
STRATEGY AND EVOLUTION OF VIETNAM'S CHINA POLICY

A Changing Mixture of Pathways

===== Alexander L. Vuving
=====

Abstract

This article examines Vietnam's strategy toward China since 1990. The study suggests that Vietnam's China policy has been informed by a changing mix of four different pathways, whose salience depends on the interplay of interest and balance of power among China, America, ASEAN, and Vietnam's two grand strategic camps and supreme leader.

Keywords: foreign policy, grand strategy, Vietnam, rise of China, Sino-Vietnamese relations

The rise of China is undoubtedly one of the defining features of post-Cold War international relations in the Asia-Pacific region. How are the regional states responding to China's growing power? Geography and history have jointly made Vietnam into one of the countries most sensitive to developments in China. Half of Vietnam's past was under Chinese rule. In almost another half, Vietnam looked at China as the largest source of ideas and danger. Now as well as then, Vietnam lies on a main route of expansion from China to Southeast Asia, the major great-power-free zone in China's neighborhood. An inquiry into Vietnamese strategy toward China is therefore highly relevant to the debate over the responses of other states in the region to the rise of China. Nonetheless, so far little attention has been paid to Vietnam's China policy. This article endeavors to redress the balance. Specifically, it explores the configuration

===== Alexander Vuving is a Research Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University. He wishes to thank Long Hoang, Viet Vu, Brantly Womack, and an anonymous reviewer for their invaluable help in preparing this article. Email: <alexander_vuving@ksg.harvard.edu>.

Asian Survey, Vol. 46, Issue 6, pp. 805–824, ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2006 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: AS.2006.46.6.805.

and trajectory of the underlying strategy that has informed and guided Vietnamese policy toward China since the demise of the Cold War.

Most of the debate over responses to China's rise revolves around whether the other states are balancing, bandwagoning, engaging, or hedging in their relations with China.¹ These options are theoretically framed by realism and liberalism. While balancing and bandwagoning are two alternatives under realism, engagement is based on liberalism, and hedging on a combination of the two. By the same token, scholars tend to ask whether Vietnam is pursuing a realist foreign policy or one based on complex interdependence.² Such framing at best truncates and at worst distorts the reality. My survey, which extensively uses Vietnamese primary sources, reveals that Vietnamese foreign policy makers are thinking about, talking about, and practicing their country's relations with China in terms of four paradigms—besides realism and complex interdependence, there are also socialist internationalism and asymmetry.³

This article is organized into three main sections. The first outlines the preferred strategies of Vietnamese foreign policy. It looks at the major ways in which Vietnam's decision makers think about and practice their country's foreign relations. The second section investigates the evolution of Vietnam's strategy toward China in the post-Cold War era. It identifies phases of the trajectory of Vietnam's dealing with China and the configurations of strategy that characterize these phases. The section also examines the geneses of Vietnam's strategic reorientations. The third section discusses the generation of strategic continuity and change in Vietnam's China policy since the late 1980s. The aim is to figure out the factors shaping the choices of Vietnamese strategy toward China. In light of these factors, the article finally attempts to forecast about the future of Vietnam's China policy.

Foreign Policy Pathways

Foreign policy pathways, or strategic approaches to international relations, are ways of organizing these relations. Each approach operates within a paradigm of international relations. Currently, the Vietnamese discussion of foreign

1. See, especially, Aaron L. Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia," *International Security* 18:3 (Winter 1993/94), pp. 5–33; Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999); David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Framework," *International Security* 27:4 (Spring 2003), pp. 57–85; and Amitav Acharya, "Will Asia's Past Be Its Future?" *ibid.*, 28:3 (Winter 2003/04), pp. 149–64.

2. Zachary Abuza, "International Relations Theory and Vietnam," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 17:4 (March 1996), pp. 406–19.

3. The survey was conducted during my research trips to Vietnam from 2002 to 2005, drawing on both archival research and communication with well-informed officials and scholars.

policy draws from four paradigms—realism, socialist internationalism, interdependence, and asymmetry. While realism seems to be primordial, the other three rose to significance during different periods of Vietnamese history. The asymmetry paradigm as thought and practiced in Vietnam is a tradition of pre-modern Sino-Vietnamese relations. Socialist internationalism was a major, if not dominant, paradigm of communist Vietnam's foreign policy during the Cold War. The interdependence paradigm emerged in the late 1980s as some Vietnamese leaders promulgated a New World Outlook, which led to Hanoi's adoption of a diversified and multidirectional foreign policy. These paradigms are linked to respective approaches to foreign policy. Corresponding to realism is the "balancing" approach. The asymmetry paradigm corresponds to the "deference" approach, socialist internationalism to the "solidarity" approach, and interdependence to "enmeshment."

Balancing

"Balancing" refers to two forms of a state's response to threats posed by another state. The more visible form of the two is external balancing, which involves building alliances with third parties on the international stage. The less apparent but more popular form is internal balancing, where a country builds up its domestic strengths to enhance its preparedness. These two forms of behavior rest on a common rationale. As Kenneth Waltz has remarked, "Weakness invites control; strength tempts one to exercise it, if only for the 'good' of other people."⁴ Because disparity in power generates insecurity, the way of providing for security is to establish a balance of power.

Although the realist school of international relations coined the term "balancing," the strategy of balancing has in fact been practiced for thousands of years. 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 was 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 1990–91, external balancing characterized Vietnam's China policy.

Balancing is all too familiar to Vietnamese policy makers. Considerations of relative power ("balance of forces") are among the chief strategic imperatives taught by both the traditional and 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

4. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 27.

proper study of international relations.⁵ Balancing features prominently in the writings of Vietnamese foreign policy makers. In Nguyen Co Thach's book on the world after World War Two, the former foreign minister (1979–91) describes world politics primarily in terms of international balances of power, alliances (“assemblages of forces”), and Great-Power relations.⁶ A recent essay by former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet implied that balancing continues to be the default strategy of Vietnamese foreign policy.⁷ 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.”⁸

Deference

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 occurring over the course of a millennium under Chinese rule and the later experience of nearly 10 centuries as an autonomous kingdom neighboring China. A basic reality underpins these 2,000 years of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship: the unchangeable asymmetry in favor of China in terms of size and capacities.⁹

Based on the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, Brantly Womack has recently developed a theoretical elaboration of asymmetric dyads. He points out that in an asymmetric bilateral relationship the two sides nurture different patterns of attention and status sensitivities. These differences are the roots of systemic misperception and thus can lead to conflict. Systemic stability can be reached by fulfilling the minimum expectations of both sides. For the weaker, it is acknowledgement by the stronger. In return, the stronger expects deference from the weaker. Acknowledgement implies that the stronger respects the weaker side's autonomy. Deference means that the weaker pursues its interests in a manner that corresponds to the stronger side's superior status.¹⁰

5. Hoc vien Chinh tri Quoc gia Ho Chi Minh, Vien Quan he Quoc te [Institute of International Relations, Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy], *Tap Bai Giang Quan He Quoc Te* [Textbook of international relations] (Hanoi: Ly luan Chinh tri, 2004), p. 18. The other five methods are economic, historical, holistic, empirical, and class analysis.

6. Nguyen Co Thach, *The Gioi Trong 50 Nam Qua (1945–1995) Va The Gioi Trong 25 Nam Toi (1995–2020)* [The world in the past fifty years (1945–1995) and the world in the coming twenty-five years (1995–2020)] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 1998), especially p. 62.

7. Vo Van Kiet, “Dong Gop Y Kien Vao Bao Cao Tong Ket Ly Luan Va Thuc Tien 20 Nam Doi Moi” [Suggestions to the concluding report on theory and practice of 20 years of renewal], April 2005, Section III.2, unpublished paper, <http://www.ykien.net/tl_viettrung90.html>.

8. Allen E. Goodman, “Vietnam in 1994: With Peace at Hand,” *Asian Survey* 35:1 (January 1995), p. 98.

9. Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

10. Brantly Womack, “Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: China, Vietnam, and Cambodia during the 1970s,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26:2 (June 2003), pp. 96–99.

The deference tradition is alive and well among Vietnam's ruling elites. An often recalled story is how the Vietnamese Le Dynasty court treated Ming Dynasty Chinese troops after defeating them on the battleground in 1427. Instead of taking 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 Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) chief Le Kha Phieu, the rationale for Vietnam's deference is that "we live adjacent to a big country; we cannot afford to maintain tension with them because they are next door to us."¹¹ The aide used this argument to justify his boss's acceptance of China's terms on a visit to Beijing and Phieu's concessions in the Sino-Vietnamese border pacts of 1999 and 2000.¹²

Solidarity

Vietnamese politics is dominated by the VCP, which from its very foundation in 1930 has endorsed Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology. Many Marxist-Leninist ideas have been propagated, repeated, and inculcated, including a worldview. Marxist-Leninists perceive world politics at the present stage of history as a class struggle between the forces of socialism and those of capitalism, which has become imperialism. While the leading forces of socialism are the communist states, those of imperialism are the Western countries. Because this conflict is for ultimate victory, it requires both solidarity and internationalism among the socialist forces. All communists know their battle cry, which concludes the *Communist Manifesto*: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!"¹³

Solidarity among socialist forces is premised on their shared fate and interests in the struggle against class enemies. The alliance of socialists against capitalism-imperialism is more than just balancing. In balancing, consideration of relative capabilities takes priority, while under solidarity, identification of the enemy is prior to any other consideration.

The solidarity approach formed the linchpin of Hanoi's foreign policy during the Cold War. A vanguard fighter in this conflict, Hanoi viewed the alliance of its friends in the socialist states, the Third World, and the advanced capitalist countries—which it called the world's "three revolutionary currents"—as a

11. Nguyen Chi Trung, "Thuc Chat Tu Dai Hoi Dang IX Tro Ve Truoc (Tu Thap Ky 90 The Ky 20) La Van De Gi?" [What is the real problem in the 1990s prior to the 9th Party Congress?], Hanoi, 2002, manuscript, <<http://www.ykien.net/clbdt011.html>>.

12. Ibid.

13. See Eero Palmujoki, *Vietnam and the World: Marxist-Leninist Doctrine and the Changes in International Relations, 1975–1993* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

solidarity bloc.¹⁴ Their support was seen as an important contribution to Hanoi's victory in the Vietnam War. In the post-Cold War era, the same approach is based on supposed solidarity among communist states, which are facing the threat of regime change emanating from the West. As Nguyen Duc Binh, then-chief ideologue of the VCP, emphasized at a Sino-Vietnamese conference on ideology, the root strength of socialism is solidarity among the socialist forces.¹⁵

Enmeshment

The strategy of enmeshment is premised upon economic interdependence and the interlocking of political interests among state, as well as non-state, actors in the international arena. The theoretical foundations of complex interdependence were laid by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye.¹⁶ The theory asserts that societies are connected through multiple channels, both interstate and transnational. These linkages have spawned non-state actors such as international organizations and regimes as well as multinational corporations. The connections among societies have reached the stage of complex interdependence. Under these conditions, the relative utility of military force declines while economic issues become as important as classic security issues.

The concept of interdependence was introduced to Vietnam through Mikhail Gorbachev's New Thinking in the late 1980s; then-Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach played a key role in promoting this outlook. Complex interdependence also featured prominently in former Premier Vo Van Kiet's view of the contemporary world. In his classified letter to the Politburo dated August 8, 1995, Kiet emphasized that driving forces of world dynamics are its diversity and multipolarity, which both result from diverse national, regional, and global interests.¹⁷ Recently in an unpublicized position paper, Kiet has again counseled the party to change its approach to how Vietnam is anchored in the world. Instead of seeking a great power to rely on, Hanoi must interlock the diverse interests of different actors into situations that are favorable for Vietnam. Officials must even create new interests for the country's opponents and then enmesh them in networks beneficial to it.¹⁸

14. See Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnamese Perspectives on International Security: Three Revolutionary Currents," in *Asian Perspectives on International Security*, ed. Donald H. McMillen (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 57–76.

15. Nguyen Duc Binh, "Doi Dieu Suy Nghi Ve Van Menh Chu Nghia Xa Hoi" [Some thoughts on the destiny of socialism], *Tap chi Cong san* [Communist Review], no. 13 (July 2000), pp. 7–16.

16. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977).

17. Vo Van Kiet, "Thu Gui Bo Chinh Tri" [Letter to the Politburo], August 9, 1995, *Dien Dan* [Forum], no. 48 (January 1996), p. 16.

18. Kiet, "Dong Gop Y Kien."

The Evolution of Vietnam's China Policy

The birth of post-Cold War Vietnamese foreign policy took place in the latter half of the 1980s. The period saw the formation of two Vietnamese grand strategies that would subsequently vie for dominance. In the mid-1980s, New Thinking in the Soviet Union and radical changes in Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev triggered a change in worldview and a transformation of national ambition within some Vietnamese ruling circles. Inspired by the emergence in Asia of newly industrialized countries (NICs) and the blossoming of reform in China, a grand strategy of integration was born out of Vietnam's own economic crisis and the experience of lagging behind other countries in the region. The New World Outlook highlighted interdependence among states and internationalization of national life.¹⁹ Recognizing that the fate of nations would no longer be determined by arms races but instead by "economic races," the integrationists set economic development as Vietnam's top priority. They also pointed out that this could only be achieved through the country's integration into the world economy and via cooperation with the world powerhouses of finance and technology.²⁰

However, the waning and finally loss of communist power in Eastern Europe, as well as the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident in China, caused a resurgence of anti-imperialism in the Vietnamese leadership. Fearing that the United States and the West were trying to eliminate communism from the world, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh and Defense Minister Le Duc Anh rehabilitated the old Marxist-Leninist worldview. This stressed a global, long-term antagonism between socialism and imperialism and revived a new-old grand strategy that gave the highest priority to protecting the former against the latter. Viewing the world through the looking glass of the Cold War era, the anti-imperialists identified themselves with the socialist forces and regarded the United States and the West as their strategic enemies.²¹

19. Earliest articles in the VCP theoretical journal propagating this view include Doan Nam, "Ket Hop Suc Manh Dan Toc Voi Suc Manh Thoi Dai Trong Giai Doan Cach Mang Moi" [Combining the strength of the nation and that of the epoch in the new revolutionary stage], *Tap chi Cong san*, no. 5 (May 1987), pp. 53–57; and The Phan, "Ve Nhung Xu Huong Cua Kinh Te The Gioi Va Nhung Doi Moi Sau Rong Trong Cong Dong Xa Hoi Chu Nghia" [On the trends of the world economy and deep changes in the socialist community], *ibid.*, no. 7 (July 1987), pp. 76–80. See also Gareth Porter, "The Transformation of Vietnam's Worldview: From Two Camps to Interdependence," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 12:1 (June 1990), pp. 1–19.

20. For important primary sources, see Thach, *The Gioi Trong 50 Nam Qua*; Phan Doan Nam, "Mot Vai Suy Nghi Ve Doi Moi Tu Duy Doi Ngoai" [Some thoughts on renewing foreign policy thinking], *Tap chi Cong san*, no. 2 (February 1988), pp. 50–54, 79; Nguyen Co Thach, "Tat Ca Vi Hoa Binh, Doc Lap Dan Toc Va Phat Trien" [All for peace, national independence, and development], *ibid.*, no. 8 (August 1989), pp. 1–8.

21. Nguyen Van Linh, "Phat Bieu Cua Dong Chi Tong Bi Thu Nguyen Van Linh Be Mac Hoi Nghi 7 Cua Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong Dang" [Speech of comrade General Secretary Nguyen

In Defense of Socialism, 1990–1991

After the collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, the VCP chief and defense minister sought an ideological alliance with China. As Party Chief Nguyen Van Linh explained to the Chinese ambassador to Vietnam on June 5, 1990, the situation was marked by the West's offensive to eliminate socialism and concurrently the difficulties of the Soviet Union in defending socialism. In this situation, Linh concluded, "China should raise high the banner of socialism and stick to Marxism-Leninism."²² Linh and Defense Minister Le Duc Anh hoped that China would take the leadership of the world's socialist forces; they indicated to the ambassador that they were ready to meet Chinese leaders to discuss solidarity between the two states to fight imperialism.²³

On September 2 that year, Vietnam's Independence Day, the party and government chiefs did not stay in Hanoi to celebrate the 45th birthday of their state but instead flew to Chengdu, China, for a secret summit with Chinese leaders, the first since the mid-1970s. The Vietnamese understood that their acceptance of the time, place, and participants was a sign of deference to China. Participants included Vietnam's elder statesman Pham Van Dong but not China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping; Foreign Minister Thach was excluded. During the meeting, the Vietnamese also let the Chinese dictate the terms of negotiation; this should be seen against the background of a decade-long hostility between the two countries.²⁴

The Vietnamese had urgent reasons for taking this approach. At the time, the counterweight of the Soviet Union was no longer available and Vietnam was still isolated, regionally and globally. In China, Vietnam faced a disproportionately powerful neighbor, and in order to prevent Chinese aggression, Hanoi had to pay deference to Beijing. It appeared to be the calculation of Pham Van Dong and, to some extent, Prime Minister Do Muoi. Yet, as discussed above, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh had different concerns and priorities.²⁵ His primary intention at Chengdu was to discuss how to protect socialism from the West, led by the United States. Although the Chinese refused to play the solidarity game, Linh and his successors over the next decade kept trying to reestablish the Sino-Vietnamese relationship on an ideological basis. Their obstinacy is understandable if one recalls that a Sino-Vietnamese alliance to

Van Linh at the closure of the Party Central Committee's Seventh Plenum], *ibid.*, no. 9 (September 1989), pp. 5–12; "Le Duc Anh Welcomes Cambodian Delegation," Hanoi Radio Domestic Service, September 7, 1989 (FBIS-EAS-89-173, September 8, 1989, p. 59); Tran Quang Co, "Hoi Uc Va Suy Nghi" [Memoirs and reflections], Hanoi, 2003, manuscript.

22. Co, *ibid.*, p. 36.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, chs. 13–14.

25. Linh, Muoi, and Dong headed the Vietnamese delegation at Chengdu.

defend communism and resist Western influence is the foreign policy linchpin of the anti-imperialist grand strategy.²⁶

While the party chief and the defense minister sought an alliance with China to oppose the West, Thach favored a balanced position between the great powers. He had been the driving force behind Politburo Resolution 13 of May 1988, which readjusted Vietnamese foreign policy from a one-sided tilt toward the Soviet Union to a “multidirectional” orientation.²⁷ As Thach resisted Beijing’s attempt to force him to adopt Linh’s line, his relationship with China deteriorated, especially after his June 1990 meeting with Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Xu Dunxin.²⁸ A month later, the United States made an about-face in its Vietnam policy, announcing it would withdraw its recognition of the anti-Vietnamese Cambodian coalition and open talks on Cambodia with Hanoi. This raised Thach’s hope for a separate agreement with the United States that could lead to both a settlement of the Cambodia crisis and lifting of the U.S. embargo against Vietnam. On September 10, Washington announced it agreed to discuss normalization of relations. As with the Chengdu summit with China, however, Thach’s meeting with Secretary of State James Baker on September 29 failed to produce what the Vietnamese had hoped for.

At the VCP Seventh Congress in July 1991, Thach was dismissed from the all-powerful Politburo. He was seen as a main obstacle to closer relations between China and Vietnam.²⁹ The Seventh Party Congress marked a triumph, though not an absolute one, of the anti-imperialists over the integrationists. The new permanent decision-making body at the top echelons of the Hanoi leadership now included General Secretary Do Muoi, who was eclectic in political calculation but anti-imperialist in instinct. Others at the top were ultra anti-imperialists President Le Duc Anh and Politburo member Dao Duy Tung, with General Anh supervising defense, security, and foreign affairs and Tung overseeing ideological and media works. To further marginalize the Foreign Ministry—a hotbed of integrationists—the party decided that the Chinese ambassador to Hanoi would replace the Vietnamese embassy in Beijing as the main nexus of bilateral communication. Explaining this strange *démarche*, Anh said it was done at China’s request.³⁰

26. Co, “Hoi Uc,” chs. 10, 13, and 18.

27. Although the resolution was not made public, its main ideas were revealed later in Thach’s interviews with his ministry’s newsmagazine *Quan he Quoc te* [World Affairs], no. 1 (November 1989) and no. 3 (January 1990).

28. Co, “Hoi Uc,” chs. 10 and 11; and Carlyle A. Thayer, “Sino-Vietnamese Relations: The Interplay of Ideology and National Interest,” *Asian Survey* 34:6 (June 1994), p. 516.

29. Co, “Hoi Uc,” p. 62.

30. *Ibid.*

Return to the Regional Matrix, 1992–1998

Vietnam's deference to China was rewarded with the normalization of relations, formally announced during a top-level visit by Vietnamese party and government chiefs to Beijing in November 1991. Hanoi's request to include security guarantees or a form of military alliance, however, was rejected. Beijing declared that the two could be "comrades but not allies." Although the summit was conducted on Chinese terms, Vietnam refused to yield to China's wishes on issues such as the return of ethnic Chinese who fled Vietnam for southern China in the late 1970s, territorial disputes, and repayment of outstanding Vietnamese debts.³¹

As the anti-imperialist proposal for an anti-Western alliance was thereby discredited, the integrationist agenda regained momentum. Before the Beijing summit and immediately after the Paris Peace Accord on Cambodia, Premier Vo Van Kiet had visited Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore, the three key states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These visits opened a new and friendly chapter in Vietnam's relations with neighboring countries. In March 1992, the VCP theoretical journal *Tap chi Cong san* published an article entitled "Vietnam in the Common Trend of the Asia-Pacific," by Deputy Foreign Minister Dinh Nho Liem. The article argued that Vietnam's national security and socioeconomic development required making relations with the Asia-Pacific a foreign policy priority. It concluded that Vietnam would "become a deserving member of the peaceful, independent, and developed Asia-Pacific."³² Liem's article heralds a quantum leap in Vietnam's redefinition of its geopolitical orientation. During the Cold War, Hanoi saw itself primarily as a socialist country and defined itself as socialism's outpost in Southeast Asia. Now Vietnam saw itself primarily as an Asian-Pacific country and defined itself as a member of the regional community.

In June that year, the Third Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee adopted a new guideline for Vietnamese foreign policy in the post-Soviet era that reiterated the policy of "diversification and multidirectionalization" announced at the Seventh Party Congress.³³ The guideline reinforced the conclusion that Vietnam had reached a geopolitical turning point, setting as top foreign policy priorities regional cooperation as well as better relations with the Great Powers and with world economic centers.³⁴ With respect to Vietnam's relations

31. Thayer, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations," p. 523.

32. Dinh Nho Liem, "Viet Nam Trong Xu The Chung Cua Chau A-Thai Binh Duong" [Vietnam in the common trend of the Asia-Pacific], *Tap chi Cong san*, no. 3 (March 1992), pp. 60–61.

33. See Do Muoi, "Thoi Cuoc Hien Nay Va Nhiem Vu Cua Chung Ta" [The present situation and our tasks], report to the Third Plenum of the Seventh Central Committee, in *ibid.*, no. 8 (August 1992), pp. 3–10; Hong Ha, "Tinh Hinh The Gioi Va Chinh Sach Doi Ngoai Cua Ta" [The world situation and our foreign policy], *ibid.*, no. 12 (December 1992), pp. 10–12.

34. Ha, "Tinh Hinh The Gioi," p. 13.

with China, regional cooperation implied a strategy of enmeshment. As a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official explained,

Sino-Vietnamese relations will be meshed within the much larger regional network of interlocking economic and political interests. It is an arrangement whereby anybody wanting to violate Vietnam's sovereignty would be violating the interests of other countries as well.³⁵

In fact, Vietnam's multidirectional foreign policy was a mix of enmeshment and balancing. This strategy can be seen clearly in Hanoi's treatment of the Kantan affair. On March 7, 1997, China sent the mobile oil platform Kantan-III and two pilot ships to conduct exploratory oil drilling in the Tonkin Gulf, in an area that Vietnam claimed was within its exclusive economic zone. After an ineffective protest, officials in Hanoi summoned the ASEAN ambassadors to explain the Vietnamese position. On March 22, during the row with China, the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, Joseph Prueher, went to Hanoi, becoming the highest U.S. military official to visit Vietnam since normalization. These activities soon yielded fruit. On April 1, China withdrew its vessels from the disputed area and agreed to resolve the problem through consultation with Hanoi.

Beneath and in parallel with the enmeshment and balancing approaches, Vietnam was still pursuing a strategy of solidarity with socialist forces. In addition to urging "diversification and multidirectionalization," the Third Plenum in June 1992 also passed a resolution on defense policy and national security that made opposing what they called "peaceful evolution," or gradual regime change, the top national security priority.³⁶ Anti-imperialists managed to add a directive that instructed party cadres on the country's geopolitical priorities. The directive determines the ideological distance to be maintained between Vietnam and various foreign countries. Marxist-Leninist states—China, Cuba, North Korea, and Laos—plus Cambodia are considered to be the closest friends of Vietnam, while America is its central foe. The rest of Southeast Asia falls only third in the ranks of partners, coming after the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe, where officials hoped for a resurgence of communist parties. This second group also includes India, which during the Cold War was on the Soviet

35. Nguyen Hong Thach, "Vietnam-China Ties: A New but Not Easy Era," *Business Times* (Singapore), December 31, 1992, quoted in Thayer, "Sino-Vietnamese Relations," p. 528.

36. The latter resolution was titled "Tasks of Defense and Safeguarding National Security, Opposing Peaceful Evolution." This 1992 strategy was only replaced by the July 2003 strategy. See Ban Tu tuong-Van hoa Trung uong [Central Committee Department of Ideology and Culture], *Tai Lieu Hoc Tap Nghi Quyet Hoi Nghi Lan Thu Tam Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong Dang Khoa IX* [Documents for the study of the Resolution of the Eighth Plenum of the Ninth Party Central Committee] (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2003), p. 25.

bloc's side against the United States. The rest of the world constitutes the fourth group, which ranks higher than America.³⁷

Back to the Future, 1998–2003

The changing of the guard at the top post of the VCP in December 1997 introduced a new phase in the country's China policy. The new general secretary, Le Kha Phieu, pursued hard-line anti-imperialism in foreign policy while attempting to establish neo-patriotism as a new ideology in domestic affairs. Ambitious but without a power base, Phieu directed his primary concerns after taking office toward gaining popular and Chinese support. Traveling to Beijing in 1999 and 2000, he made several concessions to China on border issues, which paved the way for the conclusion of a Sino-Vietnamese pact on land borders and another on maritime borders in the Tonkin Gulf.³⁸ In return, China rewarded Vietnam with a "Sixteen-Word Guideline," a framework to codify the bilateral commitment to stability of relations that stressed "long-term stability, future orientation, good neighborliness, and all-round cooperation."³⁹

It was at Phieu's initiative that China and Vietnam agreed to hold regular consultations on ideology. At the first such conference in 2000, Vietnam's chief ideologue Nguyen Duc Binh urged the Chinese to intensify solidarity among communist countries.⁴⁰ Sources in Hanoi reported that Phieu also renewed the Vietnamese request for a two-way ideological alliance.⁴¹ Although the Chinese did not hail this idea, Vietnam continued to regard China as a "strategic ally."

While Phieu attempted, unsuccessfully, to elevate Vietnam into a pole in China's multipolar world order, other leaders pursued their own agendas. The integrationists tried to counterbalance Vietnam's close ties with China by strengthening relations with America. Notably, they were eager to conclude a comprehensive trade pact, which would facilitate Vietnam's integration into the world economy and shift its position between China and America closer to Washington. Although the anti-imperialists successfully delayed the trade pact, they did not succeed in altering its substance when it was finally signed in 2001. The same year also saw new ties with Russia. To meet both the integrationists' need for balancing and the anti-imperialists' need for solidarity,

37. Thanh Tin [Bui Tin], *Mat That: Hoi Ky Chinh Tri* [True face: Political memoirs] (Irvine, Calif.: Saigon Press, 1993), pp. 334–35.

38. The lands lost are said to be about 1,500 sq km. David Koh, "The Politics of a Divided Party and Parkinson's State in Vietnam," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23:3 (December 2001), p. 540.

39. Note, the order of these terms is different in Chinese and Vietnamese respective documents. While the Chinese version places long-term stability and future orientation first, the Vietnamese version lists good neighborliness and comprehensive cooperation first.

40. Binh, "Doi Dieu Suy Nghi," p. 16.

41. N. S. P. [pseudonym], "Thu Ha Noi" [Letter from Hanoi], *Dien Dan* [Forum], no. 104 (February 2001).

some key players led by President Tran Duc Luong created a strange mixture of both in a “strategic partnership” with Russia that was formally declared at the visit of President Vladimir Putin to Hanoi in 2001.

Overall, the Phieu era saw a decline of enmeshment in Vietnam’s China policy. The Asian financial crisis, which started in July 1997, substantially weakened the potential for ASEAN and other multilateral mechanisms to enmesh China. Phieu remained suspicious of the ASEAN partners, which he saw as capitalist and thus adversaries in the long run; he preferred bilateralism in dealing with China. When he was criticized for not drawing ASEAN into Vietnam’s disputes with China over territorial issues in the South China Sea, Phieu argued that his country would lose sovereignty if the issues were multilateralized.⁴²

The replacement of Le Kha Phieu by Nong Duc Manh as party chief at the Ninth Party Congress in April 2001 at first did not substantively change Vietnam’s China policy. Although Manh pays lip service to reform and integration, he is, like Phieu, anti-imperialist in inclination. Thus, he tried—by invoking Ho Chi Minh’s description of the warm Sino-Vietnamese relationship during the 1950s and 1960s—to redefine the relationship as “comrades plus brothers.”⁴³ The Sino-Vietnamese joint statement issued at Manh’s inaugural visit to Beijing in December 2001 included for the first time an anti-hegemonist clause, which demonstrated Vietnam’s alignment with China in opposing American clout.⁴⁴ Manh’s was the third Vietnamese attempt since 1991 to reestablish an ideological alliance with China, although his approach was much less demanding than those of his predecessors. But again the Vietnamese request was rebuffed. In 2002, Chinese President Jiang Zemin jettisoned the idea of brotherhood when proposing that China and Vietnam should be “good neighbors, good friends, good comrades, and good partners.”⁴⁵

Balancing Act, 2003-Present

Unlike Phieu, who rather stubbornly pursued his own pathway, Manh yielded to the pressures of the major camps in the Vietnamese leadership. To the comfort of the integrationists, Manh established, though not wholeheartedly, ties with two of China’s Asian rivals, a “reliable partnership” with Japan and a “strategic and comprehensive cooperative relationship” with India, during his visits to the two in 2003.

That same year, the U.S. invasion of Iraq triggered a radical change in the Vietnamese leadership’s strategic assessments. After a short period of fury,

42. Trung, “Thuc Chat Tu Dai Hoi Dang IX.”

43. See Nong Duc Manh’s interview in *Nhan Dan* [People], November 30, 2001.

44. “Vietnam-China Joint Statement,” December 2, 2001, Vietnam News Agency, December 4, 2001.

45. See *Nhan Dan*, April 9, 2003. Jiang’s “four-good” motto was not mentioned in the Vietnamese media until Manh’s visit to China in April 2003.

Hanoi realized that the balance of forces tilted much more toward the United States than Vietnam had estimated. Prior to the war, many in the Hanoi leadership had expected that the United States would not go to war because big powers such as Russia, China, France, Germany, and India would not tolerate U.S. unilateralism. But Saddam's defeat was quicker and the other major powers' reactions weaker than expected by the Vietnamese. Although authors in the journal *Tap chi Cong san* kept predicting the advent in the long run of a multi-polar world order, they admitted that the world was momentarily quasi-unipolar with the United States as the predominant power.⁴⁶

In July 2003, the VCP Central Committee adopted a "Strategy of Fatherland Defense in a New Situation," which stipulated new criteria for the determination of friend and foe. Foreign states would be considered either cooperation partners (*doi tac*) or targets of struggle (*doi tuong*) according to their attitude toward Vietnam's goals—not their ideological affiliation.⁴⁷ With this strategy, which took the form of an Eighth Plenum resolution, ideology ceased to play a role in defining friends and enemies; pragmatism was implicitly elevated to be a principle of Vietnamese foreign policy.

This fundamental change has had three major implications. First, the solidarity approach has lost much of its advantage vis-à-vis the other policy options. Solidarity is waning, although some Vietnamese leaders keep stressing that Vietnam and China share the same ideology and regime nature. Second, the change has improved the position of the integrationists, who use national interest—as opposed to ideological considerations—in setting foreign policy priorities. Third, the Eighth Plenum resolution cleared the way for closer ties with the United States. After July 2003, high-level Vietnamese visits to America surged and U.S. warships visited Vietnam annually, unthinkable in previous periods. Within the last five months of 2003, Vietnam sent four heads of major ministries—trade, planning and investment, foreign affairs, and defense—and a deputy prime minister to Washington and hosted the first ever visit by U.S. Navy ships since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

This new-found friendship with America does not mean that Hanoi is veering toward Washington at the expense of other partners. What it does do is make Vietnam's geopolitical position more balanced, as reflected in Hanoi's arrangement of top-level visits for the major powers. In 2005, Vietnam sent General Secretary Manh to France and President Luong to China right after Premier Phan Van Khai's first ever visit to the United States.

46. Quang Loi, "Bao Luc Cuong Quyen" [Power politics violence], *Tap chi Cong san*, no. 10 (April 2003), pp. 57–61; Tran Ba Khoa, "Chien Tranh I-rac Va Hau Qua Doi Voi Quan He Quoc Te" [The Iraq War and its implications for international relations], *ibid.*, no. 20 (July 2003), pp. 55–58; Hoang Hoa, "Thach Thuc Cua Vi The Sieu Cuong My" [The challenge of U.S. superpower status], *ibid.*, no. 36 (December 2003), pp. 60–63.

47. Ban Tu tuong-Van hoa, *Tai Lieu Hoc Tap*, p. 44.

Although the solidarity approach is waning and Vietnam is carefully maintaining a balancing act between the great powers, Hanoi is still ready to pay deference to China. This is especially manifest in Vietnam's response to the killing by Chinese marine police of nine Vietnamese fishermen in the Tonkin Gulf in January 2005. In the aftermath of the incident, Vietnamese leaders holding talks with Gu Xiulian, vice-chairwoman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress, failed to mention the killing but declared that "the friendship and comprehensive cooperation between the two countries are developing well."⁴⁸ After the news of the killing was leaked, Hanoi calmed public outrage and, in negotiations, accepted the Chinese argument that the Vietnamese fishermen were "pirates" killed in a "little incident" that could not be allowed to undermine the "big situation" of a good bilateral relationship.

Hanoi's preference for deference is also evident in its treatment of public demonstrations related to China. Although officials cracked down on protests by Vietnamese outside the Chinese embassy after the fishermen were killed, that April they tolerated an anti-Japan protest by Chinese demonstrators outside the Japanese embassy in Hanoi, following similar demonstrations in China.

Although Vietnam practiced only a tacit and soft balancing approach in dealing with Beijing, it was reluctant to engage China in multilateral arrangements. Vietnam was not enthusiastic about the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA), which was successfully proposed by China in 2001 and will be established by 2010.⁴⁹ However, Hanoi saw no alternative but to bandwagon. The same pattern can be seen in Vietnam's response to the Chinese-initiated Sino-Philippine joint oil search in the South China Sea. In March 2005, Vietnam agreed to join the Sino-Philippine pact, even though Hanoi had previously protested against the very same deal, describing it as a violation of the Declaration of Conduct, a non-binding agreement among China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei on their behavior in the South China Sea.

While Vietnam's suspicion of multilateralism in the Phieu era derives primarily from the *weltanschauung* of the general secretary, its reluctance to join multilateral initiatives such as CAFTA and the joint exploration of the South China Sea has its roots in Hanoi's fear of Chinese dominance of those arrangements. Vietnam's attitude toward China-Southeast Asia cooperation has changed from supportive in the mid-1990s to reluctant in the 2000s. This reflects less a change in the Vietnamese mind-set than a shift in the China-Southeast Asia balance of power. In terms of gross domestic product (GDP), this relative power changed from roughly equal in the early 1990s to about 2:1 in favor of China

48. "Vietnamese Prime Minister Calls for Further Cooperation with China," Vietnam News Agency, January 13, 2005.

49. Personal interviews with government officials, Hanoi, September 2003 and December 2004.

by the early 2000s. In 1990 China's GDP was 1.12 times larger than that of the 10 Southeast Asian countries combined. By 1999 this figure surged to 1.82 and by 2004 had reached 2.15.⁵⁰

The way China and Vietnam practiced top-level exchanges is a good indication of how their relations evolved. A framework of annual exchanges was agreed upon in 1991, and until 1997 an exact rotation was observed. But from 1998, this was replaced by an asymmetric scheme in which the Vietnamese may visit China in two consecutive years and not wait for a Chinese return visit. Thus, General Secretary Do Muoi made a trip to China in 1997 and Premier Phan Van Khai did so in 1998. After Vietnamese Party chief Le Kha Phieu's and Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's visits in 1999, Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong and General Secretary Nong Duc Manh went to China in 2000 and 2001, respectively. The change in the pattern of top-level exchanges reflects the change of salience in Vietnamese strategy from enmeshment/balancing in 1992–97 to solidarity/deference in 1998–2002.

After 2003 the pattern of top-level exchanges returned to symmetry as the volume of visits grew. After Jiang Zemin's visit to Vietnam in 2002 and Nong Duc Manh's trip to China in 2003, the following year saw both Premier Phan Van Khai going to China and Premier Wen Jiabao traveling to Vietnam. In 2005 Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong visited China in July and Chinese President Hu Jintao made an official trip to Vietnam in November. The return of symmetry is probably an effect of the U.S.-Vietnamese rapprochement that was set into motion after Vietnam's adoption of a new national security strategy in 2003. On the other hand, the higher intensity of top-level visits may be a consequence of the fact that deference is now more firmly established as a platform of Vietnamese China policy.

Determinants of Vietnam's China Policy

From 1990 to the present, Vietnam's China policy has undergone four phases. Between early 1990 and the end of 1991, the solidarity approach, backed by deference, maintained the upper hand, while the potential for balancing and enmeshment was explored. From 1992 until 1997, the crucial dimension of Vietnam's China policy was enmeshment, accompanied by elements of balancing. The strategy of solidarity was pursued in parallel. Between 1998 and 2002, solidarity had the highest priority but was increasingly transformed into deference. Steps along the path of balancing were also taken. From 2003 on, deference became

50. In 1990, China's GDP was \$383 billion while Southeast Asia's was \$342.7 billion. In 1999, China's GDP amounted to \$991.36 billion and Southeast Asia's \$544.9 billion. In 2004 China's GDP surged to \$1.64 trillion while Southeast Asia's stopped at \$765.6 billion. See United Nations Statistics Division, *National Accounts Statistics: Analysis of Main Aggregates, 2003–2004* (New York: United Nations, 2006), pp. 6–7.

the most salient ingredient of Vietnamese China policy; balancing also gained ground but solidarity was increasingly abandoned. In the last two phases, enmeshment was neither pursued with much interest nor strongly resisted.

The four-way mixture reflects the composition of the Vietnamese leadership, which is divided into two broad camps with two contending visions. The anti-imperialists are preoccupied with defending socialism and combating Western influence; the integrationists are primarily concerned with economic development and national modernization. The anti-imperialists pursue a strategy of solidarity with China because it fits into their vision of the world. Solidarity is aimed at creating a united front of world socialist forces in the struggle against American imperialism. As early as 1990, when the Vietnamese anti-imperialists decided that the Soviet Union was no longer able to assume a leadership role in the socialist camp, they placed their hopes on China and tried to persuade Beijing to take the reins. This vision implied that the anti-imperialists were ready to pay deference to China. Indeed, Vietnam pursued its solidarity strategy toward China in a deferential manner.

The integrationists developed their grand strategy out of the realization that falling economically behind other countries in the surrounding region is Vietnam's largest danger. Thus, their preference for economic growth can be seen as a form of internal balancing. And yet, this grand strategy is based on the view that Vietnam's internal economic buildup can only be achieved through integration into the region and the world and through close ties with the West. As their worldview suggests, the integrationists' preferred avenues of dealing with China are balancing and enmeshment. Their aim is to deter China and interlock it into a network of multilateral interests.

However, both the anti-imperialists and the integrationists have encountered serious difficulties in pursuing their preferred pathways. First, China does not share with Vietnam's anti-imperialists the vision of a united front of socialist forces. The strategy of solidarity is therefore not viable. Second, the integrationists constituted—until the Tenth Party Congress in 2006—a minority in the Vietnamese leadership and have never controlled the most powerful office in the country, party general secretary. As a result, Vietnam's pursuit of balancing and enmeshment was halfhearted. Because the integrationists, too, have been socialized in the traditional Vietnamese view of relations with China, some also tend to take the expedient path of deference. Combined with China's preference for Vietnam's deference, these factors explain the steady rise of deference as a salient component of Vietnam's China strategy after the Cold War.

The ups and downs of the approaches within the four-way mixture also reflected the interplay of the strategies of major international and domestic actors backed by their relative capabilities, independence, and prestige. In the period under review, the international actors that played a crucial role in affecting Vietnamese foreign policy orientation were China, the United States and, to a

lesser extent, ASEAN. In the aftermath of the Cold War, China's refusal to engage in the solidarity game and America's refusal to play the balancing game with Vietnam proved catalytic for the rise of the enmeshment approach. As will be argued below, the preference of enmeshment over deference stems in part from ASEAN's relative high prestige at the time and its positive attitude toward Vietnam. At the same time, the Vietnamese party chief's leadership style also had a significant influence on policy direction. But enmeshment lost its attractiveness when ASEAN lost much of its weight in the China-ASEAN balance of power since the late 1990s.

In the domestic arena, the major actors are the two grand strategy camps and the party chief. Vietnam's preference of policy options reflects the interplay of the balance of power between the anti-imperialists and the integrationists and the leadership style of the party general secretary. The fact that until the Tenth Congress the anti-imperialists were stronger than the integrationists accounts for a number of puzzles in Vietnam's China policy. These include Hanoi's perseverance in pursuing a strategy of solidarity with China despite repeated refusals by the latter. The power balance also explains why from the mid-1990s Vietnam failed to exploit the balancing option even though chances for its success had increased. From the integrationist perspective, with a friendlier relationship with Washington Hanoi will become more self-confident and less disadvantaged when facing Beijing. In the anti-imperialist view, however, the danger of "peaceful evolution" that escorts this option outweighs its benefits.

Although the three party chiefs from Do Muoi (1991–97) to Le Kha Phieu (1997–2001) and Nong Duc Manh (2001–present) are all anti-imperialists, their different leadership styles have left their imprint on Vietnam's foreign policy orientation. As the supreme leader, the party general secretary enjoys significant autonomy in "processing" pressures from international and domestic actors. The salience of the enmeshment approach and the hidden pathway of solidarity during 1992–97 reflected Do Muoi's moderator role between the two grand strategies. If someone like Le Kha Phieu had been elected VCP general secretary in 1991, the early and mid-1990s would have seen a surge of solidarity and deference, as occurred in the late 1990s under Phieu. The difference between Muoi and Phieu was that Muoi's coalition building was largely domestically oriented, while Phieu saw in China a key source of his power. After 2002, the salience of deference—together with tacit balancing—bore to a considerable extent the mark of Nong Duc Manh's *laissez-faire* style of leadership.

A number of trends will determine the future of Vietnamese China policy. First, China's consistent refusal of solidarity and its preference for Vietnam's deference have caused the decline of solidarity and a rise in Hanoi's deference. Because China is most likely to continue this policy, Vietnam will abandon solidarity and retain deference in the core of its China policy. Second, the United

States is concerned with China's growing power and keen to preserve the regional balance of power. As a result, America will act and react positively to Vietnam's strategy of balancing. Third, the balance of power between the two Vietnamese grand strategies is increasingly shifting in favor of the integrationists. The salience of balancing will follow the rise of the integrationists. If balancing proves more effective, deference is likely to become less important. Fourth, China is likely to increase its engagement with Southeast Asia as a means both to demonstrate its "peaceful development" and undermine opposing efforts by rival great powers. Given the potential benefits, a majority of the ASEAN states will respond positively to China's cooperation initiatives. As Vietnam's fear of Chinese domination and its interest in peace and stability remain intact, Hanoi will pursue enmeshment with some reluctance.

Conclusions

Vietnam's China policy in the post-Cold War era has not been guided by a single strategy. Nor is there a pattern of shifting from one strategy to another. What has informed Vietnamese policy is a mixture of four different pathways with a changing salience of components. These pathways are the preferred foreign policy approaches of Vietnam's two competing grand strategies. As a result of the superposition of the two, Vietnam's China strategy has been a mix of solidarity, deference, balancing, and enmeshment.⁵¹

This four-way combination has undergone four major phases. While its components remained the same, its composition changed as a result of the balance of power and interplay of interests of major international and domestic actors; these have included China, the United States, ASEAN, the two Vietnamese grand strategic camps, and the VCP chief. The post-Cold War era has witnessed the rise and fall of different strategies as the most salient—but not dominant—ingredient of Vietnamese China policy. The combined strategy cannot be seen as hedging, however. It is the product of a political contest among competing views within the country's ruling elites rather than the deliberate calculation of a unified leadership. It is true that Vietnamese foreign policy at the strategic level is tightly controlled and centrally directed by a few core members of the VCP Politburo. Nevertheless, these top decision-makers represent incompatible grand strategies. Thus, the coordination of Vietnam's China policy has yielded less a symphony than a mismatch.

The case of Vietnam suggests that the debate about the implications of a rising China is misleading because it assumes that the state is a unitary actor behaving

51. This superposition is perceived by integrationists as a "paradigm lost." Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnamese Foreign Policy: Multilateralism and the Threat of Peaceful Evolution," in *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, ed. Thayer and Ramses Amer (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 1–24.

according to a single logic of international relations. This study also demonstrates that it is not power or ideas alone, but the interplay of power and ideas that matters most in shaping the choices of a state.

In 2006 Vietnam witnessed a major leadership change in the wake of the VCP Tenth Congress. Although the anti-imperialist Manh remains party chief, the Congress itself marked a watershed as it restored the balance of power between the two grand strategies. This change reflects the repercussions of the U.S. show of force in Iraq, but the shift also results from a decade-long learning process for Vietnam's ruling elites. Their central lesson is that an ideological alliance with China—the foreign policy linchpin of the anti-imperialist grand strategy—is impossible. Vietnam's China policy in the future will be a synthesis of balancing, deference, and enmeshment. Which of these components is more salient will depend on Chinese and U.S. policies toward Vietnam as much as on the balance of power between the two grand strategies. As long as the country's leadership continues to be divided in terms of grand strategy, the leadership style of the general secretary will remain an important factor in shaping Vietnam's policy choice.