

ASIA SENTINEL

8-11-22

China-Vietnam in warm, new communist embrace

Vietnamese leader Trong's visit to Beijing put cooperation ahead of conflict and sent a clear signal to democracy-promoting US

By RICHARD JAVAD HEYDARIAN

Shortly after Chinese President Xi Jinping secured a historic third term in office, Vietnam's Communist Party chief Nguyen Phu Trong became the first foreign leader to visit Beijing. Last year, Trong himself secured his own third term as Vietnam's top party leader. His visit to China was his first foreign trip after suffering a stroke in 2019.

Despite the bitter history and festering maritime disputes between the two Asian neighbors, the meeting seemed genuinely warm and convivial. The two communist leaders vowed to upgrade their "special bond" as "comrades and brothers" to a new level, signing as many as 13 major agreements covering key aspects of their bilateral relations.

The two sides agreed to "properly manage" their maritime spats in the South China Sea, boost bilateral trade and investment, and jointly battle terrorism as well as "color revolutions", referring to Western-backed democratic revolts in authoritarian regimes.

For the first time in almost a decade, the joint statement highlighted shared concerns over new and evolving challenges to their communist political systems.

Amid growing uncertainties over its strategic relations with a heavily-sanctioned Russia and the increasingly ideological turn in America's foreign policy, Vietnam is quietly doubling down on its charm offensive vis-à-vis its fellow communist regime and historical adversary to the north. By all indications, concerns over regime stability and self-preservation are increasingly shaping Hanoi's strategic engagement with Beijing.

Traditionally, Vietnam has followed a policy of dynamic neutrality vis-à-vis major powers. Its traumatic experience during the Cold War, when Hanoi was squeezed by competing superpowers, convinced the Southeast Asian country to avoid reliance on external forces in favor of optimal strategic autonomy.

The country's constitution commits the ruling party to a so-called "Three Nos" national security doctrine, namely (i) no military alliance with any foreign power; (ii) no foreign military bases on its soil; and (iii) no siding with one superpower against the other.

To enhance its strategic autonomy, Vietnam has adopted a "multi-vector" foreign policy, thus actively pursuing robust relations with multiple powers simultaneously.

As Vietnam expert Carlyle Thayer explains, Hanoi has relied on a "series of agreements that stress comprehensive cooperation through party-to-party, state-to-state and military-to-military ties" to maintain, at the very least, a state of cold peace with China.

In short, Hanoi has sought to "enmesh China in a web of bilateral ties in order to make China's behavior more predictable."

Meanwhile, Vietnam has adopted a “porcupine strategy” by rapidly upgrading its defensive capabilities via a wide network of suppliers, most prominently Russia. In fact, Vietnam alone is responsible for more than half of Russia’s total defense exports, amounting to more than US\$10 billion, to the entire region in the past two decades.

From modern fighter jets to kilo-class submarines, Russia has been the primary supplier of the Vietnamese armed forces. In 2016, Vietnam became the world’s eighth-largest arms importer, largely thanks to its purchase of Russian weaponry.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, has hit Hanoi’s relations with Moscow. Although maintaining neutrality on the conflict, Vietnam hasn’t been able to escape the adverse impact of Western sanctions on Russia. Financial sanctions have even complicated normal trade and investment transactions between Hanoi and Moscow.

The Pentagon’s decision to double down on implementation of the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) has forced neighboring Indonesia and the Philippines to cancel big-ticket arms deals with Russia. Meanwhile, the disastrous military campaign against NATO-backed Ukraine has exposed the vulnerabilities of Soviet-originated military hardware.

Moreover, Russia’s growing dependence on China has also undermined its reliability as a long-term partner for Vietnam, which is seeking to enhance its minimum deterrence capabilities against its northern neighbor, including in the South China Sea.

Growing uncertainties over Russo-Vietnamese relations, meanwhile, have coincided with a more ideological turn in American foreign policy. Under the Biden administration, Washington has made “democracy promotion” a centerpiece of its foreign policy.

Earlier this year, Biden underscored the need for bolstering American democracy at home amid “a battle for the soul of this nation” as well as pushing back against authoritarian regimes overseas.

Recently, the Biden administration announced an aid package to help African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo with “preparations for next year’s free, fair and on-time elections”

The newly-released National Security Strategy has also emphasized the need for reinforcing democracies as a key pillar of American foreign policy. The White House is expected to host a second Summit for Democracy to underscore America’s commitment to a global campaign of democracy promotion.

Vietnam clearly views Biden’s democracy promotion agenda with suspicion. Last year, Vietnam’s foreign ministry implicitly criticized the country’s exclusion from the first Summit for Democracy in Washington, DC.

“[Vietnam has] a Socialist democracy in tandem with upholding people’s rights to democracy in all aspects of their social life,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang said in a press briefing last year.

“It offers a means for the people to exercise their rights to freedom and equality, and identifies the people as the one who can exercise this power,” she added in a thinly-veiled criticism of the Biden administration’s exclusion of communist Vietnam from the global summit. China and Russia were also uninvited to the event.

Amid uncertainties over Vietnam's relations with both Moscow and Beijing, Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping is emerging as a dominant geopolitical reality for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, Vietnam is hedging its bets by cultivating optimal, personal ties with Xi.

During their meeting, Trong and Xi agreed that it was "crucial to properly manage differences and maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea", with both sides vowing to "refrain from taking actions that complicate the situation and aggravate disputes".

They also promised to "actively negotiate transitional and temporary solutions that do not impact their respective positions and propositions" with a long-term goal of attaining "basic permanent solutions" to the maritime and territorial disputes.

Accordingly, both sides agreed to "carry out maritime cooperation in low-sensitive areas", with a focus on environmental and fisheries agreements while accelerating long-stalled negotiations over a Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea.

Crucially, the two sides agreed that any final COC will have to be "in line with international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" rather than China's doctrine of "historic rights", which was rejected by an arbitral tribunal at The Hague in 2016 in a case pitting the Philippines versus China.

China and Vietnam also agreed to enhance border trade and investments, which has proven crucial to post-pandemic economic recovery for both communist regimes. In recent years, China's "zero-Covid" policy has heavily disrupted cross-border supply chains, which are crucial to Vietnam's burgeoning export industry.

Around half of Vietnam's textile industry's raw materials imports come from China; the figure for its rubber industry is as high as 70%. Meanwhile, Chinese contractors also constitute a major source of industrial investments in Vietnam, which is heavily embedded in the larger Pearl River Delta supply chain network.

Concerns over regime survival, however, seem to be driving the deepening Sino-Vietnamese rapprochement. For the first time in recent memory, both communist regimes have explicitly highlighted their shared ideological concerns and political outlook in a joint declaration.

Vietnamese and Chinese communist youths wave flags to welcome Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong at a meeting in Hanoi on November 6, 2015. Photo: AFP / Na Son Nguyen

"The regional and global situations are undergoing rapid, complex and unpredictable changes...multilateralism, economic globalization, and world peace and development are facing severe challenges," the two communist regimes said in their unusually lengthy joint statement.

Accordingly, the two communist regimes vowed to deepen cooperation in "the fight against terrorism, 'peaceful evolution', 'color revolution' and the politicization of human rights issues", a thinly-veiled criticism at the West's pro-democracy global agenda.

For his part, Xi warned both nations against "a very complicated international environment and severe risks and challenges", while calling on his communist counterpart to resist any external interference in their special relationship.

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