

Domestic Protests and Foreign Policy: An Examination of Anti-China Protests in Vietnam and Vietnamese Policy Towards China Regarding the South China Sea

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Abstract

The Sino-Vietnamese relationship is characterized by asymmetry, yet Vietnam's post-Cold War foreign policy towards China encompasses three paradigms: (a) internal and external balancing against China, (b) greater international integration to prevent political and economic dependence on China and (c) 'cooperation' with China on mutual interests while 'struggling' against China's encroachment on Vietnam's sovereignty. The ongoing dispute in the South China Sea presents a primary security concern for Vietnam as well as a challenge to its bilateral relations with China, particularly as maritime tensions provoke nationalist and anti-China protests among the Vietnamese public. This article presents an analysis of anti-China protests in Vietnam that resulted from South China Sea tensions between 2007 and 2017 in order to examine whether the protests—which are rare in Vietnam—had any effect on Vietnam's foreign policy towards China. The findings reveal that the protests did not result in a change in Vietnam's foreign policy towards China both during the maritime crises or in the long term.

Keywords

China, South China Sea, Vietnam, protest, foreign policy

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Introduction

Vietnam's foreign policy towards China has evolved throughout history in response to both external power dynamics and internal political change. In the present day, the ongoing dispute between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea poses a primary security challenge for Vietnam and is a key factor influencing Vietnam's foreign policy towards China. Recent Chinese efforts to solidify sovereignty over its South China Sea claims have reaffirmed Vietnam's longstanding perception of China as an assertive and expansionist northern neighbour, while stirring anti-Chinese unrest among the Vietnamese public. The anti-China backlash was first evident in 2011 after a Chinese surveillance vessel cut the cables of a Vietnamese ship conducting seismic research in the South China Sea. As a result, hundreds of Vietnamese took to the streets in sustained protests against China. Large-scale and violent anti-China demonstrations occurred again in Vietnam in 2014 after China stationed the Haiyang Shiyu 981, an oil rig operated by the China National Offshore Oil Corporation, in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near the disputed Paracel Islands.

In authoritarian Vietnam, where political demonstrations are repressed, the occurrence of these rare protests during Sino-Vietnamese confrontations on the South China Sea begs the question: What, if any, impact did anti-China protests in Vietnam have on Vietnamese foreign policy towards China regarding the South China Sea in both the short and long term? To examine whether anti-China protests have shifted Vietnamese foreign policy towards China, this article consists of three sections. The first section discusses the evolution of Vietnamese foreign policy towards China and engages the existing research on the relationship between domestic protests and foreign policy. The second section analyses the incidents in which anti-China protests erupted in Vietnam between 2007 and 2017 as a result of the South China Sea disputes. Through a comprehensive analysis of media coverage, this section traces the protests and provides a detailed timeline of (a) the initial maritime confrontation that precipitated the protests, (b) the development of anti-China protests in Vietnam, (c) the Vietnamese government's reaction to the protests, (d) the Vietnamese government's reaction to the dispute with China and (e) the mutual resolution or agreement ending the incident between Vietnam and China. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion on the implications of anti-China protests on Vietnam's foreign policy towards China regarding the South China Sea.

The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy Towards China

Ever since Vietnam gained independence in 939 AD after about a millennium of Chinese rule, Vietnamese foreign policy has centred around its larger and more powerful northern neighbour. The immutable asymmetry in size and capacity in favour of China has inevitably defined the Sino-Vietnamese relationship

(Womack, 2006). To manage this asymmetrical relationship, Vietnamese statecraft has primarily consisted of an internal balancing strategy in which Hanoi developed domestic capabilities to repel a potential Chinese invasion (Vuving, 2006; Waltz, 1979). Because China was the sole dominant power in Vietnam's periphery for much of Vietnamese history, Hanoi's foreign policy towards Beijing did not involve external balancing until the twentieth century.

From the founding of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 1930 until the end of the Cold War, Marxist–Leninist ideology provided the foundation for Vietnamese politics and propelled socialist internationalism as the dominant strategy underpinning Vietnam's foreign policy towards China and the rest of the world. At this time, Vietnam viewed its alliances with the world's 'three revolutionary currents'—(a) socialist states (notably China and the Soviet Union), (b) the Third World and (c) the advanced capitalist countries—as crucial to its military victories over France and the United States (Palmujoki, 1997). Benefiting from significant military and economic aid from Beijing, Hanoi de-emphasized the historical threat posed by China and characterized the Sino-Vietnamese relationship 'as close as lips and teeth' because of their common Marxist–Leninist ideology (Thayer, 2002; Vuving, 2006). However, Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorated in the 1970s as China normalized its relationship with the United States, which drove Vietnam to externally balance against China by entering into a formal military alliance with the Soviet Union in 1978 (Hiep, 2013; Thayer, 2002). Bilateral relations fully disintegrated in 1979 when the two countries went to war after China attacked six Vietnamese provinces along the Sino-Vietnamese border.

In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations dramatically shifted Vietnam's foreign policy. The Soviet collapse deprived Vietnam of a major economic, military and political ally, leaving Hanoi regionally and globally isolated. On the other hand, renewed Sino-Vietnamese relations reflected the congruent interests between Vietnam and China in the post-Cold War era as both countries sought to maintain Communist Party rule while pursuing economic growth and diversification (Hiep, 2013; Thayer, 2016; Vuving, 2006). Since these twin developments in 1991, Vietnam's foreign policy towards China has consisted of three paradigms: (a) balancing, (b) international integration and (c) cooperation and struggle.

After the end of the Cold War, Vietnam has consistently pursued a policy of both internal and external balancing against China. To develop its military into a credible deterrent force against Beijing, Hanoi began to update its naval and air capabilities in the 1990s and accelerated its modernization efforts in the 2000s (Hiep, 2013; Thayer, 2016, 2017). Between 2000 and 2017, notable arms acquisitions by Hanoi included 36 Su-30MK multirole jet fighters, 4 Gepard guided-missile frigates with over 500 anti-ship missiles and 6 Kilo-class submarines—all of which improve Vietnam's ability to monitor its maritime zones and occupied features in the South China Sea (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018; Thayer, 2017; Vuving, 2017). In addition to these internal balancing efforts, Vietnam has also pursued multipolar external balancing by establishing strategic partnerships with five major powers: China, India, Japan,

Russia and the United States (Thayer, 2017). Yet to avoid becoming entangled in great power rivalries—especially between Beijing and Washington—Hanoi has maintained a national defence policy of three nos: no to joining any military alliance; no to permitting foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil; and no to allowing a foreign country to use Vietnamese soil to carry out military activities against other countries (Hiep, 2013; Thayer, 2017; Vuving, 2006).

The second prong of Vietnam's foreign policy towards China—international integration—is rooted in the theory of complex interdependence and consists of the multilateralization of Vietnamese foreign policy and economic development, particularly greater integration into supranational political and economic organizations (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Thayer, 2017; Vuving, 2006). The Seventh National Congress of the CPV began to pursue political and economic multilateralization and diversification in 1991, which prompted Vietnam to normalize relations with China in the same year and with the United States in 1995. By then, Hanoi had diplomatic relations with 163 countries, up from only 23 in 1989 (Thayer, 2017). To further enmesh itself politically and economically into the regional architecture, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) in 1998. More recently, Hanoi became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2007 and a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2008–2009 term. These efforts towards greater international integration are intended to prevent Hanoi from excessive political and economic dependence on any country, particularly China.

In the post-Cold War era, a third paradigm emerged in Vietnam's strategic approach to foreign policy. Rather than developing close relationships with uniquely Marxist–Leninist countries—as was Hanoi's policy during the Cold War—Vietnam pursued a more flexible strategy of 'cooperation and struggle', a concept that began to appear in CPV foreign policy documents by 1994 (Hiep, 2013). In 2003, the CPV issued a resolution entitled 'On defence of the homeland in the new situation', which provided greater detail on the twin concepts of 'objects of cooperation' and 'objects of struggle' (Thayer, 2016). In this paradigm, Vietnam's policy is to cooperate with all countries in areas of convergent interests, while struggling against any country that attempts to undermine Vietnam's national interests (Thayer, 2016). Yet the two categories of 'cooperation' and 'struggle' are not mutually exclusive. Vietnam envisions its foreign policy towards China as one of both struggle and cooperation: struggling against China's expansionist maritime goals while cooperating with China on economic development and other mutual interests.

The Linkages Between Domestic Protests and Foreign Policy

Much of the scholarly research on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy focuses on the United States and other liberal democracies and can

be categorized into two major schools of thought (Knecht, 2010; Risse-Kappen, 1991; Sobel, 2001; Wittkopf, 1990). The ‘bottom-up’ approach argues that the pluralist nature of democracies allows the domestic public to shape the foreign policymaking of leaders (Risse-Kappen, 1991). In liberal democracies, elected officials are beholden to their citizens—who have the ability to vote them out of office—and therefore are more inclined to change their foreign policy when faced with significant public protests (Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, Reifler, & Sharp, 2006). The second school of thought assigns the public a more limited and indirect role in the foreign policymaking of democratic states, particularly during interstate crises, and argues that domestic protests and movements are more likely to influence domestic policy than foreign policy for two reasons (Giugni, 2004; Neack, 2008; Taras, 2015). First, a host of external and uncontrollable factors limit the decisions of national leaders regardless of domestic opinion (Giugni, 2004). Second, domestic protests that undermine the key interests of the state are less likely to result in foreign policy concessions by national leaders (Giugni, 2004). Although democratic structures allow for greater public displays of opposition to foreign policy decisions, the extent to which domestic protests shape foreign policy in democratic states remains a fundamental question debated in academic research.

The scholarly research on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy in non-democratic states identifies two sets of circumstances in which domestic protests could influence a state’s approach to external actors. Public opinion on foreign policy can matter in non-democratic states where a regime’s political legitimacy depends on public perception of the regime’s ability to stand strong in the face of regional competition and interstate disputes (Chubb, 2018; Neack, 2008). In particular, domestic protests that are nationalist in nature are more likely to influence the foreign policymaking of authoritarian states because they are directly linked to the regime’s legitimacy (Reilly, 2012, 2017). Regimes that disregard or repress nationalist domestic protests risk being perceived by the public as weak and unpatriotic, which could cause the protests to evolve into a political movement that undermines the regime. In authoritarian China, leaders have been promoting nationalist sentiments among the population in order to maintain the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and could be compelled to respond to domestic nationalist pressure with a more aggressive foreign policy (Christensen, 2004; Reilly, 2012, 2017; Ross & Li, 2016; Shirk, 2007). One analysis of widespread nationalist protests in China after the 2005 publication of a Japanese textbook on Japanese war crimes during World War II reveals that the protests did cause China to reverse its outreach policy towards Japan (Reilly, 2017). In the South China Sea, Beijing’s coercive maritime activities could be rooted in the need to reinforce nationalist sentiments among the domestic Chinese audience by signalling that the CCP was willing and able to defend challenges to Chinese sovereignty (Heath, 2012; Medcalf & Heinrichs, 2011; Swaine & Fravel, 2011; Zhang, 2015). Although the literature on the relationship between public opinion—particularly nationalist domestic protests—and foreign policy in Vietnam is rather scarce, there are indications that public opinion has gradually played a greater role in Vietnam’s

foreign policy because it has the potential to undermine the political legitimacy of the CPV (Thayer, 2017).

The second mechanism through which nationalist sentiments could affect the foreign policy decisions of authoritarian states arises when political divisions exist among the ruling elite. Public opinion is less likely to influence a cohesive elite that could quickly reach a consensus on addressing both the foreign policy crisis and domestic nationalist demands (Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001; Reilly, 2012, 2017). However, a divided elite could split into competing factions that exploit the nationalist fervour to consolidate political power or advance more aggressive foreign policy preferences (Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001; Weiss, 2014). In this scenario, the factions are disincentivized from pursuing reconciliation during the interstate crisis—and from advocating for the suppression of nationalist protests—so as not to appear weaker and less patriotic than their rivals, creating a situation in which nationalist protests drive the divided authoritarian regime to adopt a more confrontational foreign policy stance (Fewsmith & Rosen, 2001; Reilly, 2012, 2014, 2017).

Yet much of the literature indicates that nationalist protests have little impact on the foreign policy decisions of authoritarian states. In fact, authoritarian regimes may permit nationalist protests during an interstate crisis in order to use domestic public opinion as a diplomatic bargaining tool. Because protests are rare in autocratic societies, they allow the regime to justify an uncompromising stance during diplomatic negotiations and assert that concessions would not be acceptable to the domestic public (Weiss, 2014). However, authoritarian states may be more inclined to suppress nationalist protests if the demonstrations involve political dissidents and other opposition forces that could destabilize the political system (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016). Even in instances of elite fragmentation, escalating nationalist mobilizations that have the potential to jeopardize the stability of the regime actually drive elites to unite to address the public unrest (Reilly, 2012, 2014). Any potential short-term impact of nationalist sentiments on the foreign policy decisions of competing elite factions could quickly recede as the top-level elites reach a consensus on a strategy to address the interstate dispute (Reilly, 2012, 2014).

An analysis of China's maritime policy in the South and East China Seas during interstate contentions reveals that public opinion had limited impact on Beijing's foreign policymaking (Chubb, 2018). During the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off, China exerted control over the atoll before stirring nationalist sentiments among the Chinese population in an effort to coerce the Philippines to relinquish its claims (Chubb, 2018). Scholarly accounts differ regarding the origins of the anti-Japan protests that materialized in China during the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputes. One study argues that the nationalist fervour led Chinese leaders to allow the demonstrations and adopt a more assertive stance towards Japan in order to maintain political legitimacy, while others maintain that the CCP permitted the protests to alleviate public anger and acquire diplomatic leverage (Chubb, 2018; Gries, Steiger, & Wang, 2015; Reilly, 2014; Weiss, 2014). As with the 2012 Scarborough Shoal stand-off, the Chinese state's deliberate

publicity of its aggressive maritime actions preceded the largest nationalist mobilizations in China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes, indicating that the government fomented nationalist protests to its diplomatic favour (Chubb, 2018). Over the course of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 dispute with Hanoi in 2014, Beijing's propaganda authorities diligently managed state media coverage of the incident and deliberately downplayed both China's aggressive maritime actions and the resulting deadly riots in Vietnam, which suggests that nationalist public sentiments did not affect China's initial decision to place the oil rig in Vietnam's EEZ (Chubb, 2014, 2018). These cases reveal that China's coercive maritime activities in the East and South China Seas were driven by enhanced military and technological capabilities rather than nationalist domestic expectations and lend support to the argument that public opinion has not had a demonstrable impact on China's short- and long-term foreign policy decisions (Chubb, 2018; Reilly, 2012).

Research on Southeast Asian states also casts doubt on whether public opinion influences the foreign policymaking of authoritarian regimes. One case study featuring Vietnam reveals that nationalist protests do not increase the risk of escalation by an authoritarian regime during an interstate crisis (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016). Although an authoritarian regime may initially permit nationalist protests to signal resolve or gain leverage during diplomatic negotiations, public demonstrations may quickly escalate and destabilize the political system. The political risks to regime stability could outweigh any diplomatic benefits acquired from allowing the protests to continue (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016). In the case of the Haiyang Shiyou 981 crisis, the widespread and deadly public demonstrations did not result in Vietnam's pursuit of more aggressive policies towards China in the short term because the Vietnamese government was able to promptly curtail protests (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016). Hanoi moved to suppress the demonstrations before they could raise the risk of interstate escalation and produce further domestic instability, and because they did not result in any concessions from China (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016).

Media Analysis of Vietnamese Protests and Maritime Disputes

The existing body of research does not adequately address whether sustained or violent nationalist protests shape an authoritarian regime's foreign policy towards the rival state after the interstate dispute. This article attempts to rectify this gap in the literature by examining whether anti-China protests in Vietnam led to a shift in Vietnamese foreign policy—as exemplified by the three paradigms of balancing, international integration, and cooperation and struggle—towards China regarding the South China Sea disputes both during and after the interstate crises that prompted the protests. The author conducted an extensive media search of protests in Vietnam on the South China Sea disputes from January 2007—when Vietnamese authorities first authorized such protests—until the conclusion of data collection

in January 2017. In the first phase of the media analysis, the author searched for the English-language keywords ‘Vietnam’, ‘South China Sea’, ‘protest’, ‘China’, ‘Spratly Islands’ and ‘Paracel Islands’ on several platforms: (a) LexisNexis, which provides a comprehensive database of media articles, (b) *Radio Free Asia* and *Voice of America*, which offer more detailed coverage of developments in Asia and (c) Vietnamese state-owned media outlets *Vietnam News*, *Nhan Dan* and *Vietnam Plus*.

Using the data collected from the media reporting, the author created a detailed timeline capturing the daily developments of each protest, focusing on the following five categories:

1. Chinese activity towards Vietnamese entities in the South China Sea that precipitated the protests: This includes administrative decisions intended to strengthen Chinese authority over the South China Sea, as well as coercive activities that led to physical interaction between Chinese and Vietnamese entities in the South China Sea.
2. Vietnamese protests resulting from Chinese activity regarding the South China Sea: this study did not include the many protests outside of Vietnam—whether by Vietnamese nationals living abroad or other members of the Vietnamese diaspora—because overseas protests have less potential to threaten the Vietnamese regime than domestic protests that could quickly accelerate and evolve into demonstrations against Vietnam’s political system. For this category, the author collected available data on the date, location, duration, number of participants and organizing mechanisms for each protest.
3. Vietnamese authorities’ response to protests: this includes actions taken by Vietnamese authorities before, during and after the protests to manage, direct, prevent or end the protests.
4. Official Vietnamese government’s reaction to China during and after each incident: this category includes public statements by Vietnamese government entities and officials, as well as diplomatic, military and other methods taken by the Vietnamese government to manage the incident.
5. Mutual resolution of each incident: this could include public statements, agreements or resolutions between Vietnam and China to end the incident, mend relations or prevent a similar incident from occurring in the future.

Although researchers studying maritime disputes in the South China Sea have described the major Vietnamese protests, none have published a detailed day-to-day timeline of the demonstrations. In addition to providing insight into the relationship between anti-China protests in Vietnam and Vietnam’s short- and long-term foreign policy towards China, this article aims to contribute a comprehensive timeline of Vietnamese protests against coercive Chinese activities in the South China Sea for future researchers.

The first phase of the media analysis revealed that the last anti-China protests in Vietnam regarding the South China Sea occurred over the course of the Haiyang

Shiyou 981 crisis in 2014, during which up to 21 people died and another 100 were injured (Hodal & Kaiman, 2014; *Reuters*, 2014a). In the second phase of the media analysis, the author collected data on media coverage of South China Sea incidents between Vietnam and China after 2014, searching for the English-language keywords ‘Vietnam’, ‘South China Sea’, ‘China’, ‘Spratly Islands’ and ‘Paracel Islands’ on the same platforms. Because protests did not transpire during these incidents, the data collection focused on two categories: (a) assertive Chinese activities towards Vietnamese entities in the South China Sea and (b) Vietnamese government’s reaction to Chinese activities. The author then analysed Hanoi’s response to Beijing during the post-2014 incidents in order to discover whether Hanoi’s approach revealed a shift from the three foreign policy paradigms of balancing, international integration and ‘cooperation and struggle’ that has characterized Vietnam’s strategy towards China since the end of the Cold War.

Anti-China Protests in Vietnam Resulting from Incidents on the South China Sea

Over the course of 2007, China steadily asserted its power in the South China Sea through a series of actions, including detaining four Vietnamese fishing boats in the Spratlys in April, opening fire on Vietnamese fishing boats and injuring five Vietnamese fishermen in the Paracels in July, and establishing a new administrative region with jurisdiction over the Paracel and Spratly Islands in December (*The Economist*, 2007; Wong, 2010). These developments exacerbated the Vietnamese public’s long-simmering antagonism towards China—particularly perceived Chinese aggression in the South China Sea—and led the Vietnamese government to authorize the first protest against China’s South China Sea activities. On 9 December, several hundred protesters gathered near the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and were allowed to protest for about one hour before Vietnamese police began to disperse the crowd (*Associated Press International*, 2007). A second demonstration occurred one week later on 16 December, with 300 protesters in Hanoi and another 100 in Ho Chi Minh City (*Agence France Presse*, 2007). However, hundreds of police prevented these protesters from rallying outside Chinese diplomatic compounds in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. China objected to these demonstrations and claimed they weakened bilateral ties, which combined with Vietnamese authorities’ fear of the presence of pro-democracy dissidents among protesters, and led to the government’s decision to suppress the protests (Vuving, 2008).

Eleven Weeks of Protests in the Summer of 2011

The first sustained protest in Vietnam regarding Chinese activity in the South China Sea occurred in the summer of 2011. On 26 May, Chinese maritime

surveillance vessels cut the exploration cables of the Binh Minh 02—a ship belonging to the state-owned oil and gas company PetroVietnam Group—about 80 miles from Vietnam’s south-central coast (*BBC News*, 2011a). Three days later, Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded that China stop violating Vietnamese sovereignty in its EEZ (*Việt Nam News*, 2011). On 5 June, 10 days after the initial maritime incident, approximately 400 protesters marched to the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and several hundred others rallied outside the Chinese Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City (*Radio Free Asia*, 2011). The demonstrators were mostly young and used blogs, Facebook, online forums and social media to organize the protests. Authorities allowed protesters to rally before dispersing the crowds and cordoning off areas around the Chinese Embassy (*Voice of America*, 2011a).

Four days later, on 9 June, a Chinese fishing boat cut the cables of the Viking II, a seismic survey ship registered in Norway and chartered by PetroVietnam, as it was operating in Vietnam’s EEZ (*Reuters*, 2011a; Timberlake, 2011). Later that day, China’s ambassador to the Philippines demanded that Vietnam and the Philippines end their oil exploration in the South China Sea, which contributed to the Vietnamese perception that China was accelerating its efforts to exert full control over the South China Sea (Gomez, 2011). On the following day, Vietnam announced its plan to hold live-fire drills in the South China Sea as a rebuke to China (*BBC News*, 2011b).

A second week of protests began on 12 June as hundreds of protesters rallied in front of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi (Ruwitch, 2011a). Hundreds more protested in Ho Chi Minh City (*Associated Press*, 2011a). In Hanoi, police initially allowed demonstrations around the Chinese Embassy. After 20 minutes, security forces ordered protesters to leave the premises, but still permitted demonstrators to rally around Hoan Kiem Lake in central Hanoi. On the following day, 13 June, Vietnam conducted at least six hours of live-fire exercises within its EEZ (*The Telegraph*, 2011). Although the Vietnamese government initially announced that it had made the live-fire drill decision on 7 June—two days after the first round of protests—Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Nguyen Phuong Nga said the exercises were ‘part of routine annual training’ (*Agence France Presse*, 2011a; *BBC News*, 2011b). Even though Vietnam intended to use the live-fire exercises to signal to China that it would protest assertive Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea, it also softened the nature of the exercises by characterizing them as routine to avoid a serious escalation with China.

Nearly one week later, on 19 June, a third round of protests occurred as several dozen demonstrators rallied once again in front of the Chinese Embassy (Ruwitch, 2011b). As with the previous protests, security forces allowed the demonstrators to rally for about half an hour before dispersing the crowd. Police reportedly told the protesters that ‘their protest had been heard and that staying could complicate diplomacy’, revealing Vietnamese authorities’ concerns that lingering anti-China protests would impact the Sino-Vietnamese relationship (Ruwitch, 2011b). On 19 June—the date of the third round of protests—the Vietnamese and Chinese navies began a two-day joint patrol of the Gulf of Tonkin, which was intended to

‘maintain security and order at sea...share experiences between the two navies and promote the friendship between the two navies, armies and peoples’ (*Nhan Dan Online*, 2011). Even though the South China Sea skirmishes had not yet been resolved, Vietnam continued joint military endeavours with China. This revealed that the two cable-cutting incidents and ensuing protests were not pressing enough to cause Hanoi to halt all bilateral collaborations with Beijing, and showed the extent to which Vietnam was willing to ‘cooperate’ with China during high-profile maritime incidents.

High-level diplomatic discussions began on 25 June when Vietnamese Vice Foreign Minister Ho Xuan Son met with State Councillor Dai Bingguo in Beijing (*People’s Daily Online*, 2011). Two days before the meeting, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Nguyen Phuong Nga used the demonstrations to bolster Vietnam’s position during diplomatic discussions by emphasizing that the protests were evidence that the Vietnamese people have ‘become very frustrated’ about the South China Sea situation (*Agence France Presse*, 2011b). On the following day, 26 June, a fourth wave of protests occurred in Hanoi with 100 demonstrators rallying to show their opposition to China (*Agence France Presse*, 2011b). Unlike the previous three protests, authorities barricaded two streets to prevent protesters from approaching the Chinese Embassy, possibly to avoid angering China and hindering the ongoing diplomatic negotiations. On the same day, Vietnam and China issued a joint press release in which both countries agreed to ‘peacefully solving the two countries’ disputes at sea through negotiation and friendly consultation’ (*VietnamPlus*, 2011). Notably, the joint press release highlighted ‘the need to steer public opinions along the correct direction, avoiding comments and deeds that harm the friendship and trust of the people of the two countries’, illustrating that both countries acknowledged the political significance of the protests in Vietnam, as well as the danger that such protests could bring to bilateral relations.

Despite the joint press release’s criticism of inflammatory public opinions, Vietnamese authorities did not curtail protests and permitted about 100 demonstrators to rally in Hanoi on 3 July for the fifth consecutive week (*Voice of America*, 2011b). On 10 July, more than a dozen protesters once again rallied near the Chinese Embassy for a sixth week of protests in Hanoi (*Associated Press*, 2011b). For the first time since protests began on 5 June, police arrested the demonstrators, hauling them onto buses. Police also detained journalists working for the Associated Press and two Japanese media outlets (*Associated Press*, 2011b). According to one detained journalist, armed police held and questioned him along with some protesters for approximately three hours (*Associated Press*, 2011b). Security forces employed similar tactics when the seventh round of protests began on 17 July, arresting more than a dozen protesters near the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi and taking them away in buses (*Voice of America*, 2011c). When a second group of protesters rallied there later that day, security forces in riot gear disbanded the crowd.

Four days later, on 21 July, ASEAN and China agreed to a draft of guidelines for a code of conduct on the South China Sea (Quiano, 2011). China had initially

resisted participating in drafting the code of conduct, but relented after high-level meetings with senior ASEAN officials. Despite this diplomatic breakthrough, an eighth wave of protests occurred in Vietnam on 24 July. Authorities decided to permit as many as 300 demonstrators to rally in central Hanoi because the repression during the previous two protests—on 10 and 17 July—stirred online anger after photographs and video footage of police violence against demonstrators circulated on blogs and other websites (*Agence France Presse*, 2011c).

Protests did not take place the following Sunday, 31 July, as rally organizers decided to spend the cold and rainy day in coffee shops across Hanoi to plan their strategy (Song & Zou, 2014). When the ninth round of protests resumed on 7 August, authorities permitted around 200 demonstrators to rally around Hoan Kiem Lake—but not the Chinese Embassy—in Hanoi (Ruwitch, 2011c). Organizers had decided to avoid the Chinese Embassy and focus their protest on China—rather than including demands for political reform into their platform—to dissuade authorities from repressing the demonstration. However, participants in the 7 August protest stated that Vietnamese authorities had pressured them into abstaining from the demonstration, revealing that the Vietnamese government had begun to curtail the protests as progress was being made in diplomatic negotiations (Ruwitch, 2011c). As with the protests that had occurred since the issuance of the joint press release on 26 June, Vietnamese police used force to end the 7 August protest. Video footage of an undercover policeman kicking a protester in the face while forcing him onto a bus was quickly circulated and widely viewed on YouTube, leading to renewed online outrage (Ruwitch, 2011c).

The circulation of the video led authorities to allow a tenth protest on 14 August, during which 100 demonstrators gathered around Hoan Kiem Lake in Hanoi (Brown, 2011; *Macau Daily Times*, 2011). Yet four days later, the Hanoi city government issued an order calling for the end of ‘gatherings, demonstrations, and spontaneous marches’ (*Reuters*, 2011b). Claiming that ‘opposition forces’ were using the protests to undermine ‘national unity’ and that such demonstrations were complicating diplomatic efforts with China—which reiterates the language used by police as they dispersed protesters on 19 June—the notice warned that authorities would ‘take necessary measures’ against those who disobeyed the order (*BBC News*, 2011c; Ruwitch, 2011b). On 21 August, some protesters defied the order and marched in the eleventh anti-China rally in Hanoi. As soon as the demonstration began, police arrested about 40 protestors, hauling them onto buses and driving them away (*Reuters*, 2011b). According to one activist, police had also subdued the rally by preventing certain activists from attending the demonstration, either by confining them to their homes or through other methods of limiting their movement (*Reuters*, 2011b). This was the last anti-China rally in Hanoi following the South China Sea tensions in the summer of 2011. Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic negotiations continued and culminated in the signing of the ‘Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Maritime Issues’ nearly two months later on 12 October, ultimately resolving this particular incident (*Xinhua News Agency*, 2011).

Two Minor Protests in 2012 and 2013

Although 2012 and 2013 saw relative calm between Vietnamese and Chinese entities in the South China Sea, a few minor maritime incidents sparked small protests in Vietnam. On 29 November 2012, China announced that police based in Hainan Province would have the authority to board and capture foreign ships in the South China Sea for committing illegal entry in Chinese waters (*Reuters*, 2012). In response, Vietnam condemned the decision as a violation of Vietnamese sovereignty and increased civilian-led patrols reinforced by maritime police to defend its fisheries in the South China Sea (*BBC News*, 2012). Tensions flared on 30 November when a Chinese fishing boat cut the survey cables of the Binh Minh 02—a repeat of the 6 May 2011 incident that resulted in 11 weeks of anti-China protests in Vietnam—as the ship was conducting seismic surveys for PetroVietnam in Vietnamese waters (*Tuoi Tre*, 2012). However, the CEO of PetroVietnam attempted to diffuse the situation by stating that the Chinese ships cut the Vietnamese ship's cables by accident (*Bloomberg News*, 2012). Nonetheless, the ongoing friction led authorities to allow protests. On 9 December, approximately 200 protesters rallied in Hanoi for about 30 minutes before police dispersed the crowd (*The Guardian*, 2012). Those who disobeyed authorities and continued to protest were quickly detained and bused away, similar to tactics employed by authorities during the summer 2011 protests. About 20 demonstrators were arrested and briefly detained before being released. As with the 2011 protests, the security forces told protesters that the demonstrations 'cause disorder and affect the party's and government's foreign policy', once again highlighting Vietnamese officials' belief that anti-China public protests damage Sino-Vietnamese relations and negotiations (*The Guardian*, 2012). A similar but smaller protest occurred in Ho Chi Minh City, where approximately 100 demonstrators gathered for 10 minutes before authorities disbanded them.

Two incidents in the South China Sea in the spring of 2013 also led to small anti-China protests in Vietnam. On 20 March, a Chinese patrol boat fired on and set ablaze a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands (*BBC News*, 2013). Although Vietnamese officials had noticed an increase in Chinese patrols in the preceding months—notably an incident in early March when Chinese marine surveillance ships chased two Vietnamese fishing boats from disputed waters—the 20 March skirmish was perceived as an escalation because of China's decision to use lethal weapons on Vietnamese fishermen (*BBC News*, 2013). China denied that it started the fire while defending its right to take action in its claimed waters, but the developments further stoked anti-China sentiments in Vietnam (*Associated Press*, 2013a). The situation was exacerbated two months later when a Chinese vessel damaged a Vietnamese fishing boat in the South China Sea (*Associated Press*, 2013b). In response to these recent skirmishes, about 150 protesters gathered around Hoan Kiem Lake on 2 June to demonstrate against China (*Associated Press*, 2013c). Vietnamese security forces reacted quickly to disperse the crowd, scuffling with some protesters while busing others away (*Reuters*, 2013). Police also detained two Vietnamese journalists.

Violent Riots in Summer 2014

The most forceful Chinese challenge of Vietnam's South China Sea claims thus far began on 1 May 2014 when China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 to Vietnamese waters (Perlez, 2014; Taylor, 2014). The oil rig was accompanied by a flotilla of escort vessels, some of which were armed (*Associated Press*, 2014a). China also announced that foreign ships were not permitted to come within a three-mile radius of the oil rig (Brummit, 2014). After the Haiyang Shiyou 981 arrived at its intended location 70 miles within Vietnam's EEZ on 2 May, Vietnam immediately demanded that China relocate the oil rig and deployed as many as 29 maritime police and fishery protection ships to the area to prevent the oil rig from establishing a fixed position to drill (*Associated Press*, 2014a; Brummit, 2014; Perlez, 2014). However, the Chinese flotilla outnumbered the Vietnamese ships, ramming into and firing high-powered water cannons at the Vietnamese vessels from 3 to 7 May, which resulted in several damaged Vietnamese ships and at least six injured Vietnamese citizens (*Associated Press*, 2014a). On 7 May, Vietnamese officials showed video footage of these incidents during a news conference to publicize China's aggressive actions. At its own press conference on 8 May, China justified its activities as legitimate and lawful, arguing that it was operating in its own waters and that Vietnam was actually violating China's sovereignty by dispatching 35 vessels to ram Chinese ships (*Associated Press*, 2014a; Kaiman, 2014a). Yet despite deploying maritime police and fishery protection vessels to disrupt the oil rig's operations, Vietnam took a more conciliatory approach than China. Hanoi did not dispatch naval ships to the area and reiterated its wish for a peaceful resolution to the crisis (Kaiman, 2014a). On 7 May, a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official suggested that international arbitration—referring to the case brought by the Philippines against China to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea—was a possible option to resolve the crisis and reaffirmed that Vietnam was only interested in a peaceful process to end tensions (Nguyen & Martina, 2014). To reiterate Hanoi's defensive position, a Vietnamese naval official said, 'Vietnam won't fire unless China fires first' (Nguyen & Martina, 2014). This approach is indicative of Vietnam's strategy of struggle and cooperation, in which it struggles with China by protesting Chinese infringement on its EEZ, publicizing Chinese provocations to the international audience, and resisting Chinese attempts to drill in Vietnam's EEZ. At the same time, Vietnam signals its desire to cooperate with China by voicing its wishes for a peaceful solution and avoiding the deployment of naval vessels to prevent further escalation.

Protests began in Vietnam on 10 May when 100 people rallied outside the Chinese Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City under the watch of security forces (*Associated Press*, 2014b). On 11 May, about 1,000 protesters marched and demonstrated again in front of the Chinese Consulate as hundreds of other demonstrators rallied in front of the Chinese Embassy (*Radio Free Asia*, 2014a). Protests also occurred in smaller cities in Vietnam, notably Da Nang and Hue. Yet Vietnamese authorities did not arrest, harass, assault or disperse protesters and

journalists covering the event, although police did erect barriers to prevent protesters from getting too close to the Chinese Embassy compound (*Agence France Presse*, 2014; Brown, 2014a). The state-owned media even provided extensive coverage of the anti-China protests throughout the country (*Radio Free Asia*, 2014a). As these large protests were occurring, the state-owned media reported that China had dispatched fighter jets and other military aircraft to protect the oil rig, an escalatory step signalling that China was not planning to yield to Vietnam's requests to withdraw the rig (*Tuoi Tre*, 2014a). Despite China's earlier claim of wanting to resolve the crisis through diplomacy on the condition that Vietnam remove its vessels from the area, China rejected an offer by the Chairman of the CPV, Nguyen Phu Trong, to visit Beijing to discuss matters with President Xi Jinping (Blanchard & Nguyen, 2014; Bradsher, 2014).

Meanwhile, 12 May was the third consecutive day of anti-China protests in Vietnam. According to Vietnamese state media, approximately 10,000 people participated in demonstrations throughout the country, including more than 2,000 in front of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi (Ito, 2014). About 5,000 people rallied in downtown Ho Chi Minh City and marched towards the Chinese Consulate (*Việt Nam News*, 2014). Another 2,000 protesters marched in Can Tho despite heavy rains (*Tuoi Tre*, 2014b). Other demonstrations were held in Da Nang and Hue (Ito, 2014). As with the previous day's protests, security forces were present at the demonstrations but did not interfere. State media provided coverage of the nationwide rallies because the Vietnamese government wanted to signal to China—and the world—that the Vietnamese people were united against Chinese intrusions in Vietnamese waters.

In addition to the thousands of protesters who rallied in cities across Vietnam, about 7,000 footwear and garment workers demonstrated in front of Chinese businesses in the industrial zones of Binh Duong and Dong Nai provinces in southern Vietnam on 12 May (*Reuters*, 2014b). This particular demonstration developed into riots by the early morning of 13 May, as partakers rallied outside Chinese- and Taiwanese-owned factories at the Vietnam Singapore Industrial Park in Binh Duong (*Reuters*, 2014c). By mid-morning, the crowd leaders persuaded factory workers to join them in attacking Chinese and Taiwanese factories in the vicinity. As many as 20,000 workers joined the riot, destroying Chinese-owned factories and mistakenly targeting Taiwanese and South Korean factories throughout the industrial park (Kaiman, 2014b; *Reuters*, 2014c). By evening, the unrest had spread to neighbouring Dong Nai province, also home to many foreign-owned industrial parks (*Reuters*, 2014c). Factory owners reported that the police either did not attempt to protect the factories or were incapable of dispersing the mobs of hundreds and thousands of people. To prevent attacks, those barricaded inside the besieged factories removed Chinese characters from their factory buildings and hung banners proclaiming support for Vietnam in the South China Sea dispute (*Reuters*, 2014c). Rioters also threw rocks at the police, injuring at least 40 policemen.

In the early morning hours of 14 May, Vietnamese authorities deployed military vehicles and riot police to end the turmoil in Binh Duong and Dong Nai, while

armoured vehicles were dispatched to guard the Chinese Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City (Kaiman, 2014b; *Radio Free Asia*, 2014b). By the end of the two-day riot, at least 15 factories were destroyed and more than 460 others were looted or vandalized (Kaiman, 2014b). Police also arrested 600 people in Binh Duong and another 100 in Dong Nai (*Radio Free Asia*, 2014b).

Yet this did not end the violent unrest in Vietnam. In Ha Tinh province in northern Vietnam, a small group of Vietnamese protesters entered the complex of a Taiwanese steel mill on 14 May to pressure workers to join them (*Reuters*, 2014c). Fuelled by false rumours that Chinese workers had beaten two Vietnamese workers to death, the group grew into a crowd of 1,000 people by the early morning of 15 May (Hodal & Kaiman, 2014). They stormed the steel mill, burned factories, beat Chinese workers and attacked the police. A total of 21 people were killed and approximately 100 were injured during these riots (Hodal & Kaiman, 2014; *Reuters*, 2014a). By the afternoon of 15 May, then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung ordered national and local authorities to restore order. Ha Tinh police had arrested 76 people for participating in the violence (*Reuters*, 2014a, 2014c).

Between 15 and 17 May, the Vietnamese government sent a series of text messages to all Vietnamese cell phone users to inform them that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung had instructed security forces to ‘stop illegal actions’—referring to the deadly violence that had occurred over the past few days—and to warn Vietnamese people against participating in ‘illegal protests’ (Brown, 2014b; *Reuters*, 2014d). On 18 May, authorities deployed large contingents of police to major cities to deter anti-China protests (*Reuters*, 2014d). Protesters who attempted to rally in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City were quickly arrested, and at least one protester was assaulted by police (Brown, 2014b; *Reuters*, 2014d). Security forces were dispatched to major intersections in both cities to inform people that such gatherings were ‘illegal’ and instructed onlookers to disperse (Brown, 2014b; *Reuters*, 2014d). In the meantime, China deployed chartered flights to transport about 300 people from Vietnam, after having previously evacuated more than 3,000 Chinese nationals (*Reuters*, 2014d).

After the 18 May government crackdown on anti-China protests, demonstrations against the oil rig placement within Vietnam’s EEZ no longer occurred. One month after Vietnamese authorities repressed the last attempted anti-China protest, Vietnam and China held the first high-level bilateral meeting on the oil rig dispute. On 17 June, Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi arrived in Hanoi to meet with the General Secretary of the CPV, Nguyen Phu Trong; Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung; and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh (*Associated Press*, 2014c). The negotiations quickly reached an impasse as Yang Jiechi reproached Vietnamese officials for publicizing and internationalizing the dispute, reasserted that the oil rig’s placement was legal, and warned Vietnam not to disrupt the oil rig’s activities (Ho & Blanchard, 2014; Lipes, 2014). Yang did add that both countries should hold bilateral talks to resolve the situation (Ho & Blanchard, 2014). As was the case during the cable-cutting incidents in the summer of 2011, Vietnamese officials were more conciliatory in their approach with China. They emphasized the need to communicate to prevent conflict,

highlighted the two countries' friendship, and even released a statement saying that Vietnam was always 'grateful for the support and great help from China' (Ho & Blanchard, 2014; Lipes, 2014). Nonetheless, Hanoi remained firm on its position regarding the oil rig and continued to request that Beijing withdraw the Haiyang Shiyou 981 from Vietnam's EEZ.

On 16 July, China withdrew the oil rig from its location in Vietnam's EEZ one month ahead of schedule (Denyer, 2014). Beijing said it was removing the oil rig because it had completed operations earlier than expected and wanted to prevent potential damage to the rig from the approaching typhoon season. It is possible that Beijing made the early withdrawal decision to defuse the situation with Hanoi, especially as the crisis had brought China near-unanimous criticism from the international community and diplomatic pressure from the United States (Thayer, 2014). On 26 August, Vietnam sent Politburo member Le Hong Anh, acting as a special envoy from the General Secretary of the CPV, to Beijing for two days of bilateral talks with President Xi Jinping and Liu Yunshan, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (Tiezzi, 2014a, 2014b). The parties reached an agreement to return to the October 2011 guidelines for managing disputes in the South China Sea. However, as this agreement did not prevent the oil rig crisis of 2014, tensions between the two countries regarding the South China Sea continued to linger.

Implications for Vietnamese Foreign Policy Towards China

During crises with China regarding the South China Sea disputes, Hanoi's response towards Beijing mostly followed the 'cooperation and struggle' hedging strategy. The developments during the first major and sustained anti-China protests in the summer of 2011 revealed that Vietnamese authorities only allowed protests near the Chinese Embassy during the first three weeks—on 5, 12 and 19 June—to signal to China that the Vietnamese government was partly constrained in negotiations by popular anger. This decision reflects Hanoi's strategy of 'struggling' against Beijing's coercive maritime activities that undermine Vietnam's national interests in the South China Sea. This is consistent with the scholarly literature indicating that authoritarian states could deliberately permit nationalist demonstrations to gain diplomatic leverage and is strikingly similar to China's own strategy during the Scarborough Shoal stand-off and Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute of 2012 (Chubb, 2018; Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016; Gries et al., 2015; Reilly, 2014; Weiss, 2014). After 19 June, Hanoi began to cooperate with Beijing and only permitted protests away from the Chinese Embassy so as not to offend its northern neighbour during negotiations. Despite the sustained nature of the protests, Vietnam was acutely aware of its asymmetrical relationship with China and cooperated and reconciled with its northern neighbour to end the stand-off. This illustrates that the nationalist demonstrations did not impact Hanoi's policymaking towards China during the 2011 crisis and lends support to research

showing that nationalist protests do not compel authoritarian regimes to adopt a more aggressive or uncompromising stance during interstate disputes (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016). As soon as Vietnam and China reached a preliminary agreement to resolve the dispute on 23 June, Vietnamese security forces used coercive tactics to detain and remove protesters and journalists covering the protests. However, the Vietnamese government does appear to acknowledge the negative optics of completely suppressing protests during heightened tensions with China—particularly if China had behaved aggressively towards Vietnamese entities in the South China Sea—which reflects the argument that repressing nationalist protest could undermine the political legitimacy of an authoritarian state (Neack, 2008; Reilly, 2012; Weiss, 2014). Hanoi also allowed protests if photo or video footage of state repression had previously circulated online in order to provide the people with an outlet to vent their anger and to avoid the perception that the regime was restricting expressions of patriotism.

The second major anti-China protests during the Haiyang Shiyou 981 crisis in the summer of 2014 revealed that even violent demonstrations did not appear to have an effect on Vietnam's 'cooperation and struggle' strategy towards China. Initially, Hanoi pursued a strategy of 'struggling' against Beijing's infringement on its sovereignty by directing state media to provide extensive coverage of anti-China protests to signal Vietnamese resolve to China and the international community. As with the 2011 protests, Hanoi's decision show that authoritarian states exploit nationalist protests to acquire diplomatic leverage (Chubb, 2018; Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016; Gries et al., 2015; Reilly, 2014; Weiss, 2014). Hanoi also 'struggled' against Beijing by sending vessels to disrupt the oil rig's operation, issuing official statements protesting China's action and publicizing the dispute to the international community. However, authorities used forceful tactics to quickly suppress protests as soon as deadly riots targeting Chinese nationals and Chinese-owned businesses began on 12 May. The riots resulted in at least 21 deaths and 100 injured people and had the potential to endanger negotiations and damage relations with China. The unrest also occurred in industrial zones and led to the destruction of foreign-owned property, which could have disrupted Vietnam's manufacturing-dependent economy. Hanoi's decision to swiftly curtail nationalist demonstrations lends support to the argument that the political risks—and economic risks in this particular case—caused by escalating protests outweigh the potential benefits of diplomatic leverage, driving authoritarian leaders to quell disruptive protests (Ciorciari & Weiss, 2016; Weiss, 2014). Even as the Haiyang Shiyou 981 stand-off continued, there were no additional anti-China protests in Vietnam. The first high-level talks during the crisis were not held until 17 June, one month after the last attempted protest. The asymmetric Sino-Vietnamese relationship, as well as Vietnam's strategy of cooperation, were especially evident during negotiations when State Council Yang Jiechi scolded Vietnam while Vietnamese officials were much more conciliatory in their approach to China. However, Hanoi did maintain a core aspect of its 'struggling' strategy by remaining firm on its request that Beijing remove the oil rig from Vietnam's EEZ, which has been Vietnam's position since the crisis began. This demonstrates that even the

deadly riots did not have a demonstrable effect on Vietnamese policy towards China. In fact, China did not withdraw its oil rig until 16 July, about two months after the last anti-China protests in Vietnam.

Since the last sustained and violent anti-China protests in 2014, Vietnam has not shown any evidence of reshaping its long-term foreign policy towards China regarding the South China Sea, which continues to reflect the three paradigms of (a) balancing, (b) international integration and (c) hedging through ‘cooperation and struggle’. A primary aspect of Vietnam’s internal balancing strategy towards China consists of the continued modernization and improvement of its military and particularly maritime capabilities (Vuving, 2017; Nguyen & Truong, 2018). In 2015, Hanoi unveiled its largest indigenous drone to patrol the South China Sea (Gady, 2015). The new drone, in conjunction with Vietnam’s agreement with India to build a satellite tracking station in Ho Chi Minh City, would significantly expand Hanoi’s intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in the South China Sea (Collin, 2016). In 2016, Vietnam not only procured more Kilo-class submarines to improve its naval capabilities, but also expanded a runway on Spratly Island to accommodate ISR and combat aircraft. To further enhance its deterrent capabilities, Vietnam installed mobile rocket launchers capable of striking China’s runways and military installations in the South China Sea (Nguyen, 2016; *Reuters*, 2016; Torode, 2016). These endeavours are intended to build up a credible deterrent to potential Chinese attempts to capture Vietnamese-occupied South China Sea features.

Hanoi’s continued security and economic outreach with outside partners and institutions demonstrates the second paradigm of international integration. Since the 2014 oil rig crisis and ensuing protests, Vietnam has strengthened its relationship with the United States, which it views as necessary to balance China’s increasing security and economic clout in the Indo-Pacific (Nguyen & Truong, 2018; Thayer, 2017). In 2015, Nguyen Phu Trong became the first CPV General Secretary to visit the United States and the White House to discuss growing tensions in the South China Sea, among other shared security concerns between Hanoi and Washington (P. Nguyen, 2018b; Petty & Wroughton, 2015). Another milestone in bilateral relations occurred in 2016 when the United States lifted its lethal weapons embargo on Vietnam (Spetalnick, 2016). Yet one more historic event occurred in 2018 when a U.S. aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, visited Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War (M. Nguyen, 2018a). In addition, Japan and India have also emerged as key security partners for Vietnam. As Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has adopted a more assertive security and foreign policy for Japan, Hanoi has procured maritime and other defence equipment from Tokyo to bolster its capabilities in the South China Sea (Hiep, 2017; *The Japan Times*, 2018). Similarly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ‘Act East’ policy has led to enhanced security ties between New Delhi and Hanoi, which include increased personnel training, equipment procurement and other defence- and maritime-related cooperation (Parameswaran, 2018).

Vietnam’s pursuit of international integration also involves developing robust economic ties with partner nations and institutions to lessen its economic

dependence on China, which is Vietnam's largest trading partner (Nguyen & Truong, 2018). In 2016, Vietnam's exports to China accounted for 13 per cent of all exports and roughly 10 per cent of Vietnam's total GDP, exposing it to economic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis its northern neighbour (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2018). Fearing that China could use sanctions and other economic punishments during a South China Sea stand-off, Vietnam has attempted to attenuate its economic reliance on China by pursuing a number of free trade agreements (FTAs) (Nguyen & Truong, 2018). Although Vietnam's preferred FTA was the original Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) which included the United States, Hanoi nonetheless worked with the remaining TPP members to reach an agreement on a Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for TPP, which was ratified by Vietnam's National Assembly in November 2018 (Jegarajah, 2017; Luong, 2016; Vu, 2018). In addition, Vietnam finalized an FTA with the European Union in 2018 and is in negotiations to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, all of which integrate Vietnam's economy with that of multiple regional and extraregional states, thereby lessening its economic dependence on China.

Finally, the third paradigm of 'cooperation and struggle' has been especially evident during more recent conflicts with China over their maritime disputes. Since the Haiyang Shiyou 981 crisis of 2014, there have not been any high-profile skirmishes between Vietnam and China over the South China Sea. Vietnam has cooperated with China by continuing to engage with its northern neighbour at the working group level, senior official level and in high-level bilateral meetings (Chubb, 2017). In January 2017, Prime Minister Nguyen Phu Trong visited China and met with President Xi Jinping over four days, after which both countries issued a joint communiqué that highlighted their mutual trust and commitment to peacefully managing maritime disputes (Quang, 2017). Despite these improvements in bilateral relations, Vietnam reportedly ended its gas-drilling expedition in a disputed area of the South China Sea after China threatened to attack Vietnamese outposts (Hayton, 2017; Rodríguez, 2017). A similar incident occurred in early 2018 when Vietnam once again cancelled an oil project in the South China Sea after Chinese pressure (Hayton, 2018). Despite Vietnam's fortifications of its South China Sea outposts, economic losses from forfeiting natural resource exploration and potential domestic backlash, Hanoi still opted for cooperation with Beijing rather than risk significantly escalating a conflict that would inevitably and asymmetrically favour China. In addition, the lack of anti-China nationalist protests in Vietnam over these two incidents reveal the extent to which the Vietnamese party-state has the ability to control the dissemination of information to the Vietnamese people and suppress protests that could endanger the goals of the state.

Yet at the same time, Vietnam has consistently pursued the 'struggle' segment of its hedging strategy towards China. After China began large-scale land reclamation on its South China Sea features in mid-2013, Vietnam began land reclamation on its own features in 2014. Between 2014 and 2016, Vietnam reclaimed at least 120 acres on its South China Sea outposts, establishing

infrastructure that could accommodate a military presence (*Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 2016, 2017). Although Vietnam's reclamation activities comprise a fraction of China's—China reclaimed over 3,000 acres between 2014 and 2016, compared to Hanoi's 120 acres—Vietnam has conducted more land reclamation in the South China Sea than any other Southeast Asian claimant. The disproportionate reclamation efforts by Beijing and Hanoi not only reflect the asymmetry between the two countries, but are also indicative of Vietnam's strategy of 'struggling' against China, as Hanoi seeks to entrench its maritime claims and maintain a robust enough South China Sea presence to deter a potential Chinese attempt at seizing Vietnamese-occupied outposts. Vietnam also 'struggles' against China by issuing public rebukes of Beijing's more assertive South China Sea actions. After China landed a plane on Fiery Cross Reef in 2016, Hanoi protested Beijing's violation of Vietnam's sovereignty (*BBC News*, 2016). Similarly, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued official statements accusing China of infringing upon Vietnam's sovereignty after Chinese bombers appeared in the Paracel Islands in May 2018 and after China began construction on a new building in the Paracel Islands in November 2018 (*Reuters*, 2018a, 2018b). In May 2018, Hanoi also asked Beijing to remove its military equipment from the South China Sea (*Reuters*, 2018c). Although these official statements are intended for Hanoi to voice its discord with Beijing, Vietnam also realizes that the other aspects of its strategy—including balancing, interdependence and cooperation—are all key to its management of the South China Sea disputes and its overall relationship with its asymmetrically larger northern neighbour.

In conclusion, despite the unprecedented and at times violent anti-China protests in 2011 and 2014, there is no evidence that these nationalist demonstrations led to a demonstrable shift in Vietnamese foreign policy towards China, both during the particular incidents and in the long term. Since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam has and continues to consistently pursue a strategy of balancing, international integration and 'cooperation and struggle' in order to manage the South China Sea disputes and its relations with China. Because Vietnam is bound by geography, history, economics and politics to its asymmetrical relationship with China, Hanoi will continue to employ a multifaceted strategy to maintain its national interests in the South China Sea while striving to sustain amicable relations with Beijing. Nationalist protests in Vietnam have yet to impact that calculation as tensions continue to linger in the South China Sea.

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