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 it hedging capabilities to actively pre-empt or minimize any unwanted consequences or contingencies.


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