Sino-Vietnamese Conflict in Perspectives

In May 2014, Hanoi is unusually hot for early summer. Apparently, China is playing a major part in global warming. The South China Sea is even more heated. China has deployed the giant oil rig HYSY 981 in Vietnam’s waters since early May, claiming sovereignty and provoking emotional anti-China sentiment in Vietnam and across the region.

The love-hate paradox of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship is so dramatic it has often led to conflict of national interests, including warfare in the past. In 1979 China invaded Vietnam in a bloody border war, despite three decades of intimacy as “lips and teeth” for shared ideology. Is history about to repeat itself in the South China Sea? What is China’s next move? Is China pushing Vietnam into American arms, like it pushed Vietnam into Russian arms in 1979? What should Vietnam do to live next door peacefully with its giant neighbor?

Historical background
There are no permanent friends or foes, only permanent interests.

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “China is a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes she will shake the world”. The Americans have not listened to this wisdom. They have helped this giant to rise by “constructive engagement”. But they have gone a bit too far and now started to regret and try to contain China’s aggressive rise. The new “pivot” and TPP game (Tran-Pacific Partnership) to rebalance China’s rise in the region reminds us of the 1950s and 1960s when they used SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) to contain the “Red China” threat. Now it seems history is repeating itself, but in a new game, with new rules.

Mr Kissinger has been credited as the architect of the China Policy, helping China to rise, in his cold war vision of a new world order in which China would gang up with the US against the USSR. He made a secret deal with the Chinese, arranging for President Nixon to come to China to shake hands with Chairman Mao and signed the historical Shanghai Communique (in 1972). In this deal, the US would give up South Vietnam, compromise Taiwan’s sovereignty, cooperate with China for its “four modernizations” in exchange for the US phased withdrawals from South Vietnam “in honor”, and a “de facto” alliance against the USSR.

Later, Mr Brzezinski (President Carter’s National Security Advisor) followed up on this China Policy by giving Mr Deng Xiaoping a tacit agreement for China to invade Vietnam (in 1979) and allowing secret support to the Khmer Rouge in the coalition government in Cambodia. Vietnam became a pawn in this indecent power game and was driven into Russian arms (1978-1979). Thus China is indebted to Mr Kissinger for this unique opportunity to rise due to his continued support with the China Lobby. But what Mr Kissinger did not know (or perhaps did not really care about) was if China would keep its word to rise “in peace” and would not “touch US interests” in East Asia or threaten its allies.

Perhaps, the Americans were either naïve or wishful thinking, taking China’s peaceful rise for granted without considering potential risks. China’s bulling its neighbors and challenging the US is only a question of time. Even when the Americans have decided to “pivot” to East Asia to contain the new China threat, it seems they have not been able to get out of Mr Kissing’s long shadow. What is going on is a bit too little too late to deter China and protect American interests and that of the allies in the region. Now, the Japanese are waking up and rushing to change the
constitution to deal with the China threat, while other countries in the region (like ASEAN) are upset, confused, and polarized by China.

In 1979, China invaded Vietnam to “teach it a lesson”, following Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia to fight China’s ally, the Khmer Rouge. In fact, China invaded Vietnam more to impress the US that China was a reliable partner in the de facto alliance against the USSR and Vietnam. For Mr Deng Xiaoping, US support for the “four modernizations” was the key objective to help China rise. Everything else was secondary, only the means to an end. For Vietnamese leaders, China became the “direct and dangerous enemy”, and Vietnam had to lean on the USSR in an alliance against China.

It took Vietnam over a decade to normalize relations with China, following a secret summit meeting in Chengdu (September 1990) when both sides adopted the “16 golden words” guideline (translated as “friendly neighbors, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, looking to the future”). This fulfilled Mr Deng Xiaoping’s earlier prediction that Vietnam would come back to China again. The key reason for Vietnam’s abrupt turnaround was the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the USSR. Vietnamese leaders feared losing power and rushed to mend the fences with the Chinese at all costs, even giving up vital national interests, just to save an outdated ideology and political system.

The Chengdu understanding was such a huge strategic folly and unfortunate turning point for Vietnam that former foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach bitterly commented, “a dangerous era of renewed northern domination has begun”. Vietnamese leaders had unwittingly put themselves in China’s ideological trap as hostages for China to manipulate, even until today. For over the next two decades, subsequent Vietnamese leaders were kept hostages to the Chengdu commitments, with growing prices for Vietnam to pay. Over the years, China has quietly built up an extensive network of agents and supporters inside Vietnam, from central to local levels, to influence important decisions - not only political and economic but also military and security. The nature of the unequal Sino-Vietnamese relationship based on shared ideology and mistaken loyalty is the key reason behind the slowing economic reform and lack of political change in Vietnam during the last two decades.

Now, a new turning point has emerged. Since early May this year China has suddenly deployed the giant oil rig HYSY 981 in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone, shocking Vietnamese leaders and shattering their illusion as China has openly discarded the “16 golden words”. They are using the oil rig not really to drill for oil, but to claim sovereignty over the contested waters that China has unilaterally declared as its “core interests”. In fact, the HYSY 981 oil rig is a “civilian weapon” for coercion, far more effective than the aircraft carrier “Liaoning”. China has not missed the opportunity while the US and NATO countries are busy dealing with Russia over Ukraine, to consolidate cooperation with Russia, for both energy and geo-political interests. At the same time it has quickly learned the lesson of the Russian take-over of Crimea as a fait accompli, to grab new assets in the South China Sea using the HYSY 981 oil rig and testing the reaction of Vietnam, the US, ASEAN, and others, so as to prepare for the next move.

**Internal affairs**

*The new tiger has turned into a sick cat*

While China has risen to become the world’s 2nd economic power, Vietnam has fallen behind and failed to take off. Major state-owned corporations with the “socialist orientation”, as the
backbone of the economy, have incurred huge losses and become mothers of all bad debts. Impressive achievements of economic reform over two decades have gone down the drain, as a result of corruption, mismanagement and manipulation by interest groups, in a crony system. Greedy interest groups grabbed lands from farmers and collaborated with corrupt officials and mafia gangs to crackdown on protests, creating popular indignation and instability nation-wide. Workers at FDI projects in industrial zones have gone on strike to demand higher salaries and better living conditions. Yet they are getting little response from employers, thus making them upset and vulnerable to incitement by bad people for violence, as recent anti-China riots.

Economic failure and social instability has quickened the political and leadership crisis. Elite factions have engaged in fiercer power struggles, polarizing the leadership and paralyzing the management of the economy. Fierce power struggles between the party faction led by the Party Chief and the government faction led by the Prime Minister took place at most party plenums during 2013. Things calmed by the end of the year because of a political stand-off and temporal compromise. Now, the deployment of the HYSY 981 oil rig and crisis in Sino-Vietnamese relationship have intensified the power struggle, in favor of the Prime Minister (who has been vocal against China, enjoying popular support) and in disfavor of the Party Chief (who has been muted, thus getting more unpopular). While there is a good opportunity for fundamental changes, the leadership seems more divided by conflicts of interests in face of the China threat.

Four decades after the Vietnam War, while the Vietnamese and the Americans have reconciled, the Vietnamese communities inside and outside the country have not. Civil wars would leave far-reaching emotional and psychological consequences. As long as people still maintain hatred and prejudice in their heart, it is not only difficult to reconcile but also easy to polarize the struggle for freedom, democracy and national sovereignty. While communist extremists are dictators, anti-communist extremists are no different. That is why extremism is a potential enemy of national reconciliation and national restoration.

**International affairs**

*A lonely wolf*

Vietnam has declared a policy of diversification of relations and enjoyed “strategic partnerships” with 10 countries (but without the US). Right now, no strategic partners (except the US) can assist Vietnam by deterring China from bullying. In face of China’s new aggressive actions in the South China Sea, many governments are very upset, but reluctant to openly support Vietnam risking China’s anger. In 1979, when Vietnam was attacked by China, it had a military alliance with the USSR to deter China. But now, Vietnam is very much lonely, without any military alliance (unlike what the US has with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines). Vietnam has tried to maintain a balance of relations with China and the US by following a “Three No” policy of no military alliance with any country, no foreign military bases in Vietnam, and no reliance on any country against another. If this policy of passive balance is not changed, how can Vietnam protect itself from dangers? Right now, Vietnam is facing a double crisis of economic failure and the China threat to its sovereignty.

The US’s “pivot” to East Asia is not effective to deter China. By deploying the oil rig HYSY 981 in the South China Sea, China has defied the US, right after the visit of president Obama to East Asia. The US response to China is not strong enough, as Vietnam is not like the Philippines. Its “comprehensive partnership” with the US should be uplifted to “strategic partnership”, including lethal arms sales, joint military exercises, and shared facilities at Cam Ranh (similar to what the
Philippines and Singapore have offered the US Military). But Vietnam’s authoritarian system with a bad human rights record of crackdowns on democracy activists is a stumbling block. Vietnam’s deeper integration into the world markets (WTO and TPP) is also difficult while it maintains its “socialist orientation” and slow transition to full market economy.

ASEAN’s reaction to the HSY 981 is quite weak. The ASEAN Summit (May 10, 2014 in Myanmar) issued a joint communiqué but without naming China. ASEAN is a patchwork of nations with diverse background, easily polarized and manipulated by China. Like a bunch of chopsticks, ASEAN members can be broken up one by one by China if they are not united in a stronger community. For years, ASEAN has failed to make China sign the COC (code of conduct) in the South China Sea. ASEAN has no collective security mechanism, and cannot intervene to protect another member country, even when it is in danger.

Tension and potential conflict in the region have spurred many countries into an arms race. Vietnam has become a major client of Russian arms. But this may run two major risks: firstly, increased defense spending while its economy is failing would put Vietnam in a Catch-22; and secondly Vietnam would be vulnerable if China and Russia upgraded their strategic partnership against the US (as they are doing now). And if Vietnam’s relationship with the US is uplifted to strategic partnership (as they are expected to do), modern weapon systems bought from Russia might not be safe against China (especially the contracts for 6 Kilo class 636 submarines and the additional 12 Su-30MK2 fighters still being delivered). That is why it is very important for the US to lift the lethal arms embargo on Vietnam right now.

The next move

*Continuing “Three Warfare Doctrine”*

China’s deployment of the oil rig HSY 981 in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zones and the riots in Bình Dương (near Saigon), Vũng Áng (in Central Vietnam) serve as a warning of Vietnam’s vulnerability. If the leadership in Hanoi is not woken up to get out of the ideological trap and courageously confront the new reality, China could continue to exploit this deadly vulnerability to get what it wants, even without fighting a war.

China has taken advantage of Vietnamese leaders’ vulnerability by using the HSY 981 oil rig to claim sovereignty in the South China Sea as a fait accompli and test the reaction of the parties involved. China’s agents in Vietnam were suspected of secretly inciting riots in Bình Dương, Vũng Áng, and elsewhere as an excuse for China to pull out people and investment, and as a threat to Taiwanese, Korean and Japanese investors in Vietnam. This would put more pressure on the Vietnamese government to suppress anti-China demonstrations again. China could also use other leverages to destabilize Vietnamese society, such as using its network of agents and supporters inside the government and the community to influence events, using financial or trade measures to rock the markets, using cyber warfare to create chaos, using the media to influence public opinion, and using legal instruments to defend its case. They are part of China’s “Three Warfare Doctrine” (psychological, media and legal warfare) that its leadership formally adopted in 2003. While the Vietnamese government has been too slow to take legal actions, on June 9, China unexpectedly presented to the UN Secretary General a formal position paper on the dispute in the South China Sea, for circulation to all 193 UN members.

The reaction of the Vietnamese leadership has been slow and muted, except Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung who made timely and strong statements on China’s aggressive actions, at the
ASEAN Summit in Myanmar (May 10) and at the World Economic Forum on East Asia in Manila (May 22), scoring high points and standing out over his political opponents. Right now, he has regained popularity and legitimacy of a national leader with the mandate for national sovereignty. This is critical in the race for the top job at the next party congress. This event has created a turning point to polarize the leadership, upsetting earlier calculations for the political lineups. This is a good opportunity for the Prime Minister to consolidate his political stakes, and make fundamental changes in domestic politics and international relations. But, this depends on the political courage and sincerity of the leader.

Popular reaction has been swift and strong. It has been, perhaps, so emotional that “enemy forces” have exploited it by inciting riots in Bình Dương and Vũng Áng to discredit Vietnam and sabotage its economy. Hopefully, the negative impact on FDI investment, including possible pull-outs, will be short-term, if the government knows how to fix the problems. After initial confusion, the government has taken stronger measures for damage control. But, they should not be too hard on people and too soft on the real culprits, as this is an indicator of where they stand. This is a good opportunity for patriotic forces to rally for national reconciliation and sovereignty. It is also a good time for the reform faction to turn the table to get an upper hand in domestic politics. But, following the visit of Yang Yiechi (June 18, 2014) it seems both factions in Hanoi leadership are still confused and dysfunctional without taking necessary actions.

The pro-China conservative faction is shocked, confused and discredited, but still in power and calling the shots. Foreign Minister Phạm Bình Minh’s postponed trip to the US at the invitation of State Secretary John Kerry (May 22), and Defense Minister Phùng Quang Thanh’s very weak statements at Shangri-La Dialogue 2014 (May 30) are bad signs indicating the Vietnamese Leadership is still fearful of China, continuing to maintain the ideological status quo, even at the expense of national sovereignty. Once China removes the oil rig and the ships, the conservative faction will recover and the political standoff will continue. Given hindsight, fundamental changes are possible only when people are free from fear for national reconciliation and unity to rally people’s power for a breakthrough by a bottom-up, not just top-down change process. The Renovation period (1986-1990) was a lesson about an abortive change process when the leadership suddenly decided to slam the door.

International reaction is stronger, but not strong enough to deter China. International support against China should not be taken for granted, as China is too big and too strong, with its long hands reaching everywhere. Vietnam should change its attitude and show a more decent face than China, as few people want to support a dictatorial and corrupt regime with a bad human rights record. This is a good opportunity for Vietnam to upgrade its ties with the US to a strategic partnership to balance off China. But, there should be no illusion about the “American card” (like there was with the “Russian card”). The US “pivot” and the TPP game are still work in progress. For Washington, China is far more important than Vietnam. The US Administration is still bogged down in the Middle East and being involved in Ukraine, while coping with defense budget cuts and isolationism trends. In his 9-page speech on foreign policy, President Obama delivered at West Point (May 28, 2014), there are only a few lines of vague reference to maritime disputes in the region, in which, he referred to the South China Sea and China only twice, and nothing about Vietnam or the Chinese oilrig.

It is unlikely for China to maintain the giant oil rig HYSY 981 and a huge armada of escort vessels in the South China Sea for too long. Simply it is too expensive for whatever reasons. China is expected to pull out the oil rig in mid August as planned, or even earlier if its mission is
accomplished or if the typhoon season comes sooner. In any case, China is not going to give up the game of using the oilrig to its advantage. It would deploy more oil rigs and intensify the construction of strategic infrastructures on the occupied reefs to claim a “special economic zone” and an “air defense identification zone”. China would continue its “tailored coercion” for incremental aggression, without provoking a military confrontation with the US. China’s oil rig gambit indicates if an armed conflict was to take place, it would be at sea by a swift move with surgical air and naval strikes to maximize its superiority and ensure a quick victory, before the US can intervene. The naval battle at Johnson South Reef in 1988 was a case in point.

But once Vietnam’s fleet of 6 Kilo 636 class submarines is in place and operational, with an additional squadron of 12 Su-30MK2 fighters, it would be more difficult for China to do what it wants in the South China Sea. Especially, when Vietnam’s relationship with the US is uplifted to “strategic partnership”, including lethal arms sales and joint military exercises with the 7th Fleet, and especially when Japan transfers a fleet of Bizan patrol boats to Vietnam’s coastguard, its defense posture in the South China Sea would be improved considerably. Although China does not really want to push Vietnam into American arms, its new aggressive actions might be a game changer, leading to unintended consequences.

China might have other options for its strategy to reach the blue oceans. If China’s access to the Indian Ocean is somehow blocked and denied by recent changes in Burma with increased American influence there, China would have to find new access to the Gulf of Thailand and beyond. For economic and geo-political reasons, China must connect its Southern provinces with the oceans by an inland corridor as a vital lifeline through some neighboring countries, in order to counter the US strategy of “offshore control” aimed at blocking China’s sea routes at critical choke points. Recently, China has secured some major deals with Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand to build high value assets for transport and logistics, including an extensive network of railways, highways, waterways, airfields, radar stations, seaports and storages.

The deployment of the giant oil rig HYSY 981 and a huge armada of escort vessels in the South China Sea is part of China’s game plan not only to grab more assets there but also to control the vital sea lanes by projecting its A2/AD (anti-access/area-denial) doctrine that the US and allies are really concerned about. The energy-hungry giant is surely interested in the bounties of the South China Sea, including 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (as estimated by US Energy Information Administration) or 17 billion barrels of oil and 498 trillion cubic feet of gas (as estimated by China National Offshore Oil Corporation). Yet, China is also interested in controlling the sea lanes in the South China Sea, as more than $5 trillion of trade volume (including three-quarters of China’s oil imports, and most of oil shipments to Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) passes these waters each year. As all shipments to China must pass through these waters, China is really concerned about the US’s “Offshore Control” strategy to defend the “First Island Chain” and use the choke points at Malacca or Lombok to block China’s key imports and exports. While China is expected to seek alternative land routes (through Laos, Cambodia and Thailand), it would do all it can to control the South China Sea.

Deploying a billion-dollar oilrig there with over a hundred vessels swarming around for a few months, throwing away almost a million dollars a day, China is not just focusing on one target. If it is used not only for oil drilling as suspected, it must be doing something else even more important. The oilrig might be used to divert public attention from the quiet construction of artificial islands and military installations on some of the reefs in the Spratlys, in order to enforce the claim of the “U-shaped” line (as a fait accompli), the expected declaration of an “air defense
identification zone” (ADIZ) and an “exclusive economic zones” (EEZ), as in the Paracels. If China is really building another giant oilrig as reported (HYSY 982), it indicates this giant dual-purpose offshore platform has been used quite effectively as a strategic asset for sovereignty claiming as well as for oil drilling.

That is why, it is important to closely watch what China is quietly doing at strategic locations in the South China Sea, as well as in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand (following the coup). China’s new assets being built on the Spratlys (such as an air strip on Johnson South Reef and an artificial island and military installations on Fiery Cross Reef) would be connected with Yulin naval base in Hainan, Sansa island in the Paracels. By direct line, Yulin is only 350km from Vung Ang special economic zone. Several thousand Chinese workers working at Vung Ang, (in Ha Tinh, Central Vietnam), at Tan Rai and Nhan Co bauxite projects (in the Highlands) are a serious security risk. If there is an armed conflict, Vietnam can be easily cut off by half in this vulnerable location. To the west of Vietnam, there is the Kunming-Vientiane high speed railways (in Laos), installations at Koh Kong and Bokor (in Cambodia) and the Kra Isthmus canal (in Thailand). Once these strategic assets are completed and connected, China may be able to neutralize the US “pivot” to contain China, and easily control Vietnam. They can use intimidation, coercion and blackmail to get what it wants, even without a fight as by then, any resistance by Vietnam would be too little too late…

In 1973 “oil shocks”, Japan learned a very hard lesson and quickly readjusted its energy strategy, thus earning the reputation of an “economic animal”. China was a fast learner, acting quickly to make a major deal with Russia recently to ensure an alternative energy supply and geo-political stakes in a new power game. Meanwhile, China has moved more aggressively into the South China Sea to take advantage of a near power vacuum there as ASEAN is too weak and polarized, and the US and its allies are having serious problems elsewhere and cannot act decisively. This is a calculated yet dangerous gambit, since China is not only a giant “economic animal” already bypassing Japan, but also an ambitious “armed monster” poised to challenge the US’s global interests, as it no longer has the patience or interest in playing the old game with the same rules. This “oil rig shock” is a new warning and a turning point not only for Vietnam, but also for the whole region. Given mutual restraint, the probability of an armed conflict as a result of human or technical mistakes or communication breakdown is quite enormous.

**How to “exit China”**

*Waking up to escape the ideological trap*

Sino-Vietnamese relationship should be based on the principle of equality, mutual respect and mutual interest. But in reality, this is impossible between a small and weak nation and a giant neighbor with a long tradition of Han chauvinism. The only way out for Vietnam is to be independent and strong enough to deter China (like Israel did with its bigger neighbors).

To be independent and strong, Vietnam must escape China’s ideological trap which has strangled and kept Vietnam down for over half a century. The best opportunity to “exit China” is when China was in crisis and weakened (like during the Cultural Revolution). The Chinese model did not work in the past (the Great Leap Forward) and will not really work in the future (the China Dream), unless there is a fundamental political change (which is very unlikely). This is a paradox of development, Chinese style. Gordon Chang has predicted “the coming collapse of China” while Paul Krugman confirms “China is in big trouble”, about to hit its Great Wall. He predicts the day of reckoning is coming soon. Why should Vietnam follow China?
To “exit China”, the Vietnamese should change their mindset, from “in the box” to “out of the box” thinking. They should learn from the “exit Asia” concept of the Japanese during the Meiji Restoration era, following the great idea of Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901). Those East Asian nations which had decided to change their mindset for modernization, have become strong and resilient (like Japan and South Korea). Only 2 or 3 decades after the war with great destruction, they have recovered and become leading economic world powers.

For half a century, Vietnam had joined China’s ideological orbit twice. The first time was when their borders were opened (1950) for them to become “shared mountains and rivers”, as close as “lips and teeth”, and for Maoism to flood Vietnam, causing huge disasters (the Land Reform, collectivization of farmers, and crackdown on the “Humanities and Belle Lettres” movement…). The second time was at Chengdu summit meeting (Sept 1990) when the two “brother enemies” suddenly embraced each other again like “good comrades” under “16 golden words”. Vietnam normalized relations with China in an abnormal way, unwittingly putting themselves in its ideological trap, only to have a broken dream now when China openly shows its true colors. The grave consequences of the huge folly at Chengdu, which former foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach has predicted are now unfolding in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

Between the two disastrous experiences of joining China’s orbit, Vietnam tried to “exit China” once after 1975 when it invaded Cambodia to fight China’s ally, the Khmer Rouge (December 1978), and then when it fought China’s invasion of Northern Vietnam (since February 1979). Vietnam identified China as a “direct and dangerous enemy”, even recording this in its Constitution (1980) and Party Charter (1982). Thus, Vietnam made a huge strategic mistake, falling into the China’s trap, being isolated with the rest of the world (except the USSR), and getting bogged down in Cambodia. Vietnam tried to “exit China” with the wrong concept: fighting China (while maintaining the same ideology), with subjectivism (assuming the USSR was invincible) and with naivete (opposing China when it was allied with the US).

Now, if Vietnam plans to “exit China” by fooling around with the US as a strategic partner against China, while refusing to give up the outdated ideology, it may repeat the same mistake. Vietnam can ally with the US only to “balance off” China, not to “oppose” her. Vietnam can “exit China” ideologically, but not geo-politically. In future, the Vietnamese must show modesty, decency, and mutual respect to the Chinese people as good neighbors, working with each other for economic and political change, building an affluent and democratic society. Dictatorship and corruption is the common enemy of both nations. That is why “exit China” means, first of all, waking up to escape the outdated ideology, the key reason for all disasters.

**How to live next to China?**

*Changing now or losing it all*

Given the hindsight with painful lessons, what should Vietnam do to live next door to this giant neighbor having a long tradition of Han chauvinism (as the Middle Kingdom)?

First, the leaders of the smaller nation must be smarter in statecraft, so the bigger neighbor cannot bully them. Leadership talents should be appreciated without discrimination or prejudice of their background, like the Germans have appreciated Angela Merkel of East German origin, or Philipp Roesler of Vietnamese origin. National leaders must care for national interests, not individual or group interests. If national jobs are up for grabs without law and order, corrupt officials would grab national assets to enrich themselves, sending the country broke.
Second, people of the smaller nation must be smarter in a civil society, so the bigger neighbor cannot fool them. People should be cultivated both intellectually and emotionally, and their democratic and human rights respected. There is no talent without creative thinking and freedom of thought. The potential strength of the nation cannot be mobilized for nation building without national reconciliation and civil society.

Third, the economic and defense potential of the smaller nation must be better, so the smaller nation cannot be dominated by its bigger neighbor. In nation building, Vietnam should learn the “start-up nation” lesson of Israel. It must learn from the national recovery of Germany, Japan and South Korea after the war. Although Japan and Germany were defeated and surrendered, only 2-3 decades later, they became the second and third economic power in the world. Meanwhile, Vietnam won the war, but four decades after, the country still remains poor and backward, and dependent. For sustainable economic growth, political change is required to support economic reform and technological innovation.

Fourth, the strategic partnership of the smaller nation must be strong enough to deter the bigger neighbor’s hegemonic ambitions. Now, Vietnam has very few choices and very little time, it cannot catch fish with both hands, trying to balance its relationship with both China and the US. The HYSY 981 incident is a lesson. In this multi-polar world, strategic partnerships are no longer based on ideology, but only on national interests and geo-politics. If Vietnam still refuses to change the mindset, it could become a prisoner of the past, and fail.

If any of these factors is missing, Vietnam could become an easy prey to Han chauvinism. The danger of northern domination is growing with the rise of China and the fall of Vietnam. For national independence and sovereignty, the Vietnamese must wake up to escape China’s ideological trap and reform the political system. It is time to change or lose it all.

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(Nguyen Quang Dy is a Harvard Nieman Fellow, 1993).

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