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Vietnamese Nationalism: Old Slogans, New Demands

Abstract. Vietnamese nationalism emerged from the struggle for national liberation. This is closely linked to the mythologisation of its leader, Ho Chi Minh, who became a key figure in Vietnamese nationalism, symbolising the country's national unity and independence. The maturation of Asian nationalisms during the colonial period and the unification around strong leadership are common traits in many Asian states. However, a distinctive feature of Vietnamese nationalism is its anti-Chinese sentiment. Despite Vietnam's historical adaptation of Chinese models beneficial for its development and survival, it has always emphasised independence in the process of absorption. This stance can be described as *adaptive autonomy* combined with a significant degree of pragmatism. Pragmatism and the ability to capitalise on historical moments have both facilitated the achievement of national goals and continue to legitimise the ruling authorities.

This article also explores modern nationalism, shaped by social media, which fosters new and often radical attitudes among the Vietnamese. This forces the authorities to manage anti-Chinese sentiment so as to prevent it from spiralling out of control. Furthermore, in the context of increasing regional rivalry in Asia, Vietnamese nationalism is being utilised in foreign policy to strengthen the country's position in relations with China, particularly regarding disputed areas in the South China Sea.

Keywords: Vietnam, nationalism, Vietnamese diplomacy, relations with China, Ho Chi Minh



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Wietnamski nacjonalizm. Stare hasła, nowe żądania

Streszczenie. Wietnamski nacjonalizm wyłonił się z walki o wyzwolenie narodowe. Jest on ściśle związany z mitologizacją jego przywódcy, Hồ Chí Minha, który stał się kluczową postacią wietnamskiego nacjonalizmu, symbolizując jedność narodową i niepodległość kraju. Do wspólnych cech wielu państw azjatyckich należą dojrzwienie nacjonalizmów w okresie kolonialnym oraz jednoczenie się wokół silnego przywództwa. Wyróżniającą cechą nacjonalizmu wietnamskiego jest jednak jego antychiński charakter. Mimo że Wietnam w swojej historii przyswajał chińskie wzorce, które okazały się korzystne dla jego rozwoju i przetrwania, zawsze podkreślał niezależność w procesie ich adaptacji. Postawę tę można określić jako adaptacyjną autonomię połączoną ze znacznym stopniem pragmatyzmu. Pragmatyzm oraz umiejętność wykorzystania przełomowych momentów historycznych ułatwiły realizację celów narodowych i nadal legitymizują władzę.

Artykuł omawia również współczesny nacjonalizm, kształtowany przez media społecznościowe, które sprzyjają powstawaniu nowych, często radykalnych postaw wśród Wietnamczyków. Zmusza to władze do kontrolowania nastrojów antychińskich, aby zapobiec ich wymknieniu się spod kontroli. Ponadto, w kontekście rosnącej rywalizacji regionalnej w Azji, wietnamski nacjonalizm wykorzystywany jest w polityce zagranicznej do wzmacniania pozycji kraju w relacjach z Chinami, szczególnie w odniesieniu do spornych obszarów na Morzu Południowochińskim.

Słowa kluczowe: Wietnam, nacjonalizm, wietnamska dyplomacja, relacje z Chinami, Ho Chi Minh

Introduction

Vietnamese nationalism has played a central role in shaping the country's identity, politics, and foreign relations. Unlike other nationalisms in Asia, Vietnam's nationalism is characterised by both deep anti-Chinese sentiment and pragmatic adaptation of foreign influences. In recent years, this nationalism has evolved further, fuelled by social media, economic modernisation, and geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea region. In order to discuss the aforementioned assessments, the paper answers the following questions: How can Vietnamese nationalism be described? What role had it played in the past, and what role does it play today in the country's modernisation process? What values does it refer to? Is it possible to identify specific characteristics of Vietnamese nationalism when the very definition of nationalism is ambiguous?

In his article on Asian nationalism, Adam Jelonek notes that defining nationalism is problematic due to geographical, historical, social, and cultural differences. Applying research on nationalism and the emergence of modern nation-states in Europe to the situation in East and Southeast Asia can be

misleading. Even the attempt to create a single model of nationalism for East Asia is flawed due to the significant differences in nation-building processes (Jelonek, 2011: 10). This ambiguity arises from the numerous theoretical approaches to nation-building. One of these is the ethnosymbolic paradigm, represented by Anthony D. Smith. In his book *Nationalism*, like Jelonek, Smith emphasises the heterogeneity of nationalism and its changing nature depending on historical, social, and contextual factors.

Taking into account the methodological limitations mentioned above, and following Smith, nationalism can be defined as follows: “Nationalism is an ideological movement aimed at attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population deemed to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’” (Smith, 2007: 21). Smith identifies key elements contributing to the emergence and strengthening of national unity, including symbols such as tradition, language, religion, and mythology. He introduces the concept of cultural nationalism and, more broadly, cultural identity (Smith, 2007: 99). While Smith acknowledges nationalism as a doctrine or ideology, he further asserts that “nationalism is much more than just a political ideology; it is also a form of culture and ‘religion’” (Smith, 2007: 51–52). Smith also highlights that certain aspects of nationalism serve as a substitute for political religion, portraying the nation as unique, extraordinary, and superior, regardless of region. He cites examples from India, the USA, and Japan. This includes the near-religious reverence for leaders of national liberation or nationalist movements in newly established states. Smith lists Nehru and Sukarno as examples. In this article, the focus will be on the mythologisation of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam.

Certain theoretical assumptions from Smith’s work will be used to support the research hypothesis that a distinguishing feature of Vietnamese nationalism is its anti-Chinese sentiment. This is despite Vietnam’s historical adoption of useful Chinese models for its development and survival. However, Vietnam has always emphasised independence in its absorption of these influences. This stance can be described as ‘adaptive autonomy’ combined with a strong dose of pragmatism.

Discussions on nationalism often touch upon another related issue, namely that nationalism can be perceived both positively and negatively. On the one hand, it fosters national unity, cooperation towards common goals, harmony, and consensus. This form of nationalism is often equated with patriotism, i.e. love for one’s country, nation, and history. However, nationalism can also have a darker side, generating xenophobia and conflicts between competing national minorities with differing cultures, religions, and traditions. It can also fuel political rivalries and power struggles.

In the literature on the subject, I have encountered both admiration for Vietnamese nationalist movements and scepticism regarding the negative aspects of nationalism. This has sometimes led to a reluctance to use the term *nationalism* in favour of *patriotism*, *love of the homeland*, or *national liberation ideas*.

This study employs a historical and contextual analysis to examine the evolution of Vietnamese nationalism, its defining characteristics, and its role in contemporary political and diplomatic strategies. By analysing primary and secondary sources, including documents, historical texts, and academic literature, the paper contextualises nationalism within Vietnam's broader sociopolitical development. The research is grounded in historical inquiry, tracing nationalism from its colonial-era emergence to its current manifestations in state ideology and foreign policy. Additionally, contextualisation is used to interpret key political decisions, diplomatic shifts, and ideological narratives in the light of Vietnam's unique geopolitical position. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of how nationalism has been shaped by historical experiences while continuously adapting to modern challenges, particularly against the backdrop of Vietnam's relations with China.

During study trips to Vietnam (Hanoi) and other expert centres in Southeast Asia (2023–2024), including ISIS in Singapore, informal interviews were conducted on ideological dependencies, trust issues, and relations with China, which reinforce traditional source analysis.

A heuristic approach is employed to synthesise multiple perspectives, combining elements of nationalism theory with empirical case studies, including Vietnam's responses to China's political and economic influence. This multi-method approach not only captures the continuity and transformation of Vietnamese nationalism but also provides insight into how it functions as both a domestic unifying force and a foreign policy tool in Vietnam's regional strategy.

Asian nationalism

When analysing Asian nationalism, it is important to highlight the differences between European and Asian nationalism, stemming from the fact that the formation of modern nations in Asia coincided with the period of colonial conquests. An analysis of the works of theorists dealing with Asian nationalism – including Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, and Prasenjit Duara – shows that colonialism had had the greatest impact on the content of nationalism in this area. The second equally important factor was the modernisation processes that emerged in response to Western colonialism.

One of the most well-known and frequently cited scholars analysing Asian nationalism is the Indian researcher Partha Chatterjee. As he states, “My argument is that, due to the way the history of our modernity intertwines with the history of colonialism, we have never been able to believe in the existence of a universal domain of free discourse, unbound by differences of race or nationality. Somehow, from the very beginning, we had a cautious suspicion that, given the

close collaboration between modern knowledge and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; we would never be taken seriously as its authors. For this very reason, for over a hundred years, we have tried to avert our gaze from this chimera of universal modernity and to clear a space where we ourselves could become the creators of our own modernity” (Chatterjee, 1997: 14). Chatterjee emphasised the importance of creating one’s own vision of modernity by constructing a negative identity in relation to universal or Western modernity.

Benedict Anderson invokes the concept of imagined community in his study of Asian nationalism and explains that it is imagined because the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each of them lives the image of their communion (Anderson, 2006: 6). However, this imagined community of the nation also has certain characteristics, such as the creation of boundaries in the form of national borders, culture, and religion, as well as sovereignty, because nations arose as a response to religious monarchies and empires – and community, because despite all their differences, nations are perceived as a unity. Anderson, like other theorists of Asian nationalism, writes about the emergence of this idea in opposition to European colonialism, but at the same time emphasises that it was the colonisers who, through their actions – namely by creating bureaucracy, maps, education, and official languages – built imagined communities. An example of this is the Vietnamese myth of national community used by Ho Chi Minh in the national liberation struggle, despite all ethnic, cultural, and religious differences.

In his reflections on Asian nationalism, Prasenjit Duara emphasises that since World War II, nationalism in Asia has taken on various forms: revolutionary, anti-communist, participatory, civic, ethnic, religious, and others. These have often been movements for social justice and the reduction of inequality. Nationalism as a grassroots movement is important, because it encourages people to consider the costs of efficient modernisation for people and the environment. Duara draws attention to the “ominous face” of contemporary nationalism – the rise of chauvinistic, populist nationalism. In his view, nationalism today works both to protect from real or perceived predation and to integrate the nation in order to gain a competitive advantage (Duara, 2018: 16).

The theoretical generalisations presented above, characterising Asian nationalism, can be applied to Vietnamese nationalism. First and foremost, its anti-colonial nature, the need to build a community based on traditional values and religions – adopted mainly from China but also from the West – as well as language and the building of strong leadership, and even mythologising the leader in the national liberation struggle are all elements that appear in Vietnam’s nationalist movements starting from the second half of the 19th century.

This raises an important question: did nationalism, as a political and social phenomenon, emerge independently in Asia, based on the way the societies in the

region perceived it, or was it a product of elite intellectual thought? Did it adopt nationalist ideas, or did it create them?

Here, one can observe certain paradoxes. As Rupert Emerson highlights in his analysis, “Every nation that becomes aware of itself inevitably seeks in its past those elements that are characteristic, that led it to independent existence, and that serve to demonstrate its exceptional and distinguished ancestors – whether real or largely mythical. What likely drives a nation forward in its will to exist and strengthen itself is the belief among its members that they share common goals, values, customs, and views, shaped by an immemorial past, of which only they are truly aware and which only they can properly influence in guiding their collective life” (Emerson, 1954: 134).

This is true, but it must also be remembered that nationalist ideas reached Asian countries through colonisers. While searching for elements that contrasted with their national specificity, Asian societies simultaneously sought tools to weaponise nationalism against Western nations – ironically, drawing from Western sources and characteristics.

Summarising the theoretical considerations regarding nationalism – particularly Asian nationalism – it is evident that it is a multidimensional concept. It has evolved over time and in different geographical contexts, but it has always been focused on the nation-state – either as its foundation or as its consequence. Nationalism appeals to strong collective emotions and identity, which can sometimes lead to xenophobic behaviour. It is based on a sense of community, shaped by shared cultural patterns, ideas, values, and religion. Asian nationalisms in particular have emphasised collective responsibility and social unity. In Asian countries, nationalism played the leading role in anti-colonial struggles and is now utilised in modernisation processes aimed at breaking away from dependence on the West as well as achieving economic and social parity with developed nations. Asian nationalism has become a tool for mobilisation in international competition. However, Asian nationalism should not be standardised. Historical and geographical factors have made it complex and diverse. Nevertheless, both Asian and Western nationalisms share a common denominator, namely the pursuit of a strong national identity and independence. The case of Vietnamese nationalism serves as a prime example of this dynamic.

Nationalism in Vietnam

The theoretical generalisations presented above, characterising Asian nationalism, can be applied to Vietnamese nationalism.

In the academic literature, three different perspectives on the emergence of the Vietnamese nation can be identified. One perspective assumes that the Vietnamese

nation, as a modern phenomenon, is a result of Western colonialism and a reaction to it. This view was popular among comparative scholars who broadly described “Asian nationalism” but did not provide specific arguments to illuminate the case of Vietnam. This perspective was noted in the first part of the article. The second perspective considers the Vietnamese nation as an ethnic group rather than a modern phenomenon. Some scholars associate the country’s nationalism with opposition to the Chinese, who ruled the region from 111 BCE to 939 CE and later from 1407 to 1428 (SarDesai, 2005: 45). The third view, one proposed by Tuong Vu, conceptualises Vietnamese nationality not as an ethnic identity but as a communal identity (Tuong Vu, 2007: 179). This last level of conceptualisation can be linked to communist ideology, which is most commonly invoked when characterising Vietnamese nationalism today.

Ideology serves as a key criterion through which Vietnamese scholars classify nationalism. By the late 19th century, nationalism was associated with the spirit of “loyalty and patriotism” under the banner of the anti-colonial and anti-French ‘Can Vương’ movement. However, by the early 20th century, two main ideological currents had emerged: one associated with bourgeois ideology and the other connected with communist ideology. Nationalism rooted in liberal democracy developed significantly in the early 20th century. Its goal was not only to overthrow the monarchy but also to expel French colonialists. The most well-known representatives of these ideas, who were also key figures in Vietnamese nationalism, were Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh.

It is worth noting that for the Vietnamese – who were more influenced by China than the rest of Southeast Asia – figures such as Sun Yat-sen and the Kuomintang, and later Chinese communism, became sources of nationalist and organisational inspiration. This confirms the validity of the assumptions of adaptive autonomy emphasised in the introduction to this article. Phan Boi Chau’s views were more radical, as he believed that military means should be used to end French colonialism. Phan Chau Trinh, on the other hand, differed, being more moderate and representing reformist views.

Despite acknowledging the influence of these thinkers as the founders of Vietnamese nationalism, Vietnamese scholars perceive the thought of Ho Chi Minh as the primary force that built and glorified nationalist ideas. According to Lai Quoc Khanh and Ngo Thi Huyen Tran, “Phan Boi Chau’s nationalism had a racist undertone when he introduced the concept of ‘incompatible heterogeneity.’ Through his entire explanation of ethnic relations, people can see glimpses of a narrow and selfish national spirit” (Lai Quoc Khanh, Ngo Thi Huyen Tran, 2023: 12).

Such remarks carefully constructed a nationalist narrative close to communist ideas and strengthened the position of the communist leader, Ho Chi Minh. Based on the aforementioned positions of Asian nationalism theorists, it should be noted that Vietnam’s national identity was not created solely in the struggle

against colonialism, but also through the adoption and use of various ideas, namely Confucianism, communism, modernism, and local tradition. From the very beginning, as David Marr argues, “Vietnamese nationalism was from the outset torn between a deep respect for tradition and a fervent desire for modernity” (Marr, 1971).

Religious contents were used in nationalistic narratives. Three religious and philosophical systems have played a particularly important role in Vietnamese national identity: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. This clearly indicates that Vietnam was historically connected to and influenced by the Chinese civilisation. Indeed, China did introduce Taoism and Confucianism to Vietnam. Only Buddhism was not associated with the Chinese civilisation, although even in this case it can be said that Chinese Buddhism and Vietnamese Buddhism have a great deal in common. Confucianism played an important role in shaping Vietnamese statehood and political elites. The concept of ‘unity in diversity’, a deeply humanistic slogan, became a core part of the Vietnamese nationalist discourse from the 18th century to the present day (Nguyen Dang Thuc, 1965: 26). During the colonial period, the influence of the Catholic Church increased, along with broader access to the European culture. These processes sparked debates among the Vietnamese elite about the country’s development path, leading to calls for reforms and modernisation. Intellectuals emerged, calling for change and modernisation in all spheres of social life. Therefore, Ho Chi Minh’s nationalist ideas, which he promoted in the national liberation movement, included a desire to draw on both Eastern culture and Western culture. As Ho Chi Minh stated, “Confucianism developed personal ethical education, the religion of Jesus strengthened the spirit of humanitarianism. Marxism reinforced dialectical methods, and Sun Yat-sen’s doctrine promoted policies tailored to the conditions of a given country” (Nguyen Dy Nien, 2008: 50).

This search for common ground between tradition and modernity – between Asian values and newly introduced European influences, including Catholicism – led to the emergence of new Vietnamese sects. The most influential one was the syncretic religion Cao Dai, which can be considered an element of nationalist ideas in Vietnam. Another important religion was Hoa Hao – a modernised, syncretic form of Buddhism, regarded as the most nationalist of Vietnam’s religions. The religious component of Vietnamese nationalism may not be its most significant aspect today, since most Vietnamese are now atheists, but it was instrumental for both nationalists such as Phan Boi Chau and communists such as Ho Chi Minh. Therefore, it should not be ignored.

The academic discourse on Vietnamese nationalism has been well-documented since the 1950s, when nationalism was presented as patriotism, an anti-colonial ideology, or a pursuit of political power. If one analyses the texts of Vietnamese nationalists and the rhetoric of official declarations and speeches, they can identify a set of expressions strongly associated with the Vietnamese nationalist tradition.

Many of these characteristics also define other East Asian nationalisms, especially anti-colonialism.

However, in my view, what distinguishes Vietnamese nationalism – and what serves as the foundation of its national identity – is a combination of two elements: anti-/non-Chineseness and pragmatism. The combination of these two characteristics means that Vietnamese people identify with the cultural heritage of the Sinitic sphere. However, Chinese intellectual traditions have always been filtered through Vietnamese values such as flexibility and practicality. Vietnam does not solely rely on Chinese heritage, nor does it always adopt it unconditionally. Instead, Vietnam selectively adapts what is useful from both Eastern culture and Western culture.

These features are not only characteristic of 20th-century anti-colonial nationalism but are also used today to promote collective political identity – especially after the introduction of the Doi Moi (economic renovation) reforms.

The specificity of Ho Chi Minh's nationalism

These two characteristics – i.e. a critical approach to Chinese influence and pragmatism – distinguish Vietnamese nationalism from others in Southeast Asia. During my study visits to Singapore (September 2024) and Vietnam (September 2023), I had conversations with prominent experts in the ASEAN diplomacy. They emphasised that all nations in the region had built their identity through strong adherence to nationalist ideals (as noted by Dr Evan Laksmana¹). However, what sets the Vietnamese elite apart is their deep knowledge of China, their sensitivity to Chinese influence, and their cautious approach towards China (as highlighted by Professor Wang Gungwu²).

This section examines these elements through the lens of Ho Chi Minh's leadership of Vietnamese communists. Referring to the theoretical framework of nationalism, particularly the ideas of Anthony D. Smith, this article explores Ho Chi Minh as a figure deeply embedded in Vietnamese nationalism – almost to the point of mythology. Ho Chi Minh's activity and ideology reflected both a fear of Chinese domination and pragmatism. His nationalist ideals combined with the communist ideology formed the foundation of the Vietnamese national identity. For Ho, communism provided a path to achieving national liberation goals, patriotism and nationalism were interchangeable concepts, while his messaging

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was straightforward, emotionally compelling, and resonated deeply with ordinary Vietnamese people. When addressing Western leaders, including the United States, Ho Chi Minh's discourse shifted. His approach differed when dealing with the West, adapting his rhetoric to emphasise independence and patriotism over communism. U.S. General Gallagher, when asked about the communist nature of the Viet Minh, responded: "They were clever and effectively created the impression that they were not communists. They emphasised their desire for independence and 'Annamese' patriotism. Their excellent organisation and propaganda techniques, Gallagher noted, bore some marks of Russian influence. However, he believed that the Viet Minh should not be labelled as full-fledged doctrinal communist" (Memorandum of Conversation..., 1946). After Ho Chi Minh's death, Alden Whitman published an article arguing that his ideas were a mixture of nationalism and communism (Whitman, 1969).

Was this opportunism, or pragmatism in Ho Chi Minh's actions and ideology? I interpret it as pragmatism, though assessments of his approach did vary. For some, his strategy was patriotic and in line with national interests, while others believed it had harmed the national liberation movement. The Republic of Vietnam's (South Vietnam) ambassador to the USA, Vu Van Thai, accused Ho Chi Minh and his political faction of subordinating the national liberation struggle to the communist ideology and systematically eliminating alternative paths to independence (Vu Van Thai, 1966: 3–12). Vu Van Thai argued that the nationalist struggle could have been shorter if internal conflicts had not been fuelled by ideological divisions. He recognised Ho Chi Minh's political genius in 1945, but was critical of how Vietnamese nationalism became entangled in the communist doctrine. This political genius was supported by skillful propaganda, which contributed to the creation of a legend, a myth of a Vietnamese nationalist, an important component of the Vietnamese identity. "Ho Chi Minh assured Vietnamese people from all walks of life that their lives and actions mattered. He encouraged both young and old to look beyond their families and villages and see that their nation – Vietnam, their 'homeland' – needed them. This nationalist message was a powerful element of the DRV regime" (Holcombe, 2020: 10).

This raises the question: how did the Vietnamese nationalist rhetoric, which was often anti-Chinese and sceptical of Chinese communist influence, fit into the communist framework? How did Vietnamese leaders convince their people to follow a similar path to China while maintaining a distinct Vietnamese identity? Some even feared that communism could not serve as a solution for national liberation, arguing that: "The communist and pro-Chinese Ho Chi Minh will never change the Vietnamese people's historically hostile attitude toward China" (Tuong Vu, 2007: 185). In the same study, Tuong Vu pointed out that Vietnamese nationalism's greatest strength – its communist character – could also become its weakness, as communists sought a close alliance with China. However, these concerns did not materialise owing to another key trait of Vietnamese nationalism,

namely pragmatism. Ho Chi Minh successfully combined ideological consistency with strategic flexibility.

The pragmatism and subordination of actions to the idea of the decolonisation and unification of the state made Ho Chi Minh choose certain elements of the communist ideology that made it easier for him to reach the Vietnamese and at the same time benefit from the support of the communist movement. Ho often avoided openly endorsing Chinese initiatives (Lacouture, 1968: 247). He frequently used the slogan “Vietnam’s own path”, emphasising that Vietnam was not blindly following either the Soviet Union or China. By maintaining this stance, Ho Chi Minh skillfully navigated the rivalry between the USSR and China, asserting: “Loyalty to Moscow? Loyalty to Beijing? To neither – loyalty belongs purely and simply to Hanoi” (Lacouture, 1968: 259).

It is worth quoting another assessment, namely Ruth Fischer, who draws attention to Ho Chi Minh’s dilemmas related to finding an alternative to the bipolar puzzle. Fisher points out that Ho deliberately emphasised during negotiations with France his agreement to join the French Union, modelled on the British Commonwealth, and adds that he was not anti-French. Fisher believed that joining the French Union could have given Vietnam a certain degree of independence from Moscow, which Ho, a man with such extensive experience in changing political fronts, certainly did not overlook. She adds that there has always been a strong anti-Chinese sentiment among the people of Indochina, because they fear assimilation by their powerful neighbour. In order to preserve their national integrity – Marxists and non-Marxists alike – the Indochinese must distinguish themselves from each other. Among the many types of Asian nationalism, Indochinese nationalism is, in her opinion, one of the most energetic ones (Fisher, 1954: 86–97). Ho Chi Minh was willing to compromise on secondary issues to achieve his ultimate goal, i.e. national unity and independence. From this analysis, one can conclude that Vietnamese nationalism was rooted in Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy but contained a strong nationalist element, and rejected Chinese extremist influences. Vietnam, like China, underwent a cultural revolution, but without book burnings, and with science and educators being respected. Throughout the ideological conflict between China and the USSR in the 1950s and beyond, Ho Chi Minh positioned himself as a mediator, presenting a moderate image to the world. As William Duiker put it: “Like other nationalist groups, the communists primarily sought a solution to the national question. Marxism, like democracy or fascism, was simply a tool in this process” (Duiker, 1976: 17).

The cited fragments of the analysis of Ho Chi Minh’s ideas and some quotes from his speeches demonstrate that Ho Chi Minh’s communism was “nationalist”, and that the only ideas he absorbed were those that aided the national liberation struggle and appealed to the Vietnamese for propaganda purposes. This section also presents other opinions. Finally, we can add those published in the *National Defense* journal (Nguyen Cong Khuong, Nguyen Duc Cuong),

which completely reject the argument that “in essence, Ho Chi Minh’s ideology is nationalism”. The authors assumed that the tactic of emphasising Ho Chi Minh’s nationalism was intended to create a dissonance between Ho Chi Minh’s ideology and Marxism-Leninism, thus undermining the ideological foundations of the Communist Party. I advocate the former position.

Anti-Chinese sentiment in contemporary Vietnamese nationalism

The characteristics of Vietnamese nationalism, discussed in the previous section, have become deeply ingrained in both political activities and the way the reality is perceived. On the one hand, anti-Chinese sentiment has taken various forms and narratives – ranging from blaming China, through criticising China, to conspiracy theories.

The situation in the region at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the intensification of anti-Chinese sentiment. The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops in December 1978 was the direct cause of the Sino-Vietnamese War. During his visit to the USA in January 1979, Deng Xiaoping spoke of a lesson for the “little hegemon.” The Third Plenum of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in December 1978 made the decision to attack. Chinese forces entered Vietnam on 17 February 1979. After three weeks, they were withdrawn. The main objectives of this operation were to quickly capture the border towns of Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Lao Cai, destroying the Vietnamese armed forces and weakening the Vietnamese defence system, as well as destroying the Vietnamese economy in the north of the country (Ostaszewski, 1998: 351). Both sides suffered losses amounting to approximately 50,000 casualties on the Vietnamese side and 20,000 casualties on the Chinese side. The economic and social costs for Vietnam were enormous. The country’s image on the international arena suffered, and anti-Chinese sentiment naturally increased.

Currently, opposition to China in Vietnam is expressed through two main channels, namely protests and debates about alternative interpretations of nationalism. Both these channels pose a serious threat to the legitimacy of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Concurrent with the protests, some Vietnamese intellectuals have begun to question the legitimacy of the Vietnamese Communist Party as the sole ruling party in Vietnam and its construct of communist nationalism.

The Vietnamese government seeks to control these sentiments, sometimes using them as leverage against China, at times tolerating them or even supporting them. On the other hand, both in the past and today, there have been many similarities between Vietnam and China, particularly in terms of their political and economic systems. Certain political experiences have been adapted to meet Vietnam’s needs.

Party diplomacy (talks and agreements at the level of senior party officials) is an important instrument of foreign policy, which helps to calm conflicts. However, it should also be noted that an overly compliant policy by the Vietnamese authorities can generate social resentment and even lead to the delegitimisation of the government, and certainly to dissatisfaction. One example of anti-Chinese sentiment was the protests in Vietnam before the Beijing Olympics, which lasted throughout 2008. Although the Vietnamese authorities pledged to prevent riots during the opening ceremony, brief demonstrations took place in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. These were dispersed by police, but anti-Chinese demonstrations resurfaced (Andělová, Strašáková, 2018: 293).

Fearing an escalation of tensions, the authorities detained bloggers inciting demonstrations, and in 2008, they adopted Decree No. 72, which “prohibits the use of the Internet and online information to oppose SRV [Socialist Republic of Vietnam – M.P.]”. The decree lists other conditions for interference in this sphere of communication, related to sowing hatred and stimulating hostility between nations (Andělová, Strašáková, 2018: 293).

There are currently two major issues in bilateral relations that are fuelling nationalist, anti-China attitudes among the Vietnamese – the fear of China’s economic dominance and China’s assertiveness on the South China Sea issue are both undermining Hanoi’s trust in Beijing. What is new in the actions of Vietnamese nationalists is the increasing use of social media to express opposition to both economic issues and sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos in the South China Sea (Dien Nguyen An Luong, 2021: 10). Vietnamese nationalists are using social media platforms to share anti-Chinese sentiments, mobilise protests, bypass censorship, and publicise demonstrations. Modernisation processes in Vietnam due to anti-Chinese sentiment have intensified.

These actions have led to repeated protests against Chinese interference, such as in 2011, when anti-Chinese protests were held every Sunday in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City for two months, and especially in 2014, when China installed an oil rig in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese people gathered in major cities to call for China’s withdrawal. Many Vietnamese Internet users called on Hanoi to unite with other Southeast Asian nations that were intimidated by China and to resist its aggression by force, referring to the country’s victorious past.

Although it appeared to be a spontaneous display of patriotism, it was quietly supported by the Vietnamese authorities, who allowed uncensored public comments on news outlets and social media. The Vietnamese government, aware of the benefits and problems associated with nationalism, took a dual approach to nationalism and the South China Sea. On the one hand, the state allowed ongoing nationalist discourse on social media and criticism of Chinese maritime activities in official news outlets. On the other hand, Vietnam’s official response to increasing Chinese interference has been limited since 2014.

The main objective of this adjustment in the authorities' actions was to prevent criticism of China and anti-Chinese sentiment from getting out of control and influencing Vietnam's foreign policy. Hence the 2016 Cybersecurity Law, which, as experts emphasise, gives the government *carte blanche* to monitor, censor, and even punish those who participate in the debate (Dien Nguyen An Luong, 2021). While the state occasionally responded to online nationalism in the 2000s and in the first half of 2010s, this situation changed after 2016, and the government began to shape the social media landscape for broader propaganda purposes. *Force 47*, established by the Vietnamese People's Army, became a supporting tool (Nguyen The Phuong, 2018).

Research by the Singapore-based ISEAS Institute found that state-affiliated cyber units such as *Force 47* and non-governmental social media accounts influence nationalist discourse (Dien Nguyen An Luong, Nguyen Khac Giang, 2024). Through *Force 47* and other cyber units, state actors have systematically intervened in online discussions on a wide range of issues beyond sovereignty. Three social media platforms are the most popular: in 2024, the most frequently used one was Facebook (with over 70 million people), while the other two included TikTok and YouTube (over 60 million people) (Dien Nguyen An Luong, Nguyen Khac Giang, 2024).

Since these protests in the mid-2010s, there have been no major anti-China protests in Vietnam, except for one instance in 2018 against a planned special economic zone law that would have favoured Chinese investors (Nguyen Nghia, 2023). The aforementioned law, which granted 99-year leases, sparked waves of protests, as people feared that the special zones would be dominated by Chinese investors. The protests even targeted local authorities. For example, in the southeastern province of Binh Thuan, 102 people were detained. Demonstrators also protested in the largest cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and the slogans used at these demonstrations – “No land lease to China, not even for a day” – reflect the nationalist sentiments of most Vietnamese (Vietnam Detains..., 2018).

Anti-China sentiment in the Vietnamese society was also exemplified by the reaction to vaccine diplomacy. After considerable deliberation, the government approved the Sinopharm vaccine, but research by the Singapore-based ISEAS Institute showed that Vietnamese people distrust China. When asked – ‘Which ASEAN dialogue partner has provided the region with the most COVID-19 assistance?’ – the respondents in the ASEAN cited China in over 44% of responses, but only 13.7% of Vietnamese cited their neighbour (The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report: 13).

In the same survey, the following question was asked: “How confident are you that China will ‘do the right thing’ by contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?” In 2021, 26% of the ASEAN respondents said they completely distrusted China, while 61% of the Vietnamese respondents said they distrusted China. If one adds those who had a slight degree of trust, it

would essentially show that no one in Vietnam trusts the Chinese, or their trust is very limited (The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report: 42).

Systematic research conducted by the ISEAS shows that distrust and fear of China's influence in Vietnam persists. In a 2025 study, when asked – “How do you perceive the influence of a specific political and strategic force on your country?” – 68.8% of the ASEAN respondents said they feared China's growing power, while 91.2% of the Vietnamese gave the same answer (The State of Southeast Asia: 2025 Survey Report: 35).

Conclusion

Vietnamese nationalism has played a central role in shaping the country's political identity, historical trajectory, and foreign policy. Unlike many other nationalist movements in Asia that emerged purely as anti-colonial struggles, Vietnamese nationalism is unique in its combination of deep-seated anti-Chinese sentiment and the pragmatic adaptation of external influences. This pragmatism – described in this paper as adaptive autonomy – has allowed Vietnam to selectively adopt useful aspects of Chinese governance, economic strategies, and political structures, while simultaneously maintaining a strong commitment to independence and resisting external domination. This flexibility has been key in sustaining political stability, economic growth, and diplomatic manoeuvrability in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. Historically, leaders such as Ho Chi Minh exemplified this pragmatic nationalism by balancing ideological loyalty to Marxism-Leninism with a firm nationalist agenda that prioritised national unity and sovereignty over rigid ideological adherence. Even today, appeals to Ho Chi Minh's legacy, through propaganda posters and on the Internet, demonstrate the state's sophisticated ability to shape and exploit genuine nationalist sentiments (Dien Nguyen An Luong, Nguyen Khac Giang, 2024).

In contemporary Vietnam, this pragmatic nationalism continues to shape the country's domestic governance and international positioning. While anti-Chinese sentiment remains a driving force in the national discourse, Vietnam does not adopt a purely confrontational stance. Instead, the government engages China strategically – leveraging economic ties, participating in regional trade agreements, and managing maritime disputes through both diplomacy and controlled nationalist rhetoric. At the same time, social media and digital activism have both introduced new dynamics, pushing the government to respond to growing nationalist sentiments while ensuring that they do not spiral out of control. The ability to balance nationalist fervour with diplomatic pragmatism remains a crucial tool in Vietnam's statecraft, helping the country assert sovereignty without jeopardising economic and security interests. As regional tensions continue to rise, the

Vietnamese government's adaptive, pragmatic approach to nationalism will be key in sustaining its political legitimacy, economic ambitions, and geopolitical resilience in the face of evolving global challenges. However, there is a risk that excessive control and management of cyber nationalism, which helps maintain regime stability and effective diplomacy, will cause a loss of the sight of genuine public sentiment and weaken the ability to respond appropriately.

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