

Comment on  
Managing Maritime Disputes with China in the South China Sea: Vietnam's Approaches  
By Tran Thi Bich

This paper has a lot going for it. It is generally well written, well researched and well organized. An ambitious paper, it offers a comprehensive elaboration of what Vietnam's so-called hedging strategy has been and how it has played out, in its different and shifting configurations, since the end of the Cold War to the present. It highlights the different drivers, both domestic and external, that have shaped Vietnam's foreign policy. The author is to be commended for this valuable effort.

My specific comments are as follows. Firstly, the paper lacks clarity over what precisely it wants to accomplish. Entitled "Managing Maritime Disputes with China in the South China Sea: Vietnam's Approaches," the paper seems less focused on that stated topic than on wanting to discuss Vietnam's foreign policy more generally. To be sure, China figure prominently in the author's story, and in that regard, the South China Sea (SCS) disputes Vietnam has with China are mentioned as well. But for the most part, the paper doesn't focus on Vietnam's SCS policy vis-à-vis China as much as how the various components of Hanoi's hedging strategy figure in its foreign policy toward China more generally. Indeed, I found surprising that for a paper purporting to discuss the Vietnam's management of maritime disputes with China, the Spratlys and Paracels, the contested territories in question, merited only a single mention in the entire paper, and then only in a passing sentence on page 3. Another case in point is the author's discussion of the first stage, 1991-2000, where the focus was on Vietnam's economic engagement – the hedging component that took center stage during the 1990s, according to the author – with China. Here, the SCS was only mentioned once in the context of ASEAN's and China's formulation of the DOC. As such, the author may wish to consider retitling the paper along the lines of "Vietnam's China Policy in the Post-Cold War Era: The Essence of Hedging," or something like that.

Secondly, the paper seems to lack a central or overarching "puzzle." There isn't a research question driving the research here, not least one that's explicitly stated. That said, since the author's apparent intent is to unpack hedging as understood and implemented by Vietnam in its bilateral relationship with China, then presumably the puzzle here could be the incommensurability of Vietnam's foreign policy choices with the expectations of Realist theory, etc. Alternatively, is there something about Vietnam's hedging behavior which the existing hedging literature failed to anticipate? If so, the paper's aim could be to make a new theoretical contribution to the current understanding of hedging.

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