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China and Vietnam: From ‘friendly neighbours’ to ‘comprehensive partners’

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9 July 2008

Vietnamese Communist Party leader Nong Duc Manh’s visit to China in early June 2008 underscores the will of the two countries to lift relations to new heights. Can they become strategic partners despite their disputes in the South China Sea ?

VIETNAMESE Communist Party leader Nong Duc Manh visited China in June. This was his second visit to Beijing within two years, reciprocating the one to Vietnam by Chinese leader Hu Jintao in late 2006.. The two neighbours billed the visit as highlighting the principle of “friendly neighbourliness, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and future orientation”. The guiding spirit was, they said, one of “good neighbours, good friends, good comrades and good partners”.

However, the visit also came against the backdrop of possible economic slowdown in the two countries and lingering bilateral tensions. Recently, there were protests in Vietnam following China’s announcement to establish Sansha city in Hainan province to govern the Paracels and Spratlys over which Hanoi also claims sovereignty. The Vietnamese are also concerned about China’s plan to deploy an underground nuclear submarine base in Hainan.

From ‘neighbourliness’ to ‘comprehensive cooperation’

Sino-Vietnamese relations have witnessed some achievements since normalization 17 years ago. Politically, reciprocal visits by the two countries’ top-ranking leaders have been frequent. During these visits, they would often review and create springboards for further cooperation, thus constantly enriching friendly ties. Apart from annual leadership visits, there have been numerous exchanges between governmental and non-governmental officials on an almost daily basis -- a unique feature of Sino-Vietnamese relations seldom seen in the bilateral ties of other nations. To further this growing tradition, Manh and Hu announced the establishment of a high-level hotline for consultations on major issues -- the first of its kind between a Vietnamese leader and a foreign counterpart.

Economically, China now ranks 15th among countries pouring investment into Vietnam. Two-way trade has jumped from the modest US\$30 million in 1991 and US\$4.9 billion in 2004 to a record US\$15.9 billion in 2007. This makes China Vietnam’s biggest trading partner. People-to-people

exchanges also see forward leaps with the number of Chinese visitors to Vietnam reaching a peak of 778,000 in 2004. Thousands of Vietnamese students are also now studying in China.

Strategically, while the two countries adopt inward-looking policies, they both want to maintain a peaceful environment for mutual development (*mulin, anlin, fulin*). In fact, the above-mentioned achievements could not be realized without efforts in resolving issues left behind by history. In particular there are the settlement of land borders (1999) and the Tonkin Gulf (2000), as well as facilitating the establishment of the ‘two corridors and one economic belt’ between China’s southern region and Vietnam’s northern provinces.

On the South China Sea dispute, they also reached important compromises bilaterally and regionally. These involved putting aside the sovereignty disputes for joint exploitation; refraining from use of force; signing the code of conduct with other ASEAN claimants; and agreeing on a joint exploration programme such as the one involving Vietnam, China and the Philippines. During Manh’s visit, the two sides agreed to complete a landmark planting along their land borderlines in 2008, sign a new regulation on border management and continue cooperation in the Tonkin Gulf. On maritime disputes, they pledged to maintain the stability of the situation in the South China Sea area while seeking long-term resolutions through peaceful negotiations.

Future orientation and challenges ahead

The South China Sea remains a major security concern for Vietnam and may continue to pose the greatest challenge for current Sino-Vietnamese friendship. Both need to exercise caution, farsightedness, and self-restraint. China’s protest against Vietnam’s plan for tourism on the Spratly islands in 2004; clashes between Chinese police and Vietnamese fishermen in the Tonkin Gulf in early 2005; and unprecedented demonstrations by Vietnamese youths outside Chinese diplomatic missions in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh city, Paris, and London in late 2007 following rumours about China’s intention to establish Sansha city are just a few cases to show the sensitive nature of the problems. More alarmingly, the rising radical nationalism, especially among the youth, should be a cause for concern.

If badly handled, this resurfacing of underlying tensions may greatly harm the improved relationship between Vietnam and China -- as has been the case in Sino-Japanese relations over issues of history. Hence, farsightedness and confidence-building are badly needed to give meaning to the ‘future-orientation’ in Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Unsurprisingly, the final Joint Statement following Manh’s visit put the important tasks ahead for the two countries as lying in friendly exchanges between their youths and non-governmental organizations, and the need to increase public awareness of the friendship between the two peoples.

Vietnam and China are facing many similar problems: coping with economic risks posed by decades of rapid development; responding to social risks; guarding against domestic and external security threats; and exploring how to take the capitalist road with their respective socialist characteristics.

Vietnam and China seek to be not just good neighbours and partners but more importantly ‘good comrades’. The statement by Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung in his reception for Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in April 2008 that “the mountains and rivers of Vietnam and China are adjacent, cultures similar, ideologies shared, and destinies interrelated” therefore has profound implications.

Intertwined Destinies

The reference to “interrelated destinies” (*mingyun xiangguan*) implies that their respective national survivals are tied. Therefore, lingering historical animosity and South China Sea issues may continue to dwell but will not put the current dynamic in relations into disarray. This, however, requires both sides to exercise self-restraint so as not to complicate the issues and to address disputes in the spirit of looking at the big picture (*yi daju weizhong*).

Another lesson they learnt, like in Sino-Russia relations, is that while ties are witnessing their best of times, they will not replicate the “lips-and-teeth” alliance of the 50s and 60s. As declared by Chinese leaders, post-Cold War China and Vietnam are “comrades but not allies,” a relationship that can be described as “intimate but not so close, distant but not so far, and having disputes but no conflicts”.

In short, the current mainstream of Vietnam-China relations relies on the “4-point good spirit” guideline, recalling the Confucian philosophy of the five characteristics of a gentleman which both countries largely share, namely *ren* (kindheartedness), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (etiquette), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (faithfulness). These phrases symbolize similarities between the two countries in terms of geography, culture, ideals, and interests. If fully observed, they will serve as a solid foundation for boosting their bilateral friendship.

The key challenge toward this end, however, is how to impart this good top-down political will to the two peoples, especially to a more nationalistic younger generation.

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