

# Vietnam's Domestic–Foreign Policy Nexus: *Doi Moi*, Foreign Policy Reform, and Sino-Vietnamese Normalization

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This article examines the link between Vietnam's adoption of the *Doi Moi* (renovation) policy and transformations in its China policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a case study of the domestic–foreign policy nexus. The article argues that during this period, changes in Vietnam's foreign policy in general and its China policy in particular originated first and foremost from the Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) domestic agenda of promoting economic reform and protecting the regime's survival. As the VCP considered hostile relations with China as detrimental to both its economic reform and regime security, it strived to mend relations with China as quickly as possible. Against this backdrop, Vietnam made a number of important concessions to China regarding the Cambodian issue in order to accelerate the normalization process, which eventually concluded in late 1991.

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**Key words:** Cambodian conflict, *Doi Moi*, domestic–foreign policy nexus, Vietnam-China normalization, Vietnam foreign policy

After Vietnam was reunified in 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) enthusiastically embarked on a new project: transforming the country along the socialist path. However, the new task turned out to be far more challenging than the party had expected. The country's economic performance in the first 10 years after reunification shows that Vietnam “won a war but lost the peace” (Kolko, 1995, p. 3), with economic failures causing the people's living standards to deteriorate dramatically after 1975. The situation got even worse after Vietnam was forced to engage in two costly armed conflicts, one against the Khmer Rouge and the other against China. Sustaining war efforts put excessive strains on the already war-torn economy and contributed to the outbreak of a socioeconomic

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crisis in the mid-1980s, causing a sharp decline in the VCP's legitimacy. Against this backdrop, the VCP decided to adopt the *Doi Moi* policy at its Sixth National Congress in late 1986, with a view to reforming the national economy before the socioeconomic crisis could threaten the regime's survival.

In order to implement *Doi Moi*, the VCP started to introduce within a short period of time a series of new policies, which included developing a multisector, market-based economy, renovating the economic structure, stabilizing the socioeconomic environment, promoting science and technology, and opening up the country's foreign relations. It should be noted that by 1986, hostile relations with China and its engagement in the Cambodian conflict were still destabilizing Vietnam's immediate external environment, which was unfavorable for its economic development. Disengaging from the Cambodian quagmire and especially normalizing relations with China emerged as Vietnam's top foreign policy priorities.

Focusing on the connection between Vietnam's domestic conditions and its foreign policy making, this article examines the link between Vietnam's adoption of *Doi Moi* and transformations in its China policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a case study of the domestic-foreign policy nexus. The article argues that during this period, changes in Vietnam's foreign policy in general and its China policy in particular originated first and foremost from the VCP's domestic agenda of promoting economic reform and protecting the regime's survival. As the VCP considered hostile relations with China as detrimental to both its economic reform and regime security, it strived to mend relations with China as quickly as possible. The VCP's desire to achieve normalization with China became even stronger after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, which deepened the VCP's regime security concerns. Against this backdrop, Vietnam made a number of important concessions to China regarding the Cambodian issue in order to accelerate the normalization process, which eventually concluded in late 1991.

This article seeks to contribute to the literature on modern Sino-Vietnamese relations by employing the domestic-foreign policy nexus as the main analytical framework to account for changes in Vietnam's China policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As such, the article is not meant to undermine alternative explanations of transformations in bilateral relations during this critical period. Rather, it seeks to deepen the understanding of such transformations through a new approach. In addition, the article will also make extensive use of former Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co's unpublished memoir *Hoi uc va suy nghi: 1975-1991* (Memoir and Reflections: 1975-1991), a valuable source that has hardly been tapped by researchers of Sino-Vietnamese relations, to provide new insights into the normalization process between the two countries.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section will provide an overview of the literature on the domestic-foreign policy nexus and discuss its relevance and significance for authoritarian states in general and Vietnam in particular. The second section will then look into how transformations in Vietnam's foreign policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s were driven by the VCP's domestic agenda of economic reform under *Doi Moi*. Finally, the third section will examine the connection between Vietnam's *Doi Moi* and its quest for normalized relations with China. The last section accordingly focuses on how Vietnam's

domestic conditions, especially in terms of the VCP's economic considerations and its regime security concerns, accounted for the evolution in Vietnam's China policy and contributed to the eventual bilateral normalization in November 1991.

### **The Domestic–Foreign Policy Nexus in Vietnam's Political Context**

How domestic factors shape a state's foreign policy has been widely studied by political scientists and foreign policy analysts. The existing body of literature on the topic mentions at least five major domestic determinants of a state's foreign policy, namely, domestic political situation, electoral cycles, the government's accountability to the legislature and domestic constituencies, public opinion, and economic interests (see, e.g., Brule & Mintz, 2006; Holsti, 1991; Levy, 1989; Levy & Vakili, 1992; Maoz, 1998; Miller, 1995; Mintz & DeRouen, 2010; Morgan & Anderson, 1999; Putnam, 1988; Ray, 1995; Russett, 1993; Smith, 1996).

First, domestic political situation is undoubtedly an important factor that foreign policy makers need to take into account when making their decisions. A popular argument that highlights the impact of domestic political situation on a state's foreign policy can be found in the diversionary war theory. The theory posits that state leaders may turn to foreign adventures, including instigating wars or escalating existing conflicts, in order to distract the population from domestic problems or to promote domestic political support for themselves (see, e.g., Levy, 1989; Levy & Vakili, 1992; Meernik & Waterman, 1996; Miller, 1995, 1999; Morgan & Anderson, 1999; Morgan & Bickers, 1992; Morgan & Campbell, 1991; Smith, 1996). The theory originated from the "in-group/out-group hypothesis" initially developed by German sociologist Georg Simmel (1898) and later expanded by Lewis Coser (1956), which states that a common external threat can help reduce conflict and increase cohesion within a group. Despite the fact that certain recent quantitative studies tend to nullify the theory, its central argument has enjoyed wide acceptance as well as support from various case studies (Morgan & Anderson, 1999). For example, in examining the diversionary war theory literature, Levy (1989) found that the outbreak of nearly every war during the two centuries prior to 1989 had been attributed by some scholars to state leaders' wish to enhance their domestic standing.

The second important factor in domestic politics that shapes state leaders' foreign policy decisions is electoral cycles. As the incumbent leaders' political survival is subject to voters' support, they tend to choose foreign policies that make voters happy rather than unhappy (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010). Research by Gaubatz (1991) finds that just before elections, leaders tend to avoid major wars with high casualties, which may diminish their popularity and hence their chance to be reelected. Meanwhile, another study by Smith (1996) indicates that governments that are assured of reelection or have no prospects of reelection tend to make unbiased foreign policy decisions. However, if a government perceives election results to be affected by voters' evaluation of foreign policy outcomes, it is likely to favor violent, adventurous foreign policy projects.

The fact that incumbent governments tend to pay more attention to voters' opinion prior to elections does not mean that they are not accountable to their domestic constituencies for their foreign policy decisions after election time. A third domestic factor influencing foreign policy, the role of domestic constituen-

cies especially regarding the negotiation of international treaties, is demonstrated by the two-level game model developed by Robert Putnam (1988). The two-level game model highlights the interactive process in which governments have to undertake negotiations on international treaties at both international and domestic levels simultaneously. As important international treaties normally need to be ratified by the legislature to be effective for the country in question, a government, while working to reach an agreement with foreign partners at the international negotiation (Level I), will also have to try to get the agreement accepted by the legislature at the domestic negotiation (Level II). This two-level negotiation process “tends to slide the negotiators of both camps into an imbroglio where they have to conciliate intense domestic pressure with international pulls and pushes” (Boukhars, 2001). The negotiation at the domestic level is particularly important in cases where the government in question does not enjoy a majority in the legislature that can help it get international treaties ratified with ease.

The fourth major domestic determinant of a state’s foreign policies is public opinion. Specifically, public opinion may encourage a state to use force, to escalate or terminate a particular conflict that it is involved in, or to pursue other foreign policy decisions. David Brule & Alex Mintz (2006), for example, find that U.S. presidents tend to refrain from using force when they face high opposition to foreign military intervention, and they are likely to use force when public support for such actions reaches above 50%. The power of public opinion is also a major factor supporting the institutional logic of the democratic peace theory, which states that democratic states never go to war with each other (see, e.g., Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, & Smith, 1999; Maoz, 1998; Oneal & Russett, 1999; Ray, 1995; Russett, 1993; Weart, 1998). According to this logic, political elites in democracies are accountable to a wide range of social groups, and they therefore pay attention to what these groups’ opinions may be, especially regarding the matter of war and peace. As domestic groups have various reasons to oppose wars, such as the costs of wars in terms of casualties and material loss, the disruption of international trade and investment, or the view of war as morally unacceptable if waged against other liberal states, leaders in democracies tend to be discouraged from pursuing war efforts against other democracies. War casualties, in particular, have a strong influence on public opinion, and thus public support for war efforts, whether they are against a democracy or nondemocracy. For example, an experiment conducted by Scott Gartner (2008; cited in Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 132) demonstrates that support for the war in Iraq declined when images of war casualties were shown to subjects of the experiment. Meanwhile, several quantitative studies of the diversionary war theory also find that U.S. presidents are less likely to use force when the country has already engaged in a major war due to public concern over casualties (DeRouen, 2001).

The final domestic factor that helps shape a state’s foreign policy is its economic interests. Studies on the origin of wars throughout history, for example, have identified economic interests as one of the main rationales for wars. These economic interests are diverse, ranging from establishing monopolies over trade routes, expanding foreign markets, to securing access to strategic resources. An important work by Holsti (1991) identifies economic interests to be a major cause of interstate wars, especially during the periods of 1648–1814 (between Westphalia

and the Congress of Vienna) and 1918–1941 (between the two world wars). Economic issues, for example, accounted for the outbreak of almost 50% of international conflicts during the 1648–1814 period (Holsti, 1991, p. 316). Since the end of World War II, although economic interests have become less important as a cause of international conflicts, they remain a significant factor that influences the decisions of foreign policy makers around the world. The 1991 Gulf War, for example, was marketed to the American public by the first Bush administration as a war about jobs, oil, and national economic security (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010, p. 130). Recent research (Brautigam, 2009, 2010; Rotberg, 2008; Tull, 2006; Zafar, 2007) also finds that economic interests, such as securing access to energy resources, have been a key determinant of China's policy toward African nations. In addition, unlike previous historical periods, economic interests nowadays tend to promote the endurance of peace rather than the proliferation of wars. For example, although there are still debates around the pacifying effect of economic interdependence, a significant thread in the literature on the topic argues that economic interdependence does discourage countries from engaging in armed conflicts with each other, mainly for fear of losing the welfare gains associated with the economic relationship, especially in terms of trade and investment (Domke, 1988; Gartzke, Li, & Boehmer, 2001; Gasiorowski & Polachek, 1982; Maoz, 2009; Oneal, Oneal, Maoz, & Russett, 1996; Oneal & Ray, 1997; Oneal & Russett, 1997; Polachek, 1980, 1992; Polachek & McDonald, 1992).

In sum, five major domestic determinants of a state's foreign policies include the domestic political situation, electoral cycles, the government's accountability to the legislature and domestic constituencies, public opinion, and economic interests. However, while all of these factors are influential in liberal democracies, such factors as electoral cycles, the government's accountability to the legislature and domestic constituencies, and public opinion have a much more limited role in the foreign policy making of authoritarian states.

The limited influence of these three domestic factors on the foreign policy making of authoritarian states derives from these states' particular political nature and power structure. In authoritarian states, as there is no free and competitive election, electoral cycles barely have any influence on the government's foreign policy decisions. Similarly, as the whole political system is controlled by the authoritarian regime, the legislature and domestic constituencies do not have the necessary independence and power to either effectively oversee the government's negotiation of international treaties or to hold it accountable for its foreign policy decisions. The lack of press freedom and the government's ability to manipulate information also constrain the influence of public opinion on foreign policies of authoritarian states.

As an authoritarian state, Vietnam also shares the above-mentioned characteristics of the domestic–foreign policy nexus. Table 1 summarizes the relevance and significance of domestic factors' influence on its foreign policy making.

Three out of the five factors, namely, electoral cycles, accountability to the legislature and domestic constituencies, and public opinion, barely have any influence on Vietnam's foreign policy making due to the above-mentioned reasons. However, it should be noted that although the VCP's foreign policy making is not affected by electoral cycles, the party tends to pursue foreign policies that help enhance its international legitimacy and consolidate its rule at

**Table 1. The Relevance and Significance of Domestic Factors to Vietnam's Foreign Policy Making**

Domestic factors	Relevance	Significance
Domestic political conditions (diversionary tactics)	Yes	No
Electoral cycles	No	N/A
Accountability to the legislature and domestic constituencies	No	N/A
Public opinion	No	N/A
Economic interests	Yes	Yes

home. In the same vein, it will also shy away from any foreign policy that may have negative implications for its rule. The party's wish to use foreign policies as a tool for sustaining its power, as demonstrated in the final section, also partly accounts for its leadership's anxiety to achieve normalization with China in order to, among other things, "safeguard socialism," code words for protecting its rule.

Meanwhile, just like state leaders around the world, Vietnam's communist leaders are also tempted to use diversionary tactics whenever appropriate to divert public attention from internal problems or to improve their domestic political standing. However, diversionary foreign policies became irrelevant for Vietnam after it launched *Doi Moi* in 1986. As a peaceful regional environment has become essential for its economic reform, it is not in the interest of the VCP to initiate military hostilities with foreign countries just to relieve domestic pressures. Instead, as the sole ruling party, the VCP has other tools at its disposal to control the domestic situation without harming its foreign relations and dampening its economic reform efforts. Therefore, although diversionary tactics remain a foreign policy choice for Vietnam, it is a remote possibility that the VCP will ever have to resort to them.

Finally, unlike the other domestic factors, economic interests play an important role in the formulation of Vietnam's foreign policy. As argued in the next section, foreign policy changes that Vietnam has pursued since the late 1980s originated first and foremost from the VCP's wish to facilitate its economic reform under *Doi Moi*. Economic interests have been able to play a significant role in the formulation of Vietnam's foreign policy because economic interests exist and matter to a country's government regardless of the type of its political regime. Promoting economic interests through foreign policies serves the interest of not only the Vietnamese people but also the VCP itself, as robust economic development helps the party enhance its performance-based legitimacy and strengthen its rule.

In sum, out of the five major domestic determinants of a state's foreign policy, only economic interests have been an important source of influence on Vietnam's foreign policy making. Due to the authoritarian nature of Vietnam's political regime, the other four factors are either irrelevant or insignificant in their influence. It should also be noted that while electoral cycles do not have a role in Vietnam's foreign policy making, the VCP's wish to maintain and strengthen its rule instead has a significant impact on the country's foreign policy decisions. The following two sections will further illuminate these points.

### ***Doi Moi* and Vietnam's Foreign Policy Reform**

By 1986, economic failures were the most important reason behind the VCP's falling legitimacy, which threatened the party's political survival. The VCP's official adoption of *Doi Moi* at its Sixth National Congress in December 1986 therefore could be seen as an effort by the party to switch to the performance-based legitimation mode to sustain its rule. Accordingly, the party began to rely on the improvement of the country's socioeconomic performance as the single most important source of its political legitimacy (Hiep, 2012). The adoption of *Doi Moi*, however, did not solve the VCP's legitimacy crisis overnight. While struggling to change the country's economic model to a market-based one, the party also faced the arduous challenge of reforming its foreign policy in order to help the country break out of international diplomatic isolation and facilitate its domestic economic transformation.

Following the Sixth National Congress, the VCP sought to change its foreign policy to achieve three critical objectives: to get Vietnam out of international isolation and economic embargo, to create a peaceful external environment conducive to the country's internal development, and to pave the way for its international economic integration. The VCP also sought to open up and diversify the country's external economic relations in order to take advantage of foreign resources, such as markets, capital, and technologies, to boost domestic economic reform.

Toward these ends, the VCP began to step up its efforts to reform the country's foreign policy after the Sixth National Congress. However, the process was actually launched earlier than that. Before the Sixth National Congress was convened, the VCP Politburo had passed Resolution No. 32 dated July 9, 1986. The resolution, entitled "The Solution to the Cambodian Issue Must Preserve the Cambodian Revolutionary Gains and Solidarity Among Three Indochinese Countries," sought to articulate changes to Vietnam's foreign policy against the background of the country's prolonged international isolation due to its military engagement in Cambodia.

The top foreign policy objective identified by the resolution was to "combine the strength of the nation with that of the time; take advantage of favorable international conditions to build socialism and defend the nation; *proactively create a stable environment to focus on economic development*" (Nam, 2006, p. 26 [emphasis added]).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the resolution stated that Vietnam should seek to peacefully coexist with China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the United States, and to help turn Southeast Asia into a region of peace, stability, and cooperation. On the Cambodian issue, however, the resolution emphasized that Vietnam should look for a solution that would preserve the revolutionary gains of Cambodia and reinforce the Indochinese trilateral (Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos) alliance.

The resolution was remarkable in that it considered the country's foreign policy as both an agent and a target of change. On the one hand, the VCP wished to use its foreign policy as a tool to change the regional and international environment into a peaceful and stable one favorable for its economic reform. On the other hand, such a change would be impossible without Vietnam first making changes to its foreign policy itself. An overhaul of the country's foreign policy

therefore became necessary. However, as shown by the above points, changes introduced by Resolution No. 32 were not radical enough, especially regarding the Cambodian issue, so as to bring about meaningful improvements in the country's external relations. The VCP's goals of preserving the "revolutionary gains" in Cambodia and reinforcing the Indochinese alliance were at odds with its objective of improving relations with China, ASEAN, and the United States.

Meanwhile, the VCP's foreign policy introduced in the Sixth National Congress's official documents a few months later remained heavily ideology based and did not bring about major breakthroughs. Therefore, it was no surprise that no major advance in Vietnam's foreign relations was made within the first few years after the Sixth National Congress. In the meantime, improvements in the country's economic conditions were modest. Inflation remained as high as 700% in 1988, causing the macroeconomic environment to remain unstable. Vietnam continued to be heavily dependent on Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) member countries for its external trade, while foreign investors remained hesitant in pouring money into the country.<sup>2</sup> The enduring economic plight therefore forced the VCP leadership to speed up its foreign policy reforms to help the country get out of the Cambodian quagmire and break out of its international isolation, thereby facilitating economic reform at home.

It was against this backdrop that, in 1987, the VCP Politburo secretly adopted Resolution No. 2, which sought to bring about more radical strategic modifications to the country's national security policy and foreign policy posture.<sup>3</sup> According to Thayer (1994b), who was the first scholar to develop a detailed account of the classified document by dissecting commentaries in Vietnamese military journals and newspapers that made reference to it in the 1989–1990 period, the resolution aimed to redefine the national defence policy and accordingly embraced a new strategic doctrine, namely, "people's war and all people's national defence" (p. 15). At the same time, the resolution also established new roles for the military in economic activities as well as new responsibilities for the national defense industry. In light of the unfolding economic reform under *Doi Moi*, the resolution also decided that Vietnam would completely withdraw its forces from Cambodia and Laos and reduce the size of its standing army to save resources for economic development efforts (Thayer, 1994b, pp. 14–17).

Soon after that, the VCP Politburo adopted Resolution No. 13 dated May 20, 1988, on "Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation." As revealed by the title, the resolution assessed new developments in domestic and international conditions, thereby outlining new directions for the country's foreign policy. With the general theme of "maintaining peace, developing the economy," the resolution stressed that the top objectives of Vietnam's foreign policy would be to assist stabilizing the political system and to facilitate the country's economic renovation. Toward these ends, the resolution laid down the policy of getting "more friends, fewer enemies" (*them ban bot thu*) and diversifying the country's foreign relations on the principle of national independence, equal sovereignty, and mutual benefit. The resolution also set specific foreign policy tasks for the country, which included actively contributing to a solution of the Cambodian issue; normalizing relations with China; improving relations with ASEAN; expanding ties with Japan, Western countries, and Northern European countries; and achieving normalization step-by-step with the United States (Nam, 2006,

p. 27). The resolution has since been considered a landmark in the renovation of the VCP's foreign policy thinking and a foundation on which the country's policy of diversifying and multilateralizing foreign relations was later developed by the party (Hung, 2006, p. 14; Nam, 2006, p. 27).

At its Seventh National Congress in 1991, the VCP reaffirmed the overall foreign policy objective of maintaining peace and expanding its foreign relations to facilitate domestic development. In *Strategy for Socio-economic Stabilization and Development up to the Year 2000*, which was also adopted by the Congress, the VCP (2007) declared that Vietnam would “diversify and multilateralize economic relations with all countries and economic organizations” (p. 178). The prevalent theme of promoting economic development and opening up the country's foreign policy at the Seventh National Congress confirmed that *Doi Moi* had become an irreversible process.

More importantly, it was at the Seventh National Congress that the VCP officially departed from its traditional ideology-based foreign policy making in favor of a more pragmatic approach. Accordingly, it officially stated that Vietnam wished “to be friends with all countries in the world community” (VCP, 2010, p. 403) and sought “equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries based on the principles of peaceful co-existence and regardless of differences in socio-political regimes” (VCP, 2010, p. 351). This was the culmination of a series of changes in the VCP's worldview, through which the party leadership gradually shifted from the view of world politics as an arena of struggle between the two camps of imperialism and socialism, to the view that all countries were interdependent and therefore amenable to peaceful coexistence (Porter, 1990). The worldwide retreat of communism also reinforced Vietnam's determination to abandon the ideology-based approach to foreign policy making. The pragmatic approach to foreign policy making was then maintained and further developed by the VCP in its subsequent congresses.

In other words, modifications to Vietnam's foreign policy since the late 1980s, as demonstrated by the above analysis of the VCP's major foreign policy documents during this period, originated first and foremost from the launch of *Doi Moi*, which made it compulsory for Vietnam to change its foreign policy to facilitate its economic reform. That said, in retrospect, there were at least two other factors that may also have contributed to the reform process of Vietnam's foreign policy.

First, in the 1980s, changes in international conditions began to influence the VCP's worldview and its perception of national interests, as well as its definition of “friends” (*ban*) and “enemies” (*thu*). By the late 1980s, the rapprochement between China, its main antagonist, and the Soviet Union, its most important ally, put Vietnam in a foreign policy dilemma. While continuing to consider relations with the Soviet Union as the “cornerstone” of its foreign policy, Vietnam could no longer afford to be reliant on the Soviet Union as a patron that could effectively help protect its national interests in the international arena. At the same time, the renewed détente between the Soviet Union and the United States, which resulted in the Malta summit in 1989, had de facto lifted the Iron Curtain and put an end to the Cold War. The development caused the VCP to assume that “dialogue and cooperation” (*doi thoi va hop tac*) rather than “confrontation” (*doi dau*) had become the mainstream of international relations. The VCP therefore perceived it

as a window of opportunity to settle differences with other countries through dialogue and cooperation. The reform of the country's foreign policy toward openness, diversification, and multilateralization therefore became necessary.

At the same time, changes in Vietnam's foreign policy in the late 1980s also resulted from the VCP's process of "renovation of thinking" (*doi moi tu duy*). Accordingly, the transformations of the VCP's worldview, the abandonment of ideology-based foreign policy making, and the adoption of dialogue and cooperation over confrontation are the cases in point showing evolutions in the VCP's perception of international conditions, its interests, as well as its approaches to managing international relations. However, neither were the changes in the VCP's foreign policy thinking happening in a vacuum, nor were they a process initiated entirely by the VCP only. The country's economic renovation under *Doi Moi* and developments in international politics, as mentioned above, were important factors that shaped changes in the VCP's foreign policy thinking and reinforced its inclination toward a more open foreign policy.

In sum, Vietnam undertook major changes to its foreign policy in the late 1980s. By 1991, its foreign policy had become much more open, with the key foreign policy objectives being diversifying and multilateralizing the country's foreign relations. The most important factor that drove all these changes was the country's economic reform under *Doi Moi*. The VCP sought to revise its foreign policy in order to create a favorable external environment and to take advantage of foreign resources for the promotion of its domestic economic development. As such, economic interests became the most significant domestic determinant that underlay Vietnam's foreign policy reform during this critical episode of the country's history.

### Vietnam's Quest for Normalization With China

Despite the VCP's efforts in the late 1980s to change the country's foreign policy and break out of international isolation, its achievements until the Seventh National Congress were limited. By June 1991, Vietnam's relations with ASEAN states, China, the United States, and major international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund had not been normalized. In particular, although Vietnam laid great emphasis on normalizing relations with China, its efforts in this regard met with limited results, and it was not until November 1991 that the two countries finally restored their relations.

By at least 1988, the most important thrust behind Vietnam's efforts to normalize relations with China had been the fact that a hostile Sino-Vietnamese relationship caused Vietnam to suffer from an unstable regional environment unfavorable for its economic reform under *Doi Moi*. Bilaterally, China continued to conduct warlike activities, mainly in terms of shelling and "land grabbing," against Vietnamese border districts during the 1980s. Major Chinese military harassments along the Vietnamese border happened in July 1980, May 1981, April 1983, April 1984, June 1985, and December 1986/January 1987 (see, e.g., Thayer, 1987). Shelling was used as the main method in China's "war of sabotage" against Vietnam. For example, it was reported that China had fired about 250,000 artillery and mortar shells into Vietnamese territory in the first half of 1986. Meanwhile, starting in May 1985, China also began to feed plastic mines

into rivers that flowed into Vietnam, causing 100 mine explosions in various Vietnamese provinces (Thayer, 1987, pp. 21–24). At the same time, China continued to use the Cambodian issue to drain Vietnam economically and isolate the country politically. Therefore, if Vietnam could not improve its relations with China, the country would face enormous difficulties in promoting its domestic economic reform under *Doi Moi*.

As of 1989, as communist regimes began to collapse one after another in Eastern Europe, deepened regime security concerns among the VCP leadership also added another important driving force to Vietnam's efforts to restore relations with China. Vietnamese leaders accordingly sought to mend bilateral relations as quickly as possible so that the two communist parties could join hands to protect their regimes. Therefore, while economic interests in terms of promoting the economic reform under *Doi Moi* served as the original trigger of Vietnam's quest for normalized relations with China, it was the VCP's desire to maintain its rule amid developments in Eastern Europe that helped accelerate the process. Evidence from the bilateral normalization process in the late 1980s and early 1990s substantiates these observations.

Although Vietnam's quest for normalization with China was particularly stepped up after the adoption of *Doi Moi*, the process, especially on the part of Vietnam, effectively started right after the end of the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979. From April 18 to May 18, 1979, Vietnam and China conducted the first round of negotiation in Ha Noi, followed by the second round in Beijing from June 28, 1979 to March 6, 1980. However, the first two rounds of negotiation did not yield any results, and China unilaterally cut off the negotiation. From 1980 until late 1988, when China finally agreed to reopen talks with Vietnam, Vietnam sent China about 20 letters and diplomatic notes requesting resumption of negotiation, all ignored or turned down by China (Co, 2003, p. 36).

The central obstacle to the normalization of bilateral relations was Vietnam's military occupation of Cambodia. Initially, China demanded that Vietnam withdraw completely from Cambodia, promising that as soon as Vietnam withdrew the first batch of its troops, China would be prepared to start negotiation with Vietnam (Loi, 2006, p. 405). In 1985, however, when Vietnam declared that it would complete troop withdrawal from Cambodia by 1990, China complained that the 1990 deadline was too distant and did not show Vietnam's good will. Soon afterward, sensing that Vietnam's complete withdrawal from Cambodia would be inevitable, China raised its conditions for normalization by adding that Vietnam must agree to include the Khmer Rouge in any political solution of the Cambodian issue and stop referring to their past genocidal crimes (Co, 2003, pp. 33–36).

By 1986, Vietnam's response to China's escalating conditions for normalization had been inconsistent. On the one hand, Vietnam spared no effort to improve relations with China by any relevant measure, including gradually withdrawing its troops from Cambodia as early as 1982. As Vietnam moved closer to economic reform, its interest in restoring relations with China deepened. Addressing the CMEA summit in Moscow on November 10, 1986, VCP General Secretary Truong Chinh declared that Vietnam was "ready to conduct negotiations with China at any level, any time, any place and without any precondition" (VCP, 2006, p. 300 [emphasis added]). The same offer was repeated in the Political Report of the

VCP's Sixth National Congress one month later. To show its good will, the VCP also decided at the Sixth National Congress to drop its reference to China as "the most direct and dangerous enemy" from the party's Constitution (Co, 2003, p. 155; Thayer, 1987, p. 25). On the other hand, Vietnam appeared resistant to a number of China's conditions, especially regarding the Khmer Rouge and intra-Cambodian issues. In Resolution No. 32 of July 1986, for example, the VCP maintained the objective of "preserving revolutionary gains" in Cambodia, which implied there was to be no compromise with the Khmer Rouge.

Nevertheless, following the adoption of *Doi Moi*, Vietnam began to accelerate its efforts to normalize relations. In April 1987, the Foreign Ministry decided to establish an internal research group code-named CP87 and headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co. CP87's key mandate was to study and make recommendations regarding normalization with China and the resolution of the Cambodian issue (Co, 2003, p. 29). In May 1988, the VCP Politburo adopted Resolution No. 13, which emphasized normalizing relations with China as one of the top foreign policy tasks of the country. On August 27, 1988, the Vietnamese National Assembly also voted to remove the reference to China as a "direct and dangerous threat" from the preamble of the country's 1982 Constitution.

The VCP's persistent wish to normalize relations with China as expressed in Resolution No. 13 is noteworthy as the resolution was adopted just two months after a brief naval clash on March 14, 1988, between the two countries in the Spratlys, which destroyed three Vietnamese naval vessels and killed 64 Vietnamese sailors. Although the naval clash did raise concerns among the Vietnamese leadership about Chinese hegemonism and expansionism, it did not diminish Vietnam's determination to pursue normalization with China. Apart from Vietnam's wish to break out of international diplomatic isolation and secure a peaceful and stable regional environment conducive to its domestic economic reform, there were at least two external factors that made Vietnam's resolve to normalize relations with China remain steadfast.

First, by the late 1980s, Vietnam had come under great pressure from the Soviet Union to repair ties with China (Thayer, 1994a, p. 515). In the first round of Sino-Soviet negotiation on normalization in October 1982, China highlighted "three obstacles" to the process, namely, the Soviet military buildup along the Chinese border, Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (Goldstein & Freeman, 1990, p. 125). After coming to power in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev decided to accelerate efforts to restore relations with China. In his famous Vladivostok speech in July 1986, Gorbachev addressed these three obstacles with a view to moving the normalization process forward. On the Cambodian issue and Sino-Vietnamese relations, Gorbachev expressed hopes for improvements in the two countries' relations, adding that the settlement of the Cambodian issue as well as other problems of Southeast Asia depended on the normalization of their relations (Thakur & Thayer, 1987, p. 223). Vietnam apparently felt great pressure from the Soviet Union, given the importance Gorbachev accorded to the process as well as the fact that the Soviet Union remained the country's most important political mentor and aid donor.

Second, and more importantly, in light of China's crackdown on the Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrations in June 1989, the Vietnamese leadership began to

reassess the nature of the Chinese government. According to Co (2003), the Tiananmen crackdown made a number of Vietnamese leaders believe that “no matter how expansionist it is, China remains a socialist country” (pp. 31–32). In the same year, the collapse of communist governments in Eastern Europe also deepened the fear of a domino effect among Vietnamese leaders, causing a segment of them to believe that Vietnam should “join hands with China at any cost to protect socialism, repulse the United States and other imperialist forces” (p. 57). Such belief instigated a “rather sudden turnaround” in Vietnam’s attitude toward China (Co, 2003, p. 57). Co’s argument proved to be well founded if we look at developments in bilateral relations in 1990–1991, especially Vietnam’s concessions to China regarding the Cambodian issue.

In the first half of 1989, Vietnam and China conducted two rounds of negotiation on the Cambodian issue and normalizing bilateral relations, both in Beijing. The negotiation marked significant progress in bilateral relations given the fact that China had refused to resume talks since 1980. In the first round on January 16–19, China proposed four main conditions for normalization: Vietnam’s respect for China’s claims to the Paracels and Spratlys Islands, an apology for mistreatment against ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, Soviet abandonment of Cam Ranh Bay, and Vietnam’s removal of troops from Cambodia and Laos (Duiker, 1989, p. 5).

Meanwhile, according to Co’s account, another major difference between the two sides was on how to solve two essential internal problems of Cambodia, namely, power-sharing arrangements and how to deal with the then existing armed forces of various Cambodian factions as a measure to facilitate the United Nations (UN)–sponsored peace-building process in the country.

While China insisted that solutions to these problems were critical to the resolution of the Cambodian issue, Vietnam refused to discuss these problems, maintaining that Cambodia’s internal problems should be solved by the Cambodians themselves. In the second round on May 8–10, China continued to emphasize that normalization would come only after the Cambodian issue was resolved, adding that it was Vietnam’s responsibility to not only withdraw completely from Cambodia but also to remove the aftermaths of its intervention, that is, the Phnom Penh government and its armed forces (Co, 2003, pp. 47–48).

Before the second round took place, the VCP Politburo announced in March that Vietnam would pull out of Cambodia completely in September 1989, earlier than its previously proposed deadline of 1990. The decision removed the most important obstacle to the normalization process that China had long been highlighting. However, Vietnam’s position remained at odds with China’s other conditions regarding the Cambodian issue for most of 1989. For example, in his speech at the Paris International Conference on Cambodia in July–August 1989, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach described the Pol Pot regime as “genocidal” and “the most barbarous regime ever known in human history.” In addressing the intra-Cambodian issues, Thach maintained that these issues must be solved by the Cambodian parties themselves, not foreign countries. He also repudiated the idea that the Khmer Rouge should be treated as an equal and legitimate party in any power-sharing arrangement for Cambodia, for which China had long been pressing Vietnam (Thach, 1991, pp. 46–47).

From the beginning of 1990, however, Vietnam began to adopt a more flexible approach toward the Cambodian issue. On March 8, 1990, Advisor to the VCP

Central Committee Le Duc Tho met with Deputy Foreign Ministers Dinh Nho Liem and Tran Quang Co, suggesting that Vietnam should take a strategic shift in its Cambodia policy. According to Tho, Vietnam should work with China to reach agreement on intra-Cambodian issues, abandon the idea of marginalizing the Khmer Rouge, and stop criticizing the Khmer Rouge for its genocidal record. Tho also stressed that there should be breakthroughs in the Cambodian issue prior to the VCP's Seventh National Congress to pave the way for the solution of other issues (Co, 2003, p. 59).

On April 10, the VCP Politburo met to discuss the Cambodian issue and decided, among other things, that the Khmer Rouge should be allowed to participate in the coalition government, and Vietnam would try to get the UN to denounce the Khmer Rouge's genocidal atrocities on its behalf. A number of Politburo members also emphasized the need for Vietnam and China to work together to safeguard socialism against the U.S. "scheme" following the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe. They therefore advocated cooperation between Vietnam and China to help craft a socialist-oriented Cambodian state that would be friendly to both Vietnam and China. Right after the meeting, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was dispatched to Cambodia to persuade the Hun Sen government to accept the Khmer Rouge into power-sharing arrangements and play down its genocidal past. Hun Sen, however, turned down Thach's request, arguing that denouncing the Khmer Rouge's genocidal past was critical to the defense of the legality of Vietnam's military intervention into Cambodia as well as the legitimacy of the Phnom Penh government (Co, 2003, pp. 61–62).

On May 2, 1990, Vietnam and China had another round of negotiations in Beijing between Deputy Foreign Minister Dinh Nho Liem and Assistant Foreign Minister Xu Dunxin. The negotiation focused on intra-Cambodian issues, particularly the power scope of the Supreme National Council's (SNC) power, the disarmament of Cambodian parties' armies, and the transitional authority prior to the general election. Xu Dunxin revealed China's intention to have the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)/State of Cambodia (SOC)<sup>4</sup> and its army dismantled, while proposing that the transitional authority should be a quadripartite coalition government including the Khmer Rouge as a legitimate party. He also demanded that Vietnam stop criticizing the Khmer Rouge's genocidal past. Liem, with prior direction from Ha Noi, conceded to Xu's demand regarding the Khmer Rouge's genocidal past, but avoided discussing the other Chinese proposals.

Following the negotiation, Beijing agreed to dispatch Xu Dunxin to Ha Noi for further discussion. As this was the first time in 10 years that China had agreed to hold bilateral negotiations in Ha Noi rather than Beijing, the Vietnamese leadership saw it as a move of good will by China. In response, before Xu arrived in Ha Noi, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh requested a courtesy call by Chinese ambassador Zhang Dewei on June 5. It was also the first time in 10 years that a Chinese ambassador had been received by a VCP general secretary. At the reception, Linh acknowledged that Vietnam had committed certain "errors" in bilateral relations over the previous decade, adding that some—such as the 1982 Constitution's preamble—had been fixed. He also proposed to meet with Chinese leaders to discuss measures for safeguarding socialism against the

scheme of “peaceful evolution.” And, despite the consensus reached at a prior Politburo meeting that the “red solution”<sup>5</sup> should not be mentioned during the reception, he suggested that the two countries adopt the “red solution” over the Cambodian question, arguing that “there’s no reason why communists cannot talk to each other.” The next day, Defence Minister Le Duc Anh also met with Zhang Dewei to further explain Linh’s points, especially the “red solution” (Co, 2003, pp. 65–66).

In the subsequent negotiation between Xu Dunxin and Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co, which started on June 11, the two sides again focused on intra-Cambodian issues. When it came to the composition of the SNC, whereas Co maintained that it should be composed of two parties only,<sup>6</sup> Xu insisted that it should be composed of four parties, which would give the Khmer Rouge a legitimate status equal to the Phnom Penh government. Facing Co’s intransigence, Xu accused Co and the Foreign Ministry of acting against the VCP leadership’s position, implying that, as the “red solution” would suggest, the Khmer Rouge had been acknowledged as a legitimate and equal party by the VCP’s top leadership. In a latter reception by Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach on June 13, Xu raised this point once again, eliciting an angry response from Thach (Co, 2003, pp. 69–73). Following the incident, China showed its open dissatisfaction with Thach and started to ignore his Foreign Ministry in dealings with Vietnam.

Nevertheless, China tended to make further conciliatory moves to Vietnam. On August 12, 1990, while on a visit to Singapore, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng made a statement expressing hope that relations with Vietnam would finally be normalized. On August 29, Chinese ambassador Zhang Dewei extended China’s invitation to General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, Prime Minister Do Muoi, and Advisor Pham Van Dong to a secret meeting with General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng in Chengdu on September 3–4 to discuss the Cambodian issue and restore bilateral relations. The invitation came as a surprise to the Vietnamese leadership, as China still insisted several days earlier that only after the Cambodian issue was settled would China agree to hold bilateral summits to discuss normalization. The invitation as well as Li Peng’s statement therefore signified a shift in China’s policy toward Vietnam. By August 1990, China seemed to have judged from changes in the international context that it was in the interest of China itself to accelerate the Sino-Vietnamese normalization process.

First, after the crackdown on Tiananmen pro-democracy demonstrations in June 1989, China faced heavy criticism and even economic embargo from Japan and Western countries. Improving relations with neighboring countries like Vietnam would ease China’s isolation and relieve the effects of the economic embargo. Second, after Vietnam completed its troop withdrawal from Cambodia, Japan, ASEAN, and Western countries began to repair their ties with Vietnam. For example, in July 1990, the United States declared that it would reopen negotiations with Vietnam. China’s hostility toward Vietnam was therefore no longer relevant, as it might cause China to be late in securing its interests in Vietnam. Third, regarding the Cambodian question, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker announced on July 18, 1990, that the United States would no longer recognize the Coalition Government of the Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).<sup>7</sup> The U.S. goal was

to prevent the possibility of the Khmer Rouge regaining power in Cambodia (Clymer, 2004, p. 155). The sudden turnaround in the U.S. policy shocked China while giving Vietnam better leverage, as the Khmer Rouge had been openly discredited by the United States. Meanwhile, at the UN, the five permanent members of the Security Council adopted on August 28, 1990, a framework document for a comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodian conflict, which was accepted shortly afterward almost in its entirety by Cambodian parties (Findlay, 1995, pp. 7–8). As a solution for Cambodia under UN auspices became just a matter of time and with the above-mentioned factors taken into consideration, China found it was about time to push the Sino-Vietnamese normalization process forward.

In Chengdu, however, playing on Vietnam's greater anxiety to restore bilateral relations, China maintained its hope to pressure Vietnam into a Cambodian solution on China's terms. The bilateral discussion concentrated on eight points, of which seven points were related to the Cambodian issue, while the remaining one was on normalization. The most outstanding question was the composition of the SNC. In this regard, Vietnam conceded to China's formula, which was  $6 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 1$ . Accordingly, the SOC would have six representatives; the three factions of the CGDK would have two representatives each, plus Prince Sihanouk himself. The concession, however, turned out to be a miscalculation for Vietnam. As the formula put the PRK/SOC in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the CGDK, it was later strongly rebuffed by the Hun Sen government and contributed to the further erosion of Phnom Penh's trust in Ha Noi.<sup>8</sup> At the Chengdu summit, China also openly dismissed the "red solution" as well as the idea of Vietnam and China working together to safeguard socialism (Co, 2003, pp. 86–87). Nevertheless, the Chengdu summit was still a significant event for Vietnam, as it marked the end of China's policy of "bleeding Vietnam white" and the official start of the Sino-Vietnamese normalization process (Thayer, 1994a, p. 517).

After the Chengdu summit, the process gained further momentum and entered its final stages. In his report to the Fourth Session of the Seventh National People's Congress on March 25, 1991, Li Peng declared that Sino-Vietnamese relations had thawed. More than two months later, in the VCP's Seventh National Congress in June, Nguyen Co Thach, who was well known for his anti-China stance, was removed from the Politburo and the Central Committee. He also lost the post of Foreign Minister soon afterward. The move was widely seen as a conciliatory gesture of Ha Noi to please Beijing and to further accelerate the normalization process. In late July, Vietnam dispatched Defence Minister Le Duc Anh, now the second top man of the new Politburo, and Hong Ha, Chief of the Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Department, to China to brief Chinese leaders on the outcome of the Seventh National Congress. While in Beijing, however, Anh also discussed the Cambodian issue as well as Sino-Vietnamese relations with Chinese leaders. Accordingly, Anh secured Beijing's agreement to proceed with the normalization process (Thayer, 1994a, p. 521).

On October 23, 1991, the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia were signed, marking the end of the Cambodian conflict as well as the removal of the greatest sticking point in Sino-Vietnamese relations. On November 5, 1991, General Secretary Do Muoi and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet paid an official visit to Beijing.

At the summit between Muoi and Kiet with their Chinese counterparts Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, the two sides officially declared the normalization of bilateral relations at both state and party levels in an 11-point joint communiqué. In addition, the two sides also signed a trade agreement and a provisional agreement on the settlement of border affairs. Sino-Vietnamese relations thus entered a new chapter after more than a decade of armed hostilities and direct political confrontation.

### Conclusion

Democratic states' foreign policies are significantly shaped by five major domestic factors, namely, domestic political conditions, electoral cycles, the government's accountability to the legislature and domestic constituencies, public opinion, and economic interests. In authoritarian states like Vietnam, however, domestic factors generally have a less significant impact on the making of their foreign policy. An examination of the domestic–foreign policy nexus in Vietnam's political context shows that economic interests are the most important domestic determinant of its foreign policy, whereas the VCP's wish to use foreign policies as a tool to maintain and consolidate its power is yet another factor that may influence the country's foreign policy making.

In the late 1980s, Vietnam underwent an overhaul of its foreign policy, which ultimately resulted in the country's policy of diversifying and multilateralizing foreign relations, as adopted at the VCP's Seventh National Congress. A combination of factors contributed to this process. As demonstrated by various official documents of the VCP, economic interests in terms of economic development under the banner of *Doi Moi* served as the most important basis for the reform, while changes in international conditions and renovations in the VCP's foreign policy thinking also played their part.

In implementing foreign policy reform, the party consistently viewed diplomatic normalization with China as one of its top priorities. However, Vietnam had a difficult time solving the Cambodian issue, a condition China had attached to the normalization process. Even as it tried to best protect its national interests, Vietnam also made a number of concessions to China along the way, which it considered a reasonable price for normalized relations with the northern neighbor. These various concessions ranged from adjustments in Vietnam's policy regarding the Cambodian issue to changes in its domestic politics to best accommodate China's conditions.

Vietnam's domestic conditions played an important role in bringing about the eventual bilateral normalization in November 1991. Vietnam's quest for normalized relations was necessitated by the VCP's adoption of economic renovation under *Doi Moi*. By 1989, however, the VCP's wish to maintain its regime security had become yet another domestic factor that helped accelerate the normalization process. As the VCP leadership wished to work with their Chinese counterparts to "safeguard socialism," they pushed for a quicker rapprochement between the two countries. As such, the bilateral normalization process is a relevant case for studying the domestic–foreign policy nexus in Vietnam's context in general, and for understanding the making of Vietnam's contemporary China policy in particular.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>All major resolutions of the VCP Politburo regarding the country's foreign policy during the 1986–1991 period, including Resolution No. 32 (1986), Resolution No. 2 (1987), and Resolution No. 13 (1988), are still classified and not included in the publicly available “Van kien Dang toan tap” [Complete Collection of Party Documents]. The author therefore has to rely on a number of articles published in the *Tap chi Cong san* [Communist Review] by Vietnamese researchers associated with government-sponsored think tanks for excerpts of Resolution No. 32 and Resolution No. 13. Meanwhile, Thayer (1994b) is used as the main source of reference for details on Resolution No. 2.

<sup>2</sup>During the period 1988–1990, there were only 211 federal direct investment projects licensed in Vietnam, with total registered capital of US\$1.6 billion (General Statistics Office, 2011, p. 161).

<sup>3</sup>Thayer (1994b) argues, based on scattered references to the resolution in the Vietnamese press, that the resolution was probably entitled “On Strengthening National Defence in the New Revolutionary Stage” and was adopted between April and June 1987.

<sup>4</sup>The PRK was established in 1979 following the removal of the Khmer Rouge regime. In late April 1989, the National Assembly of the PRK officially changed the name of the country to the SOC.

<sup>5</sup>The idea of the “red solution” had been floated since early 1987. It suggests that the two communist rivals, namely, the Phnom Penh government and the Khmer Rouge, should cease hostility and cooperate to form a united communist government, which would exclude noncommunist factions of Sihanouk and Son San.

<sup>6</sup>This means the Phnom Penh government on one side and the Coalition Government of the Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) as a single party on the other side.

<sup>7</sup>The CGDK is composed of three factions: the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge), the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (led by Son San), and the FUNCINPEC (led by Prince Sihanouk). The CGDK was formed on June 22, 1982, as a resistance force against the PRK/SOC government. The CGDK assigned Sihanouk as its president.

<sup>8</sup>It should be noted that in a meeting in Tokyo June 4–5, 1990, Hun Sen and Sihanouk had agreed to the formula of 6 + 2 + 2 + 2 for the SNC. Accordingly, the Phnom Penh government and the CGDK would each have six representatives on the council.

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