggest obstacle to the peaceful emergence of China. Also, Vietnam is a strategic hub of the whole of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has to be conquered first if Southeast Asia is to be under [China's] control again."²⁹

While many Vietnamese regard China as a threat and resent Chinese encroachments, Vietnamese leaders have found it necessary to accommodate China to prevent further territorial losses, to seek mutual protection against "peaceful evolution," and to learn from China's

²⁹ Greg Torode and Shi Jiangtao, "Vietnam protests over Chinese 'invasion plans' Beijing dismisses online threats," *South China Morning Post*, 5 September 2008.

experience. After the 1988 Politburo Resolution 13,³⁰ and especially after 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnamese leaders decided to downplay the perception of China as a big power pursuing hegemony and look at China as a saviour of socialism, despite its rejection of Vietnam's proposal to form a socialist alliance.³¹ For them, after the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the danger of "peaceful evolution" far outweighed the threat of China's hegemony. Building a socialist alliance with China took precedence over the publicly announced policy of openness, diversification and multilateralization of foreign relations.

While worried about Chinese moves in the South China Sea and protesting as much as possible, Vietnamese officials argued that one can change friends, but not geography; hence the need to placate China.³² Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien declared at a press conference on April 20, 2001: "Vietnam and China are two socialist countries that have a long tradition of friendship. China is a neighboring country which is very friendly with Vietnam." Even after years of being provoked and pushed around by China, including the 2014 oil rig crisis, Vietnam's Vice-Minister of Defence, General Nguyen Chi Vinh, still affirmed that "Vietnam and China are two friendly neighbors and this fact will never change."³³

Each time it prepared to make a move towards the U.S., Vietnam has had to cast an anxious glance towards China. Vietnamese leaders' visits to the United States have always been preceded or followed (or both) by their visits to China.³⁴ Vietnam's deference to China while trying to

³⁰ Resolution 13 adopted "multidirectional foreign policy" and considered China a "both a socialist country and a big power pursuing hegemony."

³¹ China told Vietnam that the two countries were "comrades, not allies".

³² Author's interviews conducted in Hanoi in the summer of 2006.

³³ "Tuong Vinh: Quan he Viet-Trung khong bao gio thay doi," VOA, 28 September 2015 <<http://www.voatiengviet.com/content/tuong-vinh-tuyen-bo-quan-he-viet-trung-khong-bao-gio-thay-doi/2886987.html>>.

³⁴ *Xinhua*, 17 July 2015. <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/18/c_134423086.htm>.

improve relations with the United States, at least in one instance – the failure to sign a bilateral trade agreement with the United States before China did as expected in September 1999 during the APEC summit in Auckland, New Zealand – has disadvantaged Vietnam in its negotiations with the United States in its bid to join the WTO.³⁵

The easiest and most comfortable way for Vietnamese leaders to resist Chinese pressure without antagonizing Beijing is to strengthen relations with ASEAN, Europe, South Korea, Japan, and India. The problem with this approach is that relations with these countries do not constitute a credible balance against China. Only the US can be a credible counterweight to China. However, it may not be a reliable partner because of its advocacy of human rights and democratization and the possibility of using Vietnam as a pawn in diplomatic bargaining with China. Moreover, in the US-China-Vietnam triangle, the degree of cooperation between Vietnam and the United States varies in direct proportion to Vietnam's perception of Chinese pressure and encroachment upon its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

There are limits to Vietnam's patience to Chinese encroachment. Tension arose after the May 2009 deadline to submit claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. China drew a "U-shape line" delineating its maritime boundaries, staking its claim as 80 per cent of the South China Sea. This encroached upon Vietnam's 200-mile exclusive economic zone. China began to aggressively assert its rights by unilaterally imposing fishing bans, sending boats to patrol disputed areas around both the Paracel and Spratly islands,

³⁵ China signed a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the United States in 1999 and joined the WTO in 2001. Vietnam signed a BTA with the United States in 2000 and joined the WTO six years later, in 2006, under stiffer conditions. Former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, in an interview with *VietnamNet* on 4 January 2006 blamed the failure to sign a trade agreement with the United States in New Zealand in 1999 on the opposition of some people "within our leadership," and admitted that "we missed a critical move" which set us back by several years and "allowed China and other countries to join the WTO before us," he said, "I must say honestly that this pained me a great deal." My translation. <http://www.ykien.net/tl_viettrung112.html>.

seizing Vietnamese boats, holding Vietnamese fishermen, confiscating their fishing tools, and even beating up Vietnamese fishermen seeking shelter from storms. The *An Ninh The Gioi* (International Security), the mouthpiece of Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security, described these actions as "part of a wicked political scheme to turn the East Sea into a 'Chinese lake'".³⁶ The Vietnamese National Assembly began to discuss a draft legislation establishing a people's self-defence force to protect Vietnam's sea boundaries. Student demonstrations near the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi in December 2009 were briefly condoned. That same month, Prime Minister Dung signed a \$2 billion agreement to buy six Russian "kilo" class submarines "to protect our sea areas."³⁷ Vietnam also sought to internationalize the issue by organizing and participating in seminars dealing with the South China sea/East Sea both in Vietnam and in the United States, and coordinating with other ASEAN members to deal with China, at the same time insisting on its commitment to "peaceful diplomacy."³⁸

Open letters were written by prominent Vietnamese intellectuals to the top state and party leaders urging them to stand up to Chinese encroachment and, despite government repression and arrests, anti-Chinese demonstrations took place in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2011 and 2012. The oil rig crisis in 2014 led to demonstrations and riots against Chinese businesses in Binh Duong, Dong Nai, and Ha Tinh. These popular reactions against Chinese encroachment put huge pressure on the leadership to stand up to China. There are voices in Vietnam suggesting a modification of the ineffective 'three no's' policy. In an interview with the BBC on January 3, 2015, Dr. Luong Van Khe of Hanoi National University maintained that "in a competition with China,

³⁶ *Cong An Nhan Dan*, 12 August 2010. Vietnam calls the South China Sea the East Sea because it lies in the East of Vietnam's coast.

³⁷ Dung's statement at a press conference in Hanoi, 1 July 2010.

³⁸ "Vietnam modernizing military for self-defense, says general," *Thanh Nien News*, 29 December 2009. <<http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnam-modernizing-military-for-selfdefense-says-general-17726.html>> (accessed on 10 December 2015).

Vietnam cannot only rely on its own power but also has to rely on other security partners to create a balance of forces or to negate the threat or danger coming from China,” and, therefore, cannot adhere “strictly to the three-no’s policy.”³⁹

If Vietnam wishes to effectively resist China’s pressure, she must look outside the region for support. ASEAN is weak and can be divided. None of the other countries in the region – Japan, South Korea or Australia - is a match for China. A military alliance with the United States may be a solution, theoretically. But the United States is not interested and presently, there is no reason for it to take sides in a military conflict between Vietnam and China. To encourage deeper American engagement, U.S. allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines have taken new measures to prove that they are willing to share the defence burden with the United States. Even Singapore, only a U.S. partner, has agreed to allow U.S. littoral combat ships to dock at Changi naval base on a rotational basis. Vietnam is not ready to make such a move. Furthermore, its leaders are wary of American policy on human rights and democratization.

Recently, there have been indications that Vietnamese leaders are more concerned over the immediate danger of Chinese hegemony than the threat of CIA’s “plots of peaceful evolution.”⁴⁰ They are increasingly concerned about China’s aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, and possible cooperation between China and the United States at the expense of Vietnam.⁴¹ Top Vietnamese leaders, such as President Nguyen Minh Triet, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, and National Assembly Chair Nguyen Phu Trong have all spoken of their determination to “forbid anyone from encroaching upon our land and sea borders,” and to defend “every inch of our territory.” Senator John Kerry disclosed that

³⁹ BBC interview, 3 January 2015, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ See Raymond Burghardt, “US-Vietnam: Discreet Friendship Under China’s Shadow,” *YaleGlobal*, 22 November 2005 <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/artilce.print?id=6546>>.

⁴¹ In private conversations with the author, Vietnamese officials repeated express their concern over the possibility of a U.S-China “new style of big-power relationship.”

during his talk with Prime Minister Dung during his visit to the United States for the Nuclear Security Summit in April 2010, the latter had expressed his concern over China's activities in the South China Sea, and Kerry promised that "we will follow up on that issue in a significant way" because "we have a mutual interest."⁴²

As Vietnam moves closer to the United States, it also has to be wary about the possibility of becoming a pawn to be sacrificed at the altar of big power politics, as was the case for North Vietnam in 1954 and South Vietnam in 1973. So long as this mistrust of, and uncertainty about U.S. commitment remains, U.S.-Vietnam relations will not reach a state of comfort similar to that between the U.S. and many of its Asian partners.

The U.S. may be a destabilizing factor in Vietnamese domestic politics, but it can be a stabilizing factor for Vietnam's foreign policy. In the U.S.-China-Vietnam strategic triangle, China is a more important country to the United States but it can also be a potential rival and a security threat. Vietnam, however, is not a security threat to the United States. While it is in the interest of the United States not to cause unnecessary conflict with China and to help the process of peaceful and democratic transition of China, it is also in the interest of the United States to encourage and support an independent Vietnam and to find ways to facilitate diversity and multi-polarity in Asia, and to prevent any single country from dominating the region, especially the strategic sea lanes in the South China Sea.

In his opening remarks at the Senate Hearing on Maritime and Sovereignty Disputes in Asia on July 15, 2009, Senator Jim Webb expressed "particular concern" over China's sovereignty claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea, and warned that China was seeking "not only to expand its economic and political influence, but also to expand its territory." He then concluded: "Only the United States has both the stature and the national power to confront the obvious imbalance of power that China brings to these situations. In that regard, we have an

⁴² "Vietnamese leader focuses on China, climate change," *Global Post*, 31 May 2010. <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/vietnam/100416/vietnam-foreign-policy-nguyen-tan-dung>>.

obligation to do so if we wish to maintain a geostrategic balance in the region that ensures fairness for every nation in Asia.” Testifying at the hearing, representatives of both the State Department and the Defense Department expressed their objections to excessive claims to “territorial waters” or any maritime zone that could place limits on the exercise of high seas freedoms and to “any effort to intimidate US companies.”

Thus, there is a commonality of interest between the United States and Vietnam and a desire to work together to deal with the ‘China problem’. A strong bond between the United States and Vietnam that is mutually beneficial depends, however, on a clear and unmistakable determination of the Vietnamese leadership to pursue an independent foreign policy and abandon their belief and hope that the survival of socialism in Vietnam requires the protection and leadership of China.

In 2012, Vietnam became increasingly alarmed over China’s aggressive behaviour and its gains in imposing its will in the South China Sea territorial disputes. The Scarborough Shoal incident in May 2012 exposed the helplessness of the Philippines when it had to stand alone against China. The disunity and disarray of ASEAN displayed during its July 2012 Phnom Penh meeting showed the vulnerability of ASEAN to the Chinese divide-and-rule tactic.⁴³

Vietnam responded with a keynote address by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on June 1, 2013 at the Shangri-La Dialogue presenting a clear and coherent foreign policy. For the first time, a top Vietnamese leader indirectly but openly denounced China’s behaviour in a multilateral forum. While affirming that Vietnam’s foreign policy was basically defensive, that it would not ally with any country against another country, and that ASEAN must be strengthened to play the role of an honest broker in building “strategic trust,” he declared, in a nod to the United States, that Vietnam also sought to form strategic partnerships with all permanent members of the UN Security Council.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the Scarborough Shoal incident and its implications, see Nguyen Manh Hung, “ASEAN’s Scarborough Shoal Failure?” *The Diplomat*, 16 June 2012 <<http://thediplomat.com/asean-beat/2012/06/16/aseans-scarborough-failure/>>.

Two months after Dung's hard-hitting speech, President Truong Tan Sang visited China where he signed with his counterpart a number of agreements to implement a Vietnam-China "comprehensive strategic partnership." Apparently, all was not well during the visit, because after Sang's China visit, Vietnamese media began to publish articles highly critical of China. Notably, articles in the well-connected *Dat Viet* newspaper which denounced China's behaviour as the "biggest act of piracy in human history" and warned China of "revenge" and "severe consequences" if it dared to attack Vietnam.⁴⁴ A hasty visit was organized for Sang to go to the United States where he agreed with President Obama to open "a new phase" of bilateral relations and form a "U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership" to provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship.⁴⁵

While the results were less than anticipated, there were some positive developments in US-Vietnam relations. It appears that while Chinese aggressive behaviour drew Vietnam closer to the United States, Vietnamese distrust of U.S. intentions, staying capability, and its concerns over Chinese sensitivity could also push them apart.

The placing of the Chinese oil rig Haiyang Shiyou 981 (HD 981) in May 2014 for exploratory work in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone brought Sino-Vietnamese relations to a boiling point. It led to a dramatic telephone call from Vietnam's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh to U.S. Secretary of States John Kerry in which Minh said that Vietnam would be willing to coordinate with the US in implementing "concrete measures to further boost the comprehensive partnership between the two countries."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ For detailed, see Hung Nguyen and Murray Hiebert, "President Sang Seeks New Ties during Washington Visit," *CogitASIA*, 29 July 2013 <<http://cogitasia.com/president-sang-seeks-new-ties-during-washington-visit/>>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ "Kerry reiterates U.S. stance on settlement of East Sea Disputes," *Thanh Nien News*, 22 May 2014. <<http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/kerry-reiterates-us-stance-on-peaceful-settlement-of-east-sea-disputes-26535.html>>.

The removal of the rig two months later due to strong Vietnamese reactions and international condemnations failed to remove Vietnam's concerns and the desire to look for a counterweight.

US-Vietnam relations received a boost in July 2015 when General Secretary Trong and President Obama signed a Joint Vision Statement, preceded by the signing between their defence ministers of a U.S.-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations on June 1, 2015 which included a clause calling for an expansion of defence trade between the two countries, "potentially including cooperation in the production of new technologies and equipment, where possible under current law and policy restrictions."

For Vietnam, the oil rig incident in 2014 was a turning point in its relations with China. Bilateral relations may eventually improve but, from Vietnam's perspective, can never return to levels prior to the oil rig incident; and Trong's visit to the United States signals a slight "pivot" of Vietnam towards the United States in the strategic U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle.

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's fence-mending visit to Vietnam in November 2015 Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang took the unusual step to say frankly to his counterpart that "in recent years, the trust in the relations between the two parties and two countries among a number of our people, officials, and party members has been eroded by disagreement and disputes over maritime issues as well as by the failure to fully implement a number of cooperative agreements between the two countries."⁴⁷ As soon as Xi left Vietnam for Singapore where he gave a speech claiming islands in the South China Sea had belonged to China "since ancient times," government-controlled newspapers in Vietnam began to run headlines accusing him of "blatant lie", "chicanery," and "contradictions."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "Tranh chấp, bất đồng trên biển làm suy giảm lòng tin Việt-Trung" (Disputes and disagreements over maritime issues weaken trust between Vietnam and China), *Người Lao Động*, 8 November 2015. My translation.

⁴⁸ "Tập Cận Bình ngang nhiên khẳng định đảo ở Biển Đông thuộc Trung Quốc," (Xi Jinping blatantly claimed islands in the East Sea [South China Sea] belonged to China), *Tuổi Trẻ*, 7 November 2015; "Sang Singapore, ông Tập Cận Bình lại

However, as the level of Vietnam's mistrust and concern over the threat of peaceful evolution from the U.S. decreases, its concern over U.S.-China collusion at Vietnam's expense increases.⁴⁹ When the Obama administration was slow to follow Senator John McCain's suggestion in ordering the U.S. Navy to sail within twelve miles of a newly built artificial island to challenge China's claims, *Petro Times* an affiliate of the government-owned Petro Vietnam, on September 26, 2015, ran an article blasting Xi Jinping for "shamelessly" claiming that the Spratly Islands belonged to China "since ancient times" and, at the same time, accusing the United States of deliberately ignoring Chinese encroachments in the South China Sea and of taking no action beyond verbal protests since 2012. It also questioned if the United States was "considering" China's suggestion to divide the South China Sea between them.⁵⁰

To hedge against the disadvantage of being a small country in the U.S.-China-Vietnam strategic triangle, Vietnam carried out its slight pivot towards the U.S. in tandem with its broader "multidirectional" foreign policy within the framework of "independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification". It seeks to strengthen defence cooperation with regional and ASEAN countries whose opposition to Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea is more pronounced.

On the same day that Chinese President Xi landed in Hanoi on November 5, 2015, Vietnam also welcomed Japanese Defence Minister Nakatani at Cam Ranh Bay. The defence ministers of the two countries agreed to have Japanese warships visit Cam Ranh Bay and for the two

xảo ngôn về Biển Đông" (In Singapore, Mr. Xi Jinping resorted to chicanery when talking about the East Sea), *Petro Times*, 7 November 2015; "Chốt lưỡi dầu môi," ("Contradictions between [China's] words and deeds"), *Giáo Dục Việt Nam*, 8 November 2015. My translation.

⁴⁹ Results of author's interviews in Hanoi, 10–17 October 2015.

⁵⁰ Linh Phương, "Sự trơ trẽn của Trung Quốc và thái độ khó hiểu của Mỹ" (Chinese Shamelessness and American Ambivalence). *Petro Times*, 26 September 2015. <<http://petrotimes.vn/su-tro-tren-cua-trung-quoc-va-thai-do-kho-hieu-cua-my-327736.html>>.

countries to hold their first ever joint naval exercise.⁵¹ Three weeks later, during President Truong Tan Sang's visit to the Philippines to attend the 23rd APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, he signed an agreement with his Filipino counterpart to upgrade their bilateral relations to strategic partnership.⁵²

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE POLITICS OF U.S.-CHINA-VIETNAM TRIANGULAR RELATIONS

For years, Vietnam has operated under the shadow of a big brother or brothers. Left standing alone after the fall of European communism and in conflict with China, Vietnam entered the game of power politics.

The politics of the US-China-Vietnam triangle took shape in 2009 when Vietnam had to find a credible counterweight to China. In this triangle, it was mainly China that took the initiative, with Vietnam and the United States mostly reacting. The United States prefers cooperation with China to solve certain global issues and to integrate China into the current international order. But it must hedge against Chinese efforts to push the United States from the Asia-Pacific region. Cooperation between the United States and Vietnam thus varies in proportion to Chinese aggressive behaviour.

China is faced with a dilemma. If it moves too aggressively, it pushes the small countries in Asia into the arms of the United States. But if it relents, other Asian countries will become stronger and bolder in its cooperation with the United States to thwart Chinese ambitions over

⁵¹ Tim Kelly and Martin Petty, "Vietnam agrees to Japanese warship visit, naval exercise," *Kyodo News*, 6 November 2015; Reuters, 6 November 2015. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/06/us-southchinasea-vietnam-japan-idUSKCN0SV0NW20151106#LeLW4iPYzhc91hTg.97>>.

⁵² "Philippines, Vietnam boost ties as South China Sea feuds fester," *The Straits Times*, 18 November 2015; "Vietnam, Philippines lift ties to strategic partnership," *Tuoi Tre News*, 18 November 2015. <<http://www.vietnambreakingnews.com/2015/11/vietnam-philippines-lift-ties-to-strategic-partnership/>>.

time. A tempting option would be to continue pressing for regional dominance before opposing forces and effective coalitions emerge.

Vietnam does not want to antagonize China, but neither does it accept excessive Chinese encroachment, or its desire for total control of the South China Sea, which would result in a subservient status for Vietnam. Among the claimant countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is in the most difficult situation. It is the most important target of Chinese encroachment and is most vulnerable to Chinese pressure due to the “curse of geography” and the binding ties between the two communist parties. Years of placating China have not spared Vietnam the prospect of further losses of territory and sovereignty. Its “three-no’s” defensive policy is safe but fails to prevent China from gaining strategic ground in the South China Sea, making islands under its control increasingly vulnerable to Chinese actions. But seeking the United States as a counterweight brings the risk of antagonizing China together with the danger of “peaceful evolution” and becoming a pawn in U.S.-China big power politics.

The speed and magnitude of China’s land reclamation and measures to add a “defence component” to the newly built features push the United States closer to the “moment of truth.”⁵³ American objections, warnings, and veiled threats have brought no response, and China has gained an overwhelming strategic advantage over all other claimants in the South China Sea and is in a position to dictate its own interpretation of international law, the law of the sea, and the meaning of maritime freedom. Inaction has its costs. Senator McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, lamented inaction as a “dangerous mistake that grants *de facto* recognition of China’s man-made sovereignty claims,” and urged the U.S. to send a ship to within the 12-mile limit to

⁵³ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a press conference on 8 March 2015, asserted that China was merely building on its “own yard.” According to the Congressional Research Service, 18 June 2015, the Chinese government has stated that the work is intended to fulfil “the need of necessary military defense,” as well as to serve non-military purposes. <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44072.pdf>>.

make it clear that the U.S. does not recognize China's claim. Because action also has its costs, it took President Obama several weeks before deciding to send the USS Lassen sailing within twelve miles of Subi Reef, a new Chinese man-made feature, on October 26, 2015, to indicate that the U.S. did not recognize territorial claims over artificial islands. To minimize Chinese reaction, the USS Lassen took steps to show that it was making a "lawful innocent passage with no warlike intent."⁵⁴

Disputes in the South China Sea must be seen in the context of intense competition for power and influence between China and the United States and the desire of ASEAN countries not to have to take sides. An equitable and durable solution to the conflict in the South China Sea rests on three mutually reinforcing and mutually dependent factors: Chinese restraint, ASEAN solidarity, and American commitment.⁵⁵

A strong and united ASEAN is the most important component in this equation. ASEAN solidarity empowers the countries in the region and offers them the advantage of collective bargaining power. It can help deter aggressive Chinese behaviour and encourage continued U.S. involvement as a stabilizing factor. Given the failure so far of ASEAN to put up a common stand and act resolutely to face Chinese aggressive behaviour against Vietnam and the Philippines, it is difficult to believe that ASEAN can serve as an effective buffer in the United States-China contest. The group's cohesiveness and unity were dealt a further blow when Indonesia, its largest member, began to talk about a "post-

⁵⁴ Defense News, 30 October 2015, reported that "the warship took steps to indicate it was making a lawful innocent passage with no warlike intent. The ship's fire control radars were turned off and it flew no helicopters, the source said. Although a US Navy P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft was in the area, it did not cross inside the 12 nautical mile limit." <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2015/10/31/navy-china-richardson-wu-destroyer-lassen-south-china-sea-innocent-passage/74881704/?utm_content=buffera2cc6&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer> (accessed on 10 December 2015).

⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis, see Nguyen Manh Hung, "Drawing a Line in the South China Sea: Why Beijing Needs to Show Restraint," *Global Asia*, Vol. 7, No 4, Winter 2012.

ASEAN” policy focusing on the role of Indonesia as a maritime power in an “Asian Fulcrum of Four” (China, India, Indonesia, and Japan) and drifting away from a policy predicated on “ASEAN leadership and ASEAN centrality.”⁵⁶

China’s restraint remains a far-fetched dream. Despite talk about peace and cooperation between China and ASEAN and China’s willingness to settle conflict peacefully based on international law, China’s position has hardened as it marches relentlessly forward in enforcing claims and creating *faits accomplis* in the South China Sea.

Recently, the Chinese Foreign Minister upped the ante by stating that China’s claims are a question of national honour and shame. In a news conference on June 27, 2015 at the Fourth World Peace Forum, held at Tsinghua University, Foreign Minister Wang Yi casually dismissed objections to Chinese claims of sovereignty by saying: “One thousand years ago, China was a large sea-faring nation. So of course China was the first country to discover, use and administer the Nansha [Spratly] Islands.” He then declared resolutely and emotionally that “China’s demands of sovereignty over the Nansha Islands have not expanded and neither will they shrink. Otherwise we would not be able to face our forefathers and ancestors.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Vibhansu Shekhar, “Realist Indonesia drifts away from ASEAN,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No 333, 30 September 2015.

⁵⁷ Ben Blanchars, “China says changing position on sea dispute would shame ancestors,” Reuters, 27 June 2015. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/southchinesea-china-idUSL3N0ZD04920150627#FYvypcpqS88vh6xT.97>> (accessed on 10 December 2015). Wang’s casual dismissal was echoed by Chinese Vice Admiral Yuan Yubai, Commander of the Chinese Navy’s North Sea Fleet when he simply reminded his international colleagues at the First Sea Lord/RUSI International Sea Power Conference in London, on 14 September 2015, that “The South China Sea, as the name indicated, is a sea area that belongs to China. And the sea from the Han dynasty a long time ago where the Chinese people have been working and producing from the sea.” (*The Diplomat*, 16 September 2015). The same dismissive argument on sovereignty was adopted by President Xi Jinping at a joint press conference with President Obama at the Rose Garden on 25 September 2015 when he told his counterpart that islands in the South China Sea have been Chinese territory “since ancient times.”

Vietnamese leaders have repeatedly vowed to protect their country's sovereignty and not to cede an inch of territory to foreign encroachment. State President Truong Tan Sang said, in an interview on June 21, 2014, that "We are determined to protect every inch of our land or sea from violation. For every Vietnamese, national territorial integrity is sacred and sacrosanct."⁵⁸ A month earlier, on May 22, 2014, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung had categorically declared that "we will not exchange out sacred sovereignty over our islands for an illusory peace based on friendship and subordination."⁵⁹

The US is unlikely to agree to play second fiddle to China in the Asia-Pacific region. Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear that the 21st century will be "America's Pacific Century," and "the region's challenges demand American leadership."⁶⁰ If ASEAN fails to unite and force an equitable solution on China, the US will have no alternative but to pursue a containment or hedging strategy. China's efforts to weaken ASEAN cohesion in order to push the U.S. out may have the unintended consequence of isolating China and triggering Cold War-style containment.

The new Cold War, if it occurs, will not be as tense and potentially apocalyptic as the period that was characterized, for example, by the Cuban missile crisis. It will be more like the period of détente between the US and the former Soviet Union, when both confrontation/competition and cooperation took place between the two major protagonists in the context of economic globalization and interdependence. But, it could

⁵⁸ "Vietnam President affirms determination to protect national sovereignty, TuoiTrenews, 22 June 2014. <<http://tuoitrenews.vn/politics/20502/vietnams-leader-affirms-determination-to-protect-national-sovereignty>>.

⁵⁹ To Phuong Thuy, "Thu tuong Nguyen Tan Dung: Khong danh doi chu quyen lay thu huu nghi vien vong," *Lao Dong*, 22 May 2014 <<http://laodong.com.vn/chinh-tri/thu-tuong-nguyen-tan-dung-khong-danh-doi-chu-quyen-lay-thu-huu-nghi-vien-vong-20>>. My translation.

⁶⁰ U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks on "America's Pacific Century" at APEC Leaders Week in Hawaii, in Honolulu, Hawaii, 10 November 2011. <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/176999.htm>>.

still lead to a face-off between opposing military alliances, a struggle to define spheres of influence and military realignments in Asia, all of which would be an unpleasant reality for smaller ASEAN countries.

In the United States-China-Vietnam triangular relations, the South China Sea disputes may be seen as a manifestation of two sets of conflicting visions. At the local level, it is the vision of China dominating the South China Sea which clashes with Vietnam's perennial dream of being a "balcony looking out to the Pacific Ocean." The realization of the China dream in the South China Sea will affectively block the Vietnam dream. If this clash of visions cannot be resolved, China will always have to face the discomfort of having the simmering resentment and opposition of a proud nation at its border.

At the global and regional level, there is the vision of a rising China desiring a respected place in the world, with its assertive behaviour being perceived by the United States as "China's piecemeal seizure of additional territory and its further deployment of naval and air assets until it has *de facto* control of all the South China Sea within the 'nine-dash line' demarcated on Chinese maps. International maritime passage through the South China Sea will be subject to Chinese regulation and approval."⁶¹ This vision clashes with the United States' determination to "protect freedom of navigation and overflight – principles that have ensured security and prosperity in this region for decades."⁶² American top leaders from President Barrack Obama to U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice and Defence Secretary Ash Carter all have affirmed: "There should be no mistake: the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as U.S. forces do all around the world."⁶³

⁶¹ Marvin Ott, "An Operational South China Sea Strategy for the United States", *CogitAsia*, 24 June 2015.

⁶² "A Regional Security Architecture Where Everyone Rises", speech delivered by U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 30 May 2015.

⁶³ Remarks by U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter at a ceremony in Hawaii to recognize Adm. Harry B. Harris, the new commander of U.S. military forces in the Pacific, *The Washington Post*, 27 May 2015. CNN reported that on

Unless one or both of these visions is modified, a new cold war, not a new type of big power relations, in Asia Pacific is inevitable. Small countries in South East Asia will be forced to take sides or be chosen in the bargaining process between the two major powers.

21 September 2015 before Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in the United States, U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice also told the press that “The United States of America will sail, fly and operate anywhere that international law permits.” <<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/24/politics/president-obama-xi-jinping-china-awkward-topics/index.html>>. This was repeated verbatim by President Obama during his joint press conference with Chinese President Xi Jinping on 25 September 2015.

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PUBLISHING

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Singapore 119614

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TRS21/15s

ISBN 978-981-4459-65-5



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