

## The Gulf Between Chinese and Vietnamese Alliance Policies

**Despite some similarities, it would be highly misleading to suggest that China and Vietnam have similar alliance policies.**

By Ngo Di Lan

Alliance policy in a non-U.S. context is a markedly understudied topic in international relations. We should therefore welcome Khang Vu's recent article in *The Diplomat* on the similarity between Chinese and Vietnamese alliance policies, which could revive an important topic and spark fruitful debates within both policy and academic circles.

This is not to say that I agree with his conclusion. While Vietnam and China share the same general foreign policy orientation because they are ideologically and culturally close, it would be highly misleading to suggest that they have similar alliance policies. In fact, it rarely makes sense to compare the alliance policy of a small state to that of a great power.

One of Khang's key claims is that "China and Vietnam, as single-party communist states, only ally with states that share both their national security interests and ideological values." Whether this is true or not very much depends on how we define the concept of an "alliance," which can take various forms and is often used in highly inconsistent ways by different analysts.

Khang himself did not explicitly define what he means by alliance but a close reading of his article suggests that the term alliance is used in a formal sense, therefore implying that two states are allied only when their alliance relationship is bound by a formal treaty. This, however, is problematic for several reasons.

First, not all "alliance treaties" are equal. States are usually considered allies when at least one member formally pledges military assistance to its partner(s), which often includes a clear promise to mutually defend each other in the event of war. Consequently, treaties that vaguely specify some form of cooperation when one of the contracting parties comes under attack should not be put in the same category as those that include an unequivocal defense guarantee.

China's defense treaty with North Korea clearly qualifies as a formal alliance because Article II clearly stipulates that the contracting parties should immediately render military aid to the side subjected to an armed attack. The language of Vietnam's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with Laos, however, is much more flexible and open to interpretation. Furthermore, it does not contain any form of ironclad security guarantee, mutual or unilateral. The only "true alliance" that Vietnam has ever entered into is the one with the Soviet Union in 1978. Article 6 of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance treaty explicitly requires both parties to "immediately consult each other" and take "effective measures to safeguard peace and the security of the two countries" when either is under armed attack. Consequently, Khang's use of the Vietnam-Laos treaty to buttress his case that China and Vietnam have similar alliance policies is not convincing.

Second, we know that not all alliances need a formal treaty to be taken seriously. The U.S. does not need a formal defense treaty with either Israel or Taiwan to deter other states from

invading these states. For domestic or strategic reasons, a state may deliberately choose to pursue an informal rather than formal alliance relationship with another state. Therefore, alliance policy should not be restricted exclusively to formal alliances.

If that's the case, then one could reasonably argue that China and the U.S. had an informal alliance in the early 1970s following Nixon's opening to China. This would contradict Khang's point that single-party communist states like China and Vietnam only ally with states that share both security interests and ideological values.

From reading Khang's analysis, one could be forgiven for thinking that Vietnam is on par with China in terms of its national power. The truth is, China has always been a great power, while Vietnam today is at best a middle power in Southeast Asia. The difference is vast: great powers provide security for lesser states, in exchange for influence and other privileges, while small states seek security guarantees by giving away some of their policy autonomy.

When Vietnam enters into an alliance, it is usually to protect itself from immediate security threats or hedge against future risks. In contrast, China wields alliance as a tool to influence the policy of its weaker partner (such as in the case of North Korea) or to gain bargaining a chip vis-à-vis its strategic competitor. So even if both China and Vietnam enter into the same number of defense treaties, with exactly the same clauses, it would be for very different reasons, suggesting highly divergent alliance policies.

Lastly, Khang points toward non-alignment as evidence showing that Vietnam and China pursue similar alliance policies. This is plausible on the surface but does not hold up to close scrutiny. The key here is that while both countries essentially follow a non-alignment policy, the basis for such a decision could not be more different.

As one of the world's leading global powers, China understandably shuns military alliance because it can provide for its own security. Even if it had wanted to, Beijing cannot build the sort of alliance network that the U.S. has because there are few countries that currently face severe security threats and are worthwhile potential allies for China. And even if these small states did seek a security provider, it is more likely that they would look toward the U.S. rather than China, as the latter's military does not yet have the kind of global reach that the U.S. military has.

Hanoi, on the other hand, is wary of military alliances because historical experience has taught Vietnamese leaders that an alliance may exacerbate a worsening security situation rather than deterring potential threats. After all, war with China broke out in 1979, shortly after Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed their mutual defense treaty. Furthermore, as China had shown during the Vietnam War, great power allies readily sell out their smaller partners when the strategic situation changes. It is therefore in the interest of every small state to maintain an independent foreign policy whenever possible. This is not to say that Vietnam will reject military alliances indefinitely. As Gen. Nguyen Chi Vinh observed in a key interview regarding the 2019 defense white paper, Vietnam's "Three Nos policy" is one for peacetime, implying that it could well change its alliance policy if the strategic context takes a U-turn in the future.

For all of these reasons, no matter how we define military alliance, for as long as Vietnamese national power has not caught up to China's, China and Vietnam will continue to have significantly different alliance policies.

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