

Dosch, Jörn; Vuving, Alexander Lam

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# The impact of China on governance structures in Vietnam

Jörn Dosch

Alexander L. Vuving

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**Prof. Dr. Jörn Dosch**, University of Leeds, UK  
E-Mail: [j.dosch@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:j.dosch@leeds.ac.uk)

**Prof. Dr. Alexander L. Vuving**, Tulane University, USA  
E-Mail: [avuving@tulane.edu](mailto:avuving@tulane.edu)

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© Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik gGmbH  
Tulpenfeld 6, 53113 Bonn  
☎ +49 (0)228 94927-0  
☎ +49 (0)228 94927-130  
E-Mail: [die@die-gdi.de](mailto:die@die-gdi.de)  
<http://www.die-gdi.de>

## Abstract

This paper addresses the question as to how and to what degree the form of political order in Vietnam has been influenced by China. How and to what extent have Vietnam's governance structures been converged toward or diverged from the Chinese model of political organization and rule? Similarities of governance structures in Vietnam and China are primarily the result of analogy or the fact that both regimes have faced comparable challenges first with regard to their respective national revolutionary struggles and later the establishment and institutional fostering of communist rule, acted under similar conditions and pursued similar goals which have resulted in the part convergence of the two countries' political institutions, structures, and practices that occurred without the direct exercise of influence. The most prominent example of chasing analogous objectives certainly refers to the economic reform processes toward market systems and the integration in global economic structures without touching the main pillars of the respective political orders. Overall, the convergence of governance systems in Vietnam and China lies in principles and policy (the value system of reform) rather than in structures and polity. Vietnam's learning from China is more a "path imitation" than "model imitation."

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## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAFTA	China-ASEAN Free Trade Area
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPIC	Communist Party of Indochina
ECAFE	UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JMSU	Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking
KMT	Kuomintang
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vietnam
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCAP	Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers
TCCS	Tap Chí Cong San
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UN	United Nations
VCP	Vietnam Communist Party
VNQDD	Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang
WTO	World Trade Organization

## 1 Introduction

How and to what degree has the form of political order in Vietnam been influenced by China? In other words, how and to what extent have Vietnam's governance structures converged toward or diverged from the Chinese model of political organization and rule? Does China try to influence Vietnam's political system? Does Vietnam accept Chinese political influence or seek to counteract it? What explains the similarities and differences between Vietnam's and China's governance structures? This paper will attempt to elaborate an answer to these questions.

There are six major ways that the governance structures of a country are potentially influenced by foreign countries. In the first, governance structures are unilaterally imposed by foreign power. In the second, importing a foreign model of political organization and rule is a condition for cooperation. The third way of systems influence is through encouragement by foreign actors. In the fourth way, convergence occurs as a result of regional integration. In the fifth way, governance structures are imported as the host country imitates an attractive model. In the sixth, a given country simply inherits the political model of its former colonial regime. There is a seventh type of systems convergence that does not involve either active or passive influencing. In this type, the convergence exists because two rational actors act under similar conditions and pursue similar goals.

The trajectories of Vietnam's governance structures after the Cold War show remarkable similarities with those of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This raises the question as to what causes those similarities. Given that China did export its political model to Vietnam during the 1950s and Vietnam has returned to the Chinese sphere of influence following the pullout of the Soviet Union from Indochina in the late 1980s, it is tempting to think that the convergence of Vietnam's governance structures toward those of China in the post-Cold War era reflects Chinese attempts to shape the lesser neighboring state after its own mold. However, although China has sought to keep Vietnam close to its orbit, we found no empirically sound evidence that China has tried to impose its own model of political organization on Vietnam. The absence of China's efforts to export its model of political organization to Vietnam can be explained by China's grand strategy in the post-Cold War period in general and China's interests in Vietnam in particular. China's grand strategy in the post-Cold War era is focused on its own economic development, national security, and international position in an era of US hegemony. In general, exporting its own development model or socialist system is not part of China's foreign policy in the post-Cold War. This is derived from China's overall goal in the period as well as from the negative lessons of the Mao era when China posed itself as the leader of the Third World and pursued a foreign policy of exporting the Chinese version of revolution and socialism. China's lack of interest in promoting its political institutions abroad is also due to the fact that in the reform period Beijing does not regard its political system the best model that the world should copy. China's main interests in Vietnam in the post-Cold War era are (1) to gain advantages in territorial disputes with Hanoi, (2) to keep Hanoi from veering toward the US, (3) to encourage Hanoi to pursue pro-China policies in the Taiwan issue and other international affairs, and (4) to encourage Hanoi to have preferential treatment of Chinese products and businesses.

We argue that the systems convergence has occurred mainly because the two communist parties ruling China and Vietnam started from similar initial conditions and pursued simi-



lar goals but also due to Vietnam's voluntary learning from the successful Chinese model (Types 7 and 5 as introduced above). These two types are closely intertwined in our case. The main reason why the Vietnamese have been looking to China for lessons is that (1) both the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are in a similar situation vis-à-vis their domestic and international environment, (2) that their economic and political systems share significant similarities, and (3) they share many similar goals, including economic development and political stability. As China's success becomes clearer and China's power increases, the Chinese model attracts more admirers and learners in Vietnam. Thus, Vietnam's reformers learn from China's lessons in boosting the economy, while conservatives build on China's lessons in keeping the communist party in power.

Yet, neither the conservatives nor the reformers want to appear that they are copying the Chinese model. This is largely because of the lessons they drew from Vietnam's socio-economic crisis in the 1980s, when Vietnam mirrored its political and economic system upon the Soviet model and nearly collapsed. The lesson was that Vietnam should not blindly copy others' models. In the post-Cold War era, the Vietnamese have tried to learn from everywhere, but most of the time, they learned from their own successes and failures. When they turned outside, they dwelled much on China if the problem was how to govern a country with a communist party, and on South Korea and Singapore if the problem was how to build a powerful and effective economy.

Although China does not seek to influence Vietnam in terms of systems convergence, Beijing does try to keep Hanoi within its own sphere of influence. To understand the complexity of Sino-Vietnamese interactions in the post-Cold War era, it is important to note the internal division of the Vietnamese ruling elite in the period. Vietnam's grand strategy in the *doi moi* (reform) era reflects the conflict and compromise between the anti-imperialists (conservatives) and the integrationists (reformers). For the Vietnamese anti-imperialists, whose first priority is to maintain the VCP regime, China is their strategic ally. For the integrationists, China is rather a source of threat and obstacle than one of support and hope. For the integrationists, China is important in the negative sense because of its size, proximity, and territorial disputes with Vietnam. For the anti-imperialists, China is important in the positive sense because of its size, proximity, and political regime. China's support for the anti-imperialists in Vietnam has been a massive source for the survival of the Hanoi regime. However, China's pressures on territorial disputes and its assertiveness and heavy-handedness in dealing with the Vietnamese have fueled anti-China sentiments. These sentiments have been restricted since the late 1980s when Hanoi badly needed an alternative source of international support to fill the gap created by Soviet pullout. With the rise in power of the integrationists, who are nationalists rather than regime-keepers, and the warming of relations between Vietnam and the United States, nationalism is increasingly breaking out of the restrictions. The anti-China protests in Vietnam of December 2007 are an indication of the re-emergence of nationalism. As China demands Hanoi to suppress these patriotic activities, it puts the VCP regime in a dire strait. If Hanoi yields to Beijing, it will appear to be unpatriotic and lose the support of the patriotic elites. If Hanoi co-opts these patriotic elites, it will antagonize China. Either way, China's actions may produce the effect of jeopardizing the stability of the Hanoi regime.

This paper will first provide a typology of systems influence and convergence. After an overview of Sino-Vietnamese relations that serves as a historical background to the analy-

sis that follows, we will examine China's grand strategy in the post-Cold War era, Vietnam's importance to China and China's policy toward Vietnam in order to show why China does not try to export its own model to Vietnam. In the next section, we explore the interests and orientations of Vietnam's ruling elites as well as China's role in their strategies. Doing so, we offer an argument as to why and how Vietnam has imitated China since the mid-1980s. We also examine the major differences between the two country's political systems. In the conclusion, we discuss the intended and unintended impact of China's interactions with Vietnam on the latter's political organization and stability.

## 2 Typology of systems influence and convergence

Any attempt at answering our central research question first requires some general reflections on the way and extent governance structures in a given national political system are potentially influenced by exogenous structures and agencies. This section will provide a typology of systems influence and convergence. This typology is to exhibit the basic mechanisms of systems influence and convergence and put the Sino-Vietnamese case in a comparative context.<sup>1</sup>

Governance structures in a given national political system can be influenced by foreign actors in various ways. These methods of influence range from the use of coercion to a mix of pressures and incentives to the provision of either incentives or attraction or tradition. Additionally, political systems in different countries can also converge without the involvement of influence. We identify six major types of external impact on governance and an extra type of systems convergence that does not involve influencing. As political influence in reality is transmitted through various channels, the types we identify here are necessarily ideal types in the Weberian sense. Although ideal types are rarely found in their pure forms in reality, they are useful for the sake of analysis because they clarify the mechanisms through which influence is exercised.

We label the six channels of systems influence (1) imposition, (2) conditioning, (3) encouragement, (4) integration, (5) imitation, and (6) inheritance. While imposition is based on the effect of coercion, conditioning on the combination of pressures and incentives, encouragement on incentives, integration on socialization, imitation on attraction, and inheritance on tradition. The extra type of convergence without influencing is termed (7) analogy.

**Type 1: Imposition.** This type refers to cases in which governance structures are externally imposed and enforced. The most prominent example refers to the political reforms brought about in Japan during the American occupation from 1945 to 1952. The Allied Forces (Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers or SCAP) imposed on the country a constitutional democracy – based on a new Constitution that was entirely drafted by SACAP without Japanese participation – and initiated significant social, economic, and political changes. The establishment of communist regimes after the Cold War in those Eastern

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1 While this typology was exclusively developed for the purpose of this study, the aim is to apply it also to other case studies. However, as with any new academic concepts, it might require further refinement to make it a useful tool for analysis.

European countries where the Soviet Red Army was present can also be seen as examples of this type. Although they were set up by local communists, communist regimes in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and East Germany had not been possible without the presence of the Red Army and the agreement of Yalta, which in effect gave the USSR the right to shape its sphere of influence in its own image.

**Type 2: Conditioning.** This type refers to a wide range of cases in which systems influence occurs as a result of the combined employment of pressures and incentives. The promotion of democracy and good governance as a cornerstone of development cooperation is a subset of this type. When democracy emerged as the only game in town after the end of the Cold War, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) world intensified its efforts to propagate and promote the transition to liberal democratic systems on a larger scale than ever before. Today, all major Western donor organizations and aid agencies follow a global strategy of fostering processes of democratization and good governance. While conditioning is a softer approach to the remodeling of governance structures driven by exogenous agencies than imposition, it can have similar outcomes and impacts. Cambodia is a case in point where democracy has to be seen as the project of the international donor community. The political reform process has been externally driven and is not rooted within Cambodian politics and society.

The transplantation of the Chinese model into Vietnam during the 1950s was also an example of conditioning. Under the pressures to conduct Mao Chinese-style land reforms and ideological adjustments and the incentives of Chinese financial, military and diplomatic support, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam adopted numerous Mao Chinese practices and institutions even at the cost of large-scale popular protests, as seen during the 1953-1956 land reform campaign (Hoang Tung 2004; Le Xuan Khoa 2004; Hoang Van Chi 1964).<sup>2</sup>

Conditioning also provides a possible mechanism of altering governance structures in the wake of sudden structural change in the international environment. Especially, international crises can force governments to adjust governance structures in order to effectively and efficiently respond to a crisis or to prevent similar crises from affecting the state again in the future. In this sense the Asian crisis of 1997-98 resulted in significant institutional changes (better mechanisms of checks and balances, more transparent decision-making procedures, more independence of central banks from the executive etc.) in Indonesia, South Korea and Thailand. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) played a significant role in prescribing the reforms and, through external pressure, contributing to their implementations.

**Type 3: Encouragement.** This type resides at the other extreme of a continuum that includes imposition at one end and conditioning in between. A subset of this type includes

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2 Tung was a former Secretary of the VCP Central Committee and Editor-in-Chief of Nhan Dan, the Party central newspaper, his memoirs was confiscated shortly after it was released. Given the fact that in the early 1950s ideological gaps within the communist camp had not yet become as manifest as from the late 1950s on, Vietnam also followed orthodox socialist practice modeled after the Soviet system. In this case, adopting certain practices and institutions that existed in China too might be interpreted as „imitation“ or „analogy“, i. e. having drawn similar conclusions under similar circumstances. Positively speaking the process might also be interpreted as „integration“, i. e. voluntary harmonization of structures within the communist bloc.

externally funded or supported insurgencies, military coups and other ‘informal’ means of influencing or overthrowing national political orders. Beijing’s sponsorship of communist insurgency movements across Southeast Asia between the 1950s and late 1970s (or possibly early 1980s) and the factual or alleged involvement of the United States in military coups in various parts of the world during the Cold War with the target of establishing or re-establishing pro-US and/or anti-communist governments are cases in point. Encouragement also includes influence by means of negative incentives. Non-intervention of external agencies can exert considerable impact on political order. For example, Washington’s decision not to render support to the regime of Ferdinand Marcos during the People Power Revolution in the Philippines in 1986 was a decisive factor that contributed to the ousting of Marcos and paved the way for the re-democratization of the country’s political system.

**Type 4: Integration.** This type refers to the convergence of governance structures by regional integration. The European integration process has been the main driving force behind the harmonization of governance structures across the region, particularly with regard to new member states which have to fully comply with an extensive set of institutional requirements before they are eligible for admission to the European Union (EU). Other regional integration schemes such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have also – but to a markedly lesser extent – resulted in institutional convergence in some areas of governance or at least a growing regional consensus on core institutional norms and procedures, for example in the case of ASEAN and the ASEAN Charter that was unveiled in November 2007.

**Type 5: Imitation.** This type refers to the convergence of political institutions resulting from international learning processes and cross-border elite interactions. In specific contextual circumstances national elites look at other states and governance systems as models with the objective of learning from the latter’s experiences to deal with similar structural challenges at national or international levels. After achieving independence in 1949 Indonesia under the regime of its first President Sukarno perceived India as a model for economic development and the conduct of foreign policy. In the 1980s then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad openly and vocally promoted the idea of substituting Western (especially British) concepts of governance with the Japanese and South Korean models which were deemed to be culturally closer to the Malaysian case. A high level and volume of interactions among political elites of different states can also result in the convergence of governance structures as relations between the communist regimes of Vietnam and Laos, for example, have demonstrated in the past decades. However, the probability for this to happen seems to be higher in the cases of neighboring countries and particularly those states that are already characterized by similar political systems and ideological or otherwise norm-based approaches to governance.

**Type 6: Inheritance.** This type refers to the post-colonial modeling of political institutions. This is probably the most common type of systems influence since newly independent states usually establish their political institutions on the basis of those they inherit from their former colonial power. When Vietnam regained its independence from China in the 10th century, its political system was largely designed after the Chinese model. In modern Asia similarly, the Philippines modeled its governance structures after the US political

system while Malaysia and Singapore set up their political institutions on the Westminster model of their former British colonial power.

**Type 7: Analogy.** In this type, the convergence of political institutions, structures, and practices occur without the exercise of influence. For example, a shared history of similar colonial experiences (and specific socio-political and socio-economic structures that emerged under colonial rule) and challenges faced during the struggle for independence often result in analogous concepts of governance as in the cases of the Andean countries. While the influence by the former colonial power is inheritance, the convergence among countries sharing the same former colonial heritage is rather analogy. This phenomenon is not limited to neighboring countries and rather based on the specific nature and characteristics of power structures and institutions which were either explicitly introduced or unintentionally brought about by colonial rules or post-colonial national elites in different parts of the world. This observation applies to governance structures in many states within the Commonwealth or similarities of governance features in the Philippines and some Latin American countries. Further instances in this category are cases of independent states that used to be part of a larger nation or empire and despite having broken free still base their political institutions on cultural and historical foundations associated with the former hegemonic power.

### **3 Historical background and recent developments in Sino-Vietnamese relations**

The formation of Vietnam's identity is closely related to the nation's resistance to its giant northern neighbor, China, and the gradual expansion southwards from its original heartland in the Red River Delta and the north-eastern coastal plain. China ruled Vietnam for more than a thousand years, from 112 BC when the present northern Vietnam became incorporated into the Chinese Han empire, until AD939. For the next 900 years Vietnam's rulers focused on preventing Chinese attempts to re-impose its power. This led to an increased sense of nationhood and identity vis-à-vis China and proto-nationalism existed in Vietnam before it emerged in the other countries of Southeast Asia. By the time of the Ly dynasty (1010-1225), which was established on the Red River Delta, the outlines of Vietnamese identity were relatively clear. This was about the same time as Great Britain and France were becoming nation states. Unlike other countries in the region (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines), Vietnam was already a clearly defined nation-state before the arrival of the European colonial powers due to the existence of an established pre-colonial tradition, a well-formed culture and language and the presence of an effective political and economic system.

At the same time, Vietnam remained closely linked with China, both politically and militarily, as a tributary state, and also absorbed Chinese cultural influences, most prominently Confucianism, after which Vietnamese family, bureaucratic, social structures and the form of government were patterned. This also applies to similarities in the revolutionary struggle of the two nations.

Unlike the British colonial regime in India, the French administration refused to tolerate a nation-wide constitutional opposition movement comparable to the Congress Party and thus effectively blocked a gradual transition to independence in Indochina. The colonial

regime permitted only limited expression to constitutionalist Vietnamese opposition and harshly suppressed more radical resistance. In these circumstances a number of communist groups were formed during the 1920s. Among them the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) Nationalist Party was established in 1927 and ideologically based on China's Kuomintang (KMT). However, like similar groups at the time, the VNQDD did not succeed due to its exclusive urban outlook and inability to develop mass mobilization. Furthermore, the party's strategy of gaining independence by coup and assassinations did not have the desired impact. In 1929 an attempt to assassinate the governor general and in 1930 an attempted military uprising within French colonial army failed. The Communist Party of Indochina (CPIC), founded in 1930, initially proved to be more influential when it organized a peasant movement of serious proportions. The movement, generally known as the 'Nghe Tinh Soviets', emerged in mid-1930 in parts of Cochin-China, and in Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Annam. It continued until 1931, when it was suppressed with the use of French air power.

Ultimately, the presentation of Marxism-Leninism as an appealing and effective means of recovering Vietnamese independence and the main pillar of nationalism was successful for five reasons. First, the socio-economic and socio-political mobility of the Vietnamese, regarded only a second or third class in society, was very limited. While French and Chinese entrepreneurs and landowners controlled the economy, French resistance to national independence hindered any political impact of the Vietnamese. Second, the attraction of Marxism in 1920s was that it provided a scientific explanation of history and a rationalization of superiority and subordination. It denounced inequality and developed a vision of the inevitable victory of the weak. Third, Leninism demonstrated the ability of a vanguard party to speed up history and push it forward and enable the dramatic reordering of society following class analysis based on domestic class forces and international factors. Fourth, Mao and the people's war in China showed that it was possible to fight a more powerful enemy. Fifth, Communism offered parallels with Confucianism. Similarities between Marxism and Confucianism include the belief in truth and quasi-sacred texts, well-trained elites who indoctrinate the masses, personal ethics, and the subordination of the individual to the community.

World War II should transform the Communist Party's prospects. The capitulation of France to Nazi Germany in June 1940 caught Indochina by surprise and ended the idea of French military prowess and invincibility. In March 1945 Japanese forces staged a coup against the French, abolishing the colonial administration. On 11 March Tokyo declared Vietnam's independence under Japanese auspices but chose a leader who was not a prominent nationalist like Aung San or Sukarno, but the Emperor Bao Dai. In the absence of any real contenders for political power the communist united front organization, the Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, who as Nguyen Ai Quoc had played a significant part in founding the CPIC, quickly filled the vacuum left by the surrender of Japan in August 1945. According to the cultural beliefs of many Vietnamese France had failed to protect Vietnam from Japan and consequently lost its 'heavenly mandate' to rule.

On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The declaration of independence sparked 30 years of war, with first French then American involvement. In 1950 the war became internationalized when France succeeded in portraying it as a fight against communism, not as struggle for independence, in the wake of Mao's victory in China and the outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula. The US

administration accepted this premise and American military aid began in May 1950, funding 80 % of the war in Indochina by 1953.

In 1940s the CPIC developed a multi-dimensional strategy that held through the French and US wars. The class struggle was subordinated to the nationalist struggle. In the anticipated two phases to revolutionary struggle the democratic nationalist revolution enjoyed priority and, once achieved, would be followed by the socialist revolution. A national united front was established, allied with the traditional class enemies (e.g. patriotic landlords) and with non-communist organizations and groups, such as the Vietnam Socialist Party, Democratic Party, Buddhists, hill tribes and students. The Viet Minh set up a network of alliances and organizations which covertly controlled trade unions and other organizations that were not overtly political. In 1945 the Viet Minh devised a broad and attractive public program comprising the establishment of a popular assembly to draft a democratic constitution, the abolishment of French taxes, the industrialization and modernization of the agriculture sector, broad social legislation (5-day week, minimum wages, etc), and autonomy for ethnic minorities. In military terms the strategy was influenced by Mao's concept of 'people's war' and dependence on peasantry and adapted strategy to peasant base. The army was divided into three groups: Guerrillas (part-time guerrillas full-time peasants for peasants fight within one or two days distance of their village), regional forces (those agree to leave fields for one to three months per year, better trained, involved in major operations), and regular troops (uniformed, full-time military).

After the communist victory in 1975 and the reunification of South and North Vietnam in 1976 the VCP became the dominant political force in the country. The party's internal structure was similar to that of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union or the Chinese Communist Party. Other important political forces - the government, the army and the bureaucracy - remained subordinate to it. Like the communist parties in China and Cuba the VCP has indigenous roots. It was not imposed upon the country by the Red Army, but gained power through a war of national liberation. However, unlike the personality-based regimes of North Korea and Cuba, for example, the VCP was committed to a system of collective leadership. For almost three decades (from independence in the north in 1954 to the Sixth Party Congress in 1986) the top leadership of the party remained virtually unchanged: a stability and continuity which distinguishes Vietnam from most other former and surviving communist states, including the Soviet Union and China. No more than 30 people served on the Politburo between the party's first congress in 1935 and its seventh in 1991. The reasons for this cohesiveness are the circumstances of fighting a revolutionary war of national liberation and the conscious attempt to pursue a collective style of leadership rather than encourage personality cults. The main institutional structures of political power and governance have remained intact since 1976. Government policy is set by the Politburo, the executive of the party. The Politburo is elected by the VCP Central Committee, which is elected by Party Congresses that are held, more or less, in five yearly intervals. The Central Committee party secretariat issues directives to party members and directs government policy on a day-to-day basis. There is considerable overlap between party and government. Sectional interests in Vietnamese society are channeled through mass organizations which are grouped under the umbrella of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, a united front organization subordinate to the party.

Any political attempts to a peaceful reconstruction of war-torn Vietnam in the 1970s and first half of the 1980s were hindered by Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in December

1978 and January 1979. According to Hanoi's view the intervention aimed at stopping the genocide in Cambodia and toppling the Khmer Rouge's murderous regime under Pol Pot's leadership – both objectives were achieved. The West, however, considered the Vietnamese action as an international aggression and an attempt to establish Vietnamese hegemony over Indochina. As a result, both Western states and China cut off aid and development assistance to Vietnam. For its neighbors in Southeast Asia, Vietnam became a threat to their security and to regional stability. As a result, Vietnam's prestige was severely damaged, and it faced diplomatic isolation. In February 1979 Vietnam suffered a large-scale Chinese invasion that further drained its manpower and scarce material resources. The war ended shortly, but friendly and peaceful relations between the two countries had been lost. Under such circumstances, Vietnam adopted a "one-sided tilt" foreign policy (*nhat bien dao*). It now completely leaned toward the Soviet Union and the Comecon for aid and markets. It soon became clear that the dream of national liberation and unity did not bring about the expected results partly due to Vietnam's international situation.

Sino-Vietnamese relations rapidly transformed into much friendlier bilateral relations in the wake of Vietnam's unconditional retreat from Indochina in 1989 and Hanoi's constructive role in the process of settling the Cambodian conflict. In general terms Vietnam's post-1988 'new outlook' in the conduct of its foreign affairs paved the way for improved relations with China. In November 1991 the two governments re-established diplomatic ties. While political mutual trust, the promotion of economic and trade cooperation, and exchanges in cultural and other fields have markedly improved, Sino-Vietnamese affairs have been far from being trouble-free. An important area of dispute concerns the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands. The Spratlys are a collection of mostly barren coral reefs, atolls, and sand bars covering an area of some 70,000 square miles. This area is claimed, in whole or in part, by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. The other major area of dispute in the South China Seas concerns the Paracels, which are claimed by China and Vietnam (in 1976 China captured the Paracels from Vietnam). Vietnam has maintained a military presence on 21 of the Spratly islands, China on seven. The controversy itself lay relatively dormant until 1988 when the Chinese and Vietnamese navies clashed at Johnson Reef, sinking several Vietnamese boats and killing over 70 sailors. Since then hostilities in the South China Sea have regularly erupted.

However, general progress on border issue and conflicting territorial claims has been made since the late 1990s. A significant Sino-Vietnamese land border treaty was concluded in December 1999, delineating the 1,300-km land border between northern Vietnam and southern China and settling more than 100 areas of dispute. The treaty marked an important step in improving the often-strained relations between the two communist neighbors. In December 2000 after many rounds of negotiations the agreement on the demarcation of the Gulf of Tongking was eventually signed, although it took effect only in June 2004 after more than three years of negotiations concerning the implementation of the agreement. There were no conflicting claims on the sea border, but its demarcation proved to be an unwieldy process. In October 2006 Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao reached agreement to complete the delineation of their land border by 2008 and to step up negotiations on demarcation of maritime waters outside the Tonkin Gulf (Thayer 2007, 11). The 'ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea' of 1992, which was also signed by China in 2002, has generally eased tensions but falls short of a legally binding code of conduct. After China and the Philippines signed the August 2004 Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) Agree-



ment to study and identify areas of oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea, in March 2005, Vietnam joined the Philippines and China to sign a new JMSU to conduct joint scientific research in the South China Sea, where the Spratly island chain is disputed.

At the same time the conflicting claims in the South China Sea to the Spratly and Paracel Islands remained unchanged. The most recent clash between Vietnam and China occurred on 9 July 2007 when a Chinese naval vessel fired on Vietnamese fishing boats in disputed waters, causing one death.

Since 2005 China has been Vietnam's top trading partner with a bilateral trade volume of 10.42 billion US\$ in 2006 (Vietnam's export was 3.03 billion US\$, and import was 7.39 billion US\$ resulting in a significant increase in Vietnam's trade deficit with China) (MOFA 2007). The promotion of economic and trade co-operation, mutual political trust and exchanges in cultural and other fields have markedly improved, as Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong's visit to China in July 2005 and Chinese President Hu Jintao's reciprocal visit to Vietnam in November of the same year demonstrated. Among the results of the state visits was a promise of Chinese support for Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). The growing importance of Sino-Vietnamese relations was illustrated in August 2006 when Nong Duc Manh chose China as the destination for his first official overseas trip since his re-election to the position of party general secretary in April that year. On the occasion of the APEC Summit hosted by Vietnam in November 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao came to Hanoi to sign 11 cooperation agreements and pledged to assist Vietnam in improving road and railway infrastructure in two economic corridors and the Beibu Gulf (or Gulf of Tongking) economic belt involving China's Guangxi, Guangdong, Hainan, Hong Kong, and Macau, and ten coastal provinces of Vietnam.

In certain aspects, China continued to be seen as more important than the US in Vietnam's efforts to maintain the best possible balance in its relations with the two giant powers when newly-elected President Nguyen Minh Triet carefully planned his first-ever visits to the two countries. He went to visit China from 15–18 May 2007, one month before his visit to the United States. However, a sense of resentment toward China, emanating from historical legacies, has persisted within much of Vietnam's political elite and a significant part of the wider Vietnamese population.

No two sets of bilateral relationships are more important to Vietnam than its relations with China and the United States. "Comrades, but not allies" was how Chinese leaders summed up their country's view of Vietnam in 1992 on the occasion of then prime minister Li Peng's trip to Hanoi - the first visit of a Chinese prime minister to Vietnam in 21 years. One and a half decades on, relations between the two states have markedly improved but still face multiple challenges. According to the deputy head of the National Assembly's External Relations Committee, Ton Nu Thi Ninh, relations with China have "*never been so good. But that doesn't mean they're perfect. Everyone knows that we have to keep a fine balance neither 'leaning over' toward the United States or 'bow[ing]' to China*" (Thayer 2007, 1). External balancing has been the leitmotiv in Vietnam's international relations since the late 1970s (as will be explained in more detail in section 5.2). This strategy is both embedded in, and derived from, the VCP's specific ideological outlook which rests on a discrete set of theoretical pillars that are partly different from the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) normative fundament (Dosch 2007a).

## 4 Why China does not try to export its model to Vietnam

When, after a decade of hostility, leaders of the PRC and Vietnam discussed the renormalization of relations between the two countries and communist parties during 1990-1991, systems convergence was not included as a condition for reconciliation. While the Vietnamese set no condition for moving the process forward, the Chinese demanded that Hanoi agree to settle the Cambodia conflict on Beijing's terms before the two countries can discuss the renormalization. An agreement was concluded at a secret meeting between Chinese and Vietnamese leaders in Chengdu, China, in early September 1990, which paved the way for the normalization of relations between the two former enemies. In the form of a memorandum of understanding, this agreement contained eight points, six of which were identical with the Chinese view and all were related to either the Cambodia conflict or the two sides' attitudes toward their bilateral relations. The Vietnamese proposal of an alliance based on ideology to fight US imperialism and defend socialism was rejected by China (Tran Quang Co 2003; Thayer 1994a).<sup>3</sup> Throughout the following decade, Vietnamese leaders repeatedly attempted to persuade China about the need for such an alliance but Beijing never got in (Vuving 2006). In fact, Beijing refrained from using either pressure or incentive or both to export its own model of political institutions to Vietnam, despite the possibility that it might have the capability to do so. Why is China uninterested in a Vietnam that is a Chinese miniature?

### 4.1 China's grand strategy

To answer this question, we must first examine first China's grand strategy. With the rise of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the PRC adopted a new grand strategy that used economic reforms and international opening to modernize China's agriculture, industries, science and military. In China's own language, this was the pursuit of "four modernizations" through "reform and opening up" (*gaige kaifeng*). The ultimate goal of this grand strategy is to make China a strong country and restore its "rightful" position in the international system – to have at least an equal status with the greatest powers in the world. To achieve this objective, Deng's strategy was to reach out to the West and take advantage of Western technology, capital, and know-how. In compliance with this strategy, Deng renounced class struggle in international relations and gave cooperation with the West priority over solidarity with fellow socialist or Third World countries. Deng China's grand strategy is based on the assumptions that China is still weak and cooperation with the West, which is superior in science, technology, and finance, is the main way to boost China's own strength. Deng China's grand strategy shares central aspect of China's foreign policy (Christoffersen 2002). As China knows it is rising, it becomes more confident and begins to cultivate its influence abroad, first in the surrounding region, then in the entire world. These new developments in China's foreign policy have been variously documented as China's "new diplomacy," "neo-Bismarckian turn," "charm offensive," or "soft power" (Goldstein 2003; Medeiros / Fravel 2003; Kurlantzick 2007; Shaumbaugh 2006; Bates 2007). It is worth noting that this "soft power" that China is projecting abroad focuses on the image of China as a rising but smiling power and does not include "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which is China's political model. This emphasis on reassurance

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3 Co was Vietnam's First Deputy Foreign Minister at the time of the Chengdu summit.

rather than regime promotion is derived directly from the requirements of China's "peaceful rise," which has become the linchpin of post-Deng China's grand strategy.

#### 4.2 Vietnam's importance for China

What role does Vietnam play in China's grand strategy? What value does Vietnam possess in China's worldview? The new Chinese grand strategy is aimed at (1) the establishment of China's regional leadership and (2) the provision of secured access to resources for China's growing economy. In this vision, Vietnam gains its importance for China in regard to (1) its role in the emerging Chinese regional leadership, (2) its role in China's energy and resources security.

**China's emerging regional leadership and Vietnam's role in it.** While the management of security and ultimately order building in ASEAN-China relations are loosely embedded in a declaratory process of community formation that has generated generally beneficial soft institutions in economic and other policy areas, the current state of relative regional peace is primarily attributable to a combination of China's role as a hegemonic stabilizer in the making and America's role as the established offshore-balancer. China increasingly sets the rules and organizes a growing network of security-relevant relationships in both traditional and non-traditional security fields. Just as in the cases of Pax Britannica and Pax Americana, the (re-)emerging Pax Sinica is characterized by the creation and enforcement of rules that favor the dominant state at the center of the security order. China has increasingly integrated Southeast Asian states into a regional order that, while not hostile to multilateralism, mainly reflects hard strategic thinking on Beijing's part and is primarily based on rules established by Beijing. Unthinkable only a decade ago, the acceptance of regional Chinese leadership in the management of security has grown among the Southeast Asian political elites. Lower-ranking ASEAN diplomats have begun turning to Chinese colleagues for guidance during international meetings. A senior diplomat commented after a recent meeting between Chinese and ASEAN senior officials: *"I was struck by how naturally, even at the working level, the other Asians looked to China and how naturally China played that role"* (Cody 2005). Only a short while ago Chinese diplomats were viewed as outsiders by their Southeast Asian counterparts.

Consider, for example, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA), which shows China's increasing leverage over the international relations of the Asia-Pacific. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji first proposed a trade agreement at the ASEAN+China meeting in November 2000 in response to the Asian economic crisis and regional concerns about the impact of China's then-imminent WTO membership. Yet this proposal *"also arose out of an acute sensitivity toward the need to maintain relations with as many states as possible in order to constrain American power under a global system defined by the struggle between 'one superpower, many great powers'"* (Hughes 2005, 125). The general political value of the project is obvious. Since China's admission into the WTO, the proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) has further contributed to the enhancement of Beijing's position as a preeminent regional power, not only in relation to the United States but also at the expense of Japan. Tokyo reacted with alarm to the plan and subsequently entered into talks on a Japan-ASEAN FTA within the framework of the so-called Japan-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Within ASEAN China is perceived as an engine of growth, a distinction that previously belonged to Japan. CAFTA, accompanied by the of-

fer of an early harvest, has strengthened China's status as a benevolent regional leader. Strategic, security, and political objectives are essential elements of Beijing's economic outreach. For example, according to one of the PRC's most senior economists, Ma Hong, "*the pattern of setting up a free-trade region is a favorable direction for China to develop the relationship of regional grouping and regional alliance*" (Keith 2004, 514). China's proposal of a "strategic partnership" with ASEAN that was made at the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Phnom Penh in June 2003 has to be seen in the same context.

China has started to act like a traditional big power, proactively drawing up its own blueprints for regional order and pulling smaller neighbors along in its wake. This is part of a broader process in which China is learning to lead in a highly interdependent international environment. In this course of action China is resorting to political thinking, policy tools and practices from imperial times, which are adapted to the modern interdependent setting. The attributes of this outlook include thinking in concentric circles, learning to lead first in the periphery that potentially shares a similar cultural background, political thinking, traditions, economic networks and so on, and in selected institutions, and then expanding the quest for influence and leadership further beyond its traditional backyard as the number of supporters grows.

Most ASEAN states have responded positively to this strategy by jumping on the Chinese bandwagon, as examples of security management in the South China Sea show. Based on a Chinese initiative, in March 2005 the Vietnam Petroleum Corporation (PetroVietnam), the Philippines National Oil Company (PNOC), and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) finalized a tripartite agreement in Manila to jointly exploit oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. Philippines Foreign Minister Alberto Romulo and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien praised the deal as a significant measure to strengthen ASEAN-China cooperation and possibly pave the way for settlement of the South China Sea dispute. Beyond the political rhetoric, the agreement does not reflect core ASEAN values and norms<sup>4</sup> but rather reflects a new strategic setting in which the Southeast Asian claimants compete for the most favorable bilateral or multilateral agreements with China as the driving force behind the creation of regional order. The above mentioned tripartite agreement illustrates this new setting very well. When Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo agreed with China on the joint oil search in the Spratlys, she did not consult other ASEAN members, not even Vietnam, the largest occupant of the archipelago. Vietnam, which initially had not responded to the Chinese initiative, promptly protested against the Sino-Philippine deal, describing it as a violation of the Declaration of Conduct among the claimants (minus Taiwan) of the islands, but only to join it seven months later. As Barry Wain has noted:

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4 The ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea of 1992 (signed by China in 2002) is often praised as a first step toward a peaceful settlement. Though nonbinding and from a formal institutional point of view not even a code of conduct, politicians and many scholarly observers alike hope that the agreement will nevertheless oblige the Southeast Asian claimants and China to avoid any activity that would damage or complicate their relations. In a very optimistic liberal-institutionalist scenario the declaration constructively contributes to the avoidance of armed clashes among the parties over their conflicting claims on the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands. One has to remain sceptical, however, that ASEAN's multilateral approach based on consensus building and voluntary, nonbinding commitment to the principle of non-use of force will provide a sustained institutional framework for security management, particularly since the Declaration on the South China Sea lacks any specific provisions on how to resolve the conflict.

*“Vietnam’s inclusion in the modified and renamed ‘Tripartite Agreement for Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking in the Agreement Area in the South China Sea,’ signed on March 14, 2005, was scarcely a victory for consensus-building and voluntary restraint. The Philippines, militarily weak and lagging economically, had opted for Chinese favors at the expense of Asean political solidarity. In danger of being cut out, the Vietnamese joined, ‘seeking to make the best out of an unsatisfactory situation,’ as Mr. Severino puts it. The transparency that Hanoi had demanded was still missing, with even the site of the proposed seismic study concealed.” (Wain 2008)*

In April 2006 the Chinese navy began its first-ever joint patrols with a foreign country, sending ships to patrol with Vietnamese warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. The area of joint patrol was the overlapping part of Chinese and Vietnamese claims that is left over after the 2000 settlement of territorial disputes between the two countries. According to the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, the joint patrols were intended to strengthen joint cooperation and maintain security of fishing fleets and oil exploration. Furthermore, in the wake of an apparent pirate attack on a Chinese fishing vessel in the Spratlys in the same month that left four crewmen dead and three wounded, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam announced plans to strengthen security cooperation in the Spratlys to address piracy, smuggling, and transnational crimes (Dosch 2007b; Anonymous 2006). It is worth noting that similar attacks on Vietnamese and Philippine fishing vessels in the areas of overlapping claims were rather kept unpublicized or downplayed by the related governments and did not prompt multilateral cooperation agreements. These events suggest that the emerging order in Southeast Asia is rather a Pax Sinica than a Pax Aseanica, despite ASEAN’s insistence on its place in the “driver’s seat” of regional cooperation. As a result, regional cooperation increasingly reflects a China-tilt power asymmetry rather than a multilateral consensus as ASEAN has always preferred.

From the Chinese perspective, it would be most favorable if Sino-Vietnamese relations could be a cornerstone of the emerging Chinese regional leadership. Vietnam shares with China the longest history of hostility among Southeast Asian countries and is seen as a potential major bulwark against Chinese hegemony in the region. Furthermore, Vietnam is located at China’s main gateway to Southeast Asia and is the third most populous regional country.

**Vietnam’s role in China’s energy and resources security.** Until recently, China, with the exception of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty and a short period in the early Ming Dynasty, was a land-oriented empire and not a maritime power. During most of Chinese history, the most dangerous threat came from nomadic powers in Inner Asia, which diverted Chinese strategic attention toward the northern and western frontiers. In addition, as agriculture provided the basis of Chinese economy in the pre-modern times, China did not need to develop a powerful navy or conquer maritime territories to secure its access to resources. All this has changed with the programs of modernization following the defeat of Qing China at the hands of maritime powers. The largest threat now came from the southeastern coasts and a modernizing China’s growth and stability would depend in large part on its connection with the world market and overseas resources, primarily through the East and South China Seas. It was in this context that in the early 20th century Chinese authorities began to assert Chinese sovereignty over the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. This triggered protest by the Vietnamese court at Hue, which had established its control over the islands well before the French conquests of Vietnam. In the 1930s, while China began to publish maps declaring its territorial claims in the South China Sea, French authorities

in Indochina also began to set up weather stations on and send garrisons to the Paracel and the Spratly Islands (Chemillier-Gendreau 2000; Nguyen Nha 1975; Li / Li 2003). The PRC and successive governments controlling South Vietnam, including the Hanoi regime since 1975, inherited this dispute from Nationalist China and French Indochina. Today, as China's participation in world trade and its demand for overseas energy and raw materials are both large and increasing, the South China Sea becomes more important for China. As Vietnam possesses a strategic location along Asia's main shipping route through the South China Sea, it presents an immense factor in China's strategic view. However, due to its disputes with China over both the Paracel and the Spratly Islands, Vietnam is important for China in a negative sense. Moreover, China tends to see Vietnam as its main rival in the South China Sea because Hanoi has the largest claims (after China) in the sea and is occupying the largest number of islets and atolls in the Spratlys (Fewsmith / Rosen 2001, 161–2).<sup>5</sup>

As in the case of the Spratly Islands, the management of security in the Mekong valley first and foremost follows China's blueprint for order maintenance based on its national interest. Furthermore, an increasingly important aspect of China's interests toward Vietnam is the enhancement of the former's energy security. This is particularly visible within the context of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

The GMS is a core element of Beijing's policy outlook. The Mekong River is the world's twelfth-largest river and Southeast Asia's longest waterway. It originates in Tibet and flows through the Chinese province of Yunnan before continuing southwards, touching the territories of six countries (China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) and ending in the South China Sea. The GMS covers some 2.3 million square kilometers and contains a population of about 245 million. The post-World War II history of cooperation within the Mekong valley dates back to 1957 when the Mekong Committee was established at the initiative of the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) and four riparian countries of the lower Mekong Basin (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam). For more than three decades, however, the implementation of subregional integration was halted by the prevalence of cold-war structures, or more accurately hot wars and armed conflict, in the region. The process only gained momentum in 1992 when, with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the six riparian states of the Mekong River (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) entered into a program of formalized subregional cooperation. China's participation in the GMS was confined to Yunnan province until mid-2005 when Guangxi province officially became a GMS participant.

The GMS program has been directed to the management of non-traditional security arenas such as the facilitation of sustainable economic growth and improvement of the standard of living in general and the management of environmental and energy security in particular. The sustainable utilization of water and natural resources in the Mekong basin is directly and inevitably linked to human survival in the region. Energy security is mainly related to the promising but not uncontroversial issue of hydroelectric power. Compared with rivers of a similar size like the Nile and the Mississippi, the Mekong is still relatively

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5 An opinion survey taken among high school students in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Foshan, Suzhou, and Baoding in 1999 reveals that Vietnam ranked third – after the United States and Japan – among foreign countries most disliked by China's youth.

untouched. The first Mekong bridge (between Thailand and Laos) was only opened in 1994 and the first mainstream dam, the 1,500 megawatt Manwan, was only completed in 1995 in Yunnan. Since then the development of hydropower has been among the main priorities of the GMS project.

With international conflicts over river water becoming more frequent, there is concern that the Mekong could become a serious source of tension unless the six states can agree on rules for developing the river. The most valuable achievement to reduce the potential for conflict is a technical cooperation agreement achieved in 2002 between China and the Mekong River Commission (MRC, founded in 1995), grouping Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The agreement commits China to sending 24-hourly water level and 12-hourly rainfall data to the MRC to help forecast floods. The design of an early flood warning strategy ranks very high on the agenda of both policy makers and international donor organizations. While China has duly provided the required information since the agreement's implementation in 2003, other key data – most decisively on water quality and pollution – are kept strictly confidential. Various attempts by the lower Mekong states, particularly Vietnam, to get access have failed.<sup>6</sup>

On issues that would impact on national decision-making authority, such as dam building in the Chinese stretch of the Mekong, China steadfastly refuses to share information. The uncoordinated construction of power plants and irrigation systems by the upper Mekong countries, particularly China, which plans to build more than a dozen power plants (although on the Mekong's tributaries and not the main stream), poses a serious challenge to subregional stability. The construction could result in a potentially explosive competition between the upper and the lower Mekong states for water resources. Politicians and senior officials from the lower Mekong states, mainly Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, have regularly expressed concerns about China's proposed dam-building activities, albeit more indirectly and in private than openly and in official intergovernmental meetings. Some perceive China's ambitious hydropower plans as a zero-sum game in which the PRC's economic gains would be paid for by the lower Mekong states' environmental costs, such as rising salinity levels in Vietnam's agriculturally indispensable Mekong Delta.

Official Chinese interests in the Mekong region can roughly be divided into two realms of importance: domestic and foreign policy. The domestic interest consists of the development of China's landlocked western provinces and the promotion of border trade with the adjoining countries of Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. A further domestic strategy aims at narrowing the gap between the ethnic Chinese Han population and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the government envisions that an economically emerging west will reduce internal migration from western China to the booming coastal cities. In a more general strategic sense, Beijing seeks to put its relations with Southeast Asia on an amicable basis in order to counterbalance US influence in the region (Dosch / Hensengerth 2005). The PRC is able to play a de facto hegemonic role in the Mekong valley, partly because it imposes its will on the lesser states in terms of setting the stage for, but also the limits to, cooperation, and partly because the other members benefit from China's cooperation and thus accept China's leadership.

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6 Interviews conducted by Jörn Dosch in the GMS states in 2006 and 2007.

Energy security offers a good example of the emergence of reciprocally beneficial linkages between China and the states in its zone of influence. Since September 2006 China has been supplying electricity to Vietnam through a cross-border 220-kilovolt power transmission line to ease Vietnam's chronic power shortage problems. Further transmission lines are under construction or being planned. China (through the state-owned company, China Southern Power Grid) is also involved in the building of electricity generation facilities in Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, enabling the Southeast Asian GMS members to deliver electricity to China's western provinces when it will be much needed in only a few years' time to further fuel rapid industrialization. The electric power trade between Yunnan and Vietnam has reached some US\$ 100 million in 2007 and accumulatively achieved revenues of over US\$ 150 million to-date (Anonymous 2007a, 1). The trend toward ever-closer ties between China and Vietnam, which is not necessarily directly facilitated but at least underpinned by the two countries' shared political ideology, also serves the wider interests of both communist parties vis-à-vis the United States. Despite strengthening US-Vietnam economic and diplomatic ties, Vietnam is keen to avoid aligning itself too closely with the US, while China is equally eager to counter the US's growing influence in Vietnam.

### 4.3 China's policy toward Vietnam

China seems to try to re-establish relations between the two countries on the traditional (pre-modern) model in which Vietnam acknowledges China's supremacy and China respects Vietnam's autonomy in domestic and international issues that do not hurt China's interests. This general approach is embedded in China's quest for regional preeminence in relations with Southeast Asia/ASEAN. This also explains why Beijing refused to engage with Hanoi in an ideology-based alliance that resembles the socialist internationalism of the 1950s and 1960s despite the latter's request. Because of Vietnam's location, size, and history of interaction with China, the country occupies a prominent place in China's strategic view. Imagine a regional order centered on China but without the cooperation of Vietnam. Geopolitically, such architecture would look like a palace built on one pillar. The development of Sino-Vietnamese relations represents therefore a core aspect of China's regional strategy. Derived from China's grand strategy, its Vietnam policy has two major goals. The first is to keep Hanoi close to the Chinese orbit. The second is to cement China's control of the South China Sea. Given the dispute between the two countries over territories in the South China Sea, China's policy toward Vietnam cannot be a straightforward course of action. The seemingly contradictory objectives of this policy thus demand a delicate balance in the conduct of China's relations with Vietnam. This in turn requires a fine combination of reward and punishment in the implementation of that policy.

The fact that Sino-Vietnamese relations operate under a long shadow of historical legacies represents a key parameter for the conduct of China's relations with Vietnam. With more than twenty centuries, Sino-Vietnamese relations are one of the world's longest-lasting bilateral relationships ever. Given the long history of conflict between the two nations, mutual distrust is still a dominant characteristic of the bilateral relationship. Therefore, in keeping Vietnam within China's sphere of influence, Beijing does not invest in shaping Vietnam's political structure but focuses on influencing Vietnam's international orientation. Especially, China tries to set the stage for Vietnam's external behavior in relation to



the United States, the Taiwan issue, the bilateral territorial disputes, and bilateral economic and cultural exchanges. Specifically, the major objectives of China's policy toward Vietnam include (1) gaining advantage in territorial disputes with Hanoi, (2) keeping Hanoi from veering too close to the United States, (3) encouraging Hanoi to pursue pro-China policies in the Taiwan and other international issues, and (4) to encouraging Hanoi to have preferential treatment of Chinese products and businesses.

## 5 Why Vietnam imitates China

Vietnamese politics in the post-Cold War era is characterized by the dualistic nature of the country's grand strategy and ruling elite. This dualistic nature refers to the "two-headed grand strategy" that Hanoi has adopted since the late 1980s, with one part of the elite pursuing anti-imperialism (fighting US imperialism) and the other integrationism (joining the Western-dominated international system) (Vuving 2004).<sup>7</sup>

### 5.1 Worldviews and interests: has the VCP followed the lead of the CCP?

The formation of Vietnam's grand strategy in the post-Cold War era was heavily influenced by defining moments during the second half of the 1980s. At the Sixth VCP Congress in December 1986, Vietnam launched an unprecedented reform process that still continues to the present day. Under the influence of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *novyi mysl* (new thinking) in the Soviet Union, Vietnam's *doi moi* (literally: renovation) included not only economic reforms but also transformations of thinking. *Doi moi tu duy* (literally: renovation of thinking) was a central theme of Vietnam's politics during the first years of the reform era. It was in this spirit that a new Vietnamese grand strategy emerged during the second half of the 1980s. Shortly after the congress, debates on fundamental issues of foreign policy were brought to the pages of the Party theoretical journal. In the May 1987 issue of this journal, an article by Phan Doan Nam, who was an assistant to Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, made a plea for changing foreign policy thinking. The article claimed that beginning in the early 1970s, both world politics and economics had undergone profound changes. In world politics, it asserted, "the time in which imperialism is relying on its military preponderance to threaten has gone forever." The class struggle on the international plane had changed its form from military confrontation into peaceful emulation and competition in the economic field. Underlying the dramatic changes in social life was the second scientific-technological revolution, which had transformed relations between man and nature as well as international relations and the world economy. The world economy was now marked by internationalization, integration, and interdependence, which were of objective nature and therefore law-like phenomena. These new characteristics of the world required, the article argued, new thinking and new way of action in foreign policy. In this spirit, the article outlined a new concept of national security, which no longer focused on the military aspect alone but tried to be comprehensive while making the economic development its priority. The article also revised the old concept of national independence, arguing that independence must be brought in keeping with

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<sup>7</sup> Vuving used the term "modernizers" in this paper but changed it to "integrationists" in subsequent articles.

interdependence, because *“it is this interdependence that renders international relations equitable”* (Doan Nam 1987) Nam’s article and another article by him in the February 1988 issue of the Party theoretical journal revealed the main arguments that provided the theoretical groundwork for the May 1988 Politburo Resolution 13. The resolution has not been made public but it is now officially acknowledged as laying the foundation for Vietnam’s official foreign policy doctrine in the post-Cold War era that stipulates a “friend-to-all” (*lam ban voi tat ca*) and “diversifying and multidirectional” (*da dang hoa, da phuong hoa*) foreign policy (Nguyen Dy Nien 1996, 47).

In the August 1989 issue of the *Communist Review*, Foreign Minister Thach himself wrote an article entitled “All for Peace, National Independence, and Development,” in which he outlined the contours of this integrationist grand strategy. Thach asserted:

*“Today, when peace, cooperation, and development have become the supreme interests of the world’s people and the common trend in international relations, the combination of the strengths of the nation and the epoch requires [all] countries to follow this trend. That is, [the trend necessitates] both contention and cooperation in peaceful coexistence between countries with different social and political regimes and conflict-resolution by means of peaceful negotiation. Opposing this trend, any country no matter big or small will fail.”* (Nguyen Co Thach 1989, 5)

These world trends were, argued Thach, the result of increasing interdependence and international division of labor among nations. They were restructuring the world and opened an unprecedented opportunity for underdeveloped societies to reach high levels of development within a time period much shorter than was possible in the past. In order to grasp this opportunity, Thach went on, it was necessary to turn the country’s economy into an integral part of the world market and to comply with the *“universal laws of the world economy.”* In plain language, this was a call for the integration of Vietnam’s economy into the Western-dominated international system.

While Thach’s arguments obviously reflected the Gorbachevite New Thinking in the Soviet Union, they also bore striking similarities to the Dengist program in China. The goals of “peace and development” and the strategies of economic integration and international cooperation with the West neatly resemble Deng China’s reform program (Deng 1987, 46–7, 97–9).

The same month as Thach’s article was published in the VCP central journal, the Party’s Sixth Central Committee convened its seventh plenum in Ho Chi Minh City. The meeting coincided with the establishment of the first non-communist government in socialist Poland. Responding to these developments, VCP General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh reaffirmed the Leninist “two camps, four contradictions” theory that had provided the worldview of Vietnam’s foreign policy doctrine in the previous period but had been rejected by Phan Doan Nam in his above mentioned articles. Attacking the integrationists, Linh claimed that the denial of the old Leninist teachings *“has led certain persons to believe mistakenly that the essence of imperialism [read: the West] has changed.”* He asserted: *“In fact, as long as imperialism exists and as long as the socialist revolution has not yet achieved victory on a world scale, the Leninist theses mentioned above have still kept their original value”* (Nguyen Van Linh 1989, 6). Echoing Linh, Defense Minister Le Duc Anh expressed alarm at a *“peaceful evolution strategy”*. This, he said, would be driven by *“imperialism and international reactionary forces”* to wipe out socialism from the world (Le

(Le Duc Anh 1989). It is interesting to note that the concept of “*peaceful evolution*” was borrowed from China. It referred to the gradual undermining of communist party power by introducing Western elements into the society. While “*opening and integration*” (*mo cua, hoi nhap*) is the main pathway that defines the reformers’ grand strategy in the post-Cold War period, “*peaceful evolution*” (*dien bien hoa binh*) is the conservatives’ concept of the central threat at the core of their own grand strategy.

The period between the Seventh and Eighth Plenums of the VCP Central Committee was a time of fierce grand strategic battle. It took the Party seven months to restore order among its ranks. At its Eighth Plenum in March 1990, the VCP reached an agreement on advancing reforms while determining “political stability” as the chief priority. At the same time, it expelled Politburo member Tran Xuan Bach, the leading advocate of political pluralism, from the leadership (TCCS 1990). The consensus reached at the Eighth Plenum incorporates both anti-imperialist and integrationist elements. According to the plenum’s communiqué, the VCP emphasized that the task of the entire Party and people was to “speed up reform in all aspects.” At the same time, the Party established that the necessary condition for fulfilling that task was to “*preserve political, economic, and social stability, above all political stability*” (TCCS 1990, 2).

While the March 1990 meeting reinforced Vietnam’s two-headed grand strategy, it also cemented the anti-imperialist advantage. In March 1989, the VCP Central Committee convened its sixth plenum to review the first two years after the Sixth Party Congress and set out the task for the next three years. It was at this meeting that the VCP defined *doi moi*’s six “basic principles.” The first principle stresses that “advance to socialism is the necessary path” and “renovation is not to change the socialist objective.” The second principle confirms that “Marxism-Leninism is always the ideological foundation of our Party” and “renovation of thinking is not to deviate from Marxist-Leninist principles.” The third states that reform of the political system is to strengthen the proletarian dictatorship. The fourth principle maintains that the leadership role of the Party is the decisive condition for victory. The fifth principle asserts that democracy must be escorted by centralism and led by the Party. Finally, the sixth principle is to “*combine of patriotism with proletarian and socialist internationalism*” and to “*combine the strength of the nation with that of the epoch*” (TCCS 1989, 4). Interestingly, the first four basic principles are identical with the Four Basic Principles of China’s reform that was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in March 1979 (Li / Lok 1995).<sup>8</sup>

## 5.2 China’s importance for Vietnam

First and foremost, China’s significance for Vietnam lies in the strategic imperative of having to come to terms with its giant neighbor. Even in instances when policy-making does not seem to be directly related to Sino-Vietnamese relations, China is nevertheless the elephant sitting in the room. Sino-Vietnamese relations both symbolize the struggle and fault lines between the integrationists and anti-imperialists, the two competing groups

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8 Deng’s “Four Basic Principles” are first, “*we must keep to the socialist path,*” second, “*we must uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat,*” third, “*we must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party,*” and fourth, “*we must uphold Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.*” In 1982, the wording of the second principle was changed to “*upholding the people’s democratic dictatorship.*”

within the Vietnamese political elite, and seemingly define the framework for Vietnam's economic development. Overall it might be more appropriate to speak in a more neutral and general sense of China's *meaning* for Vietnam rather than its *importance* because the latter, to an extent, would imply China's role as a sine-qua non for Vietnam's survival.

**China in Vietnam's national security and geo-strategic considerations.** For the anti-imperialists, China is of significant importance. While the integrationists tend to view the fact that Vietnam is located next door to a giant neighbor like China as the "tyranny of geography," (Thayer 1994b) the anti-imperialists may regard the same fact as the "blessing of geography." Without the presence and proximity of that giant neighbor and fellow communist regime, the VCP might have gone down the same path as did their brother communist parties in Eastern Europe. This difference reflects the differences in their overall goals and central concerns. While the anti-imperialists are preoccupied with regime security, the integrationists are primarily concerned with economic development and national modernization. As a result, the two blocs respond to Chinese power in opposite ways. While the integrationists prefer balancing, the anti-imperialists favor solidarity. However, as both camps have been socialized in the traditional Vietnamese foreign policy culture and since China either refuses or is very reluctant to play the solidarity game with the anti-imperialists, deference is also a major component of Vietnam's China policy.

Balancing may be internal or external. Since Vietnam's split from the Chinese empire in the 10th century, internal balancing has been an indispensable ingredient of Vietnamese grand strategy. External balancing is almost absent from the tradition of Sino-Vietnamese relations until 1978, when Hanoi entered a formal military alliance with the Soviet Union as a response to China's threat. From then until the normalization of relations between Hanoi and Beijing in 1990–1991, external balancing characterized Vietnam's China policy.

Balancing thinking is all too well familiar to Vietnamese policy makers. Considerations of relative power (*tuong quan luc luong*) are among the chief strategic imperatives taught by both the traditional and the communist Vietnamese political cultures. The international relations textbook of the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy, the central political training institution for senior state officials, lists analysis of relative capabilities as one of the six major methods for a proper study of international relations (Hoc vien Chinh tri Quoc gia Ho Chi Minh 2004, 18). Balancing thinking features prominently in the writings of Vietnamese foreign policy makers. In Nguyen Co Thach's book on the world after World War II, the Foreign Minister from 1979 to 1991 has described world politics primarily in terms of international balances of power, alliances ("assemblages of forces"), and great power relations (Nguyen Co Thach 1998, 62). A more recent writing by former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet has implied that balancing continues to be the default strategy of Vietnamese foreign policy (Vo Van Kiet 2005). During his premiership, Kiet himself frequently reminded government officials that they "*are living in a region surrounded by tigers and a dragon; the continued backwardness of the country is the biggest security threat to the nation*" (Goodman 1995, 98).

The strategy of deference has its roots in the traditional Vietnamese way of dealing with imperial China. This tradition rests on the earlier Vietnamese experience of over a millennium under Chinese rule and the later experience of nearly ten centuries as an autonomous kingdom neighboring China. A basic reality features in these two thousand years of the

Sino-Vietnamese relationship: the unchangeable asymmetry in favor of China in terms of size and capacities (Womack 2006).

The deference tradition of Vietnam's dealings with China is well alive among Vietnam's ruling elites. One of the most often recalled stories is the Vietnamese Le court's treatment of Ming Chinese troops after defeating them on the battleground in 1427. Instead of revenge the Vietnamese supplied their enemies with food and sent them unharmed back to China. The Vietnamese often say that military resistance and diplomatic deference are the twin characteristics of the traditional Vietnamese way of dealing with China. As expressed by the personal secretary of VCP chief Le Kha Phieu, the rationale of Vietnam's deference to China is that *"we live adjacent to a big country; we cannot afford to maintain tension with them because they are next door to us"* (Nguyen Chi Trung 2002). The man was using this argument to justify his boss's acceptance of China's terms in a visit to Beijing and Phieu's concessions to the latter in the Sino-Vietnamese border pacts of 1999 and 2000.

While deference is a way to live with Chinese hegemony, balancing sets limits to the Vietnamese acceptance of Chinese preeminence. Vietnam's balancing against China rests on two pillars. The first is *"a continued sense of resentment vis-à-vis China that feeds on the rejection of Chinese superiority and the feeling of historically having been given a raw deal by the northern neighbour"* (Haacke 2005, 125). The second is the preponderance of US power. The combination of deference and balancing produces contradictory actions. For example, in November 2006 China was unsuccessful in lobbying the Vietnamese government for the exclusion of Taiwan from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Hanoi and the right of sitting next to the host at the summit meetings (the seating was instead arranged in alphabetical order as at previous APEC summits).<sup>9</sup> However, in 2007 Vietnam yielded to Beijing's pressure and denied visa for several Taiwanese delegations (Mitton 2007a).

**The significance of Sino-Vietnamese relations for the struggle between integrationists and anti-imperialists.** The VCP has since the Cold War's end been a coalition of integrationists and anti-imperialists. The integrationists identify themselves with the nation more than the regime and value territory rather than ideology. They see in the country's integration to the world economy the chief way to promote national interests in the contemporary era. In contrast, the anti-imperialists identify themselves with the Communist Party rather than the Vietnamese nation and treasure regime security more than territorial integrity. For them, fighting "US imperialism" from which the threat of regime change emanates is the central task. After the decline of the USSR, the anti-imperialists opted for an alliance based on regime and ideological affinity with China as a keystone of their foreign policy and security strategy. Fearing that mobilizing patriotism may backfire, Vietnam's government has restrained patriotism since the renormalization of relations with China in 1991. The rise of alternative, patriotic, and wealthy elite groups is ever deepening the gap between the integrationists and anti-imperialists and facing the ruling party with the tough choice: nation or regime, Party or country. In 2007, integrationists in the Party leadership floated the idea of dropping the word "communist" in the Party's name and adopting a

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9 Interview (conducted by Jörn Dosch) with a Vietnamese journalist who covered the APEC summit and its preparations, Hanoi, April 2007.

new name that was not anachronistic and detrimental to Vietnam's international image (Mitton 2007b).

Nowhere is the struggle between integrationists and anti-imperialists more obvious than in Vietnam's relations with China and the United States. In 2007, Vietnam's relations with the United States and China were intensified, as exemplified by the large number and high level of exchanges, but were also full of tensions – with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea and with the United States over human rights situation in Vietnam. This paradoxical state of affairs suggests that both the United States and China have great interest in close ties with Vietnam but if Vietnam continues to pursue its current policy it may be crushed between the two giants.

Sino-Vietnamese relations have been overshadowed by tensions related to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and contradictory interactions between the two governments. During parliament chairman Nguyen Phu Trong's visit in early April 2007, China lodged strong complaints against a US\$ 2 billion gas pipeline project between PetroVietnam and British Petroleum near the Spratlys that Vietnam said had been implemented since 2000 and lay within the bounds of its exclusive economic zones and continental shelf and Vietnam's plans to hold local elections on the Spratlys (Symon 2007; Xinhua 2007; Kazmin / McGregor 2007). Less than two weeks later Vietnam set up three administrative units on the Spratly Islands while in June of the same year BP suspended its pipeline project due to the dispute (Phan Song Ngan 2007; Bergin/Chen 2007). On 9 July, just days after India and Vietnam declared that they were strategic partners, Chinese navy vessels fired on Vietnamese fishing boats in disputed waters near the Paracel Islands, causing one death and several injuries. Throughout the year, there were several Chinese assaults on Vietnamese fishing boats in waters claimed by both nations (Mitton 2007c; Nguyen Trung 2007a; Nguyen Trung 2007b). Furthermore, China pressured Vietnam to deny visa to a number of Taiwanese leaders and officials and vigorously protested against the Vietnamese media's reports on tainted food and counterfeit goods from China (Mitton 2007d; Taiwan News 2007). Since China failed to do so against other countries that granted visa to the same Taiwanese persons and where the local media reported the same stories, the moves reinforced the sense that China treated Vietnam as a second-class friend (Mitton 2007e). While Vietnam yielded to Chinese pressures on the Taiwanese issues and downplayed Chinese attacks on Vietnamese fishing boats, it lodged verbal protests against China's planting of sovereignty markers and promotion of tourism in the Paracels (in January and August 2007) and China's military drills and administrative plans in the South China Sea (in November 2007). The last move – China's plan to create an administrative region to manage three archipelagos, including the Paracels and the Spratlys – triggered a series of street protests in Vietnam, which marked a turning point not just in Sino-Vietnamese relations but more importantly in relations between the authorities and emerging elites in Vietnam.

On three consecutive Sundays from the 9th to the 23th of December 2007, thousands of Vietnamese took to the streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to protest against what they viewed as China's incursions into Vietnamese territory in the South China Sea. The 9 December rally was the first of its kind in half a century of communist Vietnam. While this one was more or less tolerated by the authorities, the other two met with much harsher police treatment (Deutsche Presse Agentur 2007; BBC Vietnamese Service 2007). The crackdown on the protesters, who were demonstrating for the cause that the government

approved, resulted from the confluence of three factors: Hanoi's fear of Chinese punishment, its fear of a possible spill-over from patriotic to anti-government protests, and its habit of putting down any political activities that it does not control.

The anti-China demonstrators were mostly students who organized their protests through blogs, online communities and mobile phone messaging. Since they represent emerging elite groups which are young and wealthy, they pose a much larger challenge to the state than the land grab protests that flared up earlier in the year. The land grab protesters were mostly peasants whose lands were seized by authorities for "development" plans. They represent a class of landless population which is among the poorest in the country. While the farmers fought for parochial interests, the students defended national interests.

The anti-China protests present the government with a dilemma. If the state chooses confrontation rather than cooptation, it will lose its last legitimacy. But if it sides with the patriotic protesters, it will risk antagonizing China. The Communist Party draws legitimacy and its image as the protector of the country from its leadership role in past wars against foreign invaders. The patriotic rallies of December 2007 mark, however, the emergence of an alternative flag-holder of patriotism. Facing this situation, the ruling elites are deeply divided. Voices in the Fourth Congress of the Veterans Association that took place at the same time as the anti-China rallies illustrated well that division. While many veterans emphasized the protection of national sovereignty and territory, Party chief Nong Duc Manh failed to mention those words in his speech. Instead, Manh stressed "*safeguarding the Party, the government, and the socialist regime*" (Nong Duc Manh 2007; Van Anh 2007).

**China's relevance for Vietnam's economic development.** Vietnam is the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia. It has sustained a growth rate of more than 7 percent in recent years, second only to China, and is now the liveliest "little tiger" in Asia. In 2007 – the first year of the WTO era – Vietnam's economy grew by an estimated 8.44 percent, which is the highest gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate since the Asian financial crisis in 1997. Gross domestic product reached US\$ 71 billion and per capita GDP stood at US\$ 835, twice the figure of 2001. The country's balance of payment records a high surplus, due to massive influx of overseas remittance, foreign investment and foreign aid despite a record amount of imports. With US\$ 20.3 billion, Vietnam attracted a record value of committed foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2007. This is an increase of nearly 70 percent from 2006 and the largest ever figure since the opening to FDI of Vietnam's economy in 1988. In the mainstream view Vietnam's impressive economic track record rests on three interconnected pillars: the successful implementation of the *doi moi* reform process since 1986, the country's accession to the WTO in January 2007 and China's role as a model for Vietnam. While the first two points are hardly disputable, the third is more complex.

From a Chinese point of view there is little doubt that Vietnam benefits from close relations with China and particularly the lessons learnt from the latter's experiences. According to Zhai Kun, head of the Southeast Asia and Oceania Studies Division of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations,

*"Vietnam will surely further enhance its good neighbor relations with China. The two countries have an inseparable geopolitical bond and China's development brings opportunities to Vietnam. If China's reform and opening efforts can be described as*

*'crossing the river by feeling the stones' – in the words of Deng Xiaoping, Vietnam's opening to the world should be seen as benefiting from China's experience, which has dramatically reduced the cost of repeating mistakes. Currently, China remains the major power in the closest relationship with Vietnam. ... Vietnam has long been a country looking for its own place around major powers. As history testifies, it has never worked for Vietnam to stand against or lean on a major power. The post-Cold War reality has shown that a diplomacy dealing with the major powers gives Vietnam more leverage for self-decision and paves the way for economic development.*" (Kun 2007, 11)

At critical junctures of its economic reform program, particularly during the mini-crisis at the turn of the century, Vietnamese leaders have indeed looked for Chinese advice and guidance. In June 2000, 16 of Vietnam's senior-most officials assembled in China for an unpublicized lesson on how to reform a socialist economy without losing party control. The then anti-imperialist Party leader Le Kha Phieu summarized the importance of China in the simple formula, *"If China succeeds in its reform, then we'll succeed. If China fails, we'll fail."* Australian historian David Marr noted that Vietnam had reverted to one of its historic roles, in which it is the pupil and China the teacher. According to Marr, *"the Vietnamese have tried to counterbalance France against China, then they tried to balance the US against China. But all that has had a limited shelf life"* (Chanda 2000, 32).

While on the one hand it is ultimately impossible to find hard empirical evidence for a direct Chinese impact on Vietnam's economic pathways, on the other hand obvious limitations to the "China model argument" are clearly visible. Neither is Vietnam an "emerging China" or a "second China" nor do direction, dynamics and results of economic reform always resemble China's approaches to, and outcomes, of economic policies.

Although Vietnam's foreign trade hit new heights, with exports rising to US\$48.3 billion and imports to US\$60.8 billion in 2007, the country's exports grew by only 21 percent, a rate much lower than China's 35 percent in its first year after entering the WTO and even lower than Vietnam's own 26 percent in 2006 (Le Dang Doanh, quoted in Quang Thuan 2007). Moreover, while China has consistently enjoyed export surpluses, Vietnam's trade deficit has persisted for decades. Also in contrast with the early phase of economic growth in China, Vietnam continues to be haunted by the high inflation rate which stood at 12.6 percent in 2007 (the highest level of inflation since 1996) (Yoong 2007). These contrasts suggest that Vietnam is unlikely to go down the Chinese path, which is characterized by a long lasting process of high-speed economic expansion.

With regard to the impressive FDI inflows, it seems that Vietnam has benefited less from its learning of the Chinese model than from its being next to China. Many foreign investors followed a "China-plus-one" strategy and went to Vietnam to diversify their manufacturing base (Shimizu 2007). This is especially true of Japanese and Taiwanese companies, which fear that tensions in their countries' relations with China may negatively affect their businesses in China. An example is Taiwan's Foxconn (Hon Hai) Group, the world's leading maker of outsourced electronics components and one of the largest foreign investors in China, which in March 2007 unveiled a plan to allocate up to US\$ 5 billion into two projects in Vietnam.

Related, Vietnam will likely complement China by making small runs of high value-added items. *"A 10 container order is nothing in China, but welcome in Vietnam... Above all*



*Vietnam will prosper because, although it may track China, it is defiantly not the Middle Kingdom. Sophisticated investors do not want all their eggs in China's basket: believers in the 'China plus one' theory are increasingly coming to the conclusion that the 'one' is Vietnam*" (Barnes 2007, 12).

Furthermore, industrial growth in Vietnam is being fuelled by some of China's fast-expanding industries which regard the neighbor as a near-shore production base for low-cost supplies to the Chinese market or exports to third countries that avoid the protective tariffs placed against China (notably in textiles). These advantages will expand now that Vietnam is a WTO member. Regional free trade access is already promoted by membership of ASEAN (Anonymous 2007b).

## 6 How Vietnam has learned from China and how it has not

When Vietnam embarked on *doi moi* in the late 1980s, it looked to both Eastern Europe and China for lessons. Although open hostility was still dominating the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, there were good reasons for the Vietnamese to feel that the Chinese path was more attractive and useful than the Eastern European paths. First, Vietnam was much closer to China than to its brother Eastern European countries in terms of culture and level of development. Second, the Chinese reform had already shown its first achievements and was accompanied by high growth rates, while in Eastern Europe reform had just started and had yet to show that it was able to boost the economy. The year 1988 marked a turning point in Vietnam's international orientation. In May, the VCP Politburo secretly passed a major adjustment to the country's foreign policy, which turned Vietnam's orientation away from Eastern Europe to the Asia-Pacific. This reorientation can also be seen in the VCP theoretical journal. During 1987, the first year of Vietnam's reform, most articles in the international part of the journal featured developments in the Soviet Union. In 1988, the number of articles related to the USSR sharply decreased, giving room for other articles criticizing the United States and examining China's economic reform. During 1988, Vietnamese leaders began to privately criticize Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev despite the fact that the USSR was Vietnam's chief ally. These leaders, including VCP General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, saw in Gorbachev's preference for *glasnost* and political pluralism the seeds of regime instability. Also privately, they praised Deng Xiaoping's reform line that put economic reform before and above political transformation. With the adoption of *doi moi's* six basic principles, the first four of which are copies of the Chinese reform's four basic principles, at the VCP sixth plenum in March 1989 (see above) and the dismissal of Politburo member Tran Xuan Bach, the major advocate of pluralism in Vietnam, at the eighth plenum in March 1990, Vietnam definitely parted company with the Eastern European models and joined the Chinese-style reform. It is worth noting that all these events occurred before the renormalization of ties between Vietnam and China. Arguably, they actually paved the way for the renormalization.

Vietnam's learning from China is more a "path imitation" than "model imitation." In other words, Vietnam imitates China's policy rather than China's polity. Vietnamese leaders have adopted a value system of reform that bears striking similarities with that of China. Both states give economic reform priority over political reform. Vietnamese integrationists share with China the view that the major world trend is "peace and development" and the central path of reform is "opening and integration" to the outside world. Vietnamese

anti-imperialists share with China the view that the major threat is the Western strategy of “peaceful evolution.” Indeed, Vietnam has copied the Chinese “software” rather than the Chinese “hardware.”

A close look at the structures of Vietnam’s and China’s regimes reveals interesting differences. Vietnam has upheld its “troika” structure: three different persons hold the posts of the Party chief, the state president, and the government chief. In China, the Party chief also assumes the position of the head of state. There were attempts in Vietnam by both conservatives (during the tenure of conservative General Secretary Le Kha Phieu) and reformers (in the run-up to the Tenth Party Congress in 2006) to merge the two posts but all failed. In China, the “duo” structure suggests that power is more concentrated than in Vietnam. Vietnam’s “troika” structure emerged after the death of Ho Chi Minh to reflect the more equal distribution of power among Ho’s successors. Before the death of General Secretary Le Duan in 1986, the troika was Le Duan, Truong Chinh and Pham Van Dong. In the post-Cold War era, the “troika” structure was reinforced to reflect the VCP leadership’s three centers of power. During 1991-1997, Vietnam’s troika included Party General Secretary Do Muoi, who represented the interests of the civilian bloc within the anti-imperialist camp; State President Le Duc Anh, who represented the interests of the anti-imperialists in the military; and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, who represented the interests of the integrationists. The dominant position of the conservatives in Vietnam’s top leadership partly explains why Vietnam has pursued reform with less determination and resolution than has China, where the supreme leader has always been a reformer, and why Vietnam lags far behind China in economic growth. Contrary to reformers, conservatives do not prefer high growth rate, fearing that rapid economic growth would destabilize politics.

Why Vietnam’s reform is pursued with less determination and resolution than is China’s can also be partly explained by the more equal distribution of power in Vietnam. On the other hand, Vietnam’s more equal distribution of power and deeper cleavage between competing grand strategies among the ruling elite explains why Vietnam goes ahead of China in some indicators of gradual political liberalization.

While China has been a role model for Vietnam economically and the latter has generally followed the formers lead politically, however, Vietnam has been more experimental and progressive than the more economically advanced neighbor.

First, China remains advanced in economic reform and marketization while Vietnam has surged ahead in political reform. In particular, at the Tenth Party Congress of the VCP in April 2006, in an unprecedented move, two candidates were fielded for election for the top post of general secretary.<sup>10</sup> Although finally one of the candidates withdraw his candidacy, new developments in the run-up and during the Tenth Congress of the VCP indicate that the Politburo is no longer in a firm command position over the Central Committee. In China, there are no multiple candidates for the party chief election, and the Politburo, or even its Standing Committee, still has more power over the Central Committee. The more relevant role of the Central Committee in Vietnam can also be seen in the fact

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10 The two were reportedly the integrationist Nguyen Minh Triet, who was expected to assume the post of state president, and the anti-imperialist incumbent Party chief Nong Duc Manh. However, Triet withdraw his candidacy for general secretary in order to comply with Party discipline, leaving Manh the only candidate.

that the Vietnamese Central Committee meets considerably more often than its Chinese counterpart. From 1987 to 2007, the VCP Central Committee met 46 times while the CCP Central Committee met 31 times.

Second, with regard to another significant development, the party report was released two months before the congress began, and feedback from the public and the media was invited. In China, the party report is released only during the CCP congress. Some political reforms in Vietnam were adopted as early as the 1990s, including one that allowed members of parliament to question government officials. At these question sessions, which are televised, government officials have to stand up to answer the questions of the members of the National Assembly. In China, legislators' committees can query government officials, but behind closed doors.

Furthermore, while decisions made by the VCP politburo used to have the power of law, today this is only the case to a great extent, but not absolutely. The situation is complex. The politburo can no longer make all decisions. However, it does make decisions on issues of special importance. Day-to-day exercise of VCP power is delegated to the Secretariat. In any case, the politburo's decisions cannot be implemented without the participation of the government and the National Assembly; and it is here that the bureaucracy takes over and that much distortion or interference takes place. Unlike in China, tolerance of criticism from *within* the party has grown (but the same cannot be said for opposition from outside the state-party apparatus).

Third, Vietnam also holds more direct and competitive elections of national legislators, in which the number of nominated candidates can exceed the number of seats by 30 per cent or more. Candidates meet constituents and state their platforms during campaigning. In China, national-level legislators are elected indirectly by provincial legislators, who also select the candidates.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper has addressed the question as to how and to what degree has the form of political order in Vietnam been influenced by China. How and to what extent have Vietnam's governance structures been converged toward or diverged from the Chinese model of political organization and rule? In order to put our analysis in a systematic context, we constructed a typology of systems convergence that includes six ideal types of systems influence and an extra type of systems convergence that does not involve active or passive influence. Throughout history, China's influence on Vietnam has taken several of the types that we have identified.

For many centuries before the onset of the modern world, Vietnam had been closely linked with China, both politically and militarily. Vietnam assumed the role of a tributary state in the Chinese world order. Vietnam also absorbed Chinese cultural influences, most prominently Confucianism, after which Vietnamese family, bureaucratic, social structures and the form of government were patterned. Although we do not dwell on these pre-modern periods, it seems that how China influenced Vietnam in these times ranges from imposition (during periods of Chinese occupation) to inheritance (in the immediate times after Chinese rule) to imitation (as Vietnam admired the Chinese performances) and integration (as Vietnam participated in the Chinese world order). It would be interesting to

explore whether or not China had also influenced Vietnam through conditioning and encouragement.

During the Cold War period, Mao and the people's war in China provided a useful example to the national struggle for independence in Vietnam as the Chinese revolution showed that it was possible to fight a more powerful enemy. Like the Chinese Communist Party, the VCP has indigenous roots and gained power through a war of national liberation. Chinese influence in Vietnam in this period seemed to be primarily a result of conditioning and imitation. Under Beijing's pressures to conduct Mao Chinese-style land reforms and ideological adjustments and the incentives of Chinese financial, military and diplomatic support, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam adopted numerous Mao Chinese practices and institutions even at the cost of large-scale popular protests, as seen during the 1953-1956 land reform campaign. The transplantation of the Chinese model into Vietnam during the 1950s was a rare example of conditioning (type 2) in Sino-Vietnamese relations. Conditioning refers to systems influence as a result of the combined employment of pressures and incentives. During the Cultural Revolution period, China also attempted to export its political model to Vietnam but Vietnam successfully resisted those attempts.

Post-Mao China, however, does not regard itself as the leader of the Third World, as did Mao China, or the overlord of "all under heaven," as did pre-modern imperial China, or the world leader, as does the United States today. There is no indication that post-Mao China has been interested in promoting its own political model abroad. We explained why China has not actively promoted its model of governance or even tried to force specific features of governance on Vietnam because system promotion is not part of China's grand strategy in the period. We have found that in this period, out of seven ideal types of systems convergence, China influences Vietnam through type 5 (imitation) and type 7 (analogy). We explained imitation as the convergence of political institutions resulting from international learning processes and cross-border elite interactions. In many ways Vietnam has followed closely – and voluntarily – the Chinese model.

The formation of Vietnam's post-Cold War grand strategy took its roots in the experiences of Vietnam's relations with the outside world during the 1980s and well before the ultimate end of the Cold War. Chinese views and examples played an important role in this formation. Vietnam's foundation for its new official foreign policy outlook since the late 1980s based on the goal of "peace and development" and the strategies of economic integration and international cooperation with the West have resembled China's reform program under Deng Xiaoping. Likewise, four of the six "basic principles" of *doi moi* are identical with the Four Basic Principles of China's reform that was introduced by Deng in March 1979. In a similar vein, the concept of "peaceful evolution," which referred to the gradual undermining of communist party power by introducing Western elements into the society, was borrowed from China.

At critical junctures Vietnamese leaders have actively sought Chinese advice and guidance particularly on economic matters and especially the question as to how to reform a socialist economy without losing party control.

Similarities of governance structures in Vietnam and China are primarily the result of analogy or the fact that both regimes have faced comparable challenges first with regard to their respective national revolutionary struggles and later the establishment and institutional fostering of communist rule, acted under similar conditions and pursued similar

goals which have resulted in a partial convergence of the two countries' political institutions, structures, and practices that occurred without the direct exercise of influence. The most prominent example of chasing analogous objectives certainly refers to the economic reform processes toward market systems and the integration in global economic structures without touching the main pillars of the respective political orders. Overall, the convergence of governance systems in Vietnam and China lies in principles and policy (the value system of reform) rather than in structures and polity. Or as we have termed it: Vietnam's learning from China is more a "path imitation" than "model imitation."

This does not make Vietnam a second or an emerging China. A closer look at governance structures reveals significant differences. For example, Vietnam has upheld its "troika" structure which is characterized by three different persons holding the posts of the Party chief, the state president, and the government chief while in China, the Party chief also assumes the position of the head of state. Whereas China remains advanced in economic reform and marketization, Vietnam has been markedly more experimental and progressive with regard to political liberalization moves.

China's restraint from any open and explicit attempts at influencing and shaping governance structures in the neighboring country is not by chance but rather the result of hard strategic thinking. In its quest to re-establish regional leadership and pre-eminence China has been reverting to its traditional model of hegemony that allows Vietnam's autonomy in choosing its governance system while constraining Hanoi's independence in selecting its allies. This strategy has positively contributed to the stability of Vietnam's communist system and shielded it off US pressures. This may be the intended impact of China's interactions with Vietnam. A communist Vietnam that seeks Chinese strategic support and thus stays within the Chinese orbit is certainly something that Beijing wants.

However, China's interactions with Vietnam also include territorial conflicts in the South China Sea and China's role in supporting Vietnam's anti-imperialists and constraining Vietnam's behavior. Thus, China's interactions with Vietnam may backfire as they have also nurtured anti-China sentiment and contributed to the re-emergence of Vietnamese nationalism. While China acts as a protector of Vietnam's communist regime, it is also seen as a rival both in the South China Sea and in the marketplace and an obstacle in Vietnam's way toward closer ties with the West, which is a richer and more sophisticated source of capital, technology, and know-how for Vietnam's modernization. With the rise of nationalism in the non-state elite and the population at large, the rise of integrationists in the VCP, and when Vietnam reaches a higher stage of economic development, China's interactions with Vietnam may deepen the cleavage between the anti-imperialists and the integrationists. This may be a negative, unintended impact of China's policy toward Vietnam for the latter's political stability.

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