

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTIONS

Today, Viet Nam's foreign policy is based on the principles of independence, self-determination, peace, friendship, cooperation and development; diversification and multilateralization of foreign relations. These values underlie all foreign policy decisions, for instance the linchpin policy of the "Four no's": no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases on home soil, no use of the country's territory to instigate military activities against another and no use of force or the threat thereof in international affairs (Quang 2020). Some would even argue that these principles have guided Viet Nam's foreign relations since feudal times, through the decades of the war for independence. These principles are by no means unique to Viet Nam as many countries would claim them as a part of their diplomatic traditions. Nevertheless, I would argue that these values attained the paramount importance they assume today through a time of great upheaval and the eventual somber realization that their absence, even momentarily, would have catastrophic consequences. This critical time period was in the immediate post-war years from 1975 to 1979. The most critical subject would be Viet Nam's relations with China.

After the triumph of the war for national independence in 1975, someone living in Viet Nam would have logically hoped for a new era of peace and economic development. However, soon after, in 1979, Viet Nam found itself bogged down in another war against the Khmer Rouge to the West, defending against a surprise Chinese invasion to the North and bearing the brunt of economic sanctions from the U.S. and allies. Viet Nam's sole lifeline was economic and military aid from the Soviet bloc. Economic and political isolation crippled the country's economy and continued until Viet Nam launched comprehensive reforms in 1986 and unilaterally withdrew from Cambodia in 1989. The policy decisions from the 1975-1979 period shaped the country's political and economic environment for more than a decade. How did everything go so wrong so quickly?

In my view, out of all policy decisions, Viet Nam's China policy between the year 1975 and 1979 was the most consequential. Viet Nam-China relations after 1975 and the two countries' bloody border war in 1979 have only been talked about more openly in Viet Nam in recent years (Le and Hoang 2021). In 2019, as reported by Viet Nam News (2019),

the central government of Viet Nam held an event commemorating the 40th anniversary of the “fight to protect the northern border” with specific mentioning of China. Academics such as Professor Vu Duong Ninh from Viet Nam’s National University stipulated that “one of the underlying factors behind China’s attack on Viet Nam’s northern border were the shifting dynamics between the U.S., China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War” (Viet Nam News 2019). Furthermore, Professor Vu argues that the war “was an invasion waged with expansionist intent” in spite of China’s reasoning that it was a “counter-strike” in response to “Viet Nam’s hostility”. Before large scale national events like these, conversations were much more discrete and disorganized, partly due to the lack of declassified archival sources and unwilling by many to revisit an otherwise tragic period in Viet Nam’s history.

My late grandfather Hoang Van Chung, a former professor of international law at the Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam who served diplomatic postings in Poland and France, used to lament the Soviet Union’s silence when China crossed the border with Viet Nam and attacked Vietnamese villages, that Viet Nam went into Cambodia with good intentions but Viet Nam’s inability to explain to the world the merits of the decade-long stay contributed to the country’s economic and political isolation. One of his contemporaries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Viet Nam, Nguyen Thanh Chau recalled to me how some of his friends who were stationed at the border met their armed Chinese comrades in sleeping shorts and shirts. He was luckier, learning of the attack through the radio in Australia where he was completing his Master’s degree. It would be safe to assume that each Vietnamese has their personal stories of what transpired and what went wrong from 1975-1979 in terms of relations with China.

I also believe that the recent interest in the 1975-1979 period is due to the similarities in the international context, particularly in terms of great power relations and their effects on regional dynamics. It can be said that the strategic triangle between the U.S, China and Russia continues to dominate global affairs today, perhaps with China in the 1975-1979 period replacing contemporary Russia in terms of economic and military power. Central tenets of the neo-realist school of international relations such as the anarchic international system, centrality of state interests, the balance of power etc., are characteristics of international politics that have endured. In such an environment, the fundamental choice

for small and medium-sized countries like Viet Nam remains: how to achieve strategic balance between relations with major powers, especially those with a shared border. Viet Nam faces the same questions today as it did more than 50 years ago. How should it conduct its relations with China in the context of escalating strategic competition between China and the U.S? What are China's national interests? How does Viet Nam amplify shared national interests and minimize competing interests with China? How does Viet Nam prevent conflicts of interests from spilling over to other aspects of the relationship and escalating into crisis and confrontation?

Against this backdrop, my thesis aims to address two key questions:

Question 1: Using the theoretical framework of neo-realism, what are the policy lessons that can be drawn from an examination of Viet Nam-China relations from 1975-1979?

Question 2: How does the historical policy lessons drawn from Question 1 inform Viet Nam's contemporary foreign policy towards China?

To answer these two questions, this thesis will comprise six chapters:

Following chapter One, in chapter Two, I will provide a review of the current literature on two subjects: First, literature related to Viet Nam-China relations from 1975-1979, in particular Viet Nam-China relations, China's decision-making process and views towards Viet Nam, China-Soviet-U.S. competition and the role of Viet Nam and Indochina. Second, literature related to key theories and concepts, namely neo-realism, bilateral relations, national interests as well as on current dynamics and Viet Nam-China bilateral relations.

In chapter Three, I will outline key research methodologies and approaches and explain the research materials that I will be using.

In chapter Four, I will provide a historical analysis of Viet Nam-China relations in the 1975-1979 period. This central chapter comprise four sub-chapters: first, an overview of the global and bilateral context for bilateral relations. This part will be followed by a brief explanation of Viet Nam's history and the role of China. Next, I will provide a causal analysis for the breakdown in bilateral relations by examining China and Viet Nam's unilateral economic and defense interests, outlining of which of these interests are compatible with one another and those that are not, which led to a clash in interests and

ultimately conflict. Finally, I will detail the process and steps in which Viet Nam and China's relations deteriorated and the lowest point of relations in early 1979 – a month long war along the two countries' border. I will end this part with an examination of consequences and aftermath by the end of 1979.

The fifth chapter will be on the historical trajectories in the current Viet Nam-China relations. Like the previous chapter, I will begin with an overview of the overarching global and regional context followed by the bilateral context. Then, I will outline an outline of Viet Nam's current policies towards China. Finally, I will draw out the important historical lessons of Viet Nam-China relations from 1975-1979 and corresponding policy recommendations for Viet Nam's contemporary foreign policy towards China.

In the final chapter - chapter Six, I will provide a conclusion to previous chapters that includes a review of the answers to the two central research questions and why these answers are relevant today.

