

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Accommodating the dragon: Vietnam's enduring asymmetric entanglements with China

Nguyen, Thanh Trung

*Date of Award:*  
2016

[Link to publication](#)

#### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

## **ABSTRACT**

As China's economic miracle does not show signs to stop soon, international relations theorists keep on asking what implications this tremendous growth will have on the regional and international security. Significant gap between China and Vietnam has become a prominent feature of various asymmetric dyads. The dissertation investigates how Vietnam could maintain an enduring asymmetric relationship with China in the context of a growing disparity between two countries since 1991.

The evolution of Sino-Vietnamese relationship is so complicated that it defies the application of a single theory. The current literature on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship primarily focuses on the bilateral ties but ignores the effects of China's power on Vietnam's foreign policy. To advance understanding in Vietnam's responses to a rising China, I formulated a theoretical paradigm based on asymmetry theory by Brantly Womack. The dissertation finds that perceptions of power asymmetry have played a crucial role in Vietnam's relationship with China over the last three decades and continued to define the trajectory of the bilateral relations in the coming years. The dissertation has covered an extended chronology of bilateral relations, which allows a better understanding of Vietnam's numerous conflicting dynamics and dramatic shifts in its strategies towards China before and after 1991 in order to analyze the enduring asymmetric relationship. It demonstrates that Vietnam learnt many harsh lessons in the Cold War era and knew how to adapt to a rising China.

Since two countries normalized relationship in 1991, Vietnam's reaction to the increasing power disparity caused by China's fast growth has been a strategy of deference, which consists of political and economic engagement of China, hedged by internal and external balancing. In other words, hedging is the preferred policy that Vietnam is embracing to manage the asymmetric gap. The complex relationship between China and Vietnam explains the recent reinforcement of deferential behaviors from Vietnamese leadership meanwhile boosting cooperation with the U.S.

The dissertation also attempts to address the crucial question of how the Vietnamese leadership has employed hedging to manage an increasingly assertive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea, which puts lots of pressures on the Vietnamese Communist Party's legitimacy as well as the national territorial integrity. Finally, the study argues that the future of Sino-Vietnamese relations will also rely on the broader policy battles that are being, and will be, laid out in the Chinese government. Vietnam is still unlikely to be viewed more important by the top Chinese leadership due to the power asymmetry. Hence, the best strategy for Vietnam is to maximize its hedging capabilities to actively pre-empt or minimize any unwanted consequences or contingencies.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>xii</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>PART I. FOUNDATIONS OF THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1. General Overview</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Relational Structures of the Relationship</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>3. The Argument and Research Questions</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b> 17	
<b>1. Literature Review</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>2. Theoretical Perspectives on Power</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>3. How to Measure Power / Capabilities</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>4. Other Concepts of Dynamics of Security</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>5. The Politics of Power Asymmetry</b> .....	<b>29</b>
Role of Deference to China .....	36
Role of Perceptions in Asymmetric Relations.....	39
Role of Historical Legacy.....	41
Role of Ideology .....	44
<b>6. Hedging Strategies</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3 RELATIONAL ASYMMETRY: VIETNAM'S BASIC STRUCTURE IN COMPARISON TO CHINA</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>1. Current Basic Parameters between China and Vietnam</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>2. Similarities between Vietnamese and Chinese Economic Reforms: Vietnamese     Present, Chinese Past</b> .....	<b>63</b>

The Launch of Economic Reform .....	65
Converging Interests or Widening Asymmetry .....	69

**PART II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BILATERAL  
RELATIONSHIP .....75**

**CHAPTER 4 SINO-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS BEFORE  
NORMALIZATION: LEANING AND BALANCING (BEFORE 1991) .....75**

<b>1. Lips and Teeth Relationship (1950-1975) .....</b>	<b>75</b>
Brother comradeship (1950-1968).....	75
Rift of relationship: Vietnam’s Disengagement of China (1968-1975) .....	81
<b>2. Sino-Vietnamese Broken Relationship: Vietnam’s Tilt toward the Soviet Union..</b>	<b>85</b>
The Soviet Factor .....	89
The <i>Hoa</i> (ethnic Chinese) Factor.....	92
The Cambodian Factor .....	95
The Brief yet Bloody Border War (1979).....	99
Punitive War vs. Deference .....	105
<b>3. The Tense Period: Asymmetry Matters (1984-1988) .....</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>4. The Dramatic Turn of 1989-1991 .....</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>5. Vietnam’s Domestic Dynamics of Change .....</b>	<b>112</b>
Economic Imperatives .....	112
Vietnam’s Battling Foreign Policy Strands .....	114

**CHAPTER 5 NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONSHIP SINCE THE END  
OF COLD WAR .....119**

<b>1. Normalization Period (1991-1999).....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>2. Normalcy Period (1999-Now) .....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>3. Management of Border Disputes.....</b>	<b>136</b>
The Borderland.....	137
The Gulf of Tonkin (Pan Beibu Wan) .....	139
<b>4. Vietnamese Public Opinion and Nationalism .....</b>	<b>143</b>
Vietnamese Public Opinion of China .....	143
Public Opinion Polls.....	146
<b>5. Vietnamese Nationalism .....</b>	<b>149</b>

**PART III. ISSUES, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS .....157**

**CHAPTER 6 VIETNAMESE ENGAGEMENT .....157**

<b>1. Party-to-Party and State-to-State Engagement .....</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>2. Military Engagement .....</b>	<b>168</b>

<b>CHAPTER 7 VIETNAM’S ECONOMIC PRAGMATISM: TRADE AND AID RELATIONS .....</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>1. Vietnam-China Trade Overview .....</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>2. Trade Deficit Problems .....</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>3. Vietnam’s FDI Landscape and Benevolence of Geography .....</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>4. Problems with Chinese Projects in Vietnam.....</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>5. Border Trade .....</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>6. Chinese Arrivals to Vietnam .....</b>	<b>208</b>
<b>7. Infrastructure Cooperation.....</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8 VIETNAM’S INTERNAL BALANCING AND MILITARY MODERNIZATION .....</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>1. Vietnam’s Military Force .....</b>	<b>214</b>
Historical Background of Vietnam’s Military Force.....	214
<b>Vietnam’s Military Force since 2009 .....</b>	<b>216</b>
Basic Parameters of China’s PLA and VPA.....	220
<b>2. Vietnamese Defense Expenditures.....</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>3. Vietnam’s Navy.....</b>	<b>232</b>
Vietnam’s Submarines.....	236
Vietnam’s Gepard Class Frigates .....	240
Vietnam’s Molniya/ Project 12418 and Dutch Sigma Ships .....	241
Seaplane Squadron .....	243
<b>4. Vietnam’s Missiles .....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>5. Marine Police (Coast Guard) .....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>6. VPA’s Air Force.....</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>CHAPTER 9 ALIGNMENTS AND MULTILATERAL FRAMEWORKS.....</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>1. Establishing Partnerships .....</b>	<b>252</b>
1.1. Forging the Vietnamese-U.S. Strategic Convergence .....	258
1.2. Russia: Traditional Ties.....	270
1.3. Vietnam’s Balancing Act with Other Powers: India and Japan.....	274
<b>2. Multilateral Framework.....</b>	<b>279</b>
Vietnam’s Road to ASEAN.....	280
Vietnam and Fragmented ASEAN .....	287
Fragmented ASEAN and a Swaggering China.....	290
Vietnam and Other Southeast Asian Institutions.....	294
<b>CHAPTER 10 THE SOUTH CHINA SEA .....</b>	<b>302</b>
<b>1. Background of the South China Sea .....</b>	<b>302</b>
<b>2. The Economic Stakes in the South China Sea .....</b>	<b>307</b>
The Mineral Resources Factor in the South China Sea .....	307

Importance of the Oil and Gas Resources to Vietnam and China .....	310
Marine Fishing Resources Factor in the South China Sea.....	315
<b>3. Territorial and Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea .....</b>	<b>317</b>
China’s Claims in the South China Sea.....	333
Evaluation of the South China Sea Disputes .....	337
China’s Evolving Strategies in the South China Sea.....	342
<b>4. Vietnam’s Multi-Pronged Strategies in the South China Sea .....</b>	<b>353</b>
Vietnam’s Marine Strategy.....	354
Vietnam’s Energy Strategy with the Involvement of Foreign Oil Companies.....	358
Bilateral Mechanism to Manage the South China Sea Problems .....	367
Internationalization and Multi-lateralization of the South China Sea .....	370
<b>5. Implications for the Future.....</b>	<b>372</b>
 <b>CHAPTER 11 CONCLUSION .....</b>	 <b>377</b>
<b>1. Future Scenarios of the Bilateral Ties .....</b>	<b>377</b>
<b>2. Contributions of the Study.....</b>	<b>382</b>
<b>3. Theoretical and Methodological Challenges .....</b>	<b>383</b>
<b>4. Limitations of this research and avenues for future study.....</b>	<b>385</b>
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	 <b>388</b>
 <b>CURRICULUM VITAE.....</b>	 <b>427</b>