

VIETNAM'S STRATEGY TOWARDS CHINA IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ASYMMETRIC GAME

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Abstract: The decision-making of weak countries against powerful countries deserves in-depth discussion, especially the dynamic choice of weak countries' strategies in the context of power gaps. In the real geopolitical game of the South China Sea, the asymmetry of interaction between Vietnam and China may become the normal state. This article develops Womack's theory of asymmetric relations. By introducing the game matrix, a new framework of asymmetric relations containing power parameters is constructed to characterize the dynamic interaction of strategies between strong and weak countries. It is believed that the "fault line" of diplomatic attention caused by asymmetry of power is a variable of Vietnam's diplomatic strategy against China in the South China Sea. Then the author collected official statements, incident comments, and ministerial interviews related to the "Hai Yang Shi You 981" crisis from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, compiled them into the corpus, and captured the dynamic changes in Vietnam's strategy based on operational code and text analysis, which could provide inspiration for the settlement of island and reef disputes in the South China Sea.

Keywords: Vietnam; China; Asymmetry; Power gap; South China Sea

Introduction

HOW DO POWER GAPS SHAPE RELATIONS BETWEEN STATES? HOW DOES A weak state make foreign policy in its interaction with a strong state? The disparity in power is embedded in Hobbes' natural state. The basis of the state's pursuit of power is to ensure survival, but strategy of countries with different power attributes to achieve survival may be different, and not all participants are in a symmetrical interaction (Womack 2015: 15-17). Weak states may perceive more risk and uncertainty, making them adopt diversified strategies. In asymmetric bilateral relations, the premise that interaction can be sustained is that the autonomy of the weaker party is not eroded, and the stronger party can be

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respected. The actual situation is that weak countries are likely to encounter violations of their interests by powerful countries. When stronger countries fail to notice the asymmetry of bilateral interaction and deal with issues with an overbearing attitude toward weaker countries. The strong country may implement an exclusive dominant policy towards the weak country, which leads to the anxiety and resistance of the latter. This article tries to discuss the strategies of weak countries to respond to the infringement of their interests by powerful countries in asymmetric interactions, so as to provide a path for the analysis of the foreign policy of weak and small countries.

Whether it is the “Prisoner's Dilemma” or the “Stag Hunt” model in game theory, it is assumed that the two players are in a state of equivalence, ignoring the power gap between the participants, which will have an effect on the strategic interaction of the game players. The theory of asymmetric interaction firstly provides a mathematical parameter about the power gap between countries, and combines the game modelling of the strategic options of state players, which can produce new insight for the analysis of inter-state interaction. This article will be divided into the following three parts. The first part clarifies the definitions of strong and weak countries and puts forward the concept of asymmetric interactions based on Womack’s work, adding the factor of incomplete information. The second part will analyse the preference "fault lines" caused by the asymmetry of relations, as well as the typologies of strategy between the two countries. At the same time, this part combines the game matrix with asymmetric parameters of the power gap to construct a dynamic game between strong and weak countries. The third part will conduct operation code analysis on the corpus of 2014 "Hai Yang Shi You 981" crisis collected from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, so as to provide inspiration for the foreign policy study of the weak power.

Literature review

Vietnam's policy towards China has been less tracked in the academic community since the normalization of relations between the two countries. The existing studies can be divided into two categories. The first category of literature, represented by Womack (2006: 1-15), uses the framework of asymmetric relations to sort out the evolution of Sino-Vietnamese relations from the period of Song Dynasty in China to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1950. However, this study mainly narrates ancient historical facts, and has limited inspiration for contemporary Sino-Vietnamese relations, without a clear definition of the concept of asymmetry, ignoring the dynamic process of strategic interaction between countries. Due to the power gap, Vietnam and China are currently a

mature and asymmetric bilateral relationship. Both countries want their core interests not to be threatened, so they manage differences in bilateral engagements. The second category of literature does some research on Vietnam's South China Sea policy. Thayer (2016) believes that Vietnam hopes to use the network of relations (socialist ideology) to strengthen political ties with China, strategically isolate China's behaviour, and make the latter's behaviour in the South China Sea more predictable. However, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea still reflect the wide gap in their power and means between the two countries, and Vietnam has been flexible in shaping foreign policy toward China amid this asymmetric interaction. Rongquan Zuo (2021) took Vietnam's national Defence Strategy report as the analytical text and found that Vietnam is adjusting the military establishment and developing the national defence industry to cope with territorial issues in the South China Sea. Strategically, Vietnam continues to seek "ASEANization" of the South China Sea issue, and actively seeks support from major powers outside the region for Hanoi's position. Zeng Yong (2021) analysed the political attributes of Vietnam's policy on South China Sea islands and reefs. Hanoi strengthened the rationalization of the claims of South China Sea sovereignty through national education and media narrative. At the same time, Vietnam will also consider the overall situation of China-Vietnam relations in the dispute, and will not use extreme means to harm the relationship between the two countries. Zhao Wei Hua (2020) discussed Vietnam's policy adjustment on the South China Sea after Nguyen Phu Trong was elected general Secretary. Vietnam resorted to judicial procedures on disputed islands such as the Vanguard Bank under the background of strategic competition between China and the US in an attempt to force China to make concessions.

The above research has noticed the new concepts and elements of Vietnam's South China Sea policy, but the case tracking analysis behind the policy is lacking. Vietnam's dynamic game strategy against China has been ignored, especially in an asymmetric environment. After gaining independence, Vietnam has experienced ups and downs in its relationship with China. The important influencing variables are the asymmetry of the relationship between the two countries and the reality of overlapping interests in the South China Sea. Vietnam puts national interests above socialist ideology and implements the foreign policy of subordination and resistance towards China in the South China Sea. Rather than self-restraint, compliance has been an important element of Vietnam's diplomatic strategy towards China. The combination of resistance and obedience has been key to Vietnam's autonomy over China for thousands of years. Behind this complex diplomatic strategy is Vietnam's recognition of China's strong power, and excessive focus on China.

The asymmetry of relations between countries

Asymmetric interactions have an important impact on international politics. This article argues that the asymmetry originates from the power gap between countries. The weak country is more obviously affected by the asymmetric relations than the strong country. In the asymmetric relations, the power gap is clearly visible. Although weak countries and strong countries are in continuous game interaction, there are great differences in their preferences and strategic choices, which ultimately leads to the asymmetry of returns (Womack 2015: 10). In a bilateral relationship with huge demographic, economic and military differences, both sides face different opportunities and risks. Strong countries cannot impose their will on weaker ones, resulting in a stable matrix of relationships. However, the interaction between strong and weak countries in specific fields may be full of asymmetry. The weak countries seek issues negotiation on the premise of independence, and build cooperation bonds by formulating flexible strategies towards the stronger side (Waltz 2007: 95). The incomplete information caused by the power gap constitutes the important content of asymmetry of relations. Strong countries have more resources for information acquisition and perception, so they may take the initiative in the interaction with weak countries, and take the lead in releasing diplomatic signals that are beneficial to their own interests. The lack of information on the intentions of powerful countries leads to the uncertainty of weak countries' diplomatic choices, which will lead to confusion and fear of them in the interactive environment. Weak countries may choose to shelve and compromise in the face of incomplete information, so as to maintain the durability of the relationship through interest entanglement, and at the same time enhance the ability of common identity construction with the help of institutional platforms (Rathbun 2007: 533-557).

The definition of strong and weak countries (relative)

The strength and weakness of countries is a relative concept, and its essence is the measurement and evaluation of state power. Foreign policy-making related to grand strategy, alliance commitments, economic policies, military procurement, etc. all depend on the evaluation of the relative strength of the self and others (Tellis et al. 2000). With the three debates on the theory of international relations, many scholars have put forward different measurement methods of state power, including Klein equation and Beckley's net indicator (Beckley 2018). When defining strong and weak states, it is generally agreed that a country with more wealth (GDP) and military assets can be judged as a strong country with greater autonomy in conducting diplomacy, stronger ability to set the agenda of international negotiations and influence the diplomatic choices of its opponents (Kennedy

1988). The measurement standard of power as assets means that weak countries have less resources, so they are less able to win disputes and set the agenda of international negotiations. In some international events such as regional crisis and armed conflict, they are more likely to be forced to compromise, or adopt the strategy of hedging (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). Weak countries with less resources can shape the outcome of bilateral relations through alliance and bandwagon strategies but may taking on greater risks and costs (Mack 1975).

Asymmetry of relations leads to "disparity" of diplomatic attention

Disparity in diplomatic attention caused by asymmetry of relations could lead to systematic misunderstandings in bilateral interactions. Strong states focus on overall diplomatic matters with weak states and pay less attention to specific areas, because interactions with weak states account for a small share of their international interests, so strong states are more influenced by domestic issues of their diplomatic agenda (see figure 1, region C). Weak countries have limited economic opportunities for strong countries, and strong countries are less insecure about weak countries than weak countries are about strong countries. Therefore, the foreign policy of strong countries may play a role in reinforcing the bond of interdependence with weak countries at the sub-national level, especially the border between the two countries (Womack 2004). Due to the concentration and intertwining of economic interests, interest groups in border areas will push the amicable policies of strong countries towards weak countries. Of course, this influence may be subordinate and serve the overall national interests of the strong countries. In terms of the overall diplomatic style, the powerful countries can be very relaxed and compensate for their lack of attention to weak countries with an overall friendly diplomatic posture (Kindleberger 1996). Weak countries are aware of the important role of bilateral relations with strong countries for their survival, and perceive the leading role of strong countries in the overall diplomatic atmosphere. Weak countries devote more attention and expend more political resources to analyse and predict the future behaviour and preferences of strong states, which can lead to a kind of diplomatic anxiety under excessive attention. Due to the excessive attention to the details of the bilateral relations, the weak country may perceive the strong country's dominate behaviour as the coercion and resist it. However, the weak countries' policy towards the strong countries is flexible and continuous, that is, maintaining the autonomy of diplomacy and integrity of interest, while not undermine their relations.

	Powerful countries : focuses on the overall trend
	Infringement of interests

Weak countries : over concerned about details	obedience	Stable relationship Weak countries respect the status of powerful countries①
	Hedging	Cracks in the relationship Powerful countries rebalance with strength②
	Resistance	Oscillation in relationship Powerful countries responded with force③

Table 1 : Strategic combinations of strong and weak countries (made by the author)

In asymmetric relations, the fundamental expectations of strong and weak countries differ significantly. The strong country expects respect from the weak country, which is reflected in the weak country's guarantee that its behaviour does not threaten the interests of the strong country, and cautiously regards the strong country as an actor with a larger share of power (see Table 1 ①). In this case, the interactive relationship can operate stably. However, this expectation may not be acceptable to the weak countries, which means that the weak countries are subservient to the strong countries in the fields where the interests of the two countries are intertwined. Therefore, the weak countries will clarify their differences with the strong countries in some specific fields, and even achieve the balance of power by bandwagon or alliance strategy, so as to maintain their diplomatic autonomy. If the weak country tries to draw in other country C to hedge the asymmetric relations, the disobedience of the weak country will threaten the power share of the strong country. The strong country may force the weak country to compromise with its strength, such as using economic sanctions, and the vulnerability of the weak country becomes more prominent (see Table 1 ②). The dominance behaviour of the strong country to the weak country intensified the latter's anxiety and insecurity. The weak country recognizes that it is in a dangerous predicament and may be under strong countries' pressure or even coercion. Therefore, the weak country takes the initiative to resist the strong country. However, such behaviour can trigger a crisis in bilateral relations, as the resistance of the weak country forces the policymakers of the strong country to further confront the weak (see table 2, ③). Despite the disparity of diplomatic attentions caused by the asymmetry of relations, which originated in the power gap, it is difficult for strong country to subdue a weak one through coercion. Economic interdependence and the emergence of weapons of mass destruction have reversed the structure of asymmetric relationships in some micro domains. In a nutshell, the strategies adopted by the weak countries in the face of encroachment by strong countries include obedience, hedging and resistance, and the degree of their toughness is gradually increasing, and the response of the powerful countries are dynamically adjusted accordingly. However, the strategy of the weak country may not be single in the real geographical interaction, but has multidimensional attributes, and the payoff of strategies options will also be affected by asymmetric relations. Therefore, if a

game matrix containing the benefit and cost of both sides can be constructed, the strategy choice of the weak countries can be further discussed.

Strategic Dynamic Game between strong and weak countries with asymmetric parameters

Strategy is an important element of asymmetry of relations. Weak countries, in particular, will pay more attention to the preferences of strong countries and then adjust their strategies. Similarly, strategy is a fundamental element in game theory, in which players choose strategies to avoid the risk of failure and achieve the payoff equilibrium that benefits both or more parties. This makes it possible to combine asymmetry of relations with matrix modelling in game theory. In the asymmetric geographical pattern, weak countries often switch flexibly between cooperation and confrontation, which comes from the policies adopted by strong countries towards them. When the confidence posture and antagonism preference of strong countries are identified by weak countries, the latter must have different strategy choices. Therefore, the game with asymmetric parameters can simulate the payment results of strong and weak countries under different strategy combinations, and then restore the dynamic strategy process of the two countries.

3.1 The breakthrough significance of introducing asymmetric mathematical parameters

Game is a modelling process involving two or more participants, who may have a common goal or conflict in strategic preference. The payoff of a game can be either a gain or a loss, so the game matrix provides a dynamic process for understanding the interaction between countries (Terry 1988). In classic game theories such as "Prisoner's Dilemma", there is an implicit assumption that players have equal strengths. Players make strategic choices in a fair environment and pursue the greatest gains. The matrix results only reflect the payoff gap behind different strategies. However, in a real geopolitical game, the asymmetry of the relationship between countries may also have an effect on the payoff result of the game. Therefore, in order to fit the real interaction between countries to the greatest extent, it is necessary to introduce the asymmetric parameters of the power gap between countries, so as to construct a game model in which both strategies and payoff can be dynamically changed. The asymmetric game matrix model tries to extract that weak countries will not deviate from the equilibrium track for a long time under rational decision-making, because weak countries cannot bear the cost accumulated due to confrontation, so as to obtain the reference optimal solution: if the two countries choose the cooperation strategy at the same time, it will produce a win-win situation.

The concept of asymmetric relations focuses on the power gap leading to the disparity of diplomatic attention of the two countries. However, there are still blank spot between the two countries from the difference in diplomatic attention to the heterogeneity of strategies adoption. This paper further constructs a model of the dynamic strategy between strong and weak countries from the perspective of game theory. Assume that the power share of weak countries in strong countries is w ($0 < w < 1$), and that of strong countries to weak countries is $(1-w > 1)$ (Mesterton-Gibbons 1992; Gu 2018). Weak and strong countries have two strategic choices, cooperation and confrontation, respectively. In the ideal state without including the concept of asymmetric relations, define the common benefit of cooperation between country A and country B as B , and the cost of confrontation as C , where $C > 0$, and the game matrix between the two countries is shown below.

		Country B (weak)	
		Confrontation	Cooperation
Country A (strong)	Confrontation	$(-C/2, -C/2)$	$(-C, B/2-C)$
	Cooperation	$(B/2-C, -C)$	$(B/2, B/2)$

Table 2: The game matrix under the conditions of power symmetry

It can be found that when country A and country B choose cooperation at the same time, the two countries can evenly distribute the common benefits of cooperation under the condition of symmetric strength, and the payoff set is $(B/2, B/2)$. However, if the cooperation turns into a confrontation, the two countries must share the external cost $-c$, and the payoff set of country A and country B is $(-C / 2, -C/2)$ (Maschler et al. 2013). The strategic choice of country A and country B is not static, but a process of dynamic change. If country B chooses a confrontational strategy, it cannot obtain the benefits of cooperation but must bear the cost of investing resources in confrontation $(- C)$. Country A can consolidate the benefits of cooperation, but it has to bear the negative externalities brought about by the confrontation of country B. At this time, the payment set of the two countries is $(-C, B/2-C)$. Now introduce the concept of asymmetric relations into the game model. The power share of country A and country B reflects the asymmetry of the relations between the two countries, so the payoff matrix after the strategy selection will also reflect this asymmetry. After introducing asymmetric parameters, the game matrix of the two countries can be written as follows:

		Country B (weak)	
		Confrontation	Cooperation
Country A (strong)	Confrontation	$(-C/4(1-w), -C/4w)$	$(-C/4(1-w), ((B/2-C)/4w)$
	Cooperation	$((B/2-C)/4(1-w), -C/4w)$	$(B/4(1-w), B/4w)$

Table3: The game matrix under the conditions of power asymmetry

By analysing the payoff matrix in Table 2, it can be found that when country A and country B choose the cooperation strategy at the same time, weak country B may adopt the behaviour of free ride under asymmetric conditions since its strength is relatively weak ($0 < w < 1$). The benefit obtained by weak country B at this time is $B/4w$. Due to the superior strength, country A needs to pay more economic and political resources in the cooperation, such as investment, infrastructure and institutional framework. In this case, the benefit obtained by country A is $B/4(1-w)$. When the two countries choose the strategy of confrontation at the same time, the cost of weak country B is $-C / 4W$. Since it cannot take advantage in the confrontation, country B will pay too much attention to the asymmetry of bilateral relations and choose the strategy of hedging by big power outside the region to improve its own strength in the confrontation with country A. Country A bears less external costs in the confrontation, so it will examine the confrontation with country B with a confident and relaxed perception, but it will closely watch the possible hedging and extraterritorial alliance behaviours of country B. As country A is superior in strength, it may adopt a more modest policy to prevent country B from forming a power-balanced alliance with third country C through economic wooing and political coordination. At this point, if country B continues to implement the strategy of confrontation, it will have to bear huge costs. At this time, if country B continues to implement the strategy of confrontation, it will have to bear huge costs. With more economic and military resources, the cost of country A's confrontation strategy is less than the cost of country B's confrontation strategy, that is $-C/4(1-w) < -C/4w$, which constitutes the theoretical source of country B's excessive attention to the diplomatic trends of country A, because country B is worried that country A may infringe its diplomatic autonomy at any time without having to bear too much losses. Therefore, due to the disadvantage of its strength, the weak country B will not choose a confrontation strategy with country A for a long time out of reason, because this will harm country B's strategic interests. Country B will implement cooperative and compliant strategies under an asymmetrical interaction framework to share the economic and political benefits given by country A.

Case Study: The Hai Yang Shi You 981 crisis in 2014

This article selects the Sino-Vietnamese " Hai Yang Shi You 981" crisis as the case to verify the composition of Vietnam's diplomatic strategy towards China under the framework of an asymmetric game. The Haiyang Shiyou-981 crisis that occurred in 2014 unfolded in a Month-Day time series, which can accurately capture the dynamic changes in Vietnam's diplomatic strategy. Starting May 2, 2014, China deployed the deep-water rig platform known as HYSY-981 in the waters near the southwest of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea to

conduct oil and gas extraction operations, which triggering strong protests from Hanoi. Vietnam has condemned China's drilling operations within its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in the East China Sea under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This article collects a total of 16 documents related to the HYSY-981 crisis from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam, including official statements, comments on the crisis, ministerial interviews, and press releases, and compiles them into a corpus. The corpus is unstructured data on Vietnamese attitudes and diplomatic strategies towards Chinese behaviour. Then, this article conducts the operational code (OCA) and leadership trait (LTA) analysis on the corpus with the help of Profile Plus software. At the same time, the author also uses the R software to perform visual analysis on the corpus, and assisted reading of the original text to improve the credibility of discourse analysis. The main findings are as follows:

The article first conducts the Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) on the corpus, and the results are shown in Table 1 (Walker 2003). It can be found that the observed value of low distrust (LD) is much higher than that of high distrust (HD) (301>29). Vietnam believes that the HYSY-981 crisis can be solved by building a relationship of trust with China, including the establishment of a communication mechanism. Concept Complexity (CC) and Task scores (TASK) are greater than 0.5. Documents issued by the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such as statements, ministerial interviews, and press announcements, use a lot of multi-dimensional vocabulary, such as *trends*, *possibility*, rather than single-dimensional vocabulary, such as *absolute*, *unacceptable*, thus increasing the space for Vietnam to seek peaceful cooperation to resolve the crisis. Vietnam also believes that it needs to be aware of the interaction with China and pay attention to China's feelings, so as to achieve a task-oriented settlement of disputes by proposing negotiations and stating position. Belief in One's Own Ability to Control Events (BACE=0.5) and Need for Power and Influence (PWR=0.4737 < 0.5) mainly focused on the emotional analysis of verbs in the corpus. Vietnam is confident that it can handle the current crisis with China, but it is trying to use persuasion and negotiation, instead of using power and influence as the tough means to defend its maritime sovereignty.

LTA	LD	HD	CC	TASK	BACE	PWR
Score	301	29	0.5377	0.5291	0.5	0.4737

Table 4: Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) of the Corpus of HYSY-981 crisis

Then, the article conducts Operational Code Analysis (OCA) on the corpus. The coding scheme constructs an indexable score by typologically dividing the direction and intensity of transitive verbs, which can be used to explain decision-makers' political beliefs on political events. The results are shown in Table 2. It can be found that Vietnam does not believe that the crisis is a hostile conflict

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with China in nature ($P1=0.1319 > 0$), but Vietnam still has a pessimistic political attitude towards the event, believing that there may be confrontation with China around the drilling platform ($P1 < 0.25$ and $P2 = -0.0568 < 0$). Hanoi thinks that resolving the crisis through the amicable approach requires a huge effort. Therefore, Vietnam adopts a more flexible strategy, including building cooperative relations with China and strengthening diplomatic coordination with ASEAN, the United States and other major powers ($I1=0.3$, $I2=0.1167$)*. With the help of R software, the author also conducts visualization analysis on the corpus, including generating word clouds and word frequency statistics (Figure 1, Figure 2), and found that there are a large number of words related to *withdraw, sovereignty, law, bilateral, peaceful, and agreement* in the corpus. According to the corpus text, the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly emphasized the sovereignty principle of international law in its statements, requiring China to withdraw the "HYSY -981" drilling platform. At the same time, Vietnam also attaches great importance to the strategic partnership with China and hopes to proceed from the long-term interests of the parties, governments and people of the two countries and reach a bilateral agreement with China based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to manage territorial disputes in the South China Sea, thereby safeguarding the region peace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam 2014, June 18). The strategy adopted by Vietnam in the crisis is multi-dimensional, including resistance and cooperation and has undergone dynamic adjustments. Hanoi's strategy toward China could be divided into two stages according to the timeline:

OCA	P1	P2	I1	I2
Score	0.1318	-0.0568	0.3	0.1167

Table 5: Operational Code Analysis (OCA) of the Corpus of HYSY-981 crisis

The index meaning	The index range
Count of high distrust observations (HD)	Count
Count of low distrust observations (LD)	Count
Conceptual Complexity score (CC)	$1.0 < CC < 1.0$
Task score (TASK)	$1.0 < TASK < 1.0$
Belief in Ability to Control Events score (BACE)	$1.0 < BACE < 1.0$
Need for Power score (PWR)	$1.0 < PWR < 1.0$
Nature of political universe (Hostile/Friendly) (p1)	$-1.0 < P1 < 1.0$
Realization of political values (Pessimism/ Optimism) (p2)	$-1.0 < P2 < 1.0$
Direction of strategy (Conflict/Cooperation) (I1)	$-1.0 < I1 < 1.0$
Intensity of tactics (Conflict/Cooperation) (I2)	$-1.0 < I2 < 1.0^*$

Table 6: The index meaning and range

* The Operational Code Analysis (OCA) is finely divided between -1.0 and +1.0, including -0.25, -0.5, +0.25 and +0.5, for a more detailed measure of how positive and negative cognition and strategy are.



Figure 1: Word cloud analysis of the corpus

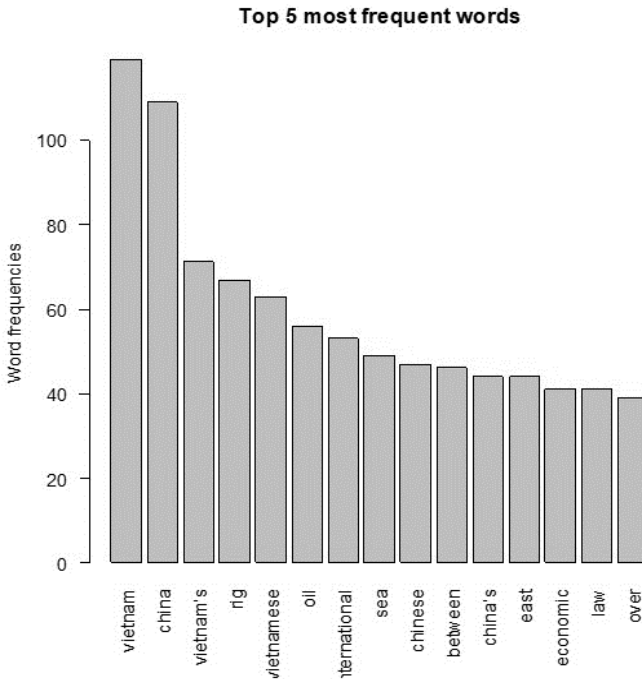


Figure 2: Word frequency analysis of the corpus

4.1 Tentative resistance (From May 2, 2014 to July 1, 2014)

A. Vietnam expresses diplomatic protest

At the beginning of the crisis on May 2, 2014, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam protested against China's deployment of HYSY-981 drilling platform. Vietnam reiterated that China's oil and gas exploration infringed its exclusive economic zone, violated international rules such as the United Nations Law of the Sea and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC), and damaged relations between the two countries. China acted confidently in the early stages of the crisis for its power advantage, manifested in the military and fishing fleet numbers in the South China Sea. In early May 2014, China has sent naval frigates and a large number of Fishing boats from Guangdong province to drive away Vietnamese coast guard vessels and fishing boats, and fired water cannons at Vietnamese fishery supervision personnel to prevent Vietnamese maritime law enforcement forces from surrounding, harassing and damaging the drilling platform. Vietnam has also countered China's actions through diplomatic channels, defending its maritime sovereignty through peaceful means such as taking pictures, collecting evidence and inviting international journalists to investigate (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of VietNam 2016, April 15).

B. Using multilateral diplomatic mechanism

In mid-May 2014, Vietnam adopted a hedging strategy against China with the help of multilateral diplomatic mechanism. In the ASEAN-U.S. Dialogue, Vietnam joined other Southeast Asian foreign ministers to demand that China stop violating Vietnam's sovereignty and refrain from taking actions that undermine regional peace and stability. Vietnam also seeks to achieve a peaceful solution to the HYSY-981 crisis with China through the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of VietNam 2014, May 19).

C. Attracting the United States to balance China's behaviour

Vietnam and the United States discussed issues in their bilateral relations in July 2014. Hanoi has improved coordination with the United States on the South China Sea issue by joining the Non-Proliferation Security Initiative (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of VietNam 2014, July 1). The United States expressed its support for Vietnam and is deeply concerned about the escalation of tensions that directly affect regional peace, maritime security and stability in the statement of foreign ministers with ASEAN. The United States opposes the threat of the use of force to unilaterally change the status quo. Washington has called on

China and Vietnam to negotiate a more binding code of conduct considering the importance of the South China Sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of VietNam 2014, June 17).

4.2. Buffering strategy (June 18, 2014-July 15, 2014)

D. Developing relations with the Chinese Communist Party and buffering tensions between the two countries

Along with the diplomatic protest over China's deployment of the rig, Hanoi is also using party diplomacy to send conciliatory signals to Beijing. Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh met with Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi on June 18, 2014, reiterating that the Communist Party, the Government and the people of Vietnam attach great importance to strengthening good-neighbourly and friendly cooperation with China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam 2014, June 18). Pham Binh Minh required China to withdraw drilling rigs and vessels from Vietnamese waters and refrain from actions that could trigger conflicts in the interests of relations between the two countries and ruling parties. Vietnam's foreign ministry has been in contact with China more than 30 times during the crisis, hoping to negotiate differences under the framework of international law, expand bilateral and local exchanges, and consolidate the strategic partnership between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam 2014, July 15).

5. The logic behind Vietnam's diplomatic strategy

Vietnam's mutual-socialization strategy forging bonds with China

Mutual-socialization provides an analytical perspective for understanding Vietnam's cooperative strategy towards China. Mutual-socialization is a process of shaping common identity, making the target country obey and conform to collective norms and values (You 2021). The activities of mutual-socialization include cultivating common norms and values (Wentworth 1980). Norms diffuse and internalize into the identity of the target country in the process of socialization, thereby forming a framework for relationship stability (Xiaoyu 2012). Vietnam seeks to build the normative bond with China so as to transform China's power advantage into mutually adaptive orbits. Government dialogue is regarded by Vietnam as a mutual-socialization strategy for regulating relations

with China, and Hanoi hopes that high-level visits will establish acceptable guiding principles for bilateral relations, so as to set a timetable and norms for negotiations in specific areas with Beijing. Vietnam's mutual-socialization strategy emphasizes common interests, especially promoting joint actions with China, thereby promoting the institutionalization of maritime security (Thayer 2011). Vietnam and China began conducting joint patrols in overlapping areas of the Beibu Gulf in April 2006, including holding search-and-rescue exercises. By 2021, the two sides have conducted 31 joint patrols (Peng & Ngeow, 2022).

Party diplomacy buffers and insulates differences with China

In addition to the government-to-government channel, cultivating and strengthening the relations between the two ruling parties could maintain the unity of the two socialist countries and was supported by Vietnam. Party-to-party relations play an important role in the foreign affairs of socialist countries. Compared with formal state-to-state interactions, party diplomacy is more flexible, subject to fewer diplomatic rules and etiquette constraints, making it easier for small countries to promote the "emotional offensive" against big countries. Vietnam and China are both socialist countries, and the communist party plays an important role in the political and economic affairs of the country. The exchanges between the ruling parties reflect the ideological connection between China and Vietnam. Vietnam sees ideological ties as preventing the worst scenarios with China, isolating and buffering conflict. Despite its power disadvantage, Hanoi uses party ties and revolutionary friendship to create a common political identity with China (Le 2013). When dealing with disputes over islands and reefs in the South China Sea, Vietnam will flexibly put political ideology above its national interests and send a signal to China through exchange of ruling party visits, in order to encourage the latter to put the common interests of ideology at the forefront of the relationship between the two countries, in order to get rid of the disadvantaged position of strength competition. When there is a crisis in the relations between the two countries, Vietnam will increase the frequency of high-level visits between the two communist parties, send special envoys to deliver messages to Chinese Communist Party, and promote the improvement of bilateral relations through the warming of the relations between the ruling party. The International Department of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party actively maintains communication with the International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and has extensively established contacts with Chinese politicians, experts and scholars. This kind of multi-dimensional "party diplomacy" provides a

mechanism and means for Vietnam to dialogue with China on an equal basis (Shambaugh 2007).

"Great power invitation" hedges China's power advantage

Great Power invitation is essentially a Vietnamese version of hedging. Hedging in the diplomatic arena is defined as a purposeful act in which Vietnam places policy bets on countries designed to offset China's power advantage, in order to secure Hanoi's long-term interests. Vietnam's hedging strategy reflects the triangular interaction of China, Vietnam, and the United States. Hanoi's approach to handling the asymmetric relations with China is based on "preparing for the best and calculating for the worst", with inviting other powers to engage in the South China Sea issue (Goh 2006). As the weaker party, Vietnam would judge China's actions as unduly threatening and look to the US and ASEAN partners for security guarantees. At the system level, Vietnam's hedging strategy is driven by balancing China's power and influence, promoting Hanoi's economic and security interaction with regional sub-powers, such as Japan and India, and using the relationship between one major power as a lever to improve relations with another (Kuik 2008). Vietnam avoids following a country unilaterally when it clearly harms national interests (Goh 2005). As a country with relatively little bargaining power, Hanoi sees developing relations with third countries could not only promote economic pragmatism and get rid of its huge trade deficit with China, but also build stronger strategic coordination with powers outside the region through direct engagement. Vietnam hopes to expand military cooperation with the United States to contain China's military superiority and invite the United States to involved deeply in the South China Sea affairs.*

Conclusion

Vietnam's diplomatic strategy towards China emphasizes the use of external power, including supporting the dominant position of the United States in Southeast Asia, and at the same time attract as many countries as possible, including Japan and Russia, to the South China Sea in the virtue of multilateral framework of ASEAN, so that the interests of these countries are entangled with each other. Vietnam tries to play the role of "hedging rider" among the great

* On June 23, 2012, the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation invited international bids for oil and gas lots within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (contested by China with its U-shaped, nine-dash line claim), which is the area of joint Vietnam-Russian oil and gas exploration projects. See: PetroVietnam protests Chinese firm's oil building. TuoiTreNews, June 28, 2012.

powers, thereby balancing China's power. This comprehensive approach enables Vietnam to enhance its ability to manage the regional order in the South China Sea, while incorporating China into a more complex balance of influence framework at the regional level, using rules and institutions to reshape common identity with China. The binding of national interests between extraterritorial powers and Vietnam may indeed make up for or even offset China's asymmetric power, but Vietnam may still face the challenge of being squeezed or even marginalized by large powers, especially Hanoi may be at the forefront of Sino-US competition. Therefore, Vietnam's current South China Sea policy is not adhered to the United States or take sides with the US-Japan alliance. On the contrary, Vietnam maintains close relations with China in the economic, trade and political fields through ruling party diplomacy.

China and Vietnam are both socialist countries, and their divergence in the South China Sea should not affect the overall situation of bilateral cooperation. In the face of Vietnam, which has relatively weak power, China needs to remain strategic prudence, proactively regulate the situation in the South China Sea, avoid impatience and bullying, and maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea as a responsible major power. China and Vietnam can strengthen economic interaction through regional economic cooperation frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the RCEP. At the same time, China also needs to improve military transparency, convey the image of peace and cooperation through amicable media narrative, abide by the South China Sea behavioural rules, and win the understanding of ASEAN member states for the defence of its core interests in the South China Sea. The South China Sea involves the sovereignty and development interests of China and Vietnam. Only with mutual trust and cooperation between the two countries can maritime disputes be resolved in an atmosphere of equal interactions.

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