In many ways the Sino-Vietnamese relationship is a limit case of China’s relationships with its neighbors. As a durable relationship between settled states, only the Sino-Korean relationship compares, and no other border relationship has seen such wild swings from intimate support to hostility to normalcy in the past sixty years. Moreover, it is a relationship between the two largest remaining communist party-states, a fact that preempts many of the domestic political dimensions of two-level games existing elsewhere in Asia. It is necessary therefore to begin by asking how the concept of rivalry might apply to China and Vietnam and further how the idea of domestic differences influencing foreign policy might be applied to nonparliamentary political contexts. However, the case of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship has more to offer than merely being the outlier of a general comparative framework. The key to understanding the relationship lies in an appreciation of the role that the asymmetry of capacities has played in shaping the perspectives of both sides. The role of asymmetry is enhanced in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, but it has more general implications for the analysis of rivalries as well.

The term “rivalry” derives from the Latin for occupants of opposite sides of a river, and this fits well the long-term relationship of China and Vietnam. To the extent that a river both divides the populations on its banks and at the same time exposes each to the other, the etymology suggests a clear difference in identity and also a constant bilateral concern. However, the philology is considerably more broad and bland than the common usage of rivalry in international relations research.

We can tighten the meaning of “rivalry” somewhat to refer to competitive identities and interests, and with some squeezing and distortion, the general Sino-Vietnamese relationship can fit within this narrower notion. Certainly Vietnam has had an attitude that the promotion of its interests required at least an unofficially critical and suspicious attitude toward China. The converse is far less true. Vietnam simply is not that important to China. Moreover, throughout much of the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations a stable asymmetric relationship has prevailed. Since 1999 the relationship can be characterized as one of normalcy, that is, one in which differences are subordinated to a bilateral framework built on the assumption that mutual interests will outweigh differences.

The most restrictive meaning of rivalry, that of a standing bilateral hostility, is most common in international relations literature and least applicable to the general Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Goertz and Diehl give three criteria for “enduring rivalry,” competitiveness, time, and spatial consistency, and they clarify competitiveness to mean “the threat or actual use of military force.” Thompson presents a more nuanced analysis, distinguishing between territorial and positional (relative status) rivalries, and allowing that frequency of countable conflicts is not a reliable indicator of rivalry. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that rivalries are mutual attitudes between particular states. But Thompson concurs that the other state must be identified as an opponent, not merely as a threat or a source of problems.

China and Vietnam do not appear on the table of enduring rivalries produced by Goertz and Diehl, but the rivalry is found in one advanced by Thompson. While the relationship was hostile in 1979–91, the search for previous major hostility would go back to the Ming occupation of Vietnam in 1407–27. Positional conflicts have been important in the relationship, but they have been over Vietnam’s autonomy (before 1427) and Vietnam’s relationship to Laos and Cambodia (1973–91), not over supremacy in the bilateral relationship. With regard to spatial conflict, territorial disputes in the South China Sea are currently the most sensitive area of the relationship. However, the remaining land border disputes were resolved in principle in 2000 along the lines of the border as it has existed for the past thousand years and was further delineated by the French and the Qing Dynasty in the 1880s. The Spratly Island problem could better be characterized as a dispute rather than a rivalry.
since there are also conflicting territorial claims from the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, and the Chinese claim is shared by Taiwan. The Paracel Islands are the only current bilateral territorial dispute, and they are a small cluster of reefs and flat islands inhabited only by Chinese garrisons.\

We are left, then, with the Sino-Vietnamese hostility of 1979–91, and that, too, is problematic as a rivalry. Clearly each was an enemy to the other. Both the military situation and their mutual diplomatic behavior provide sufficient evidence. But were they competing for the same goal? Vietnam was responding to a clear threat to its national security when it invaded Cambodia, though it is not unreasonable to assume that they wanted to assert permanent control over Indochina. By 1985 Cambodia was secure and Vietnam's position shifted toward accepting military withdrawal. China's principal concern initially was Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union, though as its relations with Gorbachev improved, its hostility toward Vietnam remained.

But there has been and remains a fundamental tension in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The tension would be admitted by both sides, and especially by Vietnam. Vietnam feels vulnerable to China; China is constricted by Vietnam. Even in the current era of increasing economic cooperation and political and military exchanges, the tension is there. But it is not the product of two competitors reaching for the same goal. Rather, it is the product of the asymmetry of capacities between China and Vietnam and the resulting differences of interests, attention, and perception.

The problem of domestic linkages to foreign policy in China and Vietnam is equally problematic, though for different reasons. While it would be a mistake to view the leadership of a party-state as indifferent to public opinion or to particular interests, there is little public spontaneity in politics and virtual uniformity of views in public media. Although there is increasing political diversity in both countries, it is growing from a comparatively tiny base and the basic party-state structures remain intact. Moreover, central control is strongest on sensitive issues such as international relations. That said, there have been differences among the Vietnamese leadership with regard to China, and there are discernable local and ministerial interests that affect China's policies toward Vietnam.

The applicability of the different categories of domestic influence suggested in this project is thus very faint indeed for China and Vietnam. In each there is only one governing party, so factional foreign policy is limited, and its public visibility is even more limited. In a Leninist party there is no legitimate, standing opposition, either within the party or (especially) on the outside. Thus the option of rivalry outbidding is precluded. The ploys of diversification and threat inflation are certainly available to party-state leaderships, though without the presence of independent media and opposition parties the judgment is in the eye of the beholder.

Perhaps the most appropriate category of domestic influences is that of governmental politics, though I will argue that these are more apparent in noncrisis situations. In sum, the party-state leaderships of China and Vietnam are closer to the stereotypical unitary national actor than are parliamentary regimes, even though party-states are not indifferent to domestic concerns.

The cases to be analyzed here are those of the developing Sino-Vietnamese hostility in 1975–79 and the movement from stalemate to normalization in 1986–91. I will argue that the leaderships of both countries were fairly uniform in their opinions of the other side in the former period, while in the latter there was significant diversity within the Vietnamese leadership. Ironically, in the 1970s the dynamics of the relationship were primarily bilateral, while external events were decisive in moving China and Vietnam to normalization. In order to support my argument that there is a more basic asymmetric tension in the relationship I will begin with a general discussion of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

The Context of the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship

The relationship between China and Vietnam has been one of substantive commonality on the one hand and identities defined by differences on the other. In cultural background, rural revolutionary experience, and current governance, there is no country more similar to China than Vietnam, and no country more similar to Vietnam than China. Nevertheless, Vietnam defines itself against China. Vietnam's name means "South Viet," and the northern Viet (Yue in Chinese) are the ancestral population of Guangdong and Guangxi. The name "Vietnam" was bestowed by the Chinese emperor in the early nineteenth century; it was an improvement over the earlier name Annam (Pacified South). Conversely, one might also say that China's name Zhongguo (Central Kingdom) implies a periphery beyond its control.

Vietnam was a part of China for a thousand years, but from the tenth century to the present, the national self-consciousness of Vietnam has been one of being "not-China." Vietnam prides itself on its defensive patriotism, and
the external object of its solidarity has usually been China. Vietnam plays a
much smaller role in China’s consciousness, but a major one in China’s sense
of its own limits. The defeat of the Ming occupation of Vietnam in 1427 was a
watershed in China’s inward turn for the next four hundred years. Vietnam
defined the limits of China to the south, which was the natural direction of
millennia of Chinese expansion.12

Despite the negative dimensions of mutual attitudes, China and Vietnam
managed to have a stable, nonhostile relationship for most of the premodern
period. The relationship was formalized in the tribute system, which provided
for regular visits to Beijing by an official Vietnamese delegation.13 Obeisance
would be made to the Chinese emperor, gifts would be exchanged, and of-
ficial recognition would be given to the Vietnamese ruler. The exchange of
decence on Vietnam’s part for recognition by China of Vietnam’s legitimacy
(implying a guarantee against invasion) was crucial for stabilizing the asym-
metric relationship. China did not have to worry about Vietnam balancing
against it, and Vietnam was free to pursue southern expansion and wars with
its symmetric rivals, Champa, Cambodia, and Siam.

Western imperialism destroyed the framework of traditional East Asian
diplomacy. What emerged was a more fraternal relationship of fellow sufferers
that was particularly intimate for China and Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh taught
rural revolution in China, and the nom de guerre of Truong Chinh, a top
lieutenant, means “Long March.” China was the first state to recognize the
Democratic Republic of Vietnam in January 1950, and it provided unstinting
assistance during its wars with France and the United States. But the very inti-
macy of the relationship created uneasiness. Ironically, Ho Chi Minh’s most
famous slogan, “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom,”
was coined at the time of a mass rally in his honor at Tiananmen in July 1966.14

The illusions of victory that prompted post-1975 hostility will be dis-
cussed in detail below, but it is important to note that with the establish-
ment of normal relations in 1991 asymmetric tensions still persist. The bi-
lateral relationship is buffered by both states’ general policies of reform
and openness. More specifically, Vietnam’s membership in ASEAN since
1975 and China’s rapidly expanding multilateral relationship with ASEAN
since 2002 have provided an encouraging context for cooperation. And
China’s strong performance in the current global economic crisis, as well
as its available cash for investment, has made it more important for all of
its neighbors. Nevertheless, Vietnam’s sensitivities to China have been en-
hanced by feelings of increased dependency.15 The Sino-Vietnamese rela-
tionship is likely to remain stable but not relaxed.

Illusions of Victory, 1976–1979
The collapse of the Thieu regime in January-April 1975, culminating in the
peaceful entry into Saigon of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), provided
an unexpectedly swift conclusion to the colonial era of Southeast Asian his-
tory.16 Although the United States had conceived of its mission in Vietnam
as one of containing communism by supporting a postcolonial Saigon gov-
ernment, its withdrawal in 1973 and the subsequent collapse of the Republic
of Vietnam (South Vietnam) marked the end of external powers and their
dependent regimes in Southeast Asia.

The two happiest countries were Vietnam and China, but they marched
in the same parade with different dreams. For Vietnam, Indochina’s national
liberation struggle had finally succeeded. Now it was free to reformulate its
domestic and foreign policy without the constraints of war. Unified Vietnam
was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the Fourth Party Con-
gress in 1976 set an ambitious program of helping the South catch up with
the socialist North. In foreign policy, the first task was “to endeavor to con-
solidate and strengthen the militant solidarity and relation of cooperation
between our country and all the fraternal socialist countries.” Secretary Le
Duan was careful to include China in his praise, but always after the Soviet
Union and only in the context of international socialist solidarity.

While no other country could be as happy as the Vietnamese about their
reunification, China had many reasons to be pleased. They had been Viet-
nam’s strongest and most faithful supporter since 1950. The weakening and
eventual defeat of the United States in Vietnam was the precondition for
China’s strategic shift from American imperialism as the principal threat to
Soviet socialist imperialism. Moreover, supporting Vietnam during the war
had been a considerable strain on China’s resources, and it was looking for-
tward to a more relaxed and less expensive relationship.

The Vietnamese and Chinese illusions of victory were not consciously op-
oposed to one another, but they contained the tensions from which conflict
quickly emerged. Vietnam mistook the reluctant cooperation of China and
the Soviet Union during the war as socialist internationalism; China forgave
Vietnam’s acceptance of Soviet aid as a necessity of war. Vietnam assumed
that victory strengthened its hand in arguing for aid from China; China figured that the end of the war meant the end of emergency aid. Vietnam assumed that the "common battleground" of Indochina had created a "special relationship" between Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that would last "forever"; China assumed that it could deal separately with independent states.

The deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations to the point of war in February 1979 passed through several stages. The brief postvictory honeymoon lasted only until Le Duan’s confrontational visit to Beijing in September 1975. Mao Zedong made it clear to Duan that the era of unstinting emergency aid was over: "Today you are not the poorest under heaven. We are the poorest." Duan asserted Vietnam’s independent foreign policy and left Beijing early and without holding the customary farewell banquet.

From October 1975 to May 1978, mutual opposition hardened. China’s sanctions against Vietnamese impertinence thinned out the veneer of official solidarity. China rejected new requests for aid and lagged in the implementation of existing agreements. Meanwhile Vietnam removed from its leadership all ethnic Chinese, those who were sympathetic to China, and even members of border-area ethnic minorities. Finally the third phase of open hostility began in May 1978 when China went public in its criticism of Vietnamese expulsion of ethnic Chinese, marking the period of open criticism that lasted until war in February 1979. Vietnam joined COMECON in June 1978 and signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union in November. In December it invaded Cambodia and quickly pushed the Khmer Rouge to the Thai frontier. China responded with the invasion and destruction of Vietnam’s northern provinces in February-March 1979. After the brief but bloody border war, officially a war to defend the border but unofficially an effort to teach Vietnam a “lesson,” there was a cold war with border skirmishes from 1979 until official normalization in November 1991.

Although China and Vietnam were each undergoing profound domestic transformations during the second half of the 1970s, there was no sustained or distinctive pattern of domestic differences related to the Sino-Vietnamese conflict itself. China provides the best demonstration of leadership consensus. The evolution of hostility was uninterrupted by the death of Mao in September 1976, the interregnum of Hua Guofeng from November 1976 to December 1978, and the beginning of the new era of reform and openness under Deng Xiaoping in December 1978. Had Vietnam been an issue within the top leadership, surely these shifts would have affected policy. Indeed, in Cambodia Pol Pot was quite worried that the death of Mao and the fall of leftist would undermine China’s support for the Khmer Rouge, but it did not.

In Vietnam, there was a purge of ethnic Chinese and of people connected with previous cooperation with China, but the purge was more ethnic cleansing than removal of a losing faction. Hanoi’s fears of a “fifth column” of support for China among Vietnam’s ethnic Chinese (Ho) were certainly exaggerated. Most Hoa were in the South, and they were part of the general pattern of urban, petty bourgeois ethnic Chinese throughout Southeast Asia. They had supported Sun Yat Sen and the Guomindang, their relatives had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, and they had little in common with socialist China. In any case, they were outsiders to the politics of unified Vietnam.

Despite the lack of domestic factionalism, an argument could be made that the leaderships of China and Vietnam engaged in threat inflation for domestic purposes. After all, China’s fear of a Soviet-Vietnam alliance turned out to be exaggerated, as was Vietnam’s fear of Chinese domination. Was Deng Xiaoping consolidating his support by creating a foreign war? Was Le Duan trying to distract domestic attention from the failure of the economy after reunification? In both cases, the threat exaggeration hypothesis lacks explanatory value. Deng’s political situation in January 1979 could hardly have been stronger. Almost everyone in China wanted to move beyond the bankruptcy of leftist. The demonstrations at Democracy Wall in December 1978 were in support of reform, not in opposition. True, one dissident, Wei Jingsheng, was convicted of betraying the state secret of the number of casualties in the war, but he was not a typical voice, and he did not represent an antiwar faction. Moreover, the war ran against Deng’s new trend of demilitarized foreign policy, and it did not win friends in Washington.

As for Duan, it can certainly be claimed that his aggressive attitude toward China was counterproductive, but the ultimate triggers for open hostility seemed unavoidable for Vietnam. Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge had become a serious and implacable threat to Vietnam’s national security, and the prospect of vastly increasing Chinese aid to the Khmer Rouge increased the urgency of the Vietnamese invasion of December 1978. Moreover, given the increasing likelihood of hostility with China, it seemed prudent that Vietnam enter into an alliance with the Soviet Union in November 1978. Meanwhile the first tactical adjustments of domestic policy began in 1979, but the strategic adjustment to reform (Doi Moi) was not initiated until 1986, after Le Duan’s
death. It would be difficult to argue that Deng started a war in order to mobilize for reform, while Duan did so in order to prevent it.

Bureaucratic politics had little to do with the war. One might say that the North and the military were its chief movers in Vietnam, but in the late 1970s, after a Northern victory ending thirty years of war, there were no significant government actors. The exception proving the rule was Nguyen Van Linh, Politburo member and Party secretary of Ho Chi Minh City. Linh disagreed with Duan concerning domestic policy and was removed from office in 1982. After Duan's death he became "Vietnam's Gorbachev" and father of Doi Moi. Linh's fate demonstrates that Duan was fully in control throughout the move toward war, and that the pressure to prioritize economic development and openness emerged rather slowly in the 1980s. In the case of China, Deng's bureaucratic ties were comprehensive, and he continued the move toward war at the same time that he ranked the military as the last of the "four modernizations."

In sum, the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1975–79 was grounded in the ambiguity of identities emerging from victory. China thought all was now quiet on the southern front, while Vietnam assumed that it was now a powerful new player that still deserved full support. The contradiction between Vietnam's assertiveness and China's resentment drove the relationship to the point where each could assume the other was an enemy. Neither domestic politics nor third parties played causal roles. Despite the seeming inevitability of conflict, Alexander Woodside was correct in his observation at the time that "since neither side can gain, it is obvious that each side has made catastrophic miscalculations about the other."


Although Vietnam succeeded easily in occupying Cambodia and in installing a compliant government there, the strain of isolation led to serious rethinking of Vietnam's international posture in the second half of the 1980s. In 1990 China also shifted toward normalization, and so in November 1991 Party General Secretary Do Muoi and Chairman of the Council of Ministers Vo Van Kiet made their historic visit to Beijing and signed a joint communiqué reestablishing relations.

As one might expect with an internal change in policy direction, there were more signs of disagreement within the Vietnamese leadership in this phase of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Disagreement was less evident in China. However, for both states events external to the bilateral relationship played key causal roles in inducing policy change.

By 1985 Vietnam had cleared out the last bases of the Khmer Rouge inside Cambodia, and it began the process of turning over security responsibilities to the Cambodian government of Hun Sen. However, an exile government, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) had been formed with bases in Thailand, and it had support from ASEAN, China, and the United States. The groundwork for a prolonged stalemate had thus been laid: Vietnam controlled Cambodia, and opposition to Vietnam created an anti-Vietnam entente that was neither costly nor risky for its members.20

But Vietnam, the apparent winner, was in a weaker position. Its economy was desperately short of consumer goods and modern inputs.20 It depended on the Soviet Union for economic and political support, and Gorbachev's dramatic change of direction in Asia policy announced in his Vladivostok speech of July 28, 1986, was a major shock to the Vietnamese leadership.21 Although Gorbachev maintained support for Vietnam, he was clearly interested in normal relations with China, and the main obstacle from China's point of view was Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.22

When Sihanouk met with Hun Sen in December 1987, the "Cambodia problem" moved from stalemate to endgame. With negotiations underway and Vietnam promising a unilateral withdrawal of its troops by 1990, regional actors began to think about life in a peaceful Southeast Asia. Thailand talked about turning Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace, and Indonesia sponsored the Jakarta Informal Meetings to facilitate discussions among parties that denied each other's legitimacy. China and the United States were the slowest to move and were caught by surprise when Vietnam withdrew its troops in September 1989. Both then shifted their positions from demanding an end to Vietnamese occupation to demanding a guarantee of a peaceful and stable Cambodia.

For Vietnam, progress on Cambodia faced the leadership with a possible choice of two roads. One was the familiar ideological road of socialist internationalism and anti-imperialism.23 But this was now undermined by Gorbachev's reforms as well as by China's continuing hostility. The new road was a policy of international openness to complement the domestic reforms that began in 1986. The chief proponent of the new market-oriented path was Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach.24 From 1988 until his dismissal
as foreign minister in 2001, he led what might be called the pro-West faction of the leadership. He was particularly interested in normalization of relations with the United States, and he personally met with every American group visiting Vietnam in the late 1980s. There was little opposition in the leadership to improvement of relations with neighbors and with the capitalist world, but there were those who were less enthusiastic than Thach.

Thach's position was undermined by three events. First, the American reaction to his overtures was one of inertial hostility. New demands were raised about cooperation in the search for remains of soldiers missing in action (MIAs). The United States did not recognize Vietnam until July 1995, the month that Vietnam entered ASEAN, and Vietnam already had diplomatic relations with more than 160 countries by that time. Second, the collapse of European communism in 1989-91 induced a resurgence of conservative anxieties about ideological and political security. Even Nguyen Van Linh, “Vietnam's Gorbachev,” revived the old rhetoric of international class struggle and socialist solidarity. Third, in August 1990 China changed its Indochina policy. A secret summit was held at Chongdu in September (Thach was not invited), and both sides reached agreement in principle concerning normalization. Improving relations with China raised the conservative hope that the remaining socialist countries could band together.

China's change of policy regarding Vietnam was also catalyzed by events. It maintained an unyielding position of support for the CGDK (including the Khmer Rouge) until the United States suddenly dropped its support in July 1990. Then China was faced with the prospect of being isolated as the sole supporter of the Khmer Rouge, and it rethought its position. The secret summit occurred six weeks later. The second event, the Tiananmen Incident of June 1989, was not external, but it was incidental to the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The shunning of China by developed countries after Tiananmen led to a reevaluation of China's relationships with its neighbors, including Vietnam. By cooperating with the UN-sponsored resolution of the Cambodian conflict China could start a new chapter in its general relationship with Southeast Asia as well as with Vietnam and Cambodia.

Although the two largest remaining communist countries normalized their relationship in 1991, China had no interest in a special and close relationship with Vietnam, to the disappointment of Vietnamese conservatives. China was still resentful of the unrequited efforts it had made on Vietnam's behalf during the wars, and the informal reaction to Vietnam's newfound friendship was that “anyone with milk is its mother.” Official analyses argued carefully that socialist internationalism was a matter of each socialist country peacefully pursuing its own national interest rather than sharing resources. For China, and eventually for Vietnam, the normal relationship between the two simply fit into larger strategies of good neighborliness and openness.

Although domestic factionalism in China between reformers and conservatives grew from 1986 and contributed to the catastrophe of Tiananmen, there are no signs of a significant policy difference regarding Vietnam or Cambodia. Deng Xiaoping was personally quite committed to teaching lessons to Vietnam, and other leaders kept contrary thoughts to themselves. Moreover, from June 1989 to July 1990, condemnation of Vietnam was one of the few things that China and the United States had in common. Even the post-1989 policy reassessment did not highlight differences because Jiang Zemin, Zhu Rongji, and Li Peng had seen the damage caused by factionalism. Thus the new policy of good neighborliness toward Southeast Asia in general and including Indochina was a group policy rather than a factional gambit or victory.

Returning to our analytical categories of two-level policy influences, greater factionalism in both Vietnam and China distinguishes the end of Sino-Vietnamese hostility from its beginnings, but only in the case of Vietnam is factionalism directly relevant to policymaking. It should be noted that even Thach was originally a strong spokesman for the conservative position. Thach was a major source for Gareth Porter's presentation of the dying embers of Vietnam's illusions of victory in the early 1980s. But as isolation began to break down in 1988-89, Thach fought mightily for a more Western option. While he did not oppose better relations with China, he was clearly not a friend of China's. One could accuse the conservatives of threat inflation with the collapse of European communism, but they do deserve some sympathy for their ideological trauma. From Confucianism and Buddhism to Catholicism and communism, all of Vietnam's major ideologies have come from abroad, and to have the source of one's orthodoxy fail can lead to desperate action. But the idea of holding tight to China was deeply repugnant to many Vietnamese, and had China been willing, the honeymoon would probably have been a short and mutually unsatisfactory one.

With regard to bureaucratic politics, one might expect that the resurgence of Ho Chi Minh City under reform might strengthen Thach's side, but in fact it would strengthen openness in any direction, including China. The army
and security, associated with Le Duc Anh, were certainly more conservative than the Foreign Ministry. But the conservatives could not achieve a special relationship with China, so the final result for Vietnam was a general policy of reform and openness, China included. As for China, there is little evidence of a difference of opinion or interest despite the change in policy. Later on, the neighboring province of Guangxi developed special interests in promoting better relations, and naval expansion has complicated relationships with all of Southeast Asia and especially with Vietnam. But in 1986–91 there was little anticipated gain in normalization.40

Enduring Asymmetry

The complications that the Sino-Vietnamese relationship poses for a general understanding of rivalry can be illustrated by events in 2009.41 By contrast, China’s share in Vietnamese trade increased, and discussion continues regarding road and rail lines linking China through Vietnam to Singapore as well as regarding plans to make the Tonkin Gulf into a “mini-Mediterranean.” On the other hand, there was a massive public outcry concerning Chinese investment plans for bauxite mining in Central Vietnam, with General Giap (Vietnam’s preeminent military hero) playing a prominent role, and China’s expansion of its submarine facilities in Hainan have led Vietnam to commit itself to purchasing six submarines from Russia. Chinese observers of Southeast Asia would agree that Vietnam is China’s most problematic and least cooperative neighbor in the region, and Vietnamese would say that China is the country that most worries them. The China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) was launched in January 2010, which is also the sixty-sixth anniversary of Sino-Vietnamese relations, but the prospect of increased dependence on China fuels Vietnamese anxieties. The best guarantor for the stability of Sino-Vietnamese relationship is that it is embedded in the broader regional relations of both countries.

The general dilemmas of the current Sino-Vietnamese relationship also reflect a diversity of domestic pressures. In China, the strong nationalistic tone of “netizen” discussions sets a climate for policy that the leadership cannot ignore. Although Vietnam did not attract much attention in 2009, the Internet reaction to Burmese pressures on ethnic Chinese in the border area shows the sensitivity of the netizen trigger.42 On the more peaceful side, Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces are clearly competing for leadership in developing pathways between China and ASEAN. The central government takes a back seat on these local initiatives so long as they do not conflict with overall national policy. Meanwhile the PLA’s interest in a blue-water navy enhances the tensions in the South China Sea.

In Vietnam there is less segmentation of public influence on China policy, but it is more acute and effective. Deep-seated anxieties about China are pervasive, and the government has the delicate responsibility of preventing public expressions of anti-China sentiment from harming an important relationship.43 In the case of the bauxite protests, there was a broad range of public criticisms, critical Web sites, and demonstrations, and eventually the government postponed indefinitely its decision on whether to allow Chinese investment to proceed. At the same time, it prevents discussion of the issue in the official media. The government’s dilemma creates an opportunity for some politicians to play to the public’s fears, and it creates an issue on which overseas Vietnamese can simultaneously vent their dislike of the government and show their patriotism. Less acute versions of the same phenomenon can be seen in ongoing criticisms of the border agreement and in demonstrations in late 2007 against Chinese policies regarding the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In sum, one could say that while at present China and Vietnam do not see their national interests as opposed in a zero-sum game and their governmental structures do not permit the oppositional conflict that highlights two-level games, there is a divergence of national perspectives, and evidence of differentiated domestic pressures can be seen. To return to the original meaning of rivalry, China and Vietnam are definitely on different sides of a river.

Rather than simply being a problem case for a general theory of rivalry, however, perhaps the Sino-Vietnamese relationship can be used to highlight a relational dimension that should be taken more seriously in other cases as well. While China and Vietnam are an uncomfortable squeeze into the category of enduring rivalries, the long and varied history of their relationship makes it an archetypal case of enduring asymmetry.

Certainly the difference in capacity between China and Vietnam was significant, multidimensional, and permanent. Traditional Vietnam did have symmetric rivalries with Champa, Cambodia, and Siam at various times, but not with China. China’s traditional external relationships were never symmetric even though the Yuan (Mongol) and Qing (Manchu) dynasties were based on nomadic conquest of China.44 Even when China fell apart, most recently in the warlord period (1916–27), its factions were more interested in
competing among themselves for central control than in challenging neighbors. And Vietnam utilized the juncture between the Tang and Song dynasties to establish its independence, not to challenge China or to war with the part of China closest to it. Vietnam's highest priority vis-a-vis China is autonony, not superiority.

Given China's relative invulnerability and Vietnam's exposure, it is not surprising that the asymmetric structure of the relationship influenced their perspectives. Even in peaceful and voluntary matters such as trade, China has proportionately less at risk than Vietnam. Vietnam can therefore be expected to be more alert to the opportunities and risks of the relationship and, as prospect theory teaches, the risks will be more vivid. In ordinary times Vietnam is simply not as interesting to China as vice versa. Every leader in Vietnam watches China closely, while China's policies are less coordinated because they do not merit as high a priority in the national economy of attention. If Vietnam invested in a bauxite mine in China it would not become a national issue. Vietnam's greater exposure in the relationship is not created by China's policies but by its presence, and exposure is not restricted to security issues. It is the direct result of asymmetry.

Differences in perspective in an asymmetric relationship produce characteristic differences in perception, and these in turn influence reciprocal postures. For China, it is more convenient to fit policy toward Vietnam in more general categories, either as part of a larger strategy (reform and openness, good neighbor policy, China-ASEAN relations) or a general formula for the bilateral relationship (friendship or hostility). Underneath the strategic umbrella, however, various specific Chinese interests may pursue policies that from Vietnam's perspective suggest contradictory or ulterior motives. For instance, while Guangxi Province pursues trade links, Hainan Province announces a plan for tourism on the disputed Paracel Islands. Another problematic pair of initiatives would be China's 2002 agreement with ASEAN for peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea and the construction of an advanced submarine base on Hainan across from central Vietnam. For Vietnam's part, it is constantly aware of its exposure to China, and therefore regardless of strategic commitments its China policies will be cautious. Its efforts to "connect the dots" of China's less coordinated behavior may lead its analysts to an unduly alarming picture of China as a malevolent and duplicitous schemer. Meanwhile China is tempted to view Vietnam's caution as the sign of an unwilling and unreliable partner. These structural misperceptions induced by asymmetry are most obvious in the emergence of hostility in the 1970s, but they are also clearly visible in the 1960s and 1990s. In the past ten years the strong diplomatic framework of normalcy has reduced the salience of mutual misperceptions, but it has not eliminated them.

Why, with its preponderance of power, has China not solved its Vietnam problem by force? David Kang argues that the strategic culture of East Asia is based on the acceptance of hierarchy and on reliance on an international order anchored by China. It is certainly true that the interaction of China as a central power with its neighbors over the millennia has created a fundamentally different set of international expectations than the presumptions of competitive anarchy in the West. But in fact culture in this case reflects a common habituation to the reality that a preponderance of power often does not translate into ease of domination. Vietnam's eventual defeat of China's occupation from 1427 to 1427 was a major reality test of the possibilities of domination. China learned to live within the limits of its reach, and its neighbors found that a stable, China-centered international order was more convenient than threatening. It is an open question whether China can restore a modernized version of the pax Sinica in East Asia, but the general success of its good neighbor policy in the past twenty years—especially in contrast to the results of American unilateralism in the same period—shows that the old approach is not irrelevant in a globalized world.

The underlying principles of the asymmetric relationship between China and Vietnam can be summed into "three Rs." First, asymmetry is "real." The difference of capacity is not a psychological or cultural construct, and it structures the material situation in which the relationship plays out. Second, asymmetry is "relational." Disparity of capacity creates differences of interest, of perspective, and of perception that create characteristic patterns of interaction. Not only does each relationship display its own path-dependent development, but also the larger and smaller positions within the relationship display structurally dependent, nontransposable characteristics. Third, asymmetry is "resilient." In times of peace, the different exposures in the relationship continually generate tensions that require diplomatic management. In times of hostility, China has found that it cannot impose its will on Vietnam, while Vietnam has experienced severe hardships and opportunity costs. Ironically, China's failure to dominate occurs not despite the asymmetry of capacities, but because of them. What to China is a "small war" with limited objectives is to Vietnam a mortal threat to its identity and
existence. China has the option of withdrawing; Vietnam’s only option is resistance.

Conclusion: Asymmetry Beyond the Archetype

An archetype has the strength of being the perfect illustration of a general principle. China and Vietnam have had a millennium of experience with stable asymmetry, and for all but a century of that experience there was no stronger third party distracting the bilateral relationship. But analysis by archetype has the weakness of not addressing the limits and conditionalities of its principle. Nevertheless, an archetypal analysis is useful in modifying the universality of contradictory claims and in adding analytical texture to the general picture of international relationships.

Returning to the initial question of the meaning of rivalry, Vasquez’s argument that rivalries must be symmetric is acceptable if we limit the term to rivalries in which both sides attempt to achieve the same goal. However, there are clearly significant situations of asymmetric international tension, and to exclude these from purview may provide too narrow a base for explicating the origins of conflict. Similarly, Vasquez’s concentration on territorial disputes unduly restricts the search for contentious issues.

Rasler and Thompson cautiously allow the possibility of asymmetric rivalries, though as outliers to the general picture since the smaller state is by definition not an equal challenger. More importantly, Rasler and Thompson add to the category of territorial rivalry that of positional rivalry, and they point out that territorial disputes often mask positional rivalry. However, they expect asymmetric rivalries to be primarily territorial. While it makes sense for two states who are close in the international pecking order to “make sure that the other state does not pull ahead,” the only positional tension Rasler and Thompson see in an asymmetric relationship is resistance by the weaker to subordination.

Asymmetry can be used to flesh out the linkage between territorial and positional rivalries, and it can add a new dimension to positional conflicts. As Rasler and Thompson suggest, tensions over territory and over relational standing are often connected. Indeed, since territory is the body of the state, a territorial dispute is at the same time a dispute over the boundaries of national identity. In an asymmetric relationship, the weaker side is necessarily more exposed and therefore is likely to be more sensitive to questions of physical boundary. By contrast, the stronger side can view the weaker’s unwillingness to yield as a lack of proper deference. Thus the spatial dispute can become a synecdoche for the tensions of the general relationship, and they can each vow to fight to the death over land that in many cases (such as the Spratlys) is so inhospitable that it is not worth living in.

The notion of positional conflict implicit in asymmetric territorial disputes is somewhat different from that assumed by Rasler and Thompson. A territorial dispute appears to be the ultimate single-goal situation. The land belongs either to one state or the other. However, the implications of securing or losing the land are different for each side. If the weaker side loses territory by force, then it must wonder where the stronger side will stop. If it secures the disputed territory, then its autonomy has been confirmed by the stronger side. If the stronger side loses territory it loses face; if it gains territory the reality of its power is demonstrated. The positional conflict inherent in the territorial dispute is thus proportional rather than absolute. The weaker side does not want to be pushed into insignificance, and the stronger does not want to have its strength challenged, but neither seeks to displace the other and to occupy its position.

In the most general terms, the famous Athenian cynicism that “the strong rule when they can and the weak serve when they must” must be modified to cope with the realities of asymmetric relationships. In either war or peace—with rivalry in between—the weak and the strong may not want the same things. A “small war” to the strong is likely to be a mortal threat to the weak, and the desperate popular resistance of the weak may outlast the limited purposes and deployable resources of the strong. In peace, the strong want deference and the weak want acknowledgment of their autonomy. Deference and autonomy are not intrinsically incompatible, but when there is tension and the commitment of the other side is doubtful, a space for asymmetric rivalry is created.

Beyond an enrichment of general theory, asymmetry theory can contribute empirical questions to the investigation of other concrete cases of rivalry. I will suggest three ideas that might have “legs” that could reach elsewhere. First, symmetric rivalries are competitive for the same goals, but asymmetric rivalries concern incompatible but different goals. To what extent, for instance, does Pakistan’s greater vulnerability to India create a divergence of goals? Does Kashmir mean the same thing to both countries? Second, rivalry between symmetric powers implies mortal risk for both, while asymmetric
rivalry creates the temptation of “small wars” for the larger side, though of course these are extralarge, identity-threatening wars for the smaller side. To what extent, for example, is the interaction of North Korea and the United States a product of a disparity of risk? Perhaps greater risk makes North Korea’s choice between compliance and challenge more dichotomous. Lastly, because of the standing difference in relative importance, the larger country’s domestic pressures on policy are likely to be more diverse and less well coordinated at the top, while the smaller side is likely to be more alert to national opportunities and risks. If we review the relationship of the United States and Iran since the hostage crisis, Iranian policy has swung between national hopes and fears, while American policy has been more inertial, disengaged, and contradictory.

Perhaps Tolstoy would opine that happy international relationships are all alike, while every rivalry is unhappy in its own way. Nevertheless, it might be worth differentiating rivalries into those that are playing the same game for the same goal because they have (or believe they have) equal chances, and those in which one side sees itself as defending the obvious values of the international order (however it conceives them), and the other defends its identity against a mortal threat. In both cases domestic influences will surely be at work, but if the main game were like tennis in the latter case, then one side would be the permanent victor and the other would be the loser. To an American, or French, or Chinese audience, the name “Vietnam” suggests a more difficult and frustrating situation.