

# The Demise of the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/04/19/the-demise-of-the-sino-vietnamese-relationship/>

JESSICA REILLY, APR 19 2017

### **The Demise of the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship in the Cold War: A Refutation of Walt's Thesis That National Interest Explains Why Alliances Endure or Collapse**

Although much has been written on alliance formation, comparatively little had been penned on their dissolution, or at least until Stephen Walt's seminal article: 'Why alliances endure or collapse'. Walt's thesis dichotomises the causes of alliance dissolution into two distinct camps: the rational and the irrational. He defines the former as termination 'in the interest of one or more members' (Walt, 1997: 156). For Walt, 'interest' in any alliance is defined primarily as mutual material assistance against threatening external actors. His thesis therefore pinpoints a change in the perception of that threat (either through the threat itself changing, or through an alteration in the ally's ability to materially counter the threat) as the principle rational cause of alliance deterioration. His theory also gives credit to the role of irrational factors, such as domestic politics, personal pique or misperception, which he suggests usually 'with hindsight' should not have been allowed to interfere with alliance politics. These irrational features are posited as external and often in opposition to the rational, material and objective calculation of 'national interest'.

Predictably the application and response to Walt's alliance thesis has been concentrated on the most famous alliance termination of the Cold War, the Sino-Soviet split, and so instead, this essay will assess the causes of the equally dramatic, albeit less studied, dissolution of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship between 1975 and 1979. It will seek to query the primacy of rationalist and materialist definitions of 'national interest' in Walt's thesis, which is similarly replicated in the literature on the rapid transition from 'brotherly comrades' to confrontation. It will argue that cold and reasoned calculations of security and power have insufficient explanatory power alone to account for the timing of events and the character of the eventual war. Through consideration of the role of alternative 'national interests' that are outside the material categorisation of rationalist approaches, such as identity and more controversially, emotion, it will attempt to break down the bifurcation of the rational, material 'national interest' from the irrational, immaterial motives for dissolution. It will seek to demonstrate that the calculation of the 'national interest' was never objective and external but formulated and socialised, underpinned by 'factors' such as emotion, identity and misperception which gave meaning to and affected the likelihood of potential actions (Finnemore, 1996). It will also show that non-materialist Chinese aims, such as the expression of betrayal and the defence of national identity, were not just irrational irritants but rational and legitimate pursuits in themselves.

Walt's alliance thesis diagnoses the 'perception of threat' as composite of 4 key elements: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions. In this case, in the aftermath of the Second Indochina War, neither of the first three criteria had drastically changed. The difference was a change in the perception of Vietnam's aggressive intentions, stemming from the increased influence of the Soviet Union on Vietnamese policy. Accordingly, the dominant (and neorealist) analytical tradition in the field of Sino-Vietnamese relations during this time has sought to subsume this alliance within the context of Grand Cold War power politics (Van Ness, 1970; Ross, 1988; Gilks, 1995; Khoo, 2011). Deriving from Peter Van Ness' 'principal enemy' thesis, the literature defines Chinese national interest from 1968 as countering Soviet hegemony, especially in its backyard of South-East Asia. Thus, according to the logic of Ness' insight that 'the friend of my enemy is my enemy', Vietnam became China's opponent as soon as it contributed to perceived Soviet encirclement. Ross argues that after the US defeat in Vietnam, a 'power vacuum in South East Asia' left room for Moscow to become the uncontested hegemon in the region (1988: 3). He believes that countering this possibility (by preventing Soviet-Vietnamese security

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cooperation against China) was Beijing's 'most urgent' post-war priority. However, this essay contends that this thesis is unconvincing. If this had truly been the primary concern and objective in the aftermath of US defeat, then why did China drastically reduce the funds from Vietnam? In the context of a heated power struggle for regional hegemony, withdrawal of economic support could be considered tantamount to surrendering Vietnam to Soviet influence. Clearly other factors are at play here. Scholars, such as Yee, have suggested that the disavowal of further funds was because China had no other choice: it was 'handicapped by its own severe economic problems as a result of political turmoil' (1980: 15 – 32). However, domestic need was no more of a problem than it had been during the Great Chinese famine or the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, during these troubled times, the CCP had managed to siphon off \$180 million to give as aid to Vietnam between 1964 and 1969 alone (Khoo, 2011: 32). The difference is that China considered the security threat in 1975 from Vietnamese – Soviet collaboration less than that of US intervention in Vietnam in the preceding years. It is also not convincing to posit that the Chinese limited their aid because the Soviet – Vietnamese relationship was already threatening enough in 1975 to make China consider other means (than economic assistance) of prevention. Vietnam was still openly requesting Chinese aid and although unwilling to join China's coalition against the USSR, it had also not joined COMECON and would not do so until all chance of Sino-Vietnamese cooperation was extinguished in June 1978. Indeed, Vietnam's attempt at neutrality in order to balance aid from both powers was veritably their best policy option in 1975 – it was not an unreasonable or intimidating stance. The lack of Chinese overtures and the huge reduction in funds between 1975 and 1976 suggests that Vietnam was not therefore viewed the site of a potential, and immediate, risk of Soviet encirclement. This, by extension, means that 'national interest', interpreted in Walt's vein by the neorealist commentators to mean countering Soviet hegemony is not the only reason for the collapse of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance. The reality is instead far more complex.

Walt perceives the international system as inherently anarchic and as a result he perceives states, who as a consequence feel insecure, as constantly striving to minimise threats. However, as Wendt perceptively points out, the 'deep structure of anarchy is cultural and ideational rather than material' and thus leaves potential for the 'logic of anarchy' to 'vary' (Wendt, 1999: 43). On a bilateral level, this sentiment is clearly demonstrated in Sino-Vietnamese relations and better explains Chinese behaviour after US defeat in Indochina. American defeat did not equate immediately to Vietnam being labelled a threat, at least in part because the Chinese characterisation of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship was based on 'a role structure of friendship' (*Ibid*: 298). Thus the fall of Saigon in 1975, rather than posing an immediate threat, was actually huge relief for the Chinese. It brought to a close years of war waged on their border and the drain of such a resource-needy ally. Even though the Soviet Union's relationship with Vietnam continued, the CCP did not conclude that Vietnam posed an immediate security threat to China. This was because China's relations with Vietnam were determined by more than just security; historical and ideological ties mattered too. China considered themselves a long, impassioned supporter of Vietnam – a belief backed up by a commensurate \$20 billion in economic and military aid between 1949 and 1978 despite their own tumultuous internal circumstances (Khoo, 2011: 9). In 1969, China, at Pham Van Dong's request, published the communique of a talk between Zhou Enlai and Pham Van Dong which reiterated: '700 million Chinese people are powerfully behind the Vietnamese People, and Vietnam can depend upon China's vast territory as its rear base' (Shen and Li, 2011: 224). This was not empty rhetoric; material backup came in multiple forms, including active personnel who made a palpable difference to the war effort. PLA operating in North Vietnam estimate that between 1964 and 1969, 32,000 PLA shot down '1,707 aeroplanes, damaged 1608 and captured 42 American pilots' (Khoo, 2011: 35; Jian, 2010: 220). The huge sums of money and resources bequeathed to Vietnam, combined with Mao's refusal to accept linkage of Vietnam in exchange for concessions on Taiwan in negotiations with Henry Kissinger led to the perception that victory was undoubtedly a shared one. Although there was tension between 1969 and 1971, China nevertheless reinstated aid upon the US' excursion into Laos, with supplies of weapons increasing by 41% in 1971. Zhou Enlai reemphasised their commitment to Vietnam, stating 'whatever you need, please request it' (Lüthi, 2009). This history was not forgotten by the Chinese upon the cessation of war, despite Soviet-Vietnamese interaction, and they expected that it would not be by the Vietnamese either. There was a very real expectation in fact that after their monumental efforts, the expressions of gratitude and deference toward China that Vietnamese leaders expressed throughout the war would continue (Womack, 2006: 187). It is within this context, as shared victor in an almighty defeat, that China finally felt able to reduce its aid to Vietnam in 1975 and address its own internal poverty and deprivation. This sentiment is conveyed in Mao Zedong's rebuttal to requests for further aid from Le Duan: 'Today you are not the poorest under heaven. We are the poorest. We have a population of 800 million' (Westad et al, 1998:

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195). The Chinese confidence to deny Vietnam demonstrates that the assumption of security was not just based on rationalist calculations but also preferences, norms and ideas. The shared history, imbued potentially with an age-old sense of 'Chinese ethnocentrism', reduced the meaning and therefore perceived threat of the continuation of Soviet-Vietnamese relationship. This essay therefore disagrees with the neorealist commentators that the continued influence of the USSR in Vietnam after the US defeat constituted the immediate cessation of the Sino-Vietnamese alliance. The relationship endured long enough for the Chinese to feel comfortable to reduce aid. It is ironic then that the Chinese refusal would stoke 'Vietnam's suspicion of China into aversion' provoking the start of an exchange (1976 – 1978) that would mark the termination of their partnership (Jian, 2010: 237).

The concepts of asymmetry, the politics of inattention and under attention are useful for understanding the origins of the systemic misconception that occurred from the end of 1975. In *The Politics of Asymmetry*, Womack illustrates the relationship between relative capacities and their characteristic perspective, suggesting that the larger state will likely have a number of other external concerns that are of equal or greater importance than the smaller state. This is likely to lead to a corresponding difference in the amount of energy expended on the relationship. Whilst in 1975, China was less concerned with the threat from Vietnam than their own domestic infighting and need to combat deprivation, Vietnam were more acutely attuned to China's maintenance of (or lack of) their bilateral relationship. Asymmetric power theory posits that the most treacherous time for these alliances is when they must be constructed or re-constructed in a new context (Womack, 2006: 188). The Sino-Vietnamese relationship is a classic example of this difficulty of reconstituting an alliance in renewed circumstances as all previous 'diplomatic ritual had been subsumed by the needs of the war.' Traditional rivalry had been kept in check by sheer necessity. Consequently, no communication mechanisms existed to counter the interaction of China's insensitivity and Vietnam's oversensitivity. Almost immediately then – upon China's refusal to keep up their current flow of capital to Vietnam – Vietnam became suspicious of their ally's motives toward them. Their suspicions were not allayed by 'China's disastrous policy of supporting the Khmer Rouge;' in fact, this unflinching support, despite Cambodian raids on the Vietnamese border, seemed to give credence to Hanoi's fears of encirclement by Beijing (Westad et al, 2006: 6). In contrast, the Chinese leadership was willfully ignorant of Hanoi's fears, assuming instead that from 1975 Vietnam would continue their deferential posturing. Even after Le Duan's tempestuous visit to Beijing in September 1975 (in which he stormed out and refused to host the traditional return gala), the Chinese chose to impose sanctions against Vietnam rather than attempt to alleviate their fears. The subsequent battle over Vietnamese treatment of Overseas Chinese eradicated any remaining pretense of civility. Westad argues that the Chinese saw this affair as indicative of aggressive Vietnamese intent toward China. Although the 'Soviet factor' alone was not enough to undo the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, increasing Soviet-Vietnamese ties' made the maintenance of solidarity between Beijing and Hanoi extremely difficult' and made the exchanges of late 1975 – 1978 even more fraught (Jian, 2010: 223). Anne Gilks has labelled this interaction between 1975 and 1978 as a prime example of the 'spiral model' (or the security dilemma), in which efforts to increase security on behalf of one state induces the other to respond with a similar measure, heightening tension and creating conflict even if neither state desires it.

Describing the interactions between Vietnam and China as a 'spiral model' implies, in line with Walt's thinking, that the systemic misperception of this period was driven by only one emotion: fear. This essay instead offers the interpretation that the heated exchanges and decisive action of invasion was motivated by more than fear of 'a changing perception of threat' but a sense of anger and betrayal on the Chinese side because of Vietnam's 'misbehaviour' (Zhang, 2010). Even Ross, a self-confessed neorealist, uses emotional terms, describing 'the overt Chinese hostility' toward Vietnam in 1978 as reflective of the 'frustration' of the preceding three years (Ross: 1988:10). According to Beijing, Hanoi committed in excess of 2,000 border violations between 1975 and 1977. This constituted a direct violation of the first principle of peaceful coexistence, 'mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.' The resultant public polemic that ensued, and escalated in May 1978 due to the Hoa refugee issue, is further evidence of an emotional feud fueled by anger and not just fear. The propagation of divisive rhetoric, as well as the symbolic gestures (such as the closing of the Chinese Consulate in July 1978) resembled 'a shouting match between individuals who have become extremely frustrated with each other' (Womack, 2010: 198). It is this pent-up anger and sense of betrayal that burst the flood-banks upon the invasion of Kampuchea, which motivated the subsequent Chinese military invasion of Vietnam in February 1979. This was an example of what Todd Hall describes as 'the diplomacy of anger', which is 'a vehement and overt state-level display of anger in response to a perceived violation' (Hall, 2011: 522). As a form of communication (and if effective, coercion), it warns the recipient

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state (State B) of the danger of escalation in response to any further provocation of the perpetrator of diplomatic anger (State A). It also has a strong 'moral element', as it communicates the belief of State A that the conduct of State B is unjust and immoral and signals that State A will not acquiesce to this behaviour. Consistent with the logic of appropriateness, the inference of diplomatic anger is that State A believes redress and recompense from State B are necessary in order to move forward (Shepherd, 2013: 7). In the diplomacy of anger, appropriate behaviour is privileged over materialist utility-maximising behaviour. The idea of emotion-led action contrasts with realist commentators, who believe that state decision-making is driven by the logic of consequences, which operates by rationalist, materialist 'means-end calculations' for the 'national interest'. However, the invasion of Vietnam does not lend itself to a realist reading because it wasn't just that it failed to achieve materialist gains but that there existed meagre materialist gains up-for-grabs at all. The stress laid on the intention for a 'limited war' from the start by the Chinese (as a means of deterring Soviet interference) meant the PLA were never likely to achieve much beyond securing the border with such little room to manoeuvre. As such, outside commentators thought China was playing with fire; Yee wrote in 1980 that many observers thought that the Chinese appeared to be engaging in a 'reckless' game of 'brinkmanship.' From a means-end perspective, the heavy death toll, as well as the very real risk of Soviet escalation, were a high price to pay for such small potential gains. Was this 'a catastrophic miscalculation' or a rash emotional response (Woodside, Nationalism and Poverty: 381)? The answer is more nuanced and is better explained by widening the definition of potential gains, or 'national interest' to include non-materialist rewards, such as the chance to avenge the lack of gratitude from their old ally; to demonstrate the nation's commitment to its values (e.g. sovereign rights); to deter the Vietnamese from further action against the Chinese (not in a material-maximising manner) and to 'teach Vietnam a lesson' (Zhang, 2010). Hall argues that the diplomacy of anger can have a 'strategic' side to it, without invalidating the authenticity of the raw emotion. It can serve as a useful tool for what Goffman described as 'impression management' (Hall, 2011: 533). Beijing emphasised repeatedly the defensive element of their invasion, spinning it as a 'counter-attack' rather than an offensive, provoked by the unforgiving, immoral actions of the Vietnamese. This was to maintain their hard-fought for national identity as 'a friendly and peace-loving socialist state.' China used the UN as the forum to persuade Third World countries that they intended to withdraw within a few days. The demonstration of their national anger was to reaffirm the injustice of Vietnam's behaviour, thereby implicitly giving legitimacy and underlining the 'appropriateness' of the Chinese response. In this sense, this was an emotional-response which made objectives within the 'national interest' look more desirable. It also made achieving them more possible; emotion created new 'logics for certain courses of action that otherwise may not be considered viable' and which in different circumstances would constitute unacceptable behaviour (Shepherd, 2013: 8).

Emotions underly the calculations of action and may make a certain action more or less likely than in an emotion-less context. The same is true of the notion of 'national identity', which Wendt argues is the basis of interests 'because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is, and since identities have varying degrees of cultural content so will interests' (Wendt, 1999: 231). The concept of national identity stems from 'the Durkheimian insight that collective representation has an existence independent from, if not more than, the sum of its constituent parts' (Dittmer, 1992: 94). This identity is defined most simply as the state of resembling some actors while differentiating yourself from others (Chafetz, G.R., Spirtas, M. and Frankel, B, 1999). This self-schema of similarity and difference is made up of a number of categorised memberships, some social (e.g. ideology, values) and some non-social elements (e.g. size). The intermeshing of these different elements produce multiple levels of 'self' which are activated in different environmental contexts. Each 'self' contains a range of acceptable behaviours and actions, which may encourage or constrain action in a certain situation. Jacques Hymans has argued that the primary means by which national identity conceptions (NICs) drive choice is via the recall of emotional collective memories stating that 'a set of NIC-linked emotional memories will flood back into the leader's mind [...] that in turn generate a certain action tendency' (2006: 26). For example, the hostile polemic generated by the Hoa Refugee crisis in 1978 on behalf of the Chinese reignited the feelings of shock and anger upon the commencement of border attacks by the Vietnamese at the end of 1975. The resultant vitriol published (amongst other responses) about Vietnam's treatment of the Overseas Chinese contrasts to the relative silence on Pol Pot's ethnic cleansing of foreigners (including Chinese).

Whilst it is true that identities underwrite the selection of interests, the defence of the very conception of a country's projected national identity that gave it currency on the international stage also constitutes a national interest in and of itself. This is a legitimate non-materialist 'national interest' that Walt doesn't acknowledge because of his

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understanding of states as black boxes mostly concerned with survival and maximising security. Dittmer has argued that China's schema was made up of two principle elements: membership of the Communist bloc and as a leader of the Third World. During the years 1975 through to 1979, Mao's Third World doctrine had lost much of its urgent, revolutionary thrust but it had not been totally forsaken. A conversation between Hua Guofeng and Polpot in September 1977, in which Hua explains that the world was divided into three blocs shows that the doctrine outlived Mao and the CCP continued to define their action through it (Goscha, 2006: 196). However, I suggest that since it was difficult for China to 'derive system legitimacy from such an amorphous and heterogenous grouping' that by 1975, this ideational identification had developed a sharpened regional focus, which made it easier to apply (Dittmer, 1992: 97). Drawing on their sense of historical and cultural precedent, China's leaders combined the Third World Theory with their role as 'father of the family of nations' (Reid in Horesh and Kavalski, 2014: 23). Crucially they saw this not as a form of hegemony they espoused against, but as a natural relationship, couching it in familial terms. Chen Jian agrees that China saw Vietnam through 'the prism of a culturally determined and ethnocentric Central Kingdom vassal relationship' (2010: 224). Thus it was this notion of China's morally and historically defined identity as the champion against hegemony, particularly in Asia, that Pol Pot cleverly appealed to in his arguments in September 1977 that the Khmer Rouge were 'united with its Burmese, Thai, Indonesian and Malayan counterparts' in being threatened by the Vietnamese revisionists and were in need of Chinese assistance (Goscha, 2006: 173). Vietnam's full-scale invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was thus perceived as an affront to China's 'morally superior' leadership (Jian, 2010: 224). The Khmer Rouge, unlike Vietnam, had faithfully adopted Beijing's anti-hegemony rhetoric since 1975 and the Chinese felt the need to defend their integrity through the defence of their principles of peaceful coexistence. That China's invasion was in sync with intensified pressure from Guerrilla forces by Polpot on Vietnam's troops in Kampuchea, reaffirms that it was the Cambodian conflict (although not explicitly stated) that was the turning point that initiated China's invasion. Deng Xiaoping positioned this 'self-defence counterattack' as necessary to advance the anti-hegemony struggle 'in Southeast Asia, and even the entire world' which had become the basis of China's NIC (Zhang, 2010: 19). The historical context of the 'endless series of humiliations' by the West similarly made dealing with an explicit disavowal of China's values by an inferior 'a moral imperative,' forcing Beijing to prove it was not a 'paper tiger' and prepared to defend its integrity (Kissinger, 1994: 770; Yee: 1980).

In conclusion, this essay has not attempted to dethrone the national interest as the primary explanatory vehicle in bringing alliances to a close. Defined most simply by Nuechterlien as 'the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to the other sovereign states', this essay has sought to dispute the reductionist conceptualisation in this period of these 'needs and desires' as an equation based predominantly on threat (1978: 74). It has sought particularly to highlight the interaction of non-materialist objectives in the downgrade of Vietnam's status from military comrade to 'Cuba of the East' (Khuo, 2011: 1). Finally, it has also illustrated the importance of perception in any assessment of national interest, suggesting that there is no objective calculation, even of threat, to be frustrated by 'irrational' factors as Walt implied. The very formulation of 'national interest' is inextricably underpinned by 'irrational' ideas, as Wendt has shown, but in the Sino-Vietnamese case, also misperception, emotions and conceptions of national identity. The role of both NICs and emotions are the recipients of much recent attention in relation to foreign policy decision-making; the scholarship on China, and particularly the Third Indochina War, can only benefit from fuller integration of these factors into the narratives, as well as understandings of 'national interest'.

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*Date written: Dec 2016*