

DIPLOMAT

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Behind Vietnam's COVID-19 Response, Deep Distrust of China

Despite public health cooperation, analysts say the Vietnamese Communist Party has little trust in the word of its Chinese counterparts.

By Bac Pham and Bennett Murray

On February 1, Vietnam made what, at the time, was a drastic decision. All flights from China, Hong Kong, and Macau were ordered cancelled over concerns about what would later be named COVID-19. Three days before, the decision had been made to cease issuing tourist visas for the same three passports. Coming just one day after the Trump administration announced tightening restrictions on travel from China, Vietnam was among the first to halt flights entirely — to China's chagrin. It began shutting its 1,300-kilometer border with its largest trading partner the same day.

Although its case numbers were still only in the single digits, Vietnam did not stop there. Schools were set to reopen on February 3 after the week-long Lunar New Year holiday — the first new school week since the virus was first detected in Vietnam on January 23. But classes nationwide were scrapped, despite only eight diagnosed cases at the time in a country of 95 million. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc called the fight against COVID-19 the “Spring General Offensive of 2020,” a reference to the name of North Vietnam's final push against Saigon in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War.

By the middle of April, community spread had apparently stopped. As of May 14, Vietnam has notched 29 consecutive days without a locally transmitted case. The country has reported a total of 288 cases of COVID-19, with no deaths.

While Vietnam's success has been attributed to a multitude of factors — prompt action, bitter lessons learned from SARS, and a recent history of mass mobilization — those who are well acquainted with the Vietnamese Communist Party point to a ruling political organization that intimately understands, and deeply mistrusts, its brethren to the north.

“I don't think [the Chinese] could convince anyone in Vietnam, even the Communist Party members,” said Nguyen Quang A, a retired businessman in Hanoi and well-known human rights activist. Once a loyal Party member and distinguished banker — he co-founded what would become Vietnam's largest private bank in 1993 — Quang A said that it is all but certain that the country's leaders were not reassured by early, optimistic reports from China doubting the virus' pandemic potential.

With both parties operating similar internal structures in their respective states, which regularly hold interparty exchanges and events with each other, Quang A said Vietnamese officials understand well the thinking behind announcements and policy decisions coming out of Beijing.

“The Vietnamese communists know them very well; they have had a lot of lessons from their so-called friends in the Chinese Communist Party,” he said.

Close Ideological Neighbors, Bitter Geopolitical Rivals

As the only other single-party communist state with a large, market-oriented economy, Vietnam is China's closest ideological neighbor. But following Vietnam's reunification in 1975, Hanoi found itself in the Soviet bloc at a time when China and the United States were partnering against the Kremlin in the latter years of the Cold War. After repelling a short but bloody Chinese invasion in 1979, Vietnam spent the 1980s fighting China's Khmer Rouge proxies in Cambodia amidst occasional skirmishes with China on both land and at sea.

Relations were only normalized in 1991. Vietnam today considers China its biggest existential threat as the two countries lock horns over Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea. The popular consensus in Vietnam is that China has been Vietnam's enemy for millennia.

"I think both the government and the people of Vietnam have always well understood China and the Chinese government and thus, they never trusted what Chinese leaders had said regarding the pandemic," said Nguyen Tien Lap, a senior partner at the NHQuang & Associates law firm in Hanoi and a former Party member.

"The Vietnamese Party leaders understand well that they should be independent from China as far as the protection of the Vietnamese people is concerned," he added.

Balazs Szalontai, an expert on communist states currently on the faculty of Korea University's North Korean studies department, said Vietnam's early border closure and flight suspensions almost certainly irked China, which had at the time broadly opposed such measures before later invoking them as the pandemic worsened worldwide.

"Judging from China's later public complaints, the Chinese authorities resented the travel restrictions that Vietnam imposed on China in late January, and they presumably prodded Hanoi to lift them as soon as possible," said Szalontai, citing an April 11 article from the state-controlled Global Times newspaper that accused Vietnam of ordering a "blockade" against China in the early days of the pandemic "consistent with the U.S. moves."

According to the U.S.-based cybersecurity company FireEye, Vietnamese intelligence agents may have even launched cyberattacks against China in the early days of the pandemic to glean information about the virus. APT32, as the cybersecurity firm has dubbed a threat group identified by FireEye as aligned with Vietnamese state interests, launched an attack on China's Ministry of Emergency Management on January 6. It also evidently attacked Wuhan's provincial government.

While Hanoi denies the cyberattacks and sources in Vietnam were unwilling to discuss the plausibility of a Vietnamese intelligence operation in-depth, Carl Thayer, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales and specialist on Vietnamese defense issues, said the alleged attacks are well within the capabilities of the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense's Cyber Command.

"It is inconceivable that the cyber command has not developed some offensive capabilities that would enable it to hack Chinese government computers," said Thayer, adding that Vietnam also has more traditional ways of conducting espionage in China.

"There is no reason why Vietnam could not have picked up on this as well through human intelligence and monitoring of the Chinese-language internet," said Thayer.

Moving Forward

Vietnam has not followed the footsteps of U.S. President Donald Trump or French President Emmanuel Macron in criticizing China's handling of the virus. The message instead is focused on Vietnam's strengths, which drew upon strict public health measures and a nationwide mobilization to quash the threat.

"Generally, Vietnamese respond well to national calls for cooperation if they are sufficiently convinced that there is a national crisis," explained David Koh, a former senior fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore who now runs his own consultancy.

He added that the Vietnamese government has preferred to stick to the positive points.

"Vietnam was not the only country that might have distrusted China's figures, although Vietnam did not publicly say anything about it," said Koh.

Thayer pointed out that both China and Vietnam have cooperated during the pandemic in the face of a common enemy. In addition to multiple cross-border meetings among public health officials, China and Vietnam have also helped each other materially.

"Vietnam's border guards have donated face masks to their Chinese counterparts. China has offered to assist Vietnam by sending medical specialists," said Thayer.

But even in the midst of Vietnam's nationwide lockdown in April, the focus of the bilateral relationship switched back to geopolitical rivalry in the South China Sea.

On April 3, Vietnam accused the Chinese Coast Guard of deliberately sinking a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the contested Paracel Islands. China retorted that the Vietnamese boat had rammed the coast guard vessel. Later that month, China named around 80 features in disputed waters in the South China Sea, including submerged banks, to Vietnam's ire, and established two new government districts in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Newspapers in both countries have accused the other side of using COVID-19 as a distraction to further their maritime claims.

"The calculations between Vietnam and China are very complicated," said Le Dang Doanh, a retired economic adviser to five Vietnamese prime ministers.

"On one hand, the two sides enjoy a very intense economic exchange, and on the other hand, during the pandemic, Chinese marine patrols have intensified their presence in the East Sea," he added, using the Vietnamese term for the South China Sea.

Thayer said Vietnam's attitude toward China amid both the pandemic and the South China Sea flareup is typical of the country's philosophy of "cooperation and struggle" toward world powers.

"Vietnam 'cooperates' with China to contain the coronavirus because of the impact this pandemic could have on Vietnam's economy and society and because Vietnam is ASEAN Chair and COVID-19 requires a regional response," he said, adding that such cooperation had no bearing on geopolitics in the South China Sea.

"Vietnam 'struggles' against China on this issue," said Thayer.

The Authors

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