

Vietnam's Approach to China: Bamboo Diplomacy With Neo-tributary Characteristics

Vietnam Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong's recent visit to Beijing was meant to assure China, but didn't signal any change in Hanoi's basic approach toward its northern neighbor.

By Alexander L. Vuving

At the annual conference to set guidance for Vietnam's diplomats last December, Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) chief Nguyen Phu Trong, the country's top leader, likened the ideal diplomacy for Vietnam to bamboo. Bamboo is a slender plant, thus implying weakness, but it is far from weak – it is more resilient than many other plants in the face of strong winds. Using bamboo as a metaphor, Trong advocated for a foreign policy that combines flexibility in tactics and firmness in principles, thus resulting in resilience.

The idea of “bamboo diplomacy” has been circulated in Vietnam for decades; indeed, it was the usual way Vietnamese characterized the external conduct of Thailand, not Vietnam. Many Vietnamese dismissed bamboo diplomacy for its lack of consistency. Others, however, complained that Vietnam did not act like bamboo, although it should.

But Trong's bamboo diplomacy is different from Thailand's in important aspects. The main difference is that it has “regime stickiness” – Vietnam's foreign policy is of the Communist Party, by the Communist Party, and for the Communist Party. Transcending regime stickiness, there is also in the Vietnamese bamboo what Carl Thayer has called the “tyranny of geography.” More than any other Southeast Asian country, Vietnam both benefited and suffered enormously from its proximity to China.

For centuries, diplomacy between China and Vietnam has been conducted under the “tributary system” in either its classical or its neo-tributary variant. The system consists of an exchange of both material and symbolic gifts between the rulers of the two countries that ritualizes the imbalance of power between them and reminds them of their places as well as their duties in the hierarchical relationship. Rituals are essential to this exchange, which reflects the asymmetry of power while helping to stabilize it.

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy with neo-tributary characteristics was on full display when Trong visited Beijing from October 30 to November 1. The material gifts exchanged were hard to see; they will come later when the agreements made during this visit are materialized. But the symbolic gifts were visible and contributed profoundly to the visit.

The most important symbolic gift from Vietnam was the rule-breaking nature of Trong's visit. The rule it broke is that the first foreign trip of a VCP chief after his election or re-election is usually to Laos, not to China. Thus, after his election as VCP general secretary in 1997, Le Kha Phieu visited Laos in 1998 before traveling to China in 1999. Replacing Phieu at the Ninth VCP Congress in April 2001, Nong Duc Manh went to China in November after visiting Laos in July. Succeeding Manh at the 11th VCP Congress in January 2011, Trong also traveled to Laos in June before going to China in October. Re-elected at the 12th VCP Congress in January 2016,

he visited Laos in November before traveling to China in January 2017. But Trong's visit to China this month is his first foreign trip after the 13th VCP Congress in early 2021. As a symbolic gift, it broke an important, albeit informal, rule that had been carefully observed for decades.

True to the way the tributary system works, the gifts from Vietnam were met with lavish gifts from China. Trong was the first foreign leader to meet Xi Jinping after Xi was re-elected as China's supreme leader at the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. He was placed even ahead of Shehbaz Sharif, the prime minister of Pakistan, China's "all-weather ally," who would see Xi two days later. Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany, the European Union's leading power, was granted the diminutive fourth place, meeting Xi two days after Sharif and one day after President Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania, China's newest "comprehensive strategic cooperative partner." Xi also awarded Trong the Friendship Medal, China's highest order of honor for foreigners, whose first recipient was Russian President Vladimir Putin.

These rituals were part of China's strategy to get Vietnam closer to its side at the expense of U.S.-Vietnam relations. Although China has pursued this objective for decades, it has become more important than ever as China-U.S. rivalry has intensified. Moreover, Vietnam has a heightened value in this rivalry due to its location along the contest's central frontline, which runs through the East China Sea and the South China Sea. With Japan, Taiwan, Australia, and India definitively closer to the United States, while Russia, North Korea, Cambodia, and Pakistan are solidly in China's camp, Vietnam – alongside Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea – stands out as a major "swing state" in this superpower contest.

The diplomatic battle for Vietnam between the two great powers has intensified in keeping with the growth of their rivalry. As the Biden administration renewed a decade-long U.S. offer to raise U.S.-Vietnam relations to a "strategic partnership," China stepped in and asked Vietnam to join its "strategic community with a shared future."

What's remarkable is that China's offer was backed by a threat. In April this year, when Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son called his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi by phone to inform the Chinese of Vietnam's position on the Russia-Ukraine war, Wang took advantage of the opportunity to warn that "We can't let... the tragedy of Ukraine be repeated around us." To some, this was a warning that of potential consequences if Hanoi did not side with Beijing against Washington. The threat was heeded and Trong's rule-breaking trip to China was a response to it.

The trip broke a rule but did not break a path; in this sense, it shows how resilient the Vietnamese "bamboo" is. Although Xi subtly nudged Trong to endorse his signature "community with a shared future" by saying that China "is also ready to work with ASEAN to [...] actively promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind," this phrase failed to appear in their Joint Statement.

Vietnam also said no, bamboo-style, to the Global Security Initiative (GSI), Xi's latest scheme for international security in an era of heightened great power rivalry. According to the Joint Statement, "Vietnam positively notes China's Global Security Initiative on the basis of the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter" – but made no commitment to take part in it. To illustrate how Vietnam "notes" the GSI in other contexts, in April a VCP mouthpiece published an article translated from Nikkei Asia that describes the GSI in a negative light, as a bait to lure other countries into a Chinese trap and a security architecture that excludes the United States.

The Joint Statement announced that Vietnam “supports and stands ready to participate in the Global Development Initiative [GDI] in appropriate contents and ways.” The conditions attached suggest that in Vietnam the GDI will share the fate of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Vietnam pays lip service to the BRI as a way of deference to Beijing, but public scrutiny and the fear of “debt traps” prevent Vietnam from substantially participating in it. Nearly all major infrastructure projects in Vietnam that use China’s money date from before 2016. Vietnam is also one of only four Asian countries that exclude China’s Huawei from their 5G networks, the other three being Japan, Taiwan, and India.

Perhaps in return for Vietnam’s participation in the GDI, China endorsed, for the first time in a China-Vietnam Joint Statement, the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Joint Statement declared that China and Vietnam “agree to [...] soon reach a substantive and effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”

But just as Vietnam pays lip service to the BRI and now the GDI, China’s endorsement of the UNCLOS is more rhetorical than real. There is no sign that China will budge from its “nine-dash line” claims, which have been dismissed by an international tribunal as a violation of UNCLOS. In fact, a similar-sounding Joint Statement issued during Xi’s visit to Vietnam in November 2017 did not prevent Beijing from harassing and disrupting Vietnam’s drilling for oil and gas in the South China Sea, forcing Hanoi to scrap major projects and pay an estimated \$1 billion in contract breakage fees.

Despite the rituals and rhetoric of Trong’s visit, Vietnam is not veering significantly from the general direction of its policy toward China since 2014, when China parked the giant HYSY-981 oil rig inside Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone and sparked the worst crisis in bilateral relations since their normalization in 1991. At best, the visit marks a truce before the next struggle between Beijing and Hanoi.

Vietnam has decided that it is in its best interest not to side with either China or the United States. As a result, it is walking a tightrope between the superpowers. But as their rivalry gets more intense, Vietnam’s tightrope will get thinner. **There will likely be a time when the tightrope becomes too thin to walk.**

GUEST AUTHOR

Alexander L. Vuving

Dr. Alexander L. Vuving is a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.