

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 06/03/2017		2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) SEP 2016 – MAR 2017	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Modern Vietnamese Military Strategy: Product of Sino-Vietnamese History and Implications for US-Vietnamese Strategy				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Dewey, Seth E., Major, USMC				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT Vietnam's historical experiences and relationship with China provides a strategic example of successfully resisting the ascendant Red Dragon. Vietnam has employed a sophisticated strategy to offset its domineering northern neighbor and maintain its independence. Vietnam's foreign policy towards China is primarily driven by internal political balancing between defiance and deference. This balancing has shaped Vietnam's hedging foreign policy which seeks to offset China through friendly interactions while building and maintaining relationships with nations that can counter Chinese actions. Vietnam's military strategy derives from this hedging strategy. As the US continues its pivot to the Asia-Pacific region and seeks to find a successful strategy in regards to China's rise, its relations with Vietnam have slowly increased but can still improve. Understanding how Vietnam has successfully resisted China throughout history and the role history has played in shaping Vietnam's military strategy can inform a more efficient and effective US strategy towards Vietnam.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Vietnam; South China Sea; US Defense Policy; Sino-Vietnamese History; Foreign Policy; National Military Strategy					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	35	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE: Modern Vietnamese Military Strategy: Product of Sino-Vietnamese History and Implications for US-Vietnamese Strategy

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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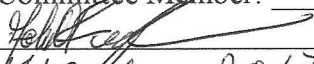
AY 16-17

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Date: 6 MARCH 2017

Executive Summary

Title: Modern Vietnamese Military Strategy: Product of Sino-Vietnamese History and Implications for US-Vietnamese Strategy

Author: Major Seth E. Dewey, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Sino-Vietnamese history has directly shaped Vietnam's modern foreign policy and military strategy, which can inform a more effective US defense strategy for Vietnam.

Discussion: The rise of China in the past two decades has turned the attention of the international community towards the Asia-Pacific. The United States has strategically 'pivoted' to the Pacific partially in response to China's actions and growth, and many nations are observing how US strategy will interact with both China and the wider Asia-Pacific region. The US is now learning how to relate to an assertive China, yet many countries in Asia have centuries of experience operating with a dominant China. Vietnam's historical experiences and relationship with China provides a strategic example of successfully resisting the ascendant Red Dragon. Vietnam has employed a sophisticated strategy to offset its domineering northern neighbor and maintain its independence. Vietnam's foreign policy towards China is primarily driven by internal political balancing between defiance and deference. This balancing has shaped Vietnam's hedging foreign policy which seeks to offset China through friendly interactions while building and maintaining relationships with nations that can counter Chinese actions. Vietnam's military strategy derives from this hedging strategy. As the US continues its pivot to the Asia-Pacific region and seeks to find a successful strategy in regards to China's rise, its relations with Vietnam have slowly increased but can still improve.

Conclusion: Understanding how Vietnam has successfully resisted China throughout history and the role history has played in shaping Vietnam's military strategy can inform a more efficient and effective US strategy towards Vietnam.

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List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CSBV	Cảnh Sát Biển Việt Nam: Vietnam Coast Guard
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
NMS	National Military Strategy
PACOM	United States Pacific Command
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAF	People's Liberation Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific (PACOM-led exercise)
SCS	South China Sea
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VCP	Vietnam Communist Party
VPA	Vietnam People's Army
VPAAF	Vietnam People's Army Air Force
VPN	Vietnam People's Navy

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Introduction

The rise of China in the past two decades has turned the attention of the international community towards the Asia-Pacific, causing every nation with interests in the region to analyze their response to this rise. The United States, under President Obama, has strategically ‘pivoted’ to the Pacific in response to China’s actions and growth, and many nations are observing how the US will interact with both China and the Asia-Pacific region. The US is now learning how to relate to an assertive China, yet most countries in Asia have centuries of experience operating with a dominant China. Vietnam’s historical experiences and relationship with China provides a strategic example of successfully resisting the ascendant Red Dragon. Lockhart and Duiker succinctly described Vietnam’s experience in the region: “Vietnam is, if anything, a survivor—sometimes a loser, often a winner, but always a survivor. It has proven this not only over decades or centuries but millennia.”¹

Vietnam possesses a complicated history based on its geography. The Indochina peninsula forms the nexus of an anthropological melting pot between three regions: the Indian subcontinent, the Southeast Asian archipelagos, and the Chinese subcontinent to the north. Vietnam lies at the center of these three areas, and China has had the most dominant impact on Vietnamese culture. The history of the Vietnamese and Chinese interactions extends beyond two millennia, and this history continues to influence the Sino-Vietnamese relationship regarding politics, foreign policy, and the military strategy sourced from that policy. *Sino-Vietnamese history has directly shaped Vietnam’s modern foreign policy and military strategy, which can inform a more effective US defense strategy for Vietnam.*

The analysis of Sino-Vietnamese history begins with China’s first invasion of Vietnam 2,100 years ago, which resulted in nearly a thousand years of feudal dominance until the Da Viet

people fought for and achieved independence.² Repeated Chinese attempts to reassert control of Vietnam, followed by strong Vietnamese resistance has characterized the past thousand years of Sino-Chinese history. French colonialism over Indochina followed Chinese feudalism, but Vietnam's enduring cultural identity of resistance was again successful in achieving independence from an outside force.

In modern times, Vietnam has employed a sophisticated strategy to offset China. Internal political calculations within the Communist Party of Vietnam primarily drive Vietnam's policy towards China, described as a measured balancing act between defiance and deference.³ This balancing act has shaped Vietnam's hedging foreign policy which seeks to offset China through friendly interactions while building and maintaining relationships with nations that can counter Chinese actions.⁴ Vietnam's military strategy is informed by this hedging strategy and demonstrated through every aspect of its military plans, posture, and activities. As the US focuses on the Asia-Pacific region and seeks to find a successful strategy in regards to China's rise, its relations with Vietnam have slowly improved. Understanding Vietnamese history and modern military strategy will support more effective US efforts as it partners with Vietnam.

Sino-Vietnamese History

One cannot study the history of Vietnam without appreciating the role China has played. Beginning over 2,000 years ago, Chinese expansion into the area now known as Vietnam has repeatedly challenged the Vietnamese and has shaped their culture and identity. Joseph Buttinger writes "[t]he more the Chinese labored to deprive this people [Vietnamese] of its ethnic identity, the faster they promoted the development of a Vietnamese national consciousness."⁵ Starting with the Han Dynasty's invasion of Vietnam in 111 BC, Chinese dynasties ruled Vietnam for a thousand years until Vietnam won independence in 939 AD.⁶

Since that independence, an action and reaction occurred between Chinese incursions aimed at renewing feudalism and Vietnamese resistance efforts. Chinese feudalism attempts were thwarted for the last time when the Vietnamese Nguyen dynasty regained independence in 1802.⁷ French colonialism over Vietnam was established in the mid-1800s, and Vietnamese resistance turned towards a new occupier. In the past century, Vietnam shed colonial control, fought nearly four decades of wars, and now faces yet another Chinese threat of domination.

The first major Chinese incursion into Vietnam occurred in 111 BC when Chinese Emperor Han Wu Di dispatched General Lu Bode and an army of over 100,000 soldiers to conquer the Red River Valley in northern Vietnam.⁸ This force established Han rule that would last nearly uninterrupted for a thousand years. During Han rule, the Vietnamese people began their practice of resistance towards the Chinese, including their first successful rebellion by the Trung sisters in 40 CE.⁹ The Trung sisters are still heralded today within Vietnamese culture as symbols of resistance.¹⁰ In 939 CE, Han rule in Da Viet finally came to an end at the battle of Bach Dang.¹¹ Independence was not to last, as Chinese invasions repeated Sino-efforts to rule its southern tributary including three separate Mongol invasions in the 13th century, the brutal Ming Dynasty rule in the 15th century, and the Mac Dynasty of the 16th century.¹² As the feudalistic period waned in the 17th and 18th centuries, a new power began to influence, and dominate the Vietnamese: colonialism. Starting in 1787 with the Treaty of Versailles, and finishing with the First Treaty of Tientsin in 1884, the French wrangled control of Vietnam and established their colonial holdings in Indochina.¹³

Vietnamese resistance towards an outside power continued, but colonialism did not have the staying power of Chinese feudalism. World events at the turn of the 20th century began to

erode colonialism's hold, and through a combination of the anti-colonialist communist movement and World War II, the Vietnamese were able to remove the grip of colonialism.

The evolution towards modern Vietnamese independence began in the Interwar period of the 1920s and 30s with the birth of communism, and was not complete for a half a century. Ho Chi Minh and his communist party had ideological similarities with their Chinese comrades, and to escape both French colonialism and Japanese aggression, he moved his party to China in 1939. Despite the challenges of fighting the Japanese and collaborating with the Chinese Communists, Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese Communist Party was able to survive World War II.¹⁴

The end of World War II allowed Vietnam to fight for and shed the weakened French control. Culminating in the 1954 Geneva Conference, France ceded control of Vietnam, yet Vietnam found itself split into two separate states.¹⁵ This split was untenable, and despite responsibility for this division belonging to the countries that were party to the 1954 conference (including the USSR, France, the US, and Britain), the Vietnamese still hold animosity primarily towards China for the outcome.¹⁶

Following the Geneva Conference, Vietnam became the next focal point in the Cold War, and war with the Americans was the result. During the American War, Vietnam benefitted from Chinese support in arms, funding, political support, and territorial sanctuary. This friendship with the Chinese was short-lived. Beginning in 1971, Vietnamese reluctance to accept Chinese troops into Vietnam, combined with Vietnam's leanings towards the USSR demonstrated Vietnam's suspicions of Chinese motives.¹⁷ These actions initiated future conflicts between Vietnam and China both in Cambodia and the 1979 Border War, exacerbated by the Vietnamese-Soviet alliance in the late 1970s.¹⁸

Despite defeating the Americans in 1973 and the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, Vietnam would not experience peace for many years to come. Soviet-sponsored Vietnam perceived itself encircled by China to the north and Chinese-sponsored Cambodia to the west. As early as May 1975, border combat between Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge forces and the Vietnamese Peoples' Army had begun, and Khmer-initiated skirmishes increased throughout 1975-1978.¹⁹ Concurrent with Chinese-supported Cambodian provocations, Vietnam formally aligned itself with the Soviet Union in November 1978, signing the 25-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.²⁰ This alliance gave Vietnam the confidence to strike back at Cambodia, and Vietnamese forces invaded on Christmas Day, 1978.²¹ Less than three weeks later, Phnom Penh was under control of Vietnamese forces.²² Vietnam's military occupation of Cambodia would last over a decade and concluded with Vietnam's withdrawal in September 1989, due partly to decreasing support from the collapsing Soviet Union.²³

During the same period as Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, Vietnam's distrust and defiance of China was demonstrated domestically as well. Suspicious of Chinese influence within Vietnam (supported by Soviet opinion), Vietnam initiated policies against its ethnic Chinese population starting in 1976.²⁴ These actions included removal of citizenship rights, prohibitions against teaching the Chinese language, and mass deportations of ethnic Chinese away from Vietnamese population centers.²⁵ The sum effect of Vietnam's actions convinced China to take military action against the Vietnamese.

Less than two months after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, over 100,000 Chinese soldiers crossed the China-Vietnam border to "teach Vietnam a lesson."²⁶ Xiaoming Zhang wrote, "It was China, not Vietnam which actually received the lesson."²⁷ Although China commenced its main attack on February 17th, the build-up of Chinese forces along the border had

begun a month earlier, and tipped the Vietnamese to the impending attack, allowing it to prepare.²⁸ The Chinese attack penetrated the border with six divisions, supported by artillery and armor.²⁹ The PLA crossed the border at multiple locations, with all axes of advance appearing to point towards Hanoi.³⁰ The campaign was limited, however, to ground warfare. Aircraft were restricted to providing air defense and did not employ offensive fire support to the PLA. Although the PLAN had its small southern fleet in the Gulf of Tonkin, they did not participate, possibly because four Soviet Navy ships were operating in the South China Sea, providing deterrence.³¹ Chinese forces withdrew on 5 March, after being handily beaten. Chinese casualties were significant; some estimations place the number above 25,000 killed and a similar number wounded.³² For the next decade, Vietnam stationed over 800,000 troops along the Chinese border. Border clashes continued throughout the 1980s, nearly always instigated by China, and some of these were significant artillery battles.

As the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the Cold War, Vietnam faced a new strategic reality. Without the USSR to support it, Vietnam's military actions against China could not endure. The fall of Soviet communism also meant that Vietnam and China were two of only a handful of surviving communist nations. Vietnam began the process of normalizing relations with China, predicated upon Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in September 1989.³³ Formal diplomatic ties between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the PRC occurred in November 1991, and a land border agreement was finalized in 1999.³⁴

Despite the normalization of relations between the two nations, disputes continued. The territorial conflicts between Vietnam and China have now shifted from what historically has been land-based conflicts to a maritime focus as both nations are placing more value on maritime resources and access to global markets through sea lines of communication. The SCS dispute

between Vietnam and China extends for decades, and from Vietnam's viewpoint demonstrates the opportunistic Chinese mindset that assumes dominance over Vietnam and the region. Beginning in 1958, during a time when Vietnam was heavily dependent on Chinese support, Beijing announced that PRC territory included the Vietnamese-claimed Spratly and Paracel islands.³⁵ China began its physical occupation of Vietnamese-claimed territory in 1974 when it seized the Crescent Group within the Paracel chain.³⁶ This annexation occurred when Vietnam was occupied with its civil war, and at the time Hanoi was only able to respond with a diplomatic protest.³⁷ A year later, Vietnam attempted to even the score. In April of 1975, Vietnamese forces countered by seizing and claiming six islands in the Spratlys;³⁸ attempting to stake claim to the strategically located territory. In 1988, Chinese forces fired on and sank two Vietnamese vessels and killing over seventy Vietnamese, laying claim to the same Spratly reefs.³⁹ Six years after Sino-Vietnamese normalization, China placed an exploratory oil rig in a disputed area of the SCS. This time, Vietnam leveraged its two-year-old membership in the ASEAN, and through ASEAN's collective protest, forced China to remove the oil rig, though China claimed the protests were not a factor in the removal.⁴⁰ Chinese expansion into the SCS has continued to accelerate throughout the past decade. As recently as May 2014, Chinese vessels used ramming tactics and water cannons against Vietnamese Coast Guard ships in the vicinity of the Paracels, which the Vietnamese Coast Guard claims has happened repeatedly.⁴¹

Sino-Vietnamese history extends beyond 2,000 years and demonstrates some clear themes and patterns. Despite the fact that neither China nor Vietnam are monolithic bodies whose character and actions perfectly align to any model, the sum effect of their history provides sufficiency to draw conclusions. China's historical record regarding Vietnam indicates that China views Vietnam as a subservient element within the Sino-sphere, which is subject to

Chinese direction, influence, and expected to show deference to China. Vietnam's historical record demonstrates that Vietnam views itself as an independent, though pragmatic neighbor to China; deferring when necessary, but defying China for the sake of Vietnamese independence. The pattern of Chinese aggression towards Vietnam is evident, as well as that aggression occurring when China perceives Vietnam to be weak or without sufficient support from partner nations. Vietnam's pattern of resistance and survival is clear, as well as successful resistance occurring when Vietnam leverages a partner capable of offsetting a threat. The themes and patterns built over millennia are unlikely to change in the near future. As a senior VPN official declared in 1999, "In thirteen major wars throughout history we stopped the Chinese. The proof is that we are still here after two thousand years."⁴²

Drivers of Vietnamese National Military Strategy

Vietnam's military strategy, like any nation's, derives from a foreign policy based on its internal politics. For Vietnam, domestic politics result from its single authoritarian party, the VCP. Even within the single party system, political opinions among party members are not monolithic; however, the party's collective internal politics frames how the VCP views the nation within the global system and determines Vietnamese action within it including its relationship with China. Two conflicting opinions exist inside the party regarding China. On one side, members of the party share an affinity to China, built on a foundation of solidarity between the two authoritarian regimes and ideals of resistance to Western colonialism.⁴³ On the other side, the historical scars given to Vietnam by China remind party leadership of the potential threat of China. This internal schism certainly isn't a new phenomenon for Vietnam; it has faced this disagreement for centuries. To achieve harmony between these two competing realities,

Vietnam's internal politics seek a balanced approach between deference and defiance with China.⁴⁴

Deference towards China allows Vietnam many advantages, among them are the political and economic gains achieved by forming internal policies friendly to China. Politically, the countries remain (at least in name) as two of only a handful of communist states that still exist. Their shared political ideology provides the basis for diplomatic ties between Vietnam and China, and are demonstrated through regular political exchanges, senior leader meetings, and bilateral discussions. Economically, the relationship is an important bond, which allows Vietnam to pay China the tribute it expects while yielding significant benefits to the Vietnamese economy. In practical terms, Vietnam's economy is asymmetrically bound to China, with 30% of its imports originating in China⁴⁵ and in return, China only receives 11% of Vietnam's exports, worth \$165B. Vietnam's growing tourism industry reinforces this financial relationship. Over a quarter of all visitors to Vietnam are Chinese, exceeding 2.2 million visitors last year.⁴⁶ The VCP's deference policies towards China demonstrate these political and economic ties, and allow Vietnam to maintain the strategic flexibility to exercise the other half of its internal Sino-balancing act: defiance.

Vietnam's defiance towards China has existed since the days of the Han invasion, but in modern times, the nuance with which Vietnam exercises its resistance has changed. Internally to Vietnam, elements within the VCP's membership have expressed defiance through the ideals of nationalism and support for military deterrence.⁴⁷ This support of Vietnamese nationalism is in spite of economic dependence (deference) on China, demonstrating that there exists a portion of the VCP that is willing to sacrifice economic gain for national independence and views China under the "traditional perception of China as an expansionist and aggressive power."⁴⁸

The internal struggle within the VCP between deference or defiance towards China will continue to define policies of the VCP for some time. As Vuving writes, “military resistance and diplomatic deference are the twin characteristics of the traditional Vietnamese way of dealing with China,”⁴⁹ and this debate shapes Vietnam’s foreign policy.

Two elements that have always factored into Vietnam’s strategic plans are the survivability of the VCP⁵⁰ and China. The internal politics within the party have sought a nuanced equilibrium between deference and defiance in regards to China. This balance then translates into Vietnam’s foreign policy, which is best described as a hedging strategy. Hedging is a compromised approach that lies between the extremes of balancing and bandwagoning,⁵¹ and allows Vietnam to achieve both its deference approach (bandwagoning) and its defiance tactics (balancing) with regard to China while maintaining strategic flexibility. This flexibility is a logical and practical approach,⁵² and reinforces the historical themes regarding Vietnamese partnering to deter Chinese aggression. As globalization has increased Vietnam’s international engagement, it has focused its strategy towards those countries that can offset Chinese risks by providing Vietnam with an economic and security counter to the Chinese.⁵³ For example, it is placing increased priority on its relationships with Russia, India, and the US, and to a lesser extent with Japan, South Korea, and Western Europe.⁵⁴

Hedging additionally allows Vietnam to continue its policy of non-alignment; it maintains no treaty alliances with any other country, although it does seek and maintain defensive ties below the level of formal alliances with Russia, India, and to a growing extent, the US. Non-alliance is another product of Sino-Vietnamese history. Simply put, Vietnam does not trust China enough to enter into a treaty alliance with the PRC, and allying with any other credible nation would defy China to such a level that Vietnam would feel Chinese wrath, as was

the case in 1979 when Vietnam allied with the Soviet Union.⁵⁵ Vietnam's competing SCS claims with China, as well as its support to other ASEAN claimant nations, benefits from its hedging strategy. Vietnam shares political and military support with countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and the US while keeping that support at a level that will not decisively affect its relationship with China.

Through sophisticated hedging, Vietnam can maintain its independence, while simultaneously keeping positive relationships with both China and China's key competitors. Given Vietnam's alternatives, it has chosen a path that allows it to succeed in the long term while remembering historical Chinese trends and patterns.

Vietnam's National Military Strategy

Military strategy begins with policy and doctrine, which in turn forms the military organization and physical posture of the force. Design, structure, and posture of the force are tangibly built through resourcing the VPA that enables the procurement of manpower and equipment. Finally, once the force is created and resourced, it gains capability through training, exercises, and operations. Vietnam's NMS reflects its history-informed hedging through all aspects of its China-focused strategy.

The VPA has two functions. First, it is responsible to safeguard the VCP, and second, to defend Vietnam from external threats.⁵⁶ Vietnam has published three white papers outlining its military strategy since 1998, and the latest one was issued in 2009.⁵⁷ The 2009 White Paper's major themes include employing an "all-people national defence,"⁵⁸ involving both its active forces and the five million reserve and militia troops in a combined conventional-guerilla construct. The 2009 White Paper emphasizes the land forces more than the 2006 version, which placed a priority on naval and air forces, but this emphasis on the army appears to indicate a

political gesture towards the army, not a substantial change in Vietnam's modernization efforts of the navy and air force.⁵⁹ Modernization efforts in the maritime domain is still a consistent theme in the 2009 White Paper, with numerous references to maritime territorial security, and defense of Vietnamese-claimed space in the SCS. Vietnam's next White Paper is expected to be released in 2017, and considering the developments in the SCS since 2009, experts anticipate that Vietnam will continue to place emphasis on maritime capabilities to increase its deterrence capabilities against Chinese actions.⁶⁰

Vietnam organizes its defense forces under the umbrella of the Vietnamese Peoples' Army, including the VPAAF, VPAN, and its militia/reserve forces. Among all the branches, the army is dominant.⁶¹ The army currently consists of 412,000 active soldiers, dominating the total active force of 485,000.⁶² The army is organized into regional commands throughout the country under a doctrinal template from a combined Soviet and Chinese model with subtle differences unique to Vietnam and its warfighting experiences during the past 60 years.⁶³

The VPN consists of 43,000 sailors (27,000 are Naval Infantry forces) and operates a fleet of small surface combatants, a newly acquired submarine fleet, and a small aviation wing. In addition, the Vietnamese Coast Guard was reorganized under the VPN in 1998, and is the third largest coast guard in the region, behind China and Japan.⁶⁴ Arrayed from Haiphong in the north to Can Tho in the south, the VPN has seven bases from which it organizes into five regional commands to "strictly manage and control the waters and islands in the East Sea under Vietnam's sovereignty...[and] to be ready for joint and combined operations to defeat any aggression from and at sea."⁶⁵ Clearly focused on Chinese actions in the disputed areas of the SCS, the VPN over the past decade has received the bulk of Vietnamese modernization efforts, and its influence within the VPA appears to be on the rise.

The VPAAF is the smallest of Vietnam's three military branches, with 30,000 active members. Possessing a full complement of fighters, transport, air defense, and command and control, the VPAAF has benefitted over the past decade in Vietnam's modernization efforts second only to the VPN.⁶⁶ Most notably, Vietnam has acquired 36 Su-30MK2 Generation IV fighters in the previous ten years,⁶⁷ and although quantitatively they are overmatched by China, these new additions do provide an added deterrence capability for Vietnam.⁶⁸

Vietnam bases its forces to achieve both internal security, as well as territorial defense. An analysis of the laydown of VPA bases clearly shows where Vietnam views likely potential threats. While there are multiple army bases in the southern portion of the country, most of the army forces garrison in the northern part of the state, specifically aligned with north-south avenues of approach along the Chinese border.⁶⁹ These were the same stations used as launching points to respond to China's invasion in 1979.⁷⁰

VPN's seven naval installations lie at historic ports, with the VPN headquarters and a bulk of its fleet reside at Haiphong in the north, along the mouth of the Red River.⁷¹ Due to China's military build-up on Hainan Island⁷² across the 150-mile Gulf of Tonkin, it appears likely that Vietnam will offset Chinese actions on Hainan by relocating more naval capability to a better strategic location, namely Cam Ranh Bay. Evidence of the VPN's shift towards Cam Ranh facilities includes the Russian-supported construction of Cam Ranh port facilities, the opening of Cam Ranh to ship visits from partner nations including India and the US, and finally, the home-porting of the VPN's newly acquired Kilo submarine fleet at Cam Ranh.⁷³

As Vietnam's economy has grown in the past two decades, it has recently been able to increase its military budget to better support its strategy. Between 2007 and 2012, Vietnam tripled its military budget.⁷⁴ From 2012 to the present, in part due to an economic growth

plateau, Vietnam's military budget has remained on a relatively flat trajectory, but has maintained growth commensurate with its GDP.⁷⁵ The 2016 defense budget was \$4.6 billion, equaling around 2.18% of Vietnam's GDP.⁷⁶ This defense expenditure, compared to the rest of the Southeast Asian States, is significant. In 2016, Vietnam's military spending exceeded Malaysia's and earned the number four ranking in the region, trailing only Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia which all are wealthier countries with larger economies.⁷⁷ The VPA has always held the lion's share of its military budget, about 59.2% of total defense spending. This is understandable considering the VPA accounts for 85% of the manpower of the Vietnamese armed forces.⁷⁸ The forecasted trend in spending, however, shows that both the VPN and VPAAF's comparable amount of the budget has, and will continue to grow through the year 2020.⁷⁹ The money diverted from the army to the navy and air force will allow Vietnam to invest in capabilities essential in providing a credible defense against Chinese actions in the SCS.

In addition, Vietnam has leveraged its hedging foreign policy to acquire additional military funding from partner nations with an interest in checking Chinese actions. Russia recently provided Vietnam with six Kilo class submarines, four Gepard-class frigates, ten Tarantul V corvettes, and 36 Su-30MK2 fighters.⁸⁰ This represents Vietnam's largest bilateral acquisition relationship,⁸¹ though significantly discounted as part of major energy agreements between the two nations.⁸² India has also been assisting Vietnam in defense funding. In 2016, India approved a \$500 million credit line to Vietnam, of which \$100 million was considered a loan for naval equipment Vietnam is purchasing from India.⁸³ Additionally, plans are underway for India to supply BrahMos cruise missiles, capable of being launched via land, air, ships, and submarines.⁸⁴ Other nations with interests in the SCS have also sold weaponry to Vietnam. Japan recently sold six coast guard patrol vessels and the Dutch have provided five offshore

coast guard patrol vessels.⁸⁵ Finally, the US has recently begun providing Vietnam with military assistance funding as part of the Maritime Security Initiative, including an anticipated \$20.5 million in FY 2016 that will go towards VPN ISR and maritime domain awareness efforts in the SCS.⁸⁶

Vietnam has begun an impressive equipment upgrade and expansion effort, most notably for their navy and air force. The Army, whose Soviet-era equipment comprises mostly armor and artillery ranks third in service investment priorities. This is a risk-acceptance decision based largely on land border agreements that Vietnam has conducted with China and Cambodia over the past fifteen years. Some experts expect that the next White Paper and subsequent budgets will place renewed emphasis on ground capability modernization once the navy and air force modernization efforts are met.⁸⁷ The naval upgrades demonstrate Vietnam's seriousness in pursuing a sea denial strategy. Although Vietnam would prefer to employ a full-fledged sea control strategy, the qualitative and quantitative advantage that the Chinese Navy possess limit Vietnam's ambitions to sea denial and an asymmetric strategy.⁸⁸ Despite asymmetry compared to China, the addition of such a large amount of modern maritime equipment has significantly increased Vietnam's maritime security capability and capacity, now owning the fourth largest fleet in the region.⁸⁹

Vietnam's acquisition of sophisticated modern military technology requires an officer and enlisted force capable of employing the new weapons systems. To this end, Vietnam's new education and training efforts, followed by its recent exercises and operations reinforce its Sino-focused strategy.⁹⁰

Vietnam is in the process of improving the quality of its people within the VPA through education and training. New policies within the VPA require undergraduate degrees for all

officers, and officers at the regimental level and above are now ordered to obtain a graduate-level education.⁹¹ Also, an up-or-out promotion system was adopted, incentivizing performance and improving the quality of the force. Finally, conscription policies have been tailored to shorten mandatory active service, based on both an increase in youth population as well as the competitive demand to serve on active duty beyond initial service obligations.⁹²

Vietnam has also diversified its training programs through hedging with partner nations concerned over China's rise. Russia has been providing technical and operative training to Vietnamese sailors on the multiple naval platforms it is providing Vietnam, including on Vietnam's new fleet of Kilo submarines.⁹³ India and Vietnam are also closely linked through a military training relationship; partnering on training for Kilo submarines, Su-30MK2 fighters, as well as tactical ground unit training.⁹⁴ Through these and other training programs, Vietnam is acquiring the technical and operational skills needed to employ its burgeoning modern force.

Vietnam recently began performing both service-level, joint, and multinational exercises to refine the VPA's warfighting capabilities. On a joint level, Vietnam recently conducted a joint exercise focused on amphibious assault and island seizure during the summer of 2016;⁹⁵ sending a clear signal towards China of Vietnam's commitment and capability towards territorial defense. Multilaterally, Vietnam has also conducted naval exercises with India, including in the SCS.⁹⁶ In 2016, Vietnam sent observers to PACOM's largest multinational exercise in the region, Cobra Gold, in Thailand.⁹⁷ This gesture indicates that Vietnam may soon begin participating in this US-led exercise, as well as others such as Balikatan in the Philippines, and RIMPAC in Hawaii.

Although Vietnam is actively training its force, its real-world operational experience is waning. The last military operations Vietnam undertook were in Cambodia, which concluded in

1989,⁹⁸ and only its most senior leaders now have combat experience. Vietnam's navy and coast guard have been active in the SCS, and although the services lack combat experience, their routine missions in the SCS are providing exposure to conventional naval operations.

Vietnam's NMS is clearly focused on China, and informed by a clear pattern of Vietnamese resistance to Chinese aggression. Vietnam's strategy, outlined in its White Paper and demonstrated through its modernization efforts, posturing actions, and operations show a clear trend towards accepting short to medium-term risk in the ground domain while prioritizing maritime territorial defense. Through an "all-people national defence,"⁹⁹ Vietnam's use of both a credible conventional force combined with unconventional 'guerilla' style militia employment will endure as its concept of national defense. In the next decade, Vietnam can be expected to continue its hedging policy through a carefully-paced increase in military relations with nations that have both an interest in and a capability to check China's aggressive actions.

Implications for US Strategy

As the US conducts its Asia-Pacific pivot and continues its efforts to counter Chinese actions in the SCS, it is developing a growing strategic relationship with Vietnam. That relationship requires a foundational understanding of Sino-Vietnamese history and the impact that history has on Vietnamese foreign policy and military strategy. The US should consider both what Vietnamese attitudes are towards a relationship with the US and what it can expect from Vietnam. These considerations will, in turn, drive what US defense strategy should look like, and shape the means to accomplish the strategy.

The development of a realistic US-Vietnamese strategy requires a level of expectation management. US strategy-makers must understand two important points from the Vietnamese perspective. First, although the Vietnamese appear confident in engaging with the US due to

defeating the US in the mid-1970s, they remain suspicious of US intentions. These suspicions are confirmed by US policies and rhetoric that the CPV finds critical and threatening; namely the issues of democracy-promotion and human-rights.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, Vietnam's willingness to develop the US-Vietnamese defense relationship as part of its hedging strategy can mostly be attributed to Vietnam's fears over China.¹⁰¹ With these points in mind, US defense strategy expectations should be modest in the near to mid-term. Specifically, US defense strategy towards Vietnam should seek the overall goal of attaining Vietnam as yet another strategic security partner that can ensure improved stability in the region.

US defense policy should understand certain facts unlikely to change in order to achieve this modest goal. First, the US must recognize that Vietnam's relationship with China is complicated, and although there continues to be friction in Sino-Vietnamese relations, there also exists critical economic and political ties that Vietnam is unwilling to risk. US strategy must leverage Vietnam's hedging to provide a defense-partnering relationship without risking Chinese consequences upon Vietnam. Secondly, geography presents a challenge impossible for the US to completely overcome. US strategy must mitigate the geographical challenge through both an overall sustained presence in the region, as well as be able to respond when and where Vietnam desires US presence. Finally, US strategy and policy must recognize and leverage the Vietnamese hedging strategy through a long-term approach.

Operating in support of Vietnam's hedging strategy requires applying a few principal tenets. First, US policy should accept that Vietnam will not commit to a formal security alliance that jeopardizes Sino-Vietnamese relations. Vietnam learned this lesson in the late 1970s with the Soviet Union, and will not "betray" China again.¹⁰² By accepting Vietnam's relationship with China, the US can potentially leverage Sino-Vietnamese relations to its benefit, gaining greater

access and engagement with China for a variety of purposes. Secondly, due to lingering Vietnamese suspicions, US policy should also seek to gain from Vietnam's bilateral relations with other nations to indirectly accomplish US strategic goals through third party nations. Finally, US defense officials should shape the reassessment of US policy towards Vietnam to allay Vietnam's suspicions of US intentions. Specifically, by adopting a longer-term approach to improving US-Vietnam relations, the US should tone down rhetoric concerning democracy-promotion and human-rights; these issues enable CPV suspicions, and drive Vietnam away from the US.¹⁰³ The intent would not be to abandon American values and policy goals, but to simply lower the rhetorical volume enough to allow democracy and human rights in Vietnam to improve over time through increased US access to Vietnam.

To these strategic ends, the US military can establish specific actions that will support improved defense relations. The creation of these goals for the US military has already begun. In 2015, US Secretary of Defense Carter signed the *U.S.-Viet Nam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations* while visiting Hanoi.¹⁰⁴ In the statement, it acknowledged a US respect for Vietnamese sovereignty, defined bilateral security interests regarding regional stability, territorial integrity, and the international rule of law, and established a broad framework of goals to improve bilateral defense ties.¹⁰⁵ The goals of US military strategy for Vietnam should include increased and enhanced efforts in the areas of bilateral military engagement activities, security funding, equipment supplying, and encouraging VPA participation in regional combined exercises. Bilateral engagement activities between the US and Vietnam should increase. Vietnam will not accept every invitation the US military extends, but over time this increasing level of engagement will reap dividends. Resourcing and funding should also increase to the VPA, especially in light of the US fully lifting its arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016.¹⁰⁶

Through initiatives such as the Maritime Security Initiative, additional funds to Vietnam will enable it to resource and sustain a force capable of defending itself and contributing towards regional security and stability.¹⁰⁷ In addition to funding, the US should increase providing military equipment including lethal aid to Vietnam. Foreign Military Sales, Excess Defense Articles, and other programs can provide Vietnam with high-end US capabilities (at discounted prices) to compete with the predominantly Russian equipment they acquire currently.

To achieve the balance required to support Vietnam's hedging strategy, the US should support Vietnam directly as much as possible without imperiling Sino-Vietnamese relations. Beyond what support is possible through direct means, the US should encourage Vietnamese relations with third party nations as the means to a US-Vietnamese end. India is a perfect example of a third-party enabler whose diplomatic, economic, and military relationship with Vietnam supports its hedging strategy.¹⁰⁸ Based on this strong relationship, the road to US-Vietnamese defense ties could be paved via India. Through PACOM's current prioritization of US-Indian relations,¹⁰⁹ trilateral engagements, exercises, and exchanges between India, Vietnamese, and American forces could initiate improved US-Vietnamese defense relations over time. In addition to India, other nations such as Japan, and the ASEAN states offer the US indirect pathways using a similar model. Supporting Vietnam by patiently operating within its hedging strategy will allow US security strategy in the region to more effectively attain the national objectives both countries have.

Conclusion

Two thousand years of Sino-Vietnamese history demonstrates a clear pattern of Chinese attempts to dominate a resilient Vietnam. This long history has formed a defining aspect of Vietnamese cultural identity. Vietnam's pragmatic foreign policy defined by a hedging approach

will continue as long as Vietnam can apply a level of defiance towards China that is supported through relationships with partner nations. While hedging, Vietnam's military will continue to seek to create and maintain a force that credibly deters China while its diplomatic activities will defer more to Beijing. The opportunity exists for the US to leverage Sino-Vietnamese tensions to accomplish mutual US-Vietnamese strategic goals through military to military relations. These goals must be tempered with long-term strategic patience and a level of commitment by the US that Vietnam can have confidence in. Working through third parties such as India, Japan, and ASEAN, the US can support Vietnamese objectives while furthering US policy goals. By applying the lessons learned in Sino-Vietnamese history to understand Vietnam's military strategy, the US risks very little but has a significant opportunity to gain another strategic military partner in the region, reinforcing the US and regional efforts to counter China's rise.

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- ⁷ *Ibid*, xxiii.
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- ²⁰ *Ibid*, xxxii.
- ²¹ Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5.
- ²² Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 221; Lockhart and Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam*, xxxii.
- ²³ Lockhart and Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam*, xxxiv. A complex set of factors led to Vietnam's withdraw from Cambodia that are outside the scope of this historical summary. In addition to the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, other factors included Vietnam's diminishing ability to resource its Cambodian efforts due to a weak economy, and the political fatigue associated with a decade-long occupation. For more information on the Vietnam-Cambodian conflict, see Stephen J Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*.
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