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VIETNAM'S ALLIANCE POLITICS
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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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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Vietnam's Alliance Politics in the South China Sea

By Le Hong Hiep

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam has long maintained “no alliance” as a core principle in its foreign policy. However, as China becomes increasingly assertive in the South China Sea, there are indications that Vietnam is moving towards “alliance politics”, or efforts to forge close security and defence ties short of formal, treaty-bound alliances with key partners, to deal with the new situation.
- The need for such a shift in Vietnam's China strategy became more relevant after the 2014 *Haiyang Shiyou 981* oil rig crisis displayed the limitations in Hanoi's hedging strategy. It deepened Vietnam's perception of China as a serious threat and highlighted the irreconcilability between its twin goals of maintaining good relations with China and protecting its interests in the South China Sea.
- Vietnam is now able to avoid the strategic costs that China used to impose on the country in the late 1970s and the 1980s after Hanoi had forged an alliance with Moscow to counteract Beijing. This is due as much to new domestic and bilateral conditions as to shifts in the regional geo-strategic landscape.
- Vietnam's alliance politics can be traced through its strengthened security and defence ties with key partners who share convergent interest and threat perceptions in the South China Sea, most notably the Philippines, Japan, and the United States.
- However, it is not likely that Vietnam will enter into formal, treaty-bound alliances with these and other partners as such arrangements will limit its policy options and unnecessarily exacerbate its already tense relations with China.

- Being for defensive purposes, Vietnam's alliance politics in the South China Sea will probably wither away once China adopts a peaceful and law-based approach to the disputes, or the disputes themselves are eventually solved in a peaceful manner. However, given China's maritime ambitions and its growing power, these latter conditions are hardly realistic. Therefore, Vietnam's alliance politics in the South China Sea will likely continue and contribute to the transforming of the region's geo-political dynamics in the years to come.

Vietnam's Alliance Politics in the South China Sea

By Le Hong Hiep¹

INTRODUCTION

In May 2014, when a crisis broke out following China's placement of its giant oil rig *Haiyang Shiyou 981* in Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), some Vietnamese commentators saw it as a blessing in disguise for the country. One of them expressed hope that the crisis would unite the Vietnamese people and serve to speed up the country's reforms the same way the *USS Susquehanna*'s unwelcome entry into the Tokyo Bay did to Japan in 1853 (Nam, 2014). While it is still too early to tell whether meaningful domestic reforms will ensue, there are indications that the crisis has been a wake-up call to the Vietnamese leadership regarding the China threat as well as Vietnam's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In particular, the crisis has sped up Vietnam's efforts to seek alternative approaches to deal with China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Against this backdrop, one observable trend in Vietnam's foreign policy in recent years, especially after the oil rig crisis, has been its quiet shift towards alliance politics. In this context and for the purpose of this paper, "alliance politics" refers to Vietnam's efforts to forge close security and defence ties short of formal, treaty-bound alliances with key partners who have highly convergent perceptions of interests and threats in the South China Sea.

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This paper seeks to shed light on this trend by analysing Hanoi's evolving strategic and foreign policy in general and its China policy in particular over the past decade. The paper argues that while Vietnam has every reason to maintain a friendly and stable relationship with China, the latter's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea has forced Vietnam to quietly look for stronger security and defence relations with regional partners to handle China's coercion, especially since around 2010. After the 2014 oil rig crisis, this trend has been strengthened as the crisis deepened Vietnam's perception of China as a serious security threat and provided Vietnamese strategists with a proper reason to justify their pursuit of alliance politics. The trend has also been strengthened by Vietnamese intellectuals and foreign policy makers advocating such a shift, as well as favorable changes in regional geopolitical conditions, especially the increasing strategic rivalry between China and other regional powers. The paper therefore concludes that as long as China remains assertive in the South China Sea, Vietnam will continue to pursue alliance politics. This is a highly likely scenario given China's growing power as well as its maritime ambitions.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first reviews Vietnam's strategic policy towards China since bilateral normalization in 1991, especially its hedging strategy and the so-called "three no's" principles. The second section explains why such a strategic position has become increasingly questionable, especially in the light of the 2014 oil rig crisis. The third then analyses why Vietnam should pursue alliance politics to deal with China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. The final section looks into the measures that Vietnam has been undertaking in that direction. The section will accordingly analyse Vietnam's strengthened security and defence ties with the Philippines, Japan and the United States as case studies of Hanoi's pursuit of alliance politics in the South China Sea.

BILATERAL NORMALIZATION AND THE "THREE NO'S PRINCIPLE"

Due to the "tyranny of geography" and power asymmetry, Vietnam has throughout its history always considered China a major security threat.

Since the communist party in the two countries took power in the 1940s, the ideological affinity as well as the dormancy of territorial and maritime disputes, tended to bring the two countries together, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. During the latter half of the 1970s and in the 1980s, however, bilateral relations deteriorated dramatically due to divergent national interests, adverse regional geostrategic conditions and the resurgence of territorial and maritime disputes. After the brief yet bloody border war in February–March 1979, the two countries had a difficult relationship throughout the 1980s. After repeated efforts, especially on the part of Vietnam, the two countries eventually normalized relations in November 1991.²

In the post-normalization period, Vietnam has been successful in maintaining a generally stable, peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship with Beijing, which contributed in many ways to the country's internal development. Bilateral trade, in particular, increased exponentially and China became Vietnam's largest trade partner in 2004. In 2008, the two countries announced the establishment of a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership".

Nevertheless, Vietnam's wish to maintain a stable and peaceful relationship with China has been constrained by heightened tension in the South China Sea. Facing growing pressures from Beijing, Hanoi has been resorting to a multi-tiered omni-directional hedging strategy that combines both bandwagoning and balancing elements. In order to operationalize the strategy, Vietnam has directly engaged China politically and promoted economic cooperation with the latter to help maintain a peaceful and stable regional environment and to reap maximal benefits out of the bilateral relationship. On the other hand, Vietnam has also been pursuing a military modernization programme through the development of its domestic defence industry as well as military acquisitions from foreign partners. Vietnam has also invested in soft-balancing efforts against China by utilizing regional institutions, especially ASEAN, to counter Beijing's pressures in the South China Sea (Hiep 2013*b*).

² For more information and analysis of the Vietnam-China normalization process, especially Hanoi's internal drivers, see Hiep (2013*a*).

At the same time, Vietnam has also stepped up its strategic ties with other major partners. For example, by the end of 2014, Vietnam had maintained regular defence and strategic dialogues at deputy ministerial level with most major military powers, including Australia, China, France, India, Italy, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.³ Some of these dialogue partners are also major sources of military acquisitions for Vietnam, especially Russia. Various defence cooperation activities with major partners, such as exchange of visits by high-ranking military officials, port calls, intelligence exchanges, training, and search and rescue exercises, have also been intensified.

Against this backdrop, Vietnamese officials have repeatedly stated that their country's strengthened defence ties with regional partners are not directed against any third country.⁴ Apparently, the target audience of such statements is China, who is likely to be worried and irritated by Vietnam's stronger defence ties with regional powers, especially the United States, Japan, and India. In particular, these officials have emphasized the so-called "three no's principle", i.e. no military alliance, no foreign base on Vietnam's soil, and no relationship with one country to be used against a third country. Elements of such principles were first mentioned in the 1998 Defence White Paper, and detailed in another from 2004.⁵ Specifically, the 2004 White Paper states:

³ Future defence and strategic dialogue partners may include Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

⁴ See various interviews with Deputy Minister of Defence Nguyen Chi Vinh, e.g.: <<http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/xa-hoi/vn-quan-he-voi-my-khong-phai-de-can-bang-suc-manh-tai-bien-dong-2172881.html>>, <<http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/xa-hoi/viet-nam-khong-chap-nhan-nen-hoa-binh-le-thuoc-2184972.html>>, and <<http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/xa-hoi/viet-nam-khong-chap-nhan-su-can-du-xam-hai-chu-quyen-2660487.html>>.

⁵ Since 1998 Vietnam has released Defence White Papers every five or six years. The first three were released in 1998, 2004 and 2009, respectively. The fourth one is scheduled for release in 2015.

Vietnam's policy is not to join any military alliance, not to allow any foreign country to establish military base in Vietnam, and not to take part in any military action that uses force or threatens to use force against another country. However, Vietnam is ready to defend itself against any violation of its territory, air space, waters and national interests; Vietnam is not going to undertake arm races, but constantly strengthens its military capabilities for the purpose of sufficient self-defence (Ministry of Defence 2004, p. 5).

Although the “three no’s principle” includes three pillars, it boils down to one core rule: no alliance. Essentially, without a formal alliance treaty, a given country would not be allowed to establish a military base on Vietnam’s soil and neither could Vietnam make use of the relationship to target a third country.

Then why has Vietnam laid so much emphasis on the “no alliance” principle?

First, having gone through an arduous struggle for independence and unification, Vietnam has always valued its independent foreign policy and refrained from any action that may compromise this principle. *Second*, historical lessons from the Cold War era, especially the antagonistic relationship with China since the late 1970s until 1991 due to Vietnam’s tilting towards the Soviet Union at the expense of China, have cautioned Vietnamese leaders that alliance politics may backfire and put the country in a disadvantaged strategic position. *Third*, China’s rise to global power status causes Vietnamese leaders to become even more prudent in taking any action that may offend Beijing. This is not only because Vietnam, as a neighbour, will get a harder blow when China vents its anger and flexes its muscles, but also because Vietnam’s communist leaders tend to view their counterparts in Beijing as key allies in the safeguarding of their regime. Moreover, the economic opportunities that China brings also soften intentions of pursuing any strategic initiatives that may destabilize bilateral relations. As such, there is a strong incentive for the Vietnamese leadership to pursue the “no alliance” principle and to maintain a balance between China and other regional powers, especially the United States.

THE INCREASING IRRELEVANCE OF THE “THREE NO’S PRINCIPLE”

Vietnam’s “no alliance” strategy, however, is showing limitations as China has become increasingly aggressive in the South China Sea over the past decade (see Table 1 for more details). Such limitations were manifested in the 2014 oil rig crisis in at least four aspects.

Table 1: Timeline of China’s increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea since 2007

Time	China’s major actions
2007, July	China established the prefecture-level city of Sansha to administer the Spratlys, the Paracels and the Macclesfield Bank.
2007, July 7	A Chinese naval ship opened fire at Vietnamese fishing boats near the Spratlys.
2007, August	China opened tourist cruises to the Paracels.
2009	China extended the annual fishing moratorium in the South China Sea to three months. ⁶
2009, March	Chinese vessels harassed US surveillance ship USNS <i>Impeccable</i> off Hainan Island.
2009, May	China formally presented a nine-dash-line map to the United Nations as a basis of its maritime claims in the South China Sea.
2009, June	A Chinese submarine collided with a US destroyer’s towed sonar array.
2010, August	A Chinese manned submarine planted a Chinese flag on the sea bed of the South China Sea.
2011, March	Two Chinese patrol boats forced Philippine seismic survey vessel MV <i>Veritas Voyager</i> to withdraw from waters near Reed Bank.
2011, May & November	Chinese ships cut seismic cable of Vietnam’s survey vessel <i>Binh Minh 02</i> within Vietnam’s EEZ.

⁶ China first imposed the moratorium in 1999.

2011, June	Chinese ships cut seismic cable of Vietnam's survey vessel <i>Viking 2</i> within Vietnam's EEZ.
2012, April–July	China maritime enforcement ships drove Philippine vessels out of the Scarborough Shoal after a three-month stand-off and seized <i>de facto</i> control of the shoal.
2012, June	China opened international bids for 9 blocks within Vietnam's EEZ.
2012, November	China issued electronic passports with nine-dash-line map.
2012, Nov	China allowed Hainan police to board and search ships in disputed waters in the South China Sea.
2014 March	China imposed a blockade on the Philippine-held Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratlys.
2014, May–July	China anchored its deepwater drilling rig <i>Haiyang Shiyou 981</i> in Vietnamese EEZ and deployed over 80 vessels, including naval warships, to protect the rig. Chinese vessels rammed and fired water cannons at Vietnamese ships.
2014 (ongoing by February 2015)	China undertook land reclamation and constructed artificial islands on seven submerged features in the Spratlys.

Source: Author's own compilation based on various media sources.

First, during the crisis, China exhibited a high level of aggression unseen since the 1988 Sino-Vietnamese naval clash in the Spratlys. At times, China deployed up to 140 ships of various types and forces, including naval warships, to protect the oil rig (Vietnam Television 2014). Chinese ships also rammed and fired water cannons at Vietnamese vessels. When these aggressive actions by Chinese forces were broadcast to the Vietnamese through mass media channels, a sense of brinkmanship was spread across the country for weeks and deepened Vietnamese public perception of China as a major threat. Against this backdrop, it can be argued that the “no alliance” policy is only relevant when Vietnam faces no grave threat to its independence and territorial integrity. In the face of a serious and pressing military threat, an insistence on the “no alliance” policy will unnecessarily deprive Vietnam of much-needed strategic

flexibility and further disadvantage the country vis-à-vis a much more powerful rival.

Second, the crisis showed the vast disparity between the two country's power and capabilities. While China normally mobilized from 80 to more than 100 ships of various types to protect the oil rig and obstruct Vietnamese vessels (Vietnam Television 2014; *VnExpress* 2014*b*), Vietnam reportedly dispatched only 29 ships to the crisis zone (Brummitt 2014). As the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) and particularly the Vietnam Maritime Resources Surveillance (VMRS) — the two key forces that Vietnam deployed to the area — were still in their initial phase of force building, the number of their vessels was limited. The level of damage that Chinese ships caused to Vietnamese vessels even raised the fear among some Vietnamese analysts that Vietnam might not have enough vessels to confront China in the waters surrounding the rig if the crisis was prolonged (Thayer 2014*c*). The confrontation over the oil rig therefore highlighted the power asymmetry between the two countries, causing the “no alliance” policy to become even more questionable as Vietnam will not be able to effectively resist China's military coercion on its own.

Third, by aggressively deploying the oil rig into Vietnam's EEZ, China ignored the agreement reached between the two countries' leadership that both sides would not seek to escalate tensions in the South China Sea.⁷ In the initial stages of the crisis, China even turned a deaf ear to Vietnam's repeated requests for negotiations.⁸ After the crisis, China

⁷ For example, during CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to China in 2011, the two sides signed an agreement on fundamental principles guiding the solution of maritime issues between the two countries. Principle number three provides that the two sides adhere to the “principles and spirit” of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) which provides, among other things, that “the Parties undertake to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability” (ASEAN 2002).

⁸ Within the first month of the crisis, Vietnamese officials contacted Chinese counterparts at different levels and through various channels more than 30 times to request China's withdrawal of the rig and initiation of negotiations. All were to no avail (Quyet 2014).

continued to pursue escalatory actions by building artificial islands in the Spratlys. Vietnam's hedging strategy in general and the "three no's principle" in particular have therefore proven not to be effective enough in deterring China's aggression in the South China Sea. In other words, the crisis has forced Vietnam to rethink its China policy, especially the "three no's principle".

Fourth, the crisis showed that international support, especially from powerful and influential partners, played an important role in boosting Vietnam's "just cause" and pressured China to de-escalate tensions. During the crisis, statements from the United States, Japan, the Philippines, India and Australia, which either condemned China's actions or asked both parties to peacefully resolve the dispute in accord with international law, all tended to delegitimize China's actions. For example, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution (S. RES.412) on July 10 calling on China to withdraw the oil rig and accompanying ships, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Fuchs also called for a "freeze" in China's provocative actions on July 11 (Thayer 2014a). Meanwhile, apart from statements dismissive of China's actions during the crisis, Japan also announced in early August 2014 that it would provide Vietnam with six patrol vessels as part of an aid package (*The Asahi Shimbun* 2014). These gestures brought home to Vietnamese strategists the fact that external support was essential to the country's efforts to defend its interests in the South China Sea.

On 15 July 2014, China finally announced the withdrawal of its oil rig.⁹ However, bores were left behind, both on the sea bed and in the mutual confidence between the two countries. The incidence also caused a number of Vietnamese scholars and intellectuals to call for alliances with like-minded countries to counteract China's aggression in the South China Sea (see, for example, Cong 2014; Hiep 2014a, 2014b; Huy 2014;

⁹ The reason China cited for the withdrawal was that the drilling and exploration operation "was smoothly completed on schedule [...] with the oil & gas shows found" (China National Oil Corporation, 2014). However, according to Thayer (2014a), three other factors also played into China's decision: safety concerns due to Typhoon Rammasun, U.S. political and diplomatic pressure, and China's wish to prevent Vietnam from escaping its orbit.

Vu & Nhi 2014). Among foreign policy makers, there was less open debate as the topic remains a sensitive issue, but some have hinted at the idea of pursuing alliance politics. For example, Hoang Anh Tuan, Director General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, stated in an interview that Vietnam's internal strength is not sufficient to secure its interests in the South China Sea. Instead, the country "must combine the strength of the nation with that of the time and international supports" as it did in the previous national liberation wars (*Lao Dong* 2014).¹⁰

The above analysis shows that it is becoming increasingly necessary for Vietnam to pursue alliance politics to deal with China's coercion in the South China Sea. However, the question whether such a move is feasible or not, remains.

THE CASE FOR VIETNAM'S PURSUIT OF ALLIANCE POLITICS

Indeed, emerging trends in the regional geopolitical landscape as well as bilateral conditions have made it increasingly feasible for Vietnam to pursue alliance politics to deal with China in the South China Sea.

First and foremost, Vietnam is unlikely to face the same problems that arose from China's hostility in the late 1970s. After Hanoi established an informal alliance with Moscow through an agreement of friendship and cooperation in November 1978, Beijing reacted strongly by putting tremendous diplomatic and military pressures on Hanoi, which culminated in a brief yet bloody border war in early 1979 and prolonged tensions between the two countries throughout the 1980s. The historical lesson for Vietnam during this episode was that it would be unwise to ally

¹⁰ Tuan paralleled such an approach to the "three revolutionary currents" theory that CPV Secretary General Le Duan promoted during the Vietnam War. The theory, which posited that international relations after World War II were driven by socialist and national liberation revolutions in the Third World as well as workers' movements in capitalist countries, helped North Vietnam, as a symbol of socialist and national liberation revolutions, to gain moral and material support from its allies, especially China and the Soviet Union, in its war against America.

itself with a foreign power to counter China. As a result, a segment of the Vietnamese leadership now tend to think that pursuing alliance politics to counteract China's aggression in the South China Sea may generate similar strategic costs for the country.

However, historical lessons may be a faulty guide for the future, especially when historical conditions have changed. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnam is now in a much better position to avoid the strategic costs that China could previously impose on the country.

First, economically, it is now hardly in the interest of China to start an armed conflict with Vietnam. Unlike in 1979 when China had just started its “four modernizations” and remained relatively isolated, China today is the second largest economy in the world (World Bank 2014, pp. 12–16) with robust international economic links. Therefore, an armed conflict with Vietnam, which will likely generate negative impacts on China's economy, especially the southern commercial hubs of Guangzhou and Hong Kong, should be the last course of action that Chinese strategists contemplate. Moreover, growing bilateral economic interdependence through trade and investment links also discourages China from taking military actions against Vietnam.¹¹

Second, although Vietnam is no match for China in terms of military power, it can still impose considerable costs on China if an open armed conflict between the two countries breaks out. For example, some Vietnamese strategists have suggested that should open armed conflict take place, Vietnam could counteract China's attacks by using missiles to target China's southern cities, or deploy its submarines and warships as well as coastal ballistic missiles to raid Chinese merchant ships and oil containers passing through the southern part of the South China Sea. Vietnam is also said to possess coastal ballistic missiles that are in range of China's naval bases on Hainan and Woody islands (Thayer 2014c). All these new capabilities of Vietnam, coupled with the higher economic stakes involved, may impose high costs on China's military actions,

¹¹ For example, in 2014, bilateral trade turnover reached US\$58.78 billion. By the end of 2013, China also ranked as the seventh largest foreign investor in Vietnam in terms of accumulative registered capital stock (GSO 2014, p. 179).

thereby deterring China from attacking Vietnam militarily the way it did in 1979.

Third, the current international strategic setting is also markedly different from the late 1970s. After China normalized its relations with the United States on 1 January 1979, the two countries became *de facto* allies in their containment of the Soviet Union — their common strategic rival. Consequently, Hanoi — as an ally of Moscow — became a convenient target for both Beijing and Washington. At the same time, Vietnam’s international isolation following its military intervention into Cambodia further facilitated China’s military actions. In other words, in the late 1970s, Vietnam’s strategic and diplomatic posture was so weak and vulnerable that China essentially had a free hand to “teach Vietnam a lesson”. Currently, however, the strategic tides have turned in Vietnam’s favour and China faces significant constraints that tend to limit its freedom to act vis-à-vis Hanoi.

Unlike 1979, China is now a competitor rather than a strategic partner of the United States. In 1979, China was weak, and barely a threat to Washington’s regional interests. However, China’s unprecedented economic and military rise over the past three decades has posed an increasing threat to U.S. regional and global primacy. China’s proposal of a “new type of great power relationship” between the two countries and President Xi Jinping’s recent initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank,¹² the New Silk Road, the Maritime Silk Road, for example, are signs of a more confident China that has grown out of Deng Xiaoping’s “*tao guang yang hui*” mantra to seek a power status on par with the US. Washington is therefore recalibrating its foreign and strategic policies to deal with these challenges. Apart from key initiatives such as the “rebalancing” to East Asia and the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership, Washington is also strengthening ties with regional allies and partners to gain a better strategic position over China. Vietnam, as an important neighbour of China and a main party to the South China Sea disputes, has become one of the key partners with which the US is trying to foster stronger

¹² Formerly referred to as BRICS Development Bank.

strategic relations. Meanwhile, growing perception of the China threat due to Beijing's fast expanding hard power as well as its increasing assertiveness in territorial and maritime disputes with neighbours has also alarmed major regional powers like Japan and India, further undermining Beijing's regional strategic posture.

On its part, Vietnam is now no longer the global pariah state it used to be in the 1970s and 1980s. Its foreign policy of "diversification and multilateralization" under *Doi Moi* has earned the country a significantly enhanced international status, enabling it to better weather China's diplomatic pressures. In late 1978, for example, Vietnam had diplomatic relations with only ninety-eight states, most of which were in the socialist bloc and the Third World (MOFA 2013). But by 2015, Vietnam has established diplomatic ties with 180 countries around the world, including all the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Vietnam has also become a member of ASEAN and entered into comprehensive or strategic partnerships with fifteen other major states. In other words, the current regional and bilateral conditions show that while China faces mounting strategic constraints, Vietnam has more resources and options to handle military and diplomatic pressures from China.

In sum, pursuing alliance politics has become an increasingly necessary and feasible option for Vietnam to deal with China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Yet, the key challenge for the country is how to undertake such a shift given the fact that it will inevitably displease China. The next section will address this question and provide a brief analysis of Vietnam's silent shift towards alliance politics over the past few years.

HOW HAS VIETNAM PURSUED ALLIANCE POLITICS?

Although Vietnam has long hoped that it can maintain a friendly and stable relationship with China and protect its national interests in the South China Sea at the same time, the two goals have become increasingly incompatible. The 2014 oil rig crisis, in particular, was a crucial event that woke the Vietnamese leadership up to this reality. Nevertheless, Vietnamese leaders keep stating that Vietnam will not join any military

alliances against third countries [read: China]. For example, in a press conference during the oil rig crisis, while condemning China's actions and stating that Vietnam would not trade its sovereignty and territorial integrity for an "illusionary friendship", Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung reiterated this position and confirmed "no alliance" as a consistent foreign policy of Vietnam (*VnExpress* 2014a). There are a number of reasons why one should look beyond these official statements to gain a better understanding of Vietnam's transforming strategy vis-à-vis China.

First, although Vietnam is worried about China's assertive moves in the South China Sea, at least a segment of its leadership tend to hope that these are temporary and China will refrain from excessively aggressive measures in the future. From this perspective, a decisive turn to alliances with third countries to counteract China may be unnecessary or at least premature, and maintaining a good relationship with Beijing should remain a priority. Such a mindset is reflected in Vietnam's decision to dispatch senior diplomats and defence officials to Beijing to mend relations after the crisis. However, although such a response makes sense in the short term, it underestimates the long-term trend of China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. China's decision to build artificial islands in the Spratlys right after the oil rig crisis cooled down and when the two countries were presumably working to fix their relations is a case in point.

Second, official language may be misleading, and what "alliances" in Vietnam's official statements means matters. Vietnam may not join formal treaty alliances, but it can pursue, and is indeed pursuing, soft and informal alliances in the form of strengthened "comprehensive" and/or "strategic" partnerships with a number of countries, especially in the field of security and defence cooperation. Therefore, the fact that Vietnam will not enter into formal alliance treaties with regional powers does not mean that alliance politics is not an option for Vietnam to counteract China's assertiveness.

Third, even when there is a shift in Vietnam's China strategy, one should not expect Hanoi to declare it openly. Vietnam's position as a junior neighbour to China, coupled with the rather close relationship between the two communist parties, makes it necessary for the Vietnamese leadership not to publicly offend their Chinese counterparts. Therefore, instead of

grounding our analyses on Hanoi's official statements, we should look at what it is actually doing to gain a more accurate assessment of its China strategy in general and its alliance politics in the South China Sea in particular.

The next part of this section will examine Vietnam's recent strategic rapprochement with key partners, namely the Philippines, Japan, and the United States, as case studies of Vietnam's gradual shift to alliance politics in the South China Sea.

The Philippines

The Philippines and Vietnam are "natural allies" in their common struggle against China's attempts to expand in the South China Sea. Both countries have the most overlapping claims with China, especially in the Spratlys, and have fallen victims to China's coercive measures a couple of times.¹³ Consequently, the two countries have strengthened their coordination and cooperation in response to Beijing's increasing assertiveness.

The two countries' coordination regarding South China Sea issues date back to the mid-1990s, after Vietnam joined ASEAN. In November 1995, Vietnam and the Philippines adopted the Joint Statement on the Fourth Annual Bilateral Consultations which contained eight principles of conduct in the South China Sea. Based on this joint statement and some other official documents of ASEAN, especially the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the two country jointly drafted an ASEAN code of conduct under an assignment by the ASEAN Regional Forum (Thao, 2001, p. 114). Due to disagreement regarding the scope of application, however, this draft ended up being adopted as the 2002 ASEAN–China Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) instead of a formal, legally binding Code of Conduct (COC).

¹³ For Vietnam, major examples include the 1988 naval clash at Johnson South Reef and the 2014 oil rig crisis for Vietnam. For the Philippines, China's grab of the Mischief reef in 1995 and the standoff over the Scarborough Shoal in 2012 are the most notable cases.

Since the late 2000s, bilateral defence cooperation has also been strengthened due to shared concerns over China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. For example, during Philippine President Benigno Aquino's visit to Vietnam in October 2010, the two sides signed an agreement on defence cooperation. One year later, during Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang's visit to Manila in October 2011, they signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on intelligence exchange between their navies and an agreement on establishing a hot line between their coast guards (*Quan doi Nhan dan* 2011). In March 2014, the two countries' navies held staff-to-staff talks to step up exchanges in intelligence and information gathering, naval technology and training. In November 2014, two Vietnamese frigates *Dinh Tien Hoang* and *Ly Thai To* made their first-ever port call to the Philippines and engaged in a joint search and rescue exercise (*Thanhvien News* 2014).

In terms of diplomatic and strategic cooperation, Vietnam and the Philippines established a Joint Permanent Working Group on Maritime and Ocean Concerns in 2004 to promote bilateral maritime cooperation. In October 2011, they decided to upgrade the Working Group into a Joint Committee on Maritime and Ocean Concerns at Deputy Foreign Ministerial Level, which held its inaugural meeting in Manila in February 2012 (*BBC* 2012; *Quan doi Nhan dan* 2011). Vietnam has also endorsed the Philippines' 2013 lawsuit against China's South China Sea claims at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (*South China Morning Post* 2014). Most importantly, in early 2015, the two countries announced that they would establish a strategic partnership soon (*Straits Times* 2015; *VnExpress* 2015b). Such a partnership will create the foundations for stronger bilateral strategic cooperation. It is also indicative of Vietnam's efforts to forge a *de facto*, informal alliance with the Philippines to deal with China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Japan

Although Japan is not a party to the South China Sea disputes, its interest in the freedom of navigation and the safety of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) as well as its increasing strategic rivalry with China has turned the South China Sea into a matter of its national security. To address this

concern, Japan has, among other things, strengthened its cooperation with ASEAN on maritime security and started to provide capacity-building support to a number of its members (Storey 2013). These conditions have facilitated the strengthening of strategic and defence cooperation between Japan and Vietnam over the past decade.

Vietnam and Japan entered into a strategic partnership in 2006. In 2007, the two sides established a Joint Cooperation Committee at the ministerial level and adopted a detailed agenda to promote bilateral relations in all aspects, including defence exchanges (MOFA, 2007). In March 2014, during his state visit to Japan, President Truong Tan Sang and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issued a joint statement upgrading their relations to an Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia (Vietnam News Agency 2014b).

Although bilateral relations have blossomed in all fields, defence and security ties are among the newest yet fastest-developing areas of cooperation between the two countries. As Thayer (2014b) observes, Vietnam-Japan defence cooperation took shape around 2011 as tensions in the South China Sea increased. Specifically, in December 2010, the two sides launched the annual strategic partnership dialogue at the deputy foreign minister level to discuss bilateral cooperation in foreign policy, national defence and security, and regional and global issues (MOFA 2011). In 2011, Japan and Vietnam signed a MOU to expand the scope of defence cooperation, which included, among other things, defence exchanges at ministerial, chief of staff and service chief level; naval goodwill visits; annual defence policy dialogue at the deputy defence minister level; cooperation in military aviation and air defence; and personnel training (*Quan doi Nhan dan* 2013; Thayer 2014b).¹⁴ In early August 2014, when China had just withdrawn its oil rig out of Vietnam's EEZ, Japan announced that it would provide Vietnam with six patrol boats to support the country's maritime defence activities in the South China Sea (*Asahi Shimbun* 2014). As Japan is revising its ODA

¹⁴ Other areas of cooperation include search and rescue, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, maritime salvage, IT training, military medicine, and peacekeeping.

regulations to legalize the provision of aid to foreign militaries, it is likely that Vietnam will get more military support from Japan in the future.

At present, Japan is perhaps Vietnam's most important strategic partner. Japan is a major power that can and is willing to help Vietnam enhance its capabilities in its struggle against China in the South China Sea. In addition, unlike the United States which typically links Vietnam's human rights record to the development of bilateral ties, Japan virtually faces no major problem in advancing its relations with Vietnam. The bilateral relationship is built upon a high level of mutual trust and respect, solid economic foundations, and a considerable convergence of interest and threat perception in their maritime domains. Therefore, it is highly likely that Vietnam-Japan strategic ties, especially in the area of defence and security cooperation, will continue to thrive in the foreseeable future, providing yet another important boost for Vietnam's shift to alliance politics in the South China Sea.

The United States

The United States is an emerging yet promising partner with which Vietnam is seeking to deepen its relations. Despite recent historical animosity due to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, the increasing convergence of strategic interests has drawn the two former enemies closer. While Vietnam is trying to strengthen its ties with major powers to balance against Chinese pressures in the South China Sea, Washington is also interested in promoting ties with regional countries, especially China's neighbours, to quietly keep China's increasing power and influence in check. China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea provides a convenient and pragmatic reason for the two countries to deepen their ties.

As I have argued elsewhere (Hiep 2012), the South China Sea dispute is now composed of three intertwined layers. The innermost layer involves the competition between China and individual ASEAN claimant states, including Vietnam. The middle layer is between ASEAN and China. The outermost layer is the newly emerging strategic competition between China and the United States, of which the South China Sea happens to be one of its theatres. This explains why the United States is trying

to involve itself more deeply in the disputes despite China's objection. Through its involvement, the United States wants to ensure not only the freedom and safety of navigation in the South China Sea, but also the prospect that China's rise will not threaten regional peace and U.S. regional and global primacy. This geo-political dynamics therefore tends to play to Vietnam's advantage.

The well-known statement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the 17th ARF (Hanoi, July 2010) that the 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" (U.S. Department of State 2010) symbolically marked a new phase of rapprochement between the two countries. The statement, which was well received by Hanoi as it indirectly rebuked China's expansive and legally vague claims in the South China Sea, was followed by a series of developments that further elevated bilateral relations to a record high.

Soon after Clinton's statement, the two countries launched their first annual defence and strategic dialogue in August 2010 (*VnExpress* 2010).¹⁵ In 2011, at the second dialogue in Washington D.C., they signed a MOU on bilateral defence relations which provided for various cooperation measures, including the exchange of visits by high ranking defence officials, maritime security, search and rescue, peace-keeping operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (*VnExpress* 2011). A major turning point came during President Truong Tan Sang's visit to Washington in July 2013 when the two sides announced the establishment of a comprehensive partnership. In December 2013, the United States announced that it would provide Vietnam with US\$18 million in new assistance to help Hanoi enhance its maritime capacity, beginning with training and the provision of five fast patrol vessels to the Vietnam Coast Guard (U.S. Department of State 2013). In a related move, in October 2014, Washington decided to partially lift its ban on lethal weapon sales

¹⁵ It should be noted there are also two similar but separate Vietnam-US dialogues, one is on political, defence and security issues, and the other is on the Asia-Pacific.

to Vietnam, allowing for the transfer of U.S. maritime security-related military hardware to Hanoi (*Voice of America* 2014).

In July 2014, while the oil rig crisis was going on, the U.S. Senate passed resolution S.RES.412 calling on China to withdraw its oil rig and associated maritime forces, and condemning “coercive and threatening actions or the use of force to impede freedom of operations in international airspace by military or civilian aircraft, to alter the status quo or to destabilize the Asia-Pacific region” (U.S. Senate 2014). In the same event, U.S. reconnaissance aircrafts were also spotted flying low over the Chinese oil rig twice on 29 June and 2 July (Vietnam News Agency 2014a; *Want China Times* 2014). Although China dismissed the influence of external pressures on its decision to withdraw the oil rig in July (Thayer 2014a), U.S. support was positively perceived in Vietnam and testified to the necessity for Hanoi to forge stronger security and defence ties with regional powers to deal with future similar crises in the South China Sea.

In 2015, Hanoi and Washington celebrates the twentieth anniversary of the normalization of their relations. The anniversary presents a timely opportunity for the two countries to further deepen ties to best serve their national interest in a fast changing regional geo-strategic landscape. One of the bilateral priorities will be the exchange of visits by top leaders. CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong is planned to pay an official visit to Washington, and President Obama is expected to make a return visit to Hanoi in November 2015. The visits will signify a higher level of engagement between the two former enemies. They also help to build mutual trust and may pave the way for more meaningful cooperation measures in the future.

As such, Washington is likely to downplay the human rights issue, and one should not be surprised if it announces a complete removal of the ban on lethal weapon sales to Hanoi in the near future. On the part of Vietnam, despite the reservation of certain segments within the Party and the government, developing stronger ties with the United States will remain a diplomatic and strategic priority in the years to come. Therefore, as former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam Pete Peterson remarked in early 2015 at a conference in Hanoi, “Vietnam-U.S. relations are now very close to the level of a strategic partnership” (*VnExpress* 2015a), an official

upgrade of bilateral ties from the current comprehensive partnership is possibly a matter of time, although such a move may not be as important as what the two countries will actually do to strengthen their ties.

CONCLUSION

Although Vietnam prefers to maintain a balance between China and other partners, especially the United States, China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea has forced Vietnam to pursue alliance politics as a key measure to handle Beijing's pressures. Although a segment of the Vietnamese leadership is concerned about possible negative consequences of such a strategy, they will have no other option should China continue to forcefully assert its claims in the South China Sea. Moreover, the current regional geo-strategic dynamics, in which China is facing growing rivalry from the United States and Japan, is also conducive to such a move by Vietnam. As a result, despite repeated statements from Vietnamese officials that Vietnam will not abandon its so-called "three no's principle", one can observe Hanoi's quiet shift towards alliance politics through its continuous efforts to forge stronger security and defence ties with key partners, most notably Japan, the US and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines.

Vietnam, however, will not likely to enter into formal, treaty-bound alliances with these and other partners as such arrangements will limit its policy options and unnecessarily exacerbate its already tense relations with China. The most likely scenario is that, while seeking to strengthen security and defence ties with important partners, Vietnam will modulate the pace and intensity of such efforts to best respond to China's actions in the South China Sea. Vietnam's overall strategic objective is to protect its interest in the South China Sea while avoiding the possibility of ending up in an armed conflict with China.

Vietnam's alliance politics in the South China Sea is therefore for defensive purposes, and will probably wither away once China adopts a peaceful and law-based approach to the disputes, or the disputes themselves are eventually solved in a peaceful manner. Given China's maritime ambitions and its growing power, however, these conditions are hardly realistic, at least in the near future. Therefore, Vietnam's alliance

politics in the South China Sea will likely continue and contribute to the region's transforming geo-political dynamics in the years to come.

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