

Balance of Threat, Dynamic Balance and Security Dilemma: Deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese Relations in the Late 1970s

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Abstract

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) had been close-knit allies since the formation of the two states. However, they gradually moved apart in approaches towards regional and international affairs in the late 1960s and 1970s. This paper offers an account for the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s. It is original in the sense that it focuses on exploring the perceptions of Vietnam and China that led to the competition for alliances, which has not been fully addressed in existing literature. This research employs the balance of threat theory in international relations – which argues that states commonly pursue an alliance strategy to balance against perceived threats – as the primary analytical framework to analyse primary and secondary sources and historical documents in Sino-Vietnamese relations. This study's main finding is that the different perceptions of threats in China and Vietnam has led the two countries to pursue balancing strategies to counter these threats. Such balancing acts led to a situation of security dilemma and it eventually ended up with a period of turbulent bilateral relations.

Keywords: *Sino-Vietnamese relations, border conflict, balance of threat, Khmer Rouge, security dilemma, dynamic balance*

1. Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) – the former name for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or Vietnam today – established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in January 1950, only three months after the latter was established. These relations were

quickly tightened as the two countries shared the socialist ideology and they belonged to the socialist camp. In the following two decades, the PRC provided the DRV with significant military and logistic aid to fight against the French and then the Americans in what is often called the First and Second Indochina Wars (Chen, 1993; Li, Wang and Shao, 2017). However, Sino-Vietnamese relations turned sour rapidly from the late 1960s until their diplomatic normalization in 1991. In 1969, the value of China's aid to Vietnam was reduced to half of that of 1968 and from the early 1970s, discontent on both sides was obvious. The deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s was marked by a short but deadly border war in 1979. It was an interesting case for experts studying Sino-Vietnamese relations. Understanding the nature of this relationship in that period is very significant as China and Vietnam have been growing rapidly in the past decades and playing an increasing role in regional and international affairs. They still face many unresolved disputes, including territorial disputes over structures in the South China Sea and maritime claims around them. Learning from past experience would shed more light on the current and future relationship of the two countries.

Scholars have attempted to clarify the root causes for the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the 1970s (Amer, 1993; Thayer, 1994; Woodside, 1979). Thayer (1994) examined the interplay between ideology and national interests in the formation of Sino-Vietnamese relations in that period. While both countries see communism as the backbone for their regime, they have gone in different ways, dubbed "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "socialism guided by Ho Chi Minh thought" respectively in China and Vietnam. At the same time, conflicting material interests between the two sides have intensified, putting Beijing and Hanoi at two opposite fronts. According to Amer (2004), Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorated in the 1970s due to the competition of China and the Soviet Union concerning their relations with Vietnam, Sino-Vietnamese conflict of interest in Cambodia, territorial disputes along the border of the two countries, and the situation of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. The lack of mutual understanding and trust between the two sides led to the failure to prevent contentious issues from escalating into an armed conflict. Woodside (1979) argued that neither China nor Vietnam gained in the deteriorating bilateral relations. He attempted to explain how "catastrophic miscalculations" from Beijing and Hanoi were made in the interplay between nationalism and the pressure of poverty. He contended that poverty in both China and Vietnam was a determinant factor for the nationalist revolutionary leaders in the two countries to enter an inevitable and "temporary uncontrollable" conflict. The Chinese Vietnamese living in Vietnam were at the focal point. Hanoi was convinced that Vietnam needed to have economic and social control over the ethnic Chinese living in

Vietnam to achieve its economic development. Meanwhile, Beijing regarded this group as Chinese needing protection. Consequently, confrontation between the two sides arose. Weitz (2011) made an interesting metaphor as he dubbed Vietnam's policy as making itself 'a poison shrimp that China cannot digest' and observed that Hanoi also relied on more powerful countries to balance China's capabilities.

Some other notable scholars such as Buszynski (1980) and Nguyen (1979) premised their ideas on the primacy of nationalism over ideology. They also pointed out other sources of contention, i.e. policy differences, territorial disputes, China's overseas affairs and internal issues pertaining to the Cambodian war. Another group of scholars looked into China's distinctive nature to seek the causes of the war like Ambrose (1979) and Zhang (2005).

Existing literature, however, has not yet properly addressed the perceptions of threats happening in both Vietnam and China at the same time that led to a security dilemma between the two countries, driving them to form alliances in the region and make a dynamic and fragile state of balance in Southeast Asia. The aggressive behaviour of the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s served as an igniter breaking the dynamic balance of power in the region, leading to an armed conflict between China and Vietnam. This paper offers another account in assessing the origin of the conflict. In exploring the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relations in the late 1970s, the paper focuses on Vietnam's and China's perceptions of external threats that drove their alliance policies. It employs the two realist theses of balance of threat and security dilemma as its theoretical framework. Perceived threats would lead the two countries to seek alliances. This strategy, in turn, put both China and Vietnam in a security dilemma. The Khmer Rouge's attacks against Vietnam served as the ignition for this dynamic balance to collapse.

The balance of threat thesis is well discussed in existing studies. Among the most famous literature in this subject is the book entitled *Origins of Alliances* by Stephen Walt (1987). Walt (1987) argued that states ally with others to balance against their perceived threats rather than against a more powerful state. While recognizing the distribution of power as an extremely important factor, Walt contended that many other considerations, such as geographical proximity, hostile intention and offensive power contribute to the perception of threats by a state. He also rejected a prominent thesis that ideological similarities and foreign aid matter in the formation of alliances between states, arguing that they are subordinate to security preferences. As states pursue balancing strategies to neutralize their perceived threats, they fall into another trap of security dilemma, in which enhanced security of one state is seen as a source of insecurity for the other. Alliance formation and the dynamic balancing are, therefore, very fragile and could collapse when one chain is broken.

2. Regional Context and the Perceptions of Threats in Vietnam and China

In the 1970s, the US and the Soviet Union were in the middle of the Cold War. Bilateral disputes over human rights issues and conventional forces, and rising concerns about Soviet activities in Africa led to a deterioration in the achieved *détente*. The US considered the Soviet Union as a major threat to global peace. However, Washington was not in favour of Beijing's idea to create a coalition against Moscow. The US continued to foster relations with Taiwan and maintained SALT talks with the Soviet Union. In Asia, after its withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, the US fundamentally lost interest in mainland Southeast Asia. There was a brief period when Washington made diplomatic attempts to improve its relations with Hanoi (Van, 2006). However, this process critically slowed down as Washington prioritized its normalization with China. A reduced presence and interest by the US in the region after 1975 led to the emergence of a power vacuum in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union and China tried to take advantage of this situation by attempting to expand their influence in Southeast Asia (Pressello, 2014).

In the 1970s, China and the USSR had fundamentally different interests in their foreign relations. It was because the two countries were the biggest socialist nations and were neighbours, so they had overlapping spheres of influence, and a conflict of interest between the two countries was highly likely. They actually engaged in a propaganda war and a war to win the hearts of the Socialist world. The split partially came about as part of the PRC's increasing international confidence and the need to steer an independent course (Ambrose, 1979; Chang, 1987; Nguyen, 1979; Ross, 1991).

The Soviets were courting Vietnam to fill the power vacuum in Southeast Asia and to encircle China through alliances (Ross, 1988; Lemon, 2007). This strategy succeeded as the Soviet Union and Vietnam signed a bilateral defence treaty in October 1978. Vietnam also joined the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECOM) in the same year. As Brezhnev declared, the Soviet-Vietnamese treaty "holds special significance at this complicated moment when the policy of the Chinese leadership has created new, major difficulties for socialist construction on Vietnamese soil" (Nguyen, 1979).

China's anti-Soviet position was manifested by China's strong condemnation of the Soviet sending troops to Afghanistan and strong support for the Khmer Rouge in the UN. It is important to note that China, at that point in time, rarely took any strong position within the UN apart from a general commitment to be a champion of the Third World. This anomalous behaviour infers that China considered these two issues to be of significant interest to it. It is no coincidence that the USSR was considered the main culprit in both cases. This interference itself carried within it the goal of straining Soviet

support for Vietnam, adding friction to its relations with Hanoi. This played in China's favour as it signalled to the Vietnamese leadership how uncertain their alliance with the Soviets really was (Hummer, 1991; Lichtenstein, 1986; Segal, 1981; Simon, 1984; Zhang, 2005).

At the same time, China was also looking for greater influence in Southeast Asia (Copper, 1984). In the 1960s, Beijing supported communist parties in several maritime Southeast Asian states. This strategy was later dropped in exchange for better relations with governments in Southeast Asia. In mainland Southeast Asia, Beijing gradually became more hostile against Vietnam and it supported the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. China managed to convince Thailand and other ASEAN countries that they shared a goal with China in containing the expanding influence of Vietnam in Indochina. Nevertheless, China's emphasis on working with the Khmer Rouge was of concern to the rest of ASEAN, particularly Thailand. The ethnic conflict and China's insistence on protecting its people abroad also raised red flags in Southeast Asian countries with a sizable Chinese population (Gompert, Binnendijk and Lin, 2014; Hood, 1990; Johnson, 1978; McGregor, 1990; Solarz, 1990).

Another player influencing international relations in Southeast Asia at this point in time was Japan. After the Second World War, Japan emerged as a dynamic and economically developed country. The Soviet Union, China and Vietnam therefore swiftly attempted to seek support from Japan in the late 1970s. Vietnam wanted to obtain Japan's sympathy for its struggle for independence. The USSR aimed to have Japan's support for its idea of an "Asian collective security" and hinder China's efforts. However, through economic means, China was the most successful in their approach to Japan.

2.1. Vietnam's Perception of Threat

Unified Vietnam emerged from the war in 1975 in a critically damaged condition as much of its economy was destroyed. As a newly independent nation, Vietnam in the late 1970s fought for survival, economic sustainability and was eager for diplomatic recognition. These issues would have to be tackled in its immediate neighbouring region. The nation at this point in time was extremely sensitive to economic and military security and as such felt forced to attach itself to a reliable partner or an ally. Adding to existing antagonisms between China and Vietnam, the Sino-US normalization made it hard for Vietnam to align itself with Beijing.

Encountering multiple challenges and instability after the 1975 unification, Vietnam prioritized a peaceful regional environment for domestic recovery, especially when it was conducting many socio-economic reforms to incorporate half the country in the south into its socialist economic

and political system and to recover from the disastrous war with the US. Circumventing another risk of conflict was, therefore, Hanoi's top priority and it had no interest in triggering another conflict but instead in building an autonomous and strong country. The US supported Hanoi's approach and considered Vietnam, as in the words of former US ambassador to the UN in January 1977, "a kind of Asian Yugoslavia that will not be part of, or a puppet of, China or the Soviet Union, but will be an independent nation" (Co, 2003; Men trety-Monchau, 2006).

China's growing political influence in Southeast Asia were among Vietnam's top security concerns, given Vietnam's long history of struggling against Chinese dynasties for independence. Theoretically, Vietnam, as a weaker state, has a structural asymmetric perception of threats vis- vis a much more powerful China (Womack, 2003). After the US military withdrawal in 1973 and the subsequent unification of the country in 1975, Hanoi perceived its greatest threat to its autonomy was China's influence. Vietnam recognized China's support during the war against the US and did not want to maintain hostile relations with China. However, it always tried to "set the boundary stone" between the two countries in every aspect (Womack, 2003). China's seizure of the whole Paracels after an armed attack against South Vietnamese forces on the islands was an eye-opening event for Hanoi about China's true intentions. This was particularly significant given that Vietnam and China at that point in time were still in dispute over border demarcation on land, in the Gulf of Tonkin and had unresolved disputes over the Spratlys and Paracels and the waters around them. In addition, Hanoi believed that Beijing had betrayed the interests of the Vietnamese at least three times during the modern history of Vietnam's struggle for independence. First, at the 1954 Geneva Conference, China agreed on a solution to divide Vietnam into two parts over the long term. Second, Beijing gave a green light for Washington to bomb Hanoi in 1972 when the war in Vietnam intensified. Third, after the unification of Vietnam in 1975, Beijing supported the Pol Pot regime in attacking Vietnam in the southwest and directly invaded the northern border region of Vietnam ("Su that ve quan he Viet Nam – Trung Quoc", 1979). Not to mention that China's 1974 seizure of the Paracels from the Republic of Vietnam after an armed confrontation worried Hanoi, although the leaders of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam did not openly discuss about it (Sellars, 2017).

The US and the West also posed persistent threats to the newly born country of Vietnam. Hanoi was faced with tight and extensive sanctions and a hostile attitude from the US and its Western allies. The US opposed Vietnam's membership of the UN and supported the anti-Vietnamese armed forces in Cambodia. As Martini (2007) put it, the US continued its war against Vietnam "by other means" for another twenty-five years. Adding to that,

ASEAN's rapprochement with China and their criticism of Vietnam, together with border conflicts with the Khmer Rouge in the southwestern provinces of Vietnam were also burning issues for Vietnam's national security.

2.2. China's Perception of Threat

In the time of the heightened Cold War, China's core interests lay within a protection of its mainland, national unity and unification, and further development of its economy. China also attempted to expand a sphere of influence in its neighbouring states, particularly Southeast Asia and to deter conflict by economically embedding possible adversaries (Huisken, 2010; McMillen, 1983; Pai, 2007). China's direct interest was to pacify its conflicts with the West, whilst aiming to improve relations with the East (Hummer, 1991; Simon, 1984; Tretiak, 1978; Vuving, 2006). However, whilst China's relations with the West stabilized tremendously through its engagement with the US and Japan, its relations with the Soviets continued to deteriorate.

Despite significant developments domestically and abroad in the 1970s, China's foreign policy maintained some fundamental principles. One was the strategy of balancing and economic embedding (Buszynski, 1980; Keith, 1985; McMillen, 1983; Vuving, 2006). Domestically, China entered 1978 with a drastic leadership change after the death of Mao and the removal of the "gang of four". Deng Xiaoping felt a need to fulfill the two goals of reforming the military and growing the economy (Huisken, 2010; Leighton, 1978). Deng himself at this moment in time argued that the PLA was unfit to undertake large-scale action abroad and was in need of restructuring. But Beijing needed to do so without damaging its economic focus. Both these aims were not just important domestically but also internationally, where it was seen that China needed a strong economic and military presence to maintain its independent course.

Externally, China's position in the early 1970s was to seek a broader level of recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. The main achievements in this regard was the PRC's ascension to membership of the UN Security Council, its steady opening up to capitalist economies such as Japan, and the US (albeit dubious) support of the "one China policy". However, China's approach towards the US, the Soviet Union and Japan in this period was consistently framed within its paradigm of anti-hegemony, one whereby China sought to be a 'third player' in the Cold War, denouncing any attempts by the two superpowers to seek dominance over the international system (Hummer, 1991; Johnson, 1978; Keith, 1985). Anti-hegemony here often goes hand in hand with China's call for non-alignment and its ambitions to be a champion of the Third World (Ness, 1998; Yu, 1977). Both these threads point to an engagement to balance the West and the East, as well as an

indirect (and at times direct) call for non-interference (Keith, 1985; McMillen, 1983; Thayer, 1994).

As Beijing was able to manage its relations with the US, Japan and the West, one of China's perceived greatest threats in the 1970s came from its north, the Soviet Union. This impacted its strategy towards Southeast Asia and Sino-Vietnamese relations. Beijing considered Soviet-Vietnamese cooperation as an instrument to encircle China and as an extension of the Sino-Soviet split and the conflict over a Southeast Asian sphere of influence (McGregor, 1990; Tretiak, 1979; Zhang, 2005). This in the Chinese mind created a fear that these issues were not temporary in nature, but rather, were part of a bigger trend where a more confident Vietnam would continue to challenge China's political and strategic position. Especially when combined with Soviet support, this was considered highly threatening to China's autonomy and international position (Ambrose, 1979; Ross, 1991; Thayer, 1994). That explains why despite having strong influence on Vietnam's national security and foreign policy, Beijing still believed that Hanoi's discontent with and disengagement from China was a signal of Vietnam's siding with the Soviet Union.

3. Alliance Building and the Formation of a Dynamic Balance

Alliance building at a global level and in Southeast Asia in the 1970s is best understood in a broad approach. Apart from entering formal military alliances such as the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the 1951 Japan-US mutual defence treaty, countries also seek to develop close but subtle relations with others to promote their national interests and mitigate threats in what can be called natural or tactical alliances (Ghez, 2011). That is the way Vietnam and China approached their external relations in the 1970s.

3.1. Vietnam's Alliance Building Strategy

Vietnam since the mid-1960s attempted to negotiate with China about their disputes and disagreements whilst simultaneously implementing a policy of balancing its relations to counter Chinese influence (Abuza, 1996). Despite a serious deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations, Hanoi wanted to seek balanced relations with both countries to maintain unity within the socialist bloc and receive support in its struggle for independence against the US. In the period from 1960-1964, the Soviet Union sent messages to Vietnam 13 times, requesting Vietnam to stay away from China. However, Hanoi tried to avoid this undesirable position (Nguyen, 2018). Key documents of Vietnam's Labour Party, the former name of the Communist Party of Vietnam, from 1960-1967 clearly set out one of Vietnam's goals in the international arena

as fostering consolidation within the socialist bloc. In the period from 1965-1972, the number of high level official exchanges between Vietnam and China and the Soviet Union are similar. Hanoi in the beginning did not want to send a wrong message that it intended to go with the Soviet Union to counter China (Nguyen, 2002; Nguyen, 2018).

However, the deteriorating relations with Beijing pushed Hanoi closer towards Moscow. Vietnam-Soviet relations were enhanced somewhat early in the 1970s as China mended its relations with the US and the West. These ties were formalized when Hanoi joined COMECON and entered a formal military alliance with the Soviet Union as a response to its perception of China's threat (Vuving, 2006).

In Southeast Asia, Hanoi believed that close relations with Laos and Cambodia were of strategic importance to protect its national sovereignty. This is well manifested in the two Indochina Wars against the French and the US when Vietnam stood closely with Laos and Cambodia to fight for their independence. After gaining independence, Vietnam strengthened its ties with Laos through a number of agreements, including the 1977 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. This agreement allowed Vietnam to deepen its security cooperation with Laos. However, Vietnam's relations with Cambodia were complicated in the 1970s. After gaining control of their countries in 1975, relations between Vietnam and Cambodia – led by the communist Khmer Rouge – entered into a rough period. The Khmer Rouge regime implemented a genocidal policy against ordinary people living in Cambodia, including the Vietnamese and the Cambodian themselves, and pursued hostile relations with Vietnam.

Concerning its relations with the capitalist world, even before the US withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1973, Hanoi sought a solution for a political settlement with the US to end the war (Van, 2006). After the unification in 1975, Hanoi restarted its normalization negotiations with the US (Co, 2003). In retrospect, US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was of the view that “the Vietnamese are trying to find a balance between overdependence on either the Chinese or the Soviet Union” (Vance, 1983). Therefore, the U.S. Department of State somehow viewed the Vietnamese initiative as being in harmony with its own goal in the region and globally during the 1976-1978 period. However, Vietnam's overriding quest to quickly reconstruct its economy and consolidate its unified statehood, while making rapprochement with the US, paradoxically drove the country “to insist on American reparations and ultimately miss their chance for normalization in 1977” (Hoang, 2004). The US-China rapprochement and China's improved relations with the West also closed the door for Vietnam to approach the capitalist world. This added another reason for Hanoi's suspicion about China.

3.2. China's Alliance Building Strategy

China's balancing strategy was implemented comprehensively at a global level. Beijing initially targeted the US as a potential coalition partner against the Soviet. However, Washington was not interested in this, as it continued to strengthen relations with Taiwan. For that reason, enhancing relations with the US based on economic interests and gradually fostering political cooperation was the alternative. Bilateral cooperation grew from 1971, marked by "ping-pong" diplomacy and the Americans established their embassy in China in 1979. The steady improvement of relations gave Deng the impression that China could count on at least silent acceptance of its intervention in Vietnam (Hummer, 1991; Hurst, 1996; Tretiak, 1979). Some even argued that China's belief was that by interfering in Vietnam, China would receive more support from the US.

Concerning Japan, China's priority was to form a subtle alliance based on economic cooperation and prevent Japan from providing aid to Vietnam (Shiraishi, 1990). This alliance was institutionalized in August 1978 as the two sides signed the Peace and Friendship Treaty. Japan with its enormous economic capabilities then actively supported China in its modernization. Nevertheless, relations gradually but increasingly became strained as Beijing still felt humiliated by the Japanese before World War II.

With regards to the Soviet Union after a short honeymoon period in the early 1950s, Sino-Soviet relations gradually turned sour. The PRC leadership realized that a significant cause of this conflict lay in the antagonism and lack of mutual trust. They then reached out to the USSR in order to mend the Sino-Soviet split, exemplified by the meeting of leaders of the two countries in Moscow in July 1963. An expected improvement of relations would in part ameliorate China's concerns in the region (Tretiak, 1979). However, differences in the development of socialist ideology, conflicting strategic interests and bitter historical relations prevented the two countries from mending their bilateral relations. Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated quickly in the late 1960s and 1970s. After the border conflict in 1969, China made attempts to enhance relations with the US and the West and tried to gain support from developing countries to form an alliance against Soviet "expansion" (Hilali, 2001).

In Southeast Asia, where China saw itself as having traditional influence, in the 1970s Beijing gradually abandoned its support for the communist parties in Malaysia and Indonesia and to mend and develop state-to-state relationships. This move allowed ASEAN countries to slowly come into terms with China, especially when they perceived Vietnam as building a hegemonic order in Indochina. However, China continued to support the Khmer Rouge and stood by Sihanouk in Cambodia. Nevertheless, Chinese influence over

the Khmer Rouge was limited and their support came without any serious conditions. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese policies towards the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia went into a more “pragmatic” phase. The PRC established relations with the Khmer Rouge in a direct effort to curb Vietnamese, and by proxy Soviet influence in Cambodia (Buszynski, 1980). China’s unconditional support for the Cambodian regime came out of a belief that any reduction of aid incurred the great possibility of its collapsing. This collapse had to be avoided by any means, as Vietnamese growing influence was then deemed unstoppable. At this point in time, the Chinese leadership was confronted with the need to support the Khmer Rouge regime no matter the cost (Buszynski, 1980; Ciorciari, 2014; Ross, 1991). In the late 1970s, the Chinese leadership decided to ramp up economic and military support to the Khmer Rouge (Buszynski, 1980).

4. The Failed Dynamic Balance and the 1979 China Attack

As previously noted, building alliances to balance the perceived threats was a salient self-help strategy both sides employed to a certain degree to deal with their perceived threats. This was manifested in diplomatic competition taking place throughout the Asia-Pacific. At the global level, China normalized its ties with the US and the West while Vietnam entered a defence alliance with the Soviet Union. In Indochina, whilst China sided with Pol Pot, Vietnam supported Hun Sen in Cambodia and signed with Laos the Treaty Of Friendship and Cooperation of 1977. This treaty provided for the stationing of Vietnamese troops and advisers in Laos in order to protect its security from the buffer zone (Evans and Rowley, 1990).

This dynamic balancing situation in Indochina was fragile for several reasons. Globally, global tension and the dynamic relations between great powers during the Cold War strongly influenced the perceptions and activities of smaller states in Southeast Asia. The Sino-Soviet split and their border conflict in 1969 added to this uncertainty. Regionally, Indochina was a hot battlefield and the outcome on the ground was the main driver deciding regional strategic outlook. Third, this balancing entails certain temporary and subtle alliances without common long term and strategic interests.

The balance was severely shaken by Vietnam’s 1975 unification and collapsed when China’s closest ally in Southeast Asia, the Khmer Rouge, and Vietnam entered a total war in December, 1978. It triggered a series of military conflicts enduring throughout the 1980s. Initially, the Khmer Rouge was promptly defeated by Vietnam and was almost knocked out of the balance. As a result, China was confronted with the most threatening possibility of being encircled by the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance (Kissinger, 1982).

To steer away from the concern after the Khmer Rouge was defeated and in an attempt to mediate the fragile balance in the region, Hanoi invited Sihanouk to return to Phnom Penh as head of the government (Chanda, 1986). It also desperately strove to actualize the normalization with the US. It seems that the Soviet Union implicitly supported these efforts, especially at the expense of Sino-US relations (Gin, 2015). However, China successfully controlled Sihanouk and blocked most of Vietnam's diplomatic manoeuvres. In November 1978, the US broke off talks with Vietnam on a post-war settlement partly because Hanoi and Washington was unable to reach consensus on the conditions for normalization and partly because the US-Soviet rivalry intensified and Washington managed to develop its relations with Beijing to enhance its leverage against Moscow.

For these reasons, the Sino-Vietnamese split became wider. China on the one hand labelled Vietnam as "invading Cambodia" and called for the attention of the international community, particularly ASEAN, about threats posed by Vietnam. At the same time, it fell into a dilemma recognizing that deterioration in Sino-Vietnamese relations had increasingly pushed Moscow and Hanoi closer together (Buszynski, 1980; Nguyen, 1979). Therefore, while hampering Hanoi's international image, Beijing was still open to negotiation with the Vietnamese. Nevertheless, their different strategic outlook in Cambodia led the two countries to seek directly opposite outcomes.

In the years leading to the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict, the two countries interacted intensively. On September 1975, in his conversation with Le Duan, Deng Xiaoping criticized the Vietnamese perception of "the threat from the North" ("Minutes of conversation", 1975). In return, Vietnam accused China of manipulating mutual disputes to aggravate bilateral relations and demonize Vietnam. To a certain extent, the two countries had held two contradictory versions of security threats in their external environments. As a consequence, rather than being venturous to deescalate the conflict, they fell victim to a security dilemma. China held firmly to the principle of conditionality, whereby its cooperation with Vietnam was dependent on Vietnam's acceptance of a pro-China stance (Amer, 1994; Path, 2012; Thayer, 1994). However, Sino-Vietnamese relations were strained by Vietnam-Soviet relations (Gompert et al., 2014; Nguyen, 1979; Simon, 1979).

Beijing was especially bold in taking action, including the use of military power against Vietnam, when Vietnam and the USSR signed a defence treaty in October 1978 and the Khmer Rouge was defeated in Cambodia. The fall of Phnom Penh caused panic in the Chinese leadership (Chang, 1982; Tretiak, 1979). So an attack against Vietnam would mainly aim to force the Vietnamese military to swich its focus up north, strain the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, and lead to Vietnamese acquiecence of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia (Buszynski, 1980; Segal, 1981).

Military action against Vietnam was discussed in a PLA General Staff meeting on November 23rd 1978. Final decision for a limited, punitive war against Vietnam in January 1979 was decided in a December 7th meeting of the Central Military Commission (Zhang, 2005). The PRC proclaimed that it did not have the intention to occupy any territory but to “teach Vietnam a lesson” and was not a way of imposing dominance upon its adversary (McGregor, 1990; Ross, 1991; Segal, 1981). In addition, Beijing’s decision to attack Vietnam also inferred that China’s foreign policy was not based on ideology, facilitating its process of improving relations with the West. Before declaring war against Vietnam, Deng Xiaoping visited Washington and Tokyo and discussed with Jimmy Carter and Ōhira Masayoshi about his intention. In January 1979, the US and China officially normalized their relationship.

In the beginning phases of the conflict it seems the Chinese were out to weaken the Vietnamese and drag out the conflict to a situation where the Chinese could leverage a resolution more favourable to the PRC’s interests in the region (Amer 1994; Chanda 1986; Hood 1990). Nevertheless, the Chinese government failed to achieve this goal. After its withdrawal from Vietnam, the Chinese leadership started actively to look for international support for a Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. This process started in 1986 when Vietnam initiated its renovation strategy at the time the Soviet Union faced grave challenges and was about to collapse. When Vietnam proceeded with the withdrawal of troops from Cambodia and the Soviet Union was about to dissolve in the last years of 1980s, Hanoi quickly negotiated and improved its relations with China. The normalization of Vietnam’s relations with China was followed by its relations with ASEAN countries, the US and the West. Although the perceptions of threats have not fully dissolved in Vietnam, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union freed China’s mind and the regional dynamic balance virtually came to an end.

5. Conclusion

The dynamics in international relations at a global level and in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s opened the way for a rise of the perceptions of security threats and subsequent security dilemma between China and Vietnam. To counter this situation, the two countries built up their alliances. As a smaller state, Vietnam responded at a regional level by moving closer to the Soviet Union and Laos and Hun Sen in Cambodia. However, it was unable to make a breakthrough in its relations with the US and the West. As a bigger country, China countered this situation at both global and regional levels. Globally, China countered the Soviet Union by promoting its leadership role in the Third World and improving its relations with the US and the West. In Southeast Asia, Beijing supported the Khmer Rouge and influenced Sihanouk

in Cambodia, improved its relations with Southeast Asian countries and blocked Vietnam from approaching the US and capitalist countries.

Vietnam's efforts after 1975 to prevent itself from entering another armed conflict were severely impeded by the international structure. The US and the West had relegated themselves to a peripheral role in Southeast Asia. They opted to not rock the boat on their relations with both China and the USSR and slapped Vietnam with economic sanctions. The Sino-Soviet split put Vietnam at a difficult crossroad. The Soviet Union provided Vietnam with certain security, but this came at the cost of restricting its relations to other states. An increasingly confident China could not accept a Soviet-friendly Vietnam and as such felt compelled to alienate its potential ally.

It seems that in the optimal scenario, Vietnam and China should have reduced their security dilemma by promoting confidence building measure, resulting in a sustainable and long-lasting peace and avoiding the bitter war in 1979. However, a veil of uncertainty and distrust, diametrically opposed interests and the perceptions of threats created a stalemate which was not easy to remedy. The Chinese pushback against Soviet-Vietnamese relations was a catalyst to strengthening exactly these ties. Similarly, Vietnam's concern about the Khmer Rouge-Chinese relations was also a factor driving the Khmer Rouge to seek Chinese support in an attempt to balance against Vietnam. In the end, the web of dynamic formal and informal alliances involving China and Vietnam in the 1970s in Southeast Asia only collapsed when the international structure changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Notes

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