

Vietnam and China

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Abstract

In its culture, revolutionary experience, and postrevolutionary efforts of reform, no country is more similar to Vietnam than is China. Likewise, no country is more similar to China than is Vietnam. The similarity is hardly surprising, given four thousand years of familiarity between the two. Despite similarity and familiarity, the relationship between Vietnam and China has been characterized by misunderstandings and misjudgments. In the past fifty years, the relationship has ranged from friendship “as close as lips and teeth” to bitter hostility. A period of normalization began in 1991, but since the relationship has never been “normal” in the past, we must examine the stability and content of normalization.

The root of the misunderstandings between Vietnam and China lies in the great disparity in size and capacity. By itself, Vietnam is never a threat to China, although it is often seen as a stubborn obstacle. From Vietnam’s perspective, however, China is, in a sense, always a threat, because China has the capacity and location to overwhelm Vietnam’s defenses, regardless of whether it intends to do so. Even in economic relations, China’s vast scale means that Vietnam is less important to China as a partner, while China is extremely important to Vietnam both as an opportunity and as a threat to domestic production. Given the necessary asymmetry of the relationship, there are inevitable friction, tensions and misunderstandings.

Is lasting normalization possible under these circumstances? It would be too optimistic to expect that the relationship will see a gradual disappearance of differences. Disparities will continue to produce a moving frontier of petty crises that will have to be negotiated by the leaderships of both countries. Nevertheless, the basic framework of normalization has been stable for nine years and is likely to remain so for three reasons. First, both sides were disappointed by the results of hostility in the 1980s. China could not force Vietnam to be submissive, and Vietnam could not become prosperous as an isolated armed camp. Secondly, the benefits of normalization have outweighed the disadvantages. The economies of both countries have improved, especially in the border areas. Thirdly, normalization between Vietnam and China is not a “special” policy for either country, but rather part of general policies of improved relations based on economic openness with the region and with the rest of the world. Even as they confront one another on various specific disagreements, it will be far more convenient for both sides to preserve the framework of normalization.