Introduction

In the first three millennia of their relationship, China and Vietnam have been through almost every conceivable pattern of interaction among neighbors. Even in the past fifty years, the relationship has swung from intimate friendship to implacable enmity, and at each extreme the Sino-Vietnamese relationship became the defining relationship for different phases of Southeast Asian regional politics and a major element of global international relations. Although the success of normalization since 1991 has taken the relationship out of world headlines, the stability of relations between China and Vietnam remains an essential part of the foundation of international order in Asia.

The one constant in relations between China and Vietnam since the unification of the Chinese empire in 221 BC has been that China is always much the larger partner. Regardless of whether the relationship was hostile, friendly, or in between, it has been asymmetric. China has always been a much more important presence for Vietnam than Vietnam has been for China, and Vietnam has had a more acute sense of the risks and opportunities offered by the relationship. Given the great disparity between China and Vietnam, one might expect that either Vietnam would be subservient to China or that China would annex Vietnam. In fact, however, even though Vietnam was formally a part of China for a millennium it was never fully "domesticated," and for most of the last thousand years the relationship has been a negotiated one. The Sino-Vietnamese relationship therefore presents an interesting case of a long-term asymmetric relationship that has moved through a full gamut of possible variations. Moreover, the asymmetry of the relationship can be used to explain its restlessness as well as the methods that both sides have used to define and to manage it.

Asymmetry provides the analytic focus for the book. I argue that asymmetry is more than just an obvious fact about the relationship between China and Vietnam; it has always been its most important structural factor. The disparity in capacity in an asymmetric relationship does not lead inevitably to

the stronger side dominating the weaker side, as the case of Vietnam shows. If greater size and strength implied that China could easily dominate Vietnam, Vietnam would not exist today as an independent state. But Vietnam's existence next to China has not been an easy one. A great disparity, especially between neighboring states, always means that the weaker side will be more attentive to the relationship than vice versa because proportionally it is more exposed to its risks and opportunities. It is easy for misunderstandings to arise because the relationship means different things to each side. In times of crisis, the misunderstandings of each side are more likely to lead to a vicious circle than to mutual correction. Therefore asymmetric relations are difficult to manage.

I stress the theory of asymmetric relations in this book because most international relations theory overlooks the matters highlighted here. Since nations are sovereign entities and Western international relations theory arose from the competition of roughly equal powers in Europe and then concentrated on great power conflicts, it is not surprising that relations of disparity are usually treated as temporary disequilibria.[1] It is assumed that either the weaker state will balance its vulnerability by means of alliances with other states or it will be subject to the hegemony of the stronger state. But in fact there exist many long-term asymmetric relationships, and the stronger cannot always impose its will on the weaker. If an asymmetric relationship cannot be "solved" through force, then it must be managed by both sides. China and Vietnam provide a broad spectrum of experiences in managing an asymmetric relationship, and their recent management of normalization has been quite effective. Asymmetry provides a useful approach to understanding their relationship, and the Sino-Vietnamese case provides a rich case study for a general theory of asymmetry.

It is beyond the scope of this book to provide a sweeping analysis of contemporary world politics, but the salience of asymmetry reaches far beyond the case of China and Vietnam and even beyond similar bilateral situations. The post–Cold War world of the lone superpower is a world of asymmetric, non-competitive relations, and in general international relations theory turns a blind eye to the problems of managing and sustaining such relations. The grand boxing match between the United States and the Soviet Union is over, and the key problem of international relations has shifted to the sustainability of leadership. Rather than speculating on the next challenger, international relations theory should attend to the problems of the sustainable leadership of the strong and the factors influencing the compliance of

[1] A recent exception is David Kang's theory of hierarchy, which like this work is also based on the East Asian model. See David Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytic Frameworks," *International Security* 27:4 (Spring 2003), pp. 57–85; "Hierarchy, Balancing, and Empirical Puzzles in Asian International Relations," *International Security* 28:3 (Winter 2004), pp. 165–80.

the weak. We live now in a world not of competitive great powers, nor one of master and slaves, but in a world of asymmetry.

The book is intended to be a contribution to the general theory of international relations as well as to the understanding of China and Vietnam, but I give greater priority to "the case" rather than to the theory. This is a deliberate methodological decision. As John Gerring has argued, case studies are especially appropriate when exploring new causal mechanisms.[2] I would argue more broadly that the "case" is the reality to which the theory is secondary. In international relations theory, "realism" is often contrasted to "idealism," but surely a more basic and appropriate meaning of "realism" is to give priority to reality rather than to theory. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead defined the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness as "neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought."[3] In effect, the concept is taken as the concrete reality, and actual reality is reduced to a mere appendage of data. Misplaced Concreteness may well be the cardinal sin of modern social science. It is certainly pandemic in international relations theory, where a serious consideration of the complexities of real political situations is often dismissed as mere "area studies." Like the Greek god Anteus who was sustained by touching his Mother Earth, theory is challenged and rejuvenated by planting its feet in thick reality.

I have decided to attempt a comprehensive analysis of interactions between China and Vietnam rather than a narrower analysis of foreign relations for two reasons. First, the most appropriate method for a new approach to a topic is to include all relevant phenomena. It might be more convenient to limit the scope of study, but a limited scope would assume the irrelevance of factors beyond its domain of attention. Second, although questions of war and peace provide the strongest illustration of asymmetric relations, asymmetry affects the full range of external activities. Its influence can be seen in border trade, national development policy, ideology, and so forth. Attention to a broad spectrum of relationships, especially in the current period of normalization, will facilitate both a well-rounded view of the effects of asymmetry and also a better understanding of methods of managing asymmetric relations.

The greatest challenge of a comprehensive analysis is brevity. It is difficult to write less than one knows about a subject, and it is a high art to present a broad and complex reality in as few words as possible. Inevitably simplification occurs, and I acknowledge in advance to the experts reading this book that topics of considerable richness and controversy are reduced to a few sentences. This may be particularly problematic in the chapters dealing with

[2] John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What Is it Good For?" *American Political Science Review* 98:2 (May 2004), pp. 341–54.
[3] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Harper, 1929), p. 11.

history. But I would also like to present a challenge to the experts. It is easy to correct simplifications by expanding the text and the research. A more interesting question might be, what would be a better simplification? To the extent that scholarship has a broader audience than the scholars themselves, simplification is a necessary and honorable task. Moreover, brevity sharpens basic issues and judgments, and scholarly progress can be made even if further research and more sophisticated articulations are required. The texture of life and of history is infinitely fine and complex, but it does not preclude the possibility of discerning shapes and patterns in its fabric.

This book has been written with audiences in Vietnam and China in mind as well as audiences in third countries. It inevitably differs from official interpretations of the relationship in each country, and it is written from the point of view of an observer in a third country. However, the ideas embodied in this book occurred to me as I interacted with friends and institutions in both China and Vietnam, and my intent is to be respectful of the interests, intelligence, and dignity of all concerned. Available resources and my language competencies have restricted my research materials to Western language materials (English, German, and French) supplemented by Chinese and Vietnamese materials. I am sure that this has led to obvious mistakes and oversights from the point of view of Chinese and Vietnamese specialists, and I apologize and request their criticisms and corrections. This book is my attempt to learn from my current experience of China and Vietnam as well as from the lessons of the past.

The Book in Brief

The book has a general overview, two major parts, and a conclusion, subdivided into a total of eleven chapters. The underlying reason for its structure is that it is first necessary to consider the general conditions affecting the relationship before analyzing its development over time. It concludes with reflections on the variations in the relationship and the implications of these for the deep structure of asymmetry.

Chapter 1 introduces the relative situations of China and Vietnam, asymmetry theory, and the variety of relationships that China and Vietnam have held in their long history. It is a microcosm of the book. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 comprise the first of the book's two major parts, "Basic Structure," which considers the preconditions to understanding the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Chapter 2 presents the basic parameters of China's external posture. It argues that there are five parameters – size, centricity, sufficiency of natural resources, the challenge of renewable resources, and history – that set a durable context for all of China's external relations, including its relations with Vietnam. Each of these parameters occurs to greater and lesser extents in other countries as well, but together they give China a unique and self-centered vantage point in external relations. Chapter 3 addresses the

parameters of Vietnam's external posture. In contrast to China, Vietnam has never considered itself to be the center of its world, a basic fact that gives its external relations a quite different cast. Vietnam's parameters are geography, an identity that combines both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, resource imbalance, the challenge of integration and diversity, and history.

The preceding pair of chapters sets the stage for the analysis of an asymmetric relationship, but before the specifics of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship are explored it is worthwhile to consider in Chapter 4 the general structural characteristics of asymmetry. Asymmetric relationships must be analyzed in terms of their two sub-relations, that of the stronger to the weaker and that of the weaker to the stronger. The position of the stronger is influenced by the fact that the relationship is less important to itself, and therefore it is less attentive. The weaker side is vulnerable to the greater capacity of the stronger side, and therefore it is more attentive. Characteristic patterns of misperception can develop in which the stronger side makes errors of inattention while the weaker makes errors of overattention, and these misperceptions can amplify one another into a crisis. Asymmetric relationships can be successfully managed, however. The two fundamental techniques are to remove issues from contention by neutralizing them and to control the vicious circle of misperceptions by relying on the common sense of an established relationship and by using diplomatic ritual to acknowledge mutual respect and mutual benefit in the relationship. Meanwhile the tensions inherent in the bilateral relationship can be buffered and reframed by being part of a larger pattern of multilateral relations.

The six chapters of the book's second part, "The Relational Dynamic," present the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations from the beginning to the present. Each chapter combines the narration of a phase of the relationship with reflections on the asymmetric structure of that phase. Chapter 5 begins with the emergence of a sinitic zone of culture and conflict before the establishment of imperial China with the Qin Dynasty in 221 BC. At this time China was not yet China, and Vietnam was not yet Vietnam, and yet the scale of what was emerging in Chinese territory affected what became Vietnam. Vietnam was drawn into northern-oriented zones of influence and eventually became part of China during the Han Dynasty. Vietnam remained part of China for the next thousand years, but its own sense of identity emerged in conflict with consolidation. On the one hand, many fundamental aspects of Vietnam's social and material culture were set during this time. On the other, the memories of resistance to Chinese control and the emergence of local leaders led to Vietnam's independence in AD 968. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of two types of asymmetric relations, amorphous asymmetry and internal asymmetry, which are illustrated by the early history of China and Vietnam.

Chapter 6 covers the relations between China and Vietnam as unequal traditional empires, a period of nine centuries from 968 to encroachments by

the West beginning with the Opium War in China in 1840. International relations between China and Vietnam began with the Song Dynasty's acknowledgment of Vietnamese autonomy, but there was considerable development in the identities of both parties as well as in the management of the relationship. The watershed of the relationship was the ultimately unsuccessful Ming occupation of Vietnam from 1407 to 1427, after which a stable coexistence was established in the framework of the tribute system. The role-based asymmetry of this era guaranteed the autonomy of Vietnam as well as Vietnam's deference to China, but did so in a patriarchal framework of inequality that limited the utility of the relationship. Role-based asymmetry provided a process for controlling a limited relationship, but it did not provide a venue for exploring and expanding mutually beneficial contacts.

The coming of the West in the modern era led to the collapse of both the Chinese and the Vietnamese empires and created crisis situations in both countries from which fraternal revolutionary movements eventually arose. Chapter 7 covers the period in which, for the first time since China was unified in 221 BC, Vietnam faced a greater threat than China, and China was not the center of its world. China and Vietnam shifted from an unequal face-to-face relationship to a shoulder-to-shoulder relationship of common threat and shared suffering. This situation of distracted asymmetry in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was complemented by one of disjunctive asymmetry between both countries and the West.

Chapter 8 covers the period from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the reunification of Vietnam in 1976. The relationship was driven by China's support for Vietnam's national liberation efforts, but it underwent a major change in the mid-1960s under the influence of the American war in Vietnam, the Sino-Soviet split, and China's internal turmoil during the Cultural Revolution. Because Vietnam was dependent on Chinese aid, the differences remained unarticulated. The major contrast between the dependent asymmetry of China and Vietnam and the dependence of the Saigon government on the United States was that China respected the autonomy of Vietnam's decision making whereas the United States subordinated the Saigon government to the requirements of its containment policy.

Chapter 9 treats the decline of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship from the 1970s to normalization in 1991. The response of both countries to the novel situation of victory in Indochina provides, unfortunately for them, an excellent illustration of the vicious circle of misperceptions in asymmetric relations. The situation was rendered more complex by the role of Cambodia, but the dynamic of misperception between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge was also deeply affected by asymmetry. The second part of the chapter covers the happier story of the undermining of stalemate in the late 1980s and finally the emergence of normalization in 1990–91. Vietnam's daring diplomatic move in 1985 of announcing a unilateral withdrawal from Cambodia by 1990 shows the frustrations and eventual success of persistent and imaginative

small country diplomacy in a hostile environment. In general, though, the period of hostile asymmetry provided a lesson in the consequences of the mismanagement of relations, a "teacher by negative example" that set the sober tone for normalization.

Chapter 10 covers the process of normalization from 1991 to 1999 and the era of relative calm that emerged from normalization. I call this the era of mature asymmetry because the acceptance of the necessity of a negotiated relationship is based on the frustrations of the preceding period of hostility. Normalization is not premised on friendship but rather on the mutual desire for peace and the real possibility of continued hostility. As confidence builds, the initial cold caution is gradually replaced by the attractive opportunities opened by peace. Eventually the weight of the relationship shifts from the defense by peaceful means of conflicting interests to the development of common interests, and the era of normalcy begins. Normalcy remains an asymmetric relationship, but it does not imply the subordination of the smaller to the larger state; rather, it signals the institutionalization of a pattern of management that is based on the autonomy of the smaller state and yet its deference to the capacities of the larger.

Chapter 11 begins by pulling together the variety of asymmetries experienced by China and Vietnam and generalizing them into a picture of possible variations, using the experiences of other states as well. Table 11.1, "Varieties of Sino-Vietnamese Asymmetry," pulls together all of the modalities experienced in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship and links them to analogous relationships elsewhere. The chapter then proceeds to questions of the deep structure of asymmetric relations and the roles of identity, context, and leadership in sustaining and changing relationships. Finally, we return to China and Vietnam and consider the possible challenges that normalcy there might face.

For the convenience of multilingual readers, the appendix provides a glossary of people, places, and important terms in English, Chinese characters and pinyin, and Vietnamese. Occasionally translations are provided in the text in the following format [pinyin, Chinese characters, Vietnamese]. The reason for these linguistic cross-references is that while Chinese and Vietnamese often share the same linguistic roots (and in traditional Vietnamese texts, most of the same characters), the pronunciation is sufficiently different to be confusing to readers with a stronger base in one language or the other. When Vietnamese names and words are used in the text and not as translations, diacritic marks are omitted because they are confusing to non-Vietnamese speakers, and in any case non-Vietnamese speakers would have little hope of pronouncing the words correctly. Similarly, polysyllabic Vietnamese words and names are run together (for example, Vietnam rather than Viet Nam), although in standard Vietnamese syllables are always separated.

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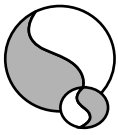

General Overview

In November 1991 the General Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party Do Muoi and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Vietnam Vo Van Kiet visited Beijing at the invitation of Chinese Communist Party Secretary Jiang Zemin and Chinese Premier Li Peng, and a Joint Communiqué was signed on November 10 establishing normal relations between China and Vietnam, ending twelve years of hostility. In one sense this marked the re-establishment of relations, since China had been the first country to extend diplomatic recognition to Ho Chi Minh's government and had been its major supporter during its struggles against the French, the Saigon government, and the Americans. But neither China nor Vietnam viewed the normalization of 1991 as a return to the alliance of 1950–1975. Despite the fact that normalization concluded a decade of bitter hostility in which neither side had triumphed, admitted defeat, or apologized, the era of normalization was immediately accepted by the participants and by external observers as a robust and long-term relationship. Normalization was expected to be a new era of peaceful but not close relations, and from 1999 it has exceeded those expectations by moving from cautious normalization to more integrated normalcy. Why?

The shorter the question, the longer the answer. This book attempts to present a holistic view of China and Vietnam in their relationship, and this chapter is in part an introduction to the subject and in part a microcosm of the book. It will first of all attempt to capture the overall shape, complexities, and tensions of the two countries' attitudes toward one another. Then the contemporary disparity between them will be sketched, outlining the asymmetry of capacities between China and Vietnam. Next, the problems posed by "normal" asymmetry for contemporary international relations theory will be discussed. The chapter concludes with a narration of the major phases of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, ending with the present era of normalcy.

Relational Attitudes: The Rock and the Giant

The relationship of China and Vietnam is not one relationship but two: the relationship of China to Vietnam and the relationship of Vietnam to China. These two sub-relationships are not simply the same game viewed from the perspective of one or the other player. Each player is playing a different game. Each player interprets the behavior of the other in terms of its own game. As a result each player is often surprised by the actions of the other, and each has a critical opinion of the other. However, since 1999 both sides have been confident that a stronger relationship is advantageous.

For China, Vietnam has been the southern boundary stone of its grand notions of itself. In periods of hostility China has kicked this rock and found it hard and difficult to move. Again and again the power of China has broken on the rock of Vietnam, and although Vietnam has suffered more from these encounters than China has, China has found it necessary to withdraw and thus to acknowledge that China was smaller than it had hoped to be. In times of peace, China accepts the limits that the existence of Vietnam imposes on its sense of regional importance and enjoys the relatively minor advantages of a mutually beneficial relationship. But in neither war nor peace does China regard Vietnam as an equal.

Vietnam does not normally intrude on China's consciousness as either a major threat or a major opportunity. Vietnam achieves major importance in China's eyes only when it appears to be linked to global forces such as imperialism, world revolution, or Soviet "social imperialism." But when China treats Vietnam as an icon or a proxy of these global forces it tends to be frustrated by the outcome. So Vietnam remains a minor mystery to China, one that is often explained privately by references to the duplicity and inconstancy of the Vietnamese character. The Chinese have said of Vietnam that "anyone with milk is her mother."

Vietnam views China as the inscrutable northern giant. Even at peace the giant is feared because the fateful decision of war or peace is largely in the giant's hand. Flushed with victory and allied with the Soviet Union, Vietnam cast off its wartime deference to China in the late 1970s, and it suffered grievously in consequence. With such a neighbor, Vietnam is caught in a standing dilemma. It needs peace with China more than China needs peace with it, but if it allows China to push it around, to move the boundary stone, its loses its national substance and autonomy. Thus Vietnam tends to desire peace and yet to be fearful of uncontrolled contact, and to be allergic to any gesture on China's part that impugns Vietnam's sovereignty.

Vietnam's estimate of China is complex. On the one hand, corresponding to Vietnam's high level of concern and suspiciousness about Chinese behavior, China is viewed as almost diabolically clever in manipulating and pushing Vietnam. On the other hand, China is derided as a global

force.[1] Vietnam would rather model its stock markets after New York or Tokyo than after Shanghai or Shenzhen. The existence of a world more attractive and more powerful than China, one in which China is itself a small player, is important to Vietnam's general sense of security. Peace with China offers a favorable environment for Vietnam's development and some opportunities for trade, but Vietnam tends to downplay the salience of China in its future even though they both pursue similar development strategies.

Of course, these sketches are only caricatures of views common in both countries; different people have different opinions, and views change over time. But such views of the other country are not the result of isolation, ignorance, or mistakes. It is certainly not the case that one side is right and the other is wrong, although this is the implicit assumption made by each side. The perspectives are each founded in basic facts: Vietnam is not China's equal, and China is threatening to Vietnam whether or not it intends to be. Nevertheless, there is something dysfunctional here. Regardless of how much their interests coincide or differ, these two perspectives will tend to cause the misinterpretation by each country of the other's actions and intentions, adding to friction in peaceful times and increasing the possibility of confrontation that neither side desires. The divergent perspectives are part of the reality of an asymmetric relationship.

The other reality of the relationship is that despite the disparities of capacities and resulting differences of perspective, neither side can eliminate the other. China's greater power does not imply that it can control Vietnam, as it discovered most recently during the hostilities that lasted from 1979 to 1991. Likewise, there is no conceivable self-strengthening program or alliance that would make Vietnam the equal of China. Not only are China and Vietnam fated to coexist, but they have done so and will do so within an asymmetric relationship. Although Vietnam cannot do to China what China can do to Vietnam, their asymmetric relationship, like many similar relationships around the world, is remarkably stable.

China and Vietnam in Comparison

To the constant frustration of the Vietnamese, external observers are struck with the similarities of China and Vietnam. In general, there is no country more similar to China than Vietnam, and there is no country more similar to

[1] These Vietnamese fears and denigrations of China are often combined in interesting ways. For instance, on the occasion of Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Hanoi in November 1994, the local press complained about the flood of Chinese goods in local markets hurting local production. But the reason China was selling these goods to Vietnam, according to the Vietnamese, was that superior Western goods now available in China were pushing China's own products out of their home markets. *Vietnam Investment Review* as reported in *South China Morning Post*, 21 November 1994.