

Asia After the Soviet Union

Five experts explore the legacy of the USSR and the impact of its collapse on China, India, Japan, the Koreas, and Vietnam.

By Kawashima Shin, Swapna Kona Nayudu, James D.J. Brown, Se Young Jang and Khang Vu

Although the writing had been on the (literal) wall since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union was only made official in December 1991 through the Belavezha Accords, which announced that “the USSR, as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality, is ceasing its existence.” With that, the Soviet Union was no more and the Cold War was over, removing the single largest impetus driving foreign policy decisions around the world.

To mark the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, The Diplomat has gathered five experts to explore the legacy of the USSR and the impact of its collapse on China, India, Japan, the Koreas, and Vietnam. Whether allies or enemies of the Soviet Union, each of these states underwent their own major economic, political, and diplomatic transformations in the years after the USSR was dissolved. In ways both obvious and subtle, the Soviet legacy remains relevant across Asia.

China

— Kawashima Shin

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 had a profound impact on China’s internal and foreign policies, forcing a shift in its national strategy. From the standpoint of China, however, the formal end of the Soviet Union was not the only event in this period that created an opportunity to shift its strategy. The Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989 and the subsequent economic sanctions imposed by the West, as well as the end of the Cold War in the same year, must also be understood to have played a part. In the course of these events, it became clear that China’s approach toward nation-building aimed to achieve economic development without Western democratization.

First, China was confronted with international isolation not only because the Cold War had ended, but also because of the collapse of the socialist bloc. The impending sense of crisis was strong, given that the Tiananmen Square incident had resulted in the imposition of economic sanctions on China by Western countries. It was in the face of this crisis that the guiding principle of foreign policy that would later become known as “keep a low profile, accomplish something” is said to have been formed. This guiding principle advocated that in the midst of a crisis, China should avoid engaging in coercion and conflict with the West, while at the same time striving to achieve results. The expression “keep a low profile, accomplish something” was used under Jiang Zemin and at least the first half of the Hu Jintao administration. It became the principle underpinning a foreign policy that pursued economic development as its main goal.

China's conflict with the Soviet Union had been brought to an end with the visit of President Mikhail Gorbachev in May 1989. Even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, however, China continued to attach great importance to its relationship with Russia, not only because relations with Russia and the newly independent Central Asian countries adjoining its long borders were critical for national security, but also because China needed Russia in order to take a stand against the West.

Second, China succeeded in realizing the second half of the "keep a low profile, accomplish something" guiding principle of foreign policy by immediately establishing diplomatic relations with the countries that emerged in Central Asia following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This was accomplished through the formation of the Shanghai Five, including Russia, continuing with the Central Asian countries the diplomatic negotiations that had already been underway with the Soviet Union.

China also normalized diplomatic relations with neighboring countries such as Singapore and South Korea. These policies became the basis for the peripheral diplomacy that would follow, including the Belt and Road Initiative. In terms of its relationships with developed countries, China prioritized the improvement of relations with Japan, hosting a visit by the Japanese emperor in 1992. At the same time, China improved relations with other developed countries by accepting investment from them in order to grow the country into "the world's factory."

Third, the disintegration of the Soviet Union altered the balance of military security in the area around China, putting pressure on Beijing to respond. The end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Soviet Union had drastically reduced the military capability of the Soviet Union's Pacific Fleet (Red Banner Pacific Fleet), which had been based in Vladivostok. This shifted the military balance in the Far East, leading China to engage in its own military confrontation with the United States. China's national defense strategy and strengthened military force were manifested in the enactment of the Law on the Territorial Sea in 1992 and its missile tests conducted in the area around Taiwan in 1996.

Fourth, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the socialist bloc, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to rebuild its legitimacy in terms of domestic governance. Up to that point, the foundation of the CCP's domestic legitimacy had been revolution. The CCP is a revolutionary party that gained legitimacy through successful leadership of the Chinese revolution and the creation of a socialist society. Despite the rejection of class struggle following the Cultural Revolution, revolution was nonetheless an important resource to maintain legitimacy. With the end of the Cold War and the virtual collapse of the socialist faction, however, the CCP government needed a new source of legitimacy.

The new sources of legitimacy envisaged were nationalism and the realization of wealth. Following the Tiananmen Square incident, the Chinese government took measures to curb economic activity, such as implementing a tight monetary policy, but after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour talks in early 1992 a policy shift occurred and the reform and opening up process started up again. At the same time, the Jiang Zemin administration promoted Patriotic Education to inspire nationalism, promote national unity, and legitimize CCP rule.

The fifth aspect concerns the lessons that the disintegration of the Soviet Union has offered China. In general, China blames the disintegration of the Soviet Union on the weakening of the regime, corruption, and the sluggish economy. Some also argue that the main reason for the

disintegration of the Soviet Union was the simultaneous promotion of economic and political reforms, which is why China has promoted economic reform but not political reform. However, speaking at the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection on February 27, 2013, Xi Jinping is said to have cited “negative and corrupt phenomena and injustice” as the reason behind the fall of the Soviet Communist Party. While this is little more than anti-corruption campaign rhetoric by Xi, it nevertheless indicates an awareness on the part of the CCP of the need to learn the “Lessons from the Soviet Union.”

India

— Swapna Kona Nayudu

Was India ever an ally of the Soviet Union? Which way one tackles that question holds key insights into what Soviet socialism meant for India before and after 1991.

There is a wide sense of what Soviet socialist diplomacy meant for the Indian economy – military cooperation, food aid, steel plants, trade delegations, and agricultural expertise made their way from Moscow to India from the mid-1950s right up to the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991.

There is also some understanding of the influence of Soviet socialist ideas on the Indian mixed economy model, often blamed for the Hindu rate of growth – a term referring to the pre-1991 low annual growth rate of the Indian economy. In that sense, India and Russia share the memorialization of 1991 as a year of radical change. India went through its own *glasnost* when a balance of payments crisis forced the Narasimha Rao government to undertake liberalization of the economy. Taking stock of the effect on India of the fall of the Soviet Union and with it, its socialist credo, a piece in the New York Times in 2009 claimed that in less than two decades, India had turned into “one of the world’s most unabashedly capitalist places.”

What does this say about Indian politics? It is uncontroversial that 1991 matters to India, mostly due to the collapse of its own economic scenery. But that historical moment in the Indian story acquired a further global dimension when it coincided with the end of the Cold War, an event so monumental that no sphere remained untouched by its force. This new era inaugurated the idea that India, famously non-aligned during the Cold War, would rid itself of this stale approach to world politics – no blocs meant no positions to not align with.

Yet, the myth and burnish of the relentless march of Soviet socialist thought in India was very much a Western Cold War construct; hence the idea that this was taken care of in 1991 was also a Western, primarily American, assessment. There is an attempt to eulogize 1991 as the defining moment when India became estranged from its socialist past, which was supposedly buried along with the ruins of the Soviet Union.

If 1991 offered, in the philosopher Raymond Aron’s phrase “the end of the ideological age,” that legacy acquired starkly different dimensions in India. Indeed, exactly a year later with the fall of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992, a deeply conservative ideological politics began a long march that culminated with the election of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in 2014, now in its second term, and the definitive rejection of and triumph over socialist policies, most remarkably visible in the dissolution of the Planning Commission and the end of the Soviet-style five-year plans.

If in the post-Cold War era, India has turned away from the welfare state and market socialism, then what has the fragmentation of international socialism meant for India's external affairs? This year also marks 50 years since the 1971 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between India and the Soviet Union, at the time considered an apostasy by New Delhi – a decisive farewell on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's part to her father and first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's non-aligned policy. It was the popular understanding that India had courted the Soviets over two decades – Khrushchev's post-Stalinist socialism had brought Nehru close to him, founding a bilateral relationship that found full form in the Indira-Brezhnev era. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 1962 India-China War, the road from New Delhi to Beijing often ran through Moscow, cementing the notion that India was loyal to the Soviet Union. In fact, these accounts obscure India's own early anti-communism, particularly among government officials. The West burdened India with an image that Nehru sought to overthrow but that has persisted.

Successive Indian governments have cultivated closer ties with the United States since 1991. In the age of Hindutva right-wing nationalism, this perceived Soviet-era closeness with Moscow has steered New Delhi even more firmly toward the U.S., not least due to the overlapping period when Modi and Trump were both in power, espousing similar political ideas. This shift is rooted in an endemic belief significant to Indian conservative politics – the belief that socialism in all its forms is anti-national because it weakens the nation-state. The conservative assessment of Indian socialism is even more critical of its perceived inefficacy because of Indian socialism's Gandhian allegiances, especially in the politics of early socialist leaders such as Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan, who along with Gandhi, are simultaneously appropriated and criticized by the ruling BJP.

This narrative of Indian socialism is held against the landscape of socialist internationalism, of which the Soviet Union was seen as the highest, most idealized form. It follows that the dissolution of that ideal is now seen as evidence that the socialist system simply cannot be successful in advancing national interests, or even nationalism of the kind that India needs.

The collapse of the Soviet Union irrevocably impaired the socialist idea in India. The effects came to the economy first, and Indian politics soon after, and have altered Indian public life ever since. Socialists, whether organized within political parties or as solidarity movements, have struggled to undo the effects of 1991 even as Indian socialism remains a palimpsest of Soviet influences. The consequences are most evident in the devolution of the idea of nationalism in India today. Without a socialist contender, the democratic debate has been reduced to one winning argument: the notion that the market will save the nation.

Japan

— James D. Brown

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 was a moment of great optimism for Japan. The glowering threat on Japan's northern frontier had lifted, and there were rays of hope that the countries' territorial dispute would soon be resolved. Yet, 30 years on, surprisingly little has changed between Tokyo and Moscow.

For a Japanese audience in 1991, perhaps even more memorable than the lowering of the Soviet flag above the Kremlin on December 25 was the visit by Mikhail Gorbachev to Tokyo in April. This was the first ever visit by a Soviet leader to Japan, and, as Gorbachev and his wife smiled in the spring sunshine, there was a strong feeling that the Cold War was truly over. This sense of historical transition was reinforced by the fact that it literally was a new era in Japan. Emperor Hirohito had died in 1989 and, with the enthronement of his son, Akihito, the Heisei era had been proclaimed, meaning “peace everywhere.”

This positive mood continued following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. When Boris Yeltsin, as president of the new Russian Federation, visited Tokyo in October 1993, the joint declaration spoke of “a new world political and economic order” and trumpeted that “Japan and the Russian Federation share the universal values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and the respect for fundamental human rights.”

The sides also conducted “serious negotiations on the issue of where Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai Islands belong.” This was a reference to the islands off the coast of Hokkaido – known as the South Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan – which had been seized by Soviet forces at the end of World War II, and whose unresolved status prevented the signing of a peace treaty.

This cordial language in the early 1990s was a welcome contrast to the chill of the Cold War, when Soviet leaders would not even acknowledge the existence of a territorial dispute with Japan. More importantly, the Soviet Union had been the leading threat to Japanese security. For this reason, during the Cold War, Japan had concentrated units of the Ground Self-Defense Forces (SDF) on Hokkaido in order to hold off a potential Soviet invasion. Japan was also kept busy monitoring Soviet aircraft and submarines, as well as tracking Soviet spies within the country.

There was also the recognition of Japan’s function as a power-projection hub for U.S. forces in East Asia. This was famously articulated by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, who urged the United States in 1983 to use Japan as “an unsinkable aircraft carrier” to combat the Soviet Backfire bomber. Moscow’s response was to threaten Japan with a nuclear attack “more serious than the one that befell it 37 years ago.”

With the Soviet Union now buried, all of this was supposed to become a thing of the past. Friendship was supposed to replace suspicion, trade and investment was supposed to flourish, and the border was supposed to be transformed from a zone of confrontation to one of cooperation. In reality, after 30 years, little of this has been achieved.

True, Russia is no longer the main security threat to Japan; both China and North Korea are now listed ahead of Russia in Japan’s annual defense white paper. For this reason, in 2010, Japan reoriented SDF deployments away from the north and toward the southwest.

Yet, Russia still presents a serious security challenge. Russian military forces in the vicinity of Japan continue to be modernized. A recent example is Moscow’s announcement in 2020 of the full deployment of the S-300 surface-to-air missile system to the disputed islands. Russia also regularly sends its strategic bombers on training runs toward Japan. In response, Japan’s Air Self-Defense Force scrambled its fighter jets 258 times in fiscal 2020. Only China provoked more.

An added concern is tighter military cooperation between Russia and China. In July 2019, Russian and Chinese strategic bombers conducted their first joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan. This included an incursion by a Russian aircraft into Japanese-claimed airspace over Takeshima. Additionally, in October 2021, five warships apiece from the Russian and Chinese navies conducted an unprecedented joint circuit around the Japanese archipelago. For Japan, this is a worse situation than during the Soviet era, since at least then Moscow and Beijing were embroiled in their own Cold War.

As for the territorial dispute, it is now further from resolution than it was three decades ago. This owes much to the amendment of the Russian constitution in 2020 to add the line that “Actions ... directed towards the alienation of part of the territory of the Russian Federation, and also calls for such actions, are not allowed.” Rather than the anticipated joint projects, development of the contested islands is also proceeding under Russia’s exclusive jurisdiction.

The post-Cold War era did bring some economic progress, not least Japanese investment in major energy projects on Sakhalin. However, overall, Japan-Russia economic cooperation remained disappointing, even before the pandemic. In 2018, bilateral trade turnover constituted \$23.1 billion, a mere 27 percent of the figure between Japan and South Korea, whose economy is only slightly larger than that of Russia.

Lastly, the hoped-for friendship that was spoken of in 1991 has not been achieved. In fact, according to a Japanese Cabinet Office survey in 2020, 85.7 percent of Japanese do not feel affection for Russia, a figure notably higher than at the beginning of the 1990s.

In short, while the Soviet Union ended, the contours of Japanese thinking about Moscow did not. It remains a relationship defined by the territorial dispute and, above all, by the geopolitical divide between Russia and the United States. So long as Japan remains the leading U.S. ally in Asia and relations between Washington and Moscow remain frayed, Japan-Russia relations will struggle to throw off the shackles of the past.

It may be 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but, across the Japan-Russia frontier, the political scenery looks dreadfully familiar.

Koreas

— Se Young Jang

On October 26, former President of South Korea Roh Tae-woo died at the age of 88. Roh’s time in power, from 1988 to early 1993, coincided with a critical moment in world history when the communist bloc in Europe, including the Soviet Union, faced drastic winds of change.

Roh is a controversial figure in Korean history. First of all, he participated in a 1979 military coup led by his friend, Chun Doo-hwan, who died less than a month after Roh this year. Chun became president in 1981 after brutally squashing democratic protests in Gwangju and killing innocent civilians. Roh held key positions under Chun’s dictatorship and became a presidential candidate of Chun’s ruling party.

Unlike his predecessor, however, Roh was democratically selected by South Koreans in a direct election held soon after a nation-wide democratic uprising in 1987. Roh’s dual identity – a democratically elected president but also a former army general who was an active member of

both the 1979 coup and its subsequent dictatorial regime – makes it somewhat difficult to objectively assess his achievements as president among his many other wrongdoings.

One of the undervalued achievements of Roh's presidency, however, was the establishment of South Korea's *Nordpolitik* (Northern Policy), which was developed against the backdrop of changing dynamics between East and West. His Northern Policy, a conciliatory approach to communist countries, was an epoch-making turning point in South Korea's diplomatic history, which had been deeply intertwined with the development of East-West confrontations since the Korean War.

The Korean War was an exemplary case of hot war during the Cold War era. The war consolidated the division of Korea – between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – which had been separately occupied by the United States and the Soviet Union soon after the surrender of Japan, which had colonized the peninsula for 35 years. The two Koreas fought each other with the strong support of their allies, which naturally resulted in adversarial relations with the other Korea's backers. In the eyes of South Korea, the Soviet Union was the mastermind behind the communist North, while Moscow viewed the South as an American imperialist colony.

The possibility for some changes in bilateral relations between Moscow and Seoul emerged with the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. His pragmatic and diplomatic approach to international relations led the Soviet Union to strengthen its relations with East Asia. As part of that process, Moscow started to reevaluate South Korea's position and potential power in the region.

At the same time, South Korea pursued a forward-looking policy instead of staying frozen in a Cold War mentality. In his inauguration speech in February 1988, Roh said, "Improving relations with countries of different ideologies and systems will contribute to security, peace and co-prosperity in East Asia," signaling his departure from South Korea's confrontational policy toward communist and socialist countries during the Cold War.

Roh's July 7 Declaration that same year demonstrated his serious intention to normalize South Korea's relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, which set the basic direction for Seoul's Northern Policy. Such a bold switch of position in Seoul was well received by Moscow, and the new rapprochement was further boosted by the latter's participation in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, after its boycott of the previous Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. These developments culminated in a summit between Roh and Gorbachev in August 1990.

The Soviet Union and South Korea established full diplomatic relations in September 1990, which enabled the simultaneous membership of both Koreas to the United Nations in the following year. The Soviet Union was officially dissolved in December 1991; however, bilateral relations between Moscow and Seoul have not fundamentally changed since the breakthrough made under Roh, despite some ups and downs from time to time.

Today, the new diplomatic space created by Roh's Northern Policy has been built upon, strengthened, and diversified into the New Northern Policy of the current South Korean administration under President Moon Jae-in.

One might argue that Roh's Northern Policy simply represented Seoul's passive acceptance of the change of world order, which was steered by the two great powers, Washington and Moscow. However, recently declassified documents from South Korea's Foreign Ministry reveal

that Washington was concerned about the possibility that South Korea's rapprochement toward the Soviet Union and China would lead to a weakening of Seoul's commitment to ROK-U.S. relations. Moscow, on its part, had to deal with anger and resistance from Pyongyang. The normalization of relations between the USSR and South Korea in 1990 was a result of active diplomatic efforts on both sides to prepare for a new post-Cold War era.

The end of the Cold War unfolded over several years, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and ending with the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991. During that process, South Korea proactively changed its position toward communist countries and successfully improved its relations with the Soviet Union and others. The new diplomatic space created by Roh's Northern Policy also helped Seoul revise its confrontational policy toward North Korea. However, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program complicated inter-Korean relations, and as a result the Korean Peninsula is arguably the only place in the world where the Cold War continues today.

Vietnam

— Khang Vu

Considering the long history and great significance of Hanoi-Moscow ties, no analysis on Vietnam's foreign relations can afford to ignore the impact of Russia and the former Soviet Union. While the contemporary spotlight is largely on Beijing and Washington, Moscow is the most important factor in defining Hanoi's post-Cold War foreign policy, and it will continue to shape how Vietnam deals with the major powers as the China-U.S. rivalry intensifies.

As single-party states led by hegemonic communist parties, the Soviet Union and Vietnam adopted similar criteria when it comes to choosing allies: the prospective ally must share both security interests and ideological values. Security interests ensure the survival and benefits of the state in international politics, while ideological values guarantee the survival and dominance of the communist party in domestic politics. Consequently, the Soviet and Vietnamese party-states were military allies from 1965 to 1991 for two major reasons. They not only shared common security interests in opposing the United States and China, but also held similar beliefs in socialist internationalism.

Indeed, the Soviet Union-Vietnam 1978 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation put socialist fraternalism at the core of a mutual commitment to assist one another in case of any threat. Soviet security and economic assistance gave Vietnam much needed support when it invaded Cambodia in late 1978 to end the genocidal Pol Pot regime and when Hanoi had to maintain a large military presence along the China-Vietnam border to prepare for and deter Chinese invasions from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. The alliance with the Soviet Union became a bedrock on which Vietnam based its foreign policy in this period.

However, the cohesion of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance largely depended on the strength of the Soviet economy, because the Vietnamese economy could not support high military costs and domestic production simultaneously. As a result, the alliance began to weaken in the mid-1980s as the Soviet Union entered a state of economic stagnation. To revitalize the economy, General Secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev launched a series of domestic reforms and improved relations with China to cut defense spending under the Vladivostok initiative. With

Vietnam seen as more of a liability than an asset, costing Moscow more than \$1 billion a year, the Soviet Union thus encouraged Hanoi to wind down military activities in Cambodia to save resources and remove one of the three obstacles to the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations as well as China-Vietnam relations.

When China attacked Vietnam-controlled Johnson South Reef in March 1988, the Soviet Union turned a blind eye even though its navy was stationed in Cam Ranh Bay because Moscow did not want to harm the ongoing Sino-Soviet normalization process. This lack of support disappointed Hanoi, for it went against Moscow's earlier assurance that it would not let developing relations with China come at Vietnam's expenses. Later that year, Vietnam was alarmed that the Soviet Union proposed to end its military presence in Cam Ranh Bay in exchange for U.S. withdrawal from its Clark and Subic bases in the Philippines. The growing prospect of Soviet abandonment eventually forced Vietnam to begin its own normalization talks with China starting in 1989 on the latter's terms. In 1991, the Soviet Union withdrew more than 6,000 experts from Vietnam and significantly reduced the size of its forces in Cam Ranh Bay.

In addition to diminishing Soviet material support, Vietnam was also upset over the Tiananmen Square Incident and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Within the Politburo, talks of protecting communism from Western imperialism clashed with ideas of reform ("doi moi") laid out at the 1986 National Congress of the Communist Party. Seeing that the Soviet Union was no longer able to lead the international communist movement, Vietnamese top leaders had a major debate over whether China was an expansionist power or a fellow communist regime. It was a difficult debate, given that China attacked Vietnamese troops on the Johnson South Reef a year prior. Vietnam allegedly supported the failed August coup by Soviet communist hardliners against Gorbachev, and by the end of 1991, many were shocked and felt a sense of betrayal by the transformation occurring within the Soviet Union. Vietnam now saw Gorbachev as a "traitor to the socialist cause."

Hanoi thus decided to forge a new Vietnam-China relationship based on ideological solidarity while downplaying aspects of Chinese expansionism with a belief that Beijing would be able to help protect the remaining socialist states in the face of a growing Western threat. However, the new relationship lacked the security interest component necessary to constitute an alliance, which made Vietnam and China into "comrades but not allies" since 1991. Such comradeship, however, has encouraged China to weaken Hanoi's ties with the United States in the context of growing China-Vietnam territorial tension in the South China Sea by stressing ideological differences in the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. Beijing seeks to remind Hanoi that the United States is an ideological enemy with a history of stoking color revolutions. If Hanoi wants to preserve its political stability and regime security, it should not trust the anti-communist United States.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation began to revise Moscow's alliance relationship with Vietnam. President Boris Yeltsin embraced liberal ideas as opposed to communist ideology, and Russian elites felt little ideological connection with Vietnam. In turn, Hanoi did not trust the new liberal Russian government. The Russian naval presence in Cam Ranh Bay was more symbolic than strategic compared to the 1980s, as Moscow was more occupied with solving its domestic problems than maintaining a far-flung military presence. In 1992, a Russian spokesman said that the Russia-Vietnam relationship remained friendly, but it had been "depoliticized and de-ideologized."

Consequently, Russia and Vietnam put a formal end to their alliance by terminating the 1978 treaty and replacing it with the new Treaty on the Basic Principles of the Vietnam-Russia Relationship in 1994. References to “socialist internationalism” and “Marxism-Leninism” were removed to make way for a normal state-to-state relationship based on “mutual benefits.” Hanoi and Moscow got rid of the military assistance clause that characterized a military alliance, too. Both sides pledged to refrain from signing treaties with other countries or undertaking actions that would hurt the interests of the other side in the 1994 treaty, which essentially functions as a neutrality pact. Interestingly, around the same time, Russia also ended its alliance relationship with North Korea. In 2000, Russia and North Korea signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation along the lines of the 1994 Vietnam-Russia treaty to suit the post-Cold War context.

The 1994 Vietnam-Russia treaty complements Hanoi’s post-Cold War policy of non-alignment and provides an important third option amid the China-U.S. rivalry. Russia does not have major territorial conflicts with Vietnam, unlike China, and it does not pose an ideological threat to Vietnam’s regime security, unlike the United States. This explains why Russia has long been Vietnam’s most trusted arms supplier and Hanoi is willing to grant it special access to Cam Ranh Bay, even at the risk of triggering U.S. anger.

Nevertheless, contemporary Russia-Vietnam relations are unlikely to reach the level of cohesion seen during the Cold War. As Russia and China converge to challenge U.S. primacy and Russia-U.S. relations remain sour, Vietnam’s need for closer security relations with the United States may damage the potential of Russia-Vietnam relations. A case in point is the U.S. Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which will punish Vietnam for its defense cooperation with the Russian defense and intelligence sector. Hanoi will have to carefully balance between Russian and U.S. arms suppliers when it comes to buying weapons to check Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea.

Moscow has been and will continue to be one of the main actors shaping Hanoi’s foreign policy. Soviet security and ideological support significantly drove Hanoi’s hostile policies toward China in the 1970s and ‘80s. In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet state deprived Hanoi of a senior ally and pushed it toward neutrality and the adoption of a multivector foreign policy. Indeed, Vietnam’s current neutral “cooperation and struggle” strategy reflects its seven-decade-old alliance policies. Except for Laos, no countries can satisfy both Hanoi’s security interests and ideological values enough for it to wholeheartedly cooperate as a full-fledged ally. Russia’s stance on the South China Sea dispute will determine whether Vietnam will cooperate with or struggle against it more in the future.

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