

Managing the Vietnam-China-United States Triangle

Brantly Womack*

Foreign Affairs Department of Politics, University of Virginia, USA

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Abstract: Triangular international relationships are difficult to manage because every action produces simultaneous reactions from the two partners. It is more difficult to predict simultaneous reactions, and if an unexpected and undesirable result occurs it is more difficult to correct. While each side pursues its own interest, managing triangular uncertainties becomes a major concern. The Vietnam-China-United States triangle is especially complex because of its asymmetries, though it has some basic similarities to the general $X>Y>Z$ asymmetric triangle. The U.S. is global but no longer hegemonic, China has become the major regional Asian power, and Vietnam is an important neighbor of China and member of ASEAN.

For Vietnam, the triangle presents opportunities for leverage, but also risks of alienating one side or the other. Vietnam's past history of participation in triangles has shown mixed results, but Vietnam has been successful in its management of the Vietnam-U.S.-China triangle since 2001. Economic relations with both have improved. Security and sovereignty issues cause tensions, but they have been handled by triangular management.

Triangles do not exist in isolation from other relationships. Depending on the issue, tensions within a triangle can be managed focusing on the problem and bringing in more states that share the problem. Non-traditional security issues are an example. ASEAN is also useful because in many respects it can attract more global and regional attention than any one member. Global regimes such as the UN and WTO can also be used to take the pressure off of triangular tensions.

Keywords: Triangular relationships; asymmetry; China; U.S.; Vietnamese foreign relations.

1. Introduction

The confluence of China's rise and the U.S. pivot toward Asia since 2008 has created a situation in which every country in the Asia Pacific must think about its strategic posture in terms of managing a triangle. However, choosing sides between the two is unnecessary and undesirable. The U.S. and China are very unlikely to go to war in the current era of the "new normal," though they are likely to be engaged in an asymmetric rivalry that will affect their relationships with other states [1].

Considering that the economies of each are larger than the next three economies combined--Japan, Germany, and India--and that together they are one-third of the global economy, they can be termed the primary nodes of the global political economy. Thus for every other state the diplomatic relationship to each of them is a major concern. However, since the U.S. and China have one another as their principal concern, the relationship of any state to each of them appears to be triangular rather than simply two separate bilateral relations.

The triangularity of Vietnam's relations with the U.S. and China is the focus of this paper. Of course, Vietnam has very different

* Email: bantly@gmail.com

relationships with each, and each would be important even if the other did not exist. Bilateral relationships are the fundamental building blocks of international relations. Nevertheless, the interrelationship between the three states introduces a dimension of uncertainty that deserves special attention. Moreover, the asymmetry of the triangle-between the U.S. and China, as well as between Vietnam and both-adds more complications. This paper is a general and theoretical treatment of the implications of the triangle for management rather than a narration of the relationships or detailed exploration of diplomatic options.

I begin with an analysis of the qualitatively greater level of uncertainty involved in triangular relationships. The simultaneous reactions of two partners is much harder to predict than the reaction of one, and it is easier to correct a series of bilateral interactions. Asymmetry does not add to the uncertainty, but it creates located, non-transposable perspectives-distinctive angles-in the triangle. The third section applies the theoretical analysis to the contextual changes in the situation of all three parties that have created the current post-2008 triangle. This leads to an analysis of how triangular uncertainty affects Vietnam's strategic posture. Finally, I explore the possibilities of reducing triangular uncertainties by diplomacy outside the triangle.

2. Managing uncertainty in multilateral diplomacy

If we consider multilateral diplomacy as simultaneous interaction with multiple other actors, then the triangle is its simplest form [2]. The relationship between the Koreans, the U.S., Japan, and China is exponentially more complex than the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle, but even a triangle such as U.S.-China-Taiwan adds a new level of uncertainty beyond bilateral interactions. In a bilateral interaction, one state's action induces a reaction by the other, and then the first

state can adjust. There is certainly considerable room for misinterpretation in a bilateral relationship, especially if it is asymmetric, but the action-reaction sequence is linear. However, in a multilateral situation, beginning with triangles, the simultaneous reactions of the others make the outcome less predictable. The action-reaction sequence is no longer linear. In a multilateral situation, an action creates a field of reactions rather than one reaction.

Of course, states must act even if they are unsure of the outcome. Non-action has consequences as well as action. But to the extent that diplomacy is multilateral, the reduction of uncertainty should be a primary objective. It is prudent for states to act in a manner that secures a favorable field of outcomes rather than to fixate on achieving a specific objective. The context of uncertainty calls for alert diplomatic management rather than single-minded diplomatic pursuit of a fixed outcome from one partner. If diplomacy is overly focused on one partner and one outcome, it is likely to be overwhelmed by unanticipated consequences from other directions [3].

Successful diplomatic management is cautious in its assertiveness of exclusive national interest in order to minimize the backlash from other states, and it tries to reassure other states that their own core interests are acknowledged and respected. A famous example of successful diplomatic management is Bismarck's complex system of alliances in the late nineteenth century [4]. But caution is not as satisfying to a domestic audience as forceful assertiveness of national interests, and so it is not surprising that Bismarck was eventually removed from office. The ensuing rise of competitive European nationalisms led eventually, through unintended consequences, to the First World War. It is an oversimplification to blame one country for the outbreak of the war. Margaret MacMillan uses the image of walkers bound by the choices they made, not choosing what befell them, but not able to avoid their own roles in the catastrophe [5].

The range of responses in an inclusive, non-hostile triangle to a gesture to cooperate should range from neutral to positive. However, in an exclusive triangle, one in which each side fears collusion between the other two, the same gesture can appear to be one of being friendly to the other's rival [6]. An action within an inclusive triangle that asserts one's own national interest against the partner raises the question for all three whether or not the matter under contention is more important than triangular inclusiveness. Even in an exclusive triangle an aggressive action by one side can be received unfavorably by both of the others if it raises the general crisis level.

The level of exposure to uncertainty can be moderated by contingent agreements with other states. The strongest form of contingent agreement is a formal alliance, but the problem with any alliance is that it binds the allies but excludes the potential enemies. As one scholar put it, "Alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something. The sense of community may consolidate alliances; it rarely brings them about" [7]. Hitler put it more bluntly: "An alliance whose object does not include the intention to fight is meaningless and useless."¹ Thus an alliance predisposes its internal relationships toward cooperation but at the same time predisposes at least some of its external relationships toward competition. There are more inclusive forms of uncertainty reduction than a typical alliance. Bismarck's Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (1887-1890) was interesting as a formal but minimal alliance, providing only that they each would maintain a "benevolent neutrality" if either were at war with a third party. Rather than establishing an alliance, it was aimed at preventing a counter-alliance, and therefore Bismarck could pursue other similar arrangements with other states.

There is a broad and ambiguous middle ground between cooperation and competition among states, and in fact most diplomacy most

of the time would occur between the extremes of harmonious unanimity and antagonistic zero-sum. Evelyn Goh well describes the subtle mixes of East Asian diplomacy as "hedging", but it would be useful to further subdivide hedging [8]. One reason for caution in cooperation is that it creates dependency on that particular relationship. However, if one engages in similar relations with others then the proportional exposure in any one relationship is reduced. I call this "buffering". By lessening the dependency on any one relationship the general engagement can be increased. Another approach would be to prepare for possible downturns or negative effects from a particular relationship. I reserve the term "hedging" for this type of insurance against adverse future situations. The difference between buffering and hedging can be blurred in reality. In fact, it is sometimes the case that a state may describe its behavior as buffering, but the other state might interpret it as hedging.

Other approaches to controlling multilateral uncertainty are the formation of regional and global associations, such as ASEAN and the UN, or the creation of transnational organizations that control arenas of possible conflict, such as the WTO. These approaches have an advantage over alliances because, even though they create "insiders," the insiders are cooperating for common goods rather than being juxtaposed to "outsiders." The greater confidence in anticipating the behavior of fellow members does not discourage cooperative actions towards others.

3. The three angles of an asymmetric triangle

While simultaneous interaction creates the uncertainties of multilateral relationships, different capabilities among states creates located positions in asymmetric triangles. There is a variety of possibilities: $X=Y=Z$ (symmetric); $X>Y>Z$ (triple asymmetric); $X=Y>Z$ (twin-headed dual asymmetric); $X>Y=Z$ (single head dual asymmetric) [9].

¹As quoted in Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 109.

Until recently Vietnam has been in the Z position of a U.S.>China>Vietnam asymmetric triangle, but recently and for the foreseeable future the situation is shifting to a complicated version of a U.S.=China>Vietnam twin-headed asymmetric triangle. The complications are due to the U.S. position as a global power and China's as a regional power as well as to the different kinds of power-wealth and demographics, respectively-that each have. Lastly, Vietnam is one of many countries in analogous situations vis-à-vis China and the U.S.

There are some international relations theorists who assume that relative power will prevail [10]. If one state has more capabilities than another state it can compel the other state to obey [11]. If that were the case, then there would be no need to pay attention to asymmetric triangles. If X is greater than Y and Y is greater than Z, then Y controls Z and X controls Y. An asymmetric triangle is merely a pecking order, it is not interactive. If X is greater than all other countries then it is the hegemonic power that everyone must obey. But the experience of Vietnam since 1945 disproves this assumption. Vietnam was not greater than France and the United States, but it succeeded in national liberation and reunification. Power does matter, but greater power does not always prevail.

I argue that differences in state capacity produce different exposures in relationships.² In a bilateral asymmetric relationship the smaller side has proportionally more to gain or lose than the larger side. Having less power means that the smaller side cannot do to the larger side what the larger side can do to the smaller side. However, greater exposure means that the smaller side has greater incentives to pursue opportunities and to resist losses. Thus it is often the case that the smaller side's capacity to resist exceeds the larger side's limited interest in prevailing. In bilateral relationships

² This is the starting point of asymmetry theory. See Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Ch 4, pp. 77-94.

this usually leads to a "mature" asymmetric relationship, one in which the larger side acknowledges the autonomy of the smaller and the smaller does not challenge the greater power of the larger.

A mature asymmetric relationship can be seen as an exchange of the larger side's recognition of autonomy for the smaller side's deference. It is rational for each side because recognition addresses the smaller side's greater vulnerability while deference reassures the larger side that the smaller will not conspire against it. Recognition and deference are a linked pair. If the smaller side remains vulnerable then deference would mean surrender to the wishes of the larger side. On the other hand, if the smaller side had ambitions to challenge the larger side then why would the larger side agree to respect it?

The tributary ritual after Le Loi's victory in 1427 provides a good illustration of a mature asymmetric relationship. After twenty years of struggle, both sides realized that they could not eliminate the other side. The Vietnamese tribute missions to Beijing showed deference to China's regional role, while the bestowal of seals of office showed respect for Vietnam's autonomy and was a guarantee that the mistake of Emperor Yong Le trying to annex Vietnam would not be repeated. Of course struggles based on differences of interest continued, but they were contained within the framework of a normal asymmetric relationship.³

If power matters but does not always prevail then asymmetric triangles deserve special attention. If a triangle is symmetric, if $X=Y=Z$, then each participant faces the same sort of options. But if a triangle is asymmetric, if $X>Y>Z$, then each participant faces different options and has different incentives. X, as the most powerful, is not vulnerable to Y and Z, but it also has less to gain from the triangle. X is in the pivot position, but it is less interested and it probably is engaged in other relationships that might be more important to it. Y is likely to feel

³ Ibid., Chapter 6, pp. 117-141.

frustrated because it is more powerful than Z but must be careful because Y is vulnerable to X. Z is likely to be nervous because it depends on X restraining Y, but X could decide not to be the pivot. Maintaining the triangle is most important to Z; it is least important to X; the triangle is least desirable to Y.

The X>Y>Z asymmetric triangle is useful in understanding the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle, but there are differences from the abstract model. It is useful because the U.S. is clearly in the X position as the most powerful global actor. Although it is not necessarily decisive in the global political economy it is the most influential actor. Also it has less to gain or lose in the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle than the other two. Similarly, China can easily be put in the Y position. China can be seen as the frustrated middle power. China can imagine that if the U.S. were not involved then it would be able to deal with Vietnam (and other neighbors) with a free hand. Vietnam is in the Z position. It needs the triangle to reduce its direct exposure to China, but it knows that the American commitment to its pivotal role is uncertain. In its bilateral relations with the U.S. and China Vietnam must be careful to maintain the triangle.

While the X>Y>Z triangle is useful for describing the basic postures of the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle, it has its limits. The U.S. and China can be said to have entered an era of asymmetric parity since 2008⁴. They are now the world's two largest economies but quite different in their capabilities. The strength of the U.S. lies in wealth and technology. It is the leading power of the developed world. The strength of China lies in demography. It has four times the population of the U.S. and is the leading power of the developing world. Their capabilities will remain asymmetric for at least the next generation [12]. China will not become as wealthy as the U.S., and the U.S. will not become as populous as China.

Even though the U.S. is a power in the Asia Pacific and China now has an important global presence, their power asymmetries make the U.S. primarily a global power and China primarily a regional power. The high technology of the US gives it global reach in services and security, while China is more involved in Asia. The established patterns of global trade, finance, and soft power are oriented toward the U.S. and to former colonial powers. Location is also important. The U.S. has direct access to both Atlantic and Pacific oceans and its few neighbors are deferential. China has 14 land neighbors and obstructed access to the Pacific. Thus the fact that Vietnam is a neighbor of China makes it more important to China than, say, Egypt, while for the U.S. Vietnam and Egypt might seem equally important. For the U.S. the importance of a partner will be strongly influenced by its position in American global strategy.

Despite the asymmetry of their capacities, the parity of their economic size has consequences that make the U.S. and China diverge from a simple X>Y relationship. The U.S. and China are now each other's most important partner. Because of their differences, they are also rivals, although their rivalry is likely to be more competitive than conflictual, and there are many areas in which they could cooperate. If they engaged in war it would be mutually destructive and a global disaster. Asymmetric rivalry can be win-win because the rivals are not running the same race against one another but rather two different races. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two will be important to other states and more generally to the world order.

While Vietnam is in the Z position in the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle, it is not alone. Every country has significant relations with both the U.S. and China, and in one way or another they are less powerful than either. However, Vietnam shares with other Asian neighbors of China a more direct exposure to

⁴ Brantly Womack, "Asymmetric Parity".

the risks and opportunities of their China relationship. The tensions between China's regional power and American global power are particularly intense in the western Pacific, and the focal point of the tensions are Taiwan and island disputes. As one of the parties directly involved in the South China Sea, Vietnam's involvement in an asymmetric triangle is particularly intense.

4. Vietnam's angle in the Vietnam-China-U.S. triangle

Triangular diplomacy is a rather recent phenomenon in Vietnam's diplomatic history. Its premodern relationship with China and its colonial relationship with France were essentially bilateral. The Japanese presence 1941-1945 created a trilateral situation but Vietnam itself was not a sovereign actor. While the 1954-1991 situation was complex, changing and multilateral, Vietnam's diplomatic approach was essentially one of a division between friends and enemies rather than a more complex approach to controlling uncertainty.

A good example of the friends and enemies approach to an essentially triangular situation was Vietnam's diplomacy with the former Soviet Union and China from 1977 to 1991. Given the antagonism between China and the Soviet Union and the increasing likelihood of hostility with China in 1977-79, it is understandable that Vietnam would see the Soviet Union as a friend and China as the enemy and therefore ally with the Soviet Union. The Soviet-China-Vietnam triangle of the 1980s can be viewed as one of asymmetric parity, $X=Y>Z$. However, the alliance made Vietnam's diplomacy dependent on the Soviet Union, and when Gorbachev shifted Soviet diplomacy toward China in 1986 Vietnam was left alone. Fortunately, Vietnam's changes in Cambodia policy from 1985 to 1991 made possible the improvement of bilateral relations with China.

Since 2001 Vietnam has been much more successful with the U.S.-China triangle, although it has not been easy. One factor in success is that the overall diplomatic context of all three states has changed greatly from the 1970s and 80s. The United States had lost interest in Southeast Asia after its failed Indochina war. It remained the unquestioned air and naval power in the region. Its relations with China were distant but warming and non-threatening, and it harbored strong resentment against Vietnam. But by the 1990s resentment had diminished and Vietnam's entry into ASEAN provided the U.S. with an occasion to normalize relations. Meanwhile American concern about China began to grow, and from 2008 dealing with China became the major focus of the U.S. pivot toward Asia. The disputes in the South China Sea provided a point of diplomatic and security contact with Vietnam.

The contextual change for China from the 1970s to the 1990s was also profound. In the earlier period China's diplomatic outlook was focused on global alignments, and Vietnam was aligned with the Soviets. China's attitude toward the U.S. was ambiguous but not hostile. The grand shift to "reform and openness" in 1978 put a priority on economic opportunities and the U.S. was the center of the global political economy. As the reform era continued and strengthened, China's hostility toward Vietnam became increasingly out of tune with its general diplomacy. But beginning in 1991 China began to emphasize good relations with neighbors and at the same time the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia provided the occasion for normalization. Economic relations developed rapidly in the 1990s, though from a very low starting point, and became much more significant in the new century. Economic relations with Vietnam became part of the larger picture of trade, investment and regional development policy. Politically the relationship became normal but complex. In security terms, however, confrontations over sovereignty claims in the South China Sea generated mutual suspicion.

The contextual change for Vietnam's external relations from the 1970s to the 1990s was even more dramatic. Throughout its wars of reunification Vietnam's foreign policy had been built on the related pillars of the struggle between the socialist and capitalist camps and socialist internationalism, and that foreign policy had been successful. By the 1990s the need to integrate into an essentially capitalist world market had become apparent, and in any case the collapse of European communism and China's rebuff of a special socialist relationship did not leave Vietnam with other choices. China rejected socialist solidarity in favor of national interest as the basis of the new relationship [13]. Vietnam began rapidly to improve its regional and global relationships, and by the 9th Congress in 2001 it was fully committed to global integration [14]. The 10th National Congress in 2006 confirmed the commitment to proactive international integration, and in that year Vietnam hosted the APEC conference and joined the WTO in 2007 [15]. By the time of the global financial crisis of 2008 Vietnam's diplomatic platform and values meshed with other state actors [16].

5. Vietnam facing the triangle

Bilateral relationships are the fundamental building blocks of international relations, and Vietnam's relationships with the U.S. and China are two of its most important. The relationships stand on their own; one is not derived from the other. Nevertheless, precisely because each relationship is important, triangular uncertainties influence Vietnam's diplomatic posture. The U.S.-China relationship influences Vietnam's relationship with each.

The basic goals of triangular strategy are similar to those of bilateral strategy: to prevent undesirable outcomes and to maximize favorable outcomes. However, due to the greater uncertainty of triangles the emphasis is different. The risk of undesirable outcomes is less precise, and the timeframe for maximizing favorable outcomes

should be longer. The rationale for the longer time frame is that the unanticipated consequences of a short-term gain would be harder to correct in a triangular chain of interactions. Thus while the purely bilateral aspect of an international relationship could be seen as a sequence of policy bargaining, a triangular relationship is best viewed as a set of postures.

A posture is a set of expectations about contingent future behavior rather than specific policy goals. The triangular (or more broadly, multilateral) task is to reduce uncertainty, and the reduction of one's own uncertainty requires the reduction of the uncertainty of others about oneself. Uncertainty cannot be eliminated, but it can be bounded. Rituals of mutual respect such as summit meetings are important, as are multilateral regimes and organizations. The positive effect of ASEAN on regional relationships is a good example of uncertainty reduction through coordinated postures. Defensive postures are also important. They lend credibility to the commitment to resistance, and they can provide assurance that aggression is not intended.

The uncertainty of others can also be used as diplomatic leverage. Strategic ambiguity can be used for multilateral bargaining. The advantages and risks of ambiguity differ depending on one's position in the triangle. The strongest power, X, can maintain its pivot position at little cost or risk as long as the others are convinced that X will not favor them if they start a conflict [17]. The middle power Y can use ambiguity to remind X of the cost of supporting Z and to remind Z of the risk of alienating Y. The smallest power has the most to gain and to lose from ambiguity. Georgia's move into South Ossetia in the summer of 2008 shows the danger of small power adventurism. It hoped to involve the US and NATO on its side against Russia [18]. As Thomas de Waal put it, "in this conjunction of the deeply local and the global, the small players can overestimate their importance and the big players can promise too much" [19]. If Z puts the peace of the triangle at risk perhaps X will

come in on its side, but perhaps not. If Z approaches a separate bargain with Y perhaps X will lose interest. Thus instrumental ambiguity can be a powerful but dangerous tool.

Given the long term asymmetric rivalry between the U.S. and China, Vietnam can expect that each will watch closely its relationship with the other. Thus the most basic principle for Vietnam's triangular posture is not to align so closely with either that the other considers Vietnam competitive. A hostile relationship with either the U.S. or China would not be worth the gain because not only would it cost Vietnam the advantages of that non-hostile relationship, it would increase dependency on the remaining relationship. Since the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and China is more important to both than their relationship to Vietnam, if Vietnam picked one side there is the chance that, like the Soviet Union in 1986, it would be sacrificed by its patron in the course of big-power diplomacy. Of course, if the U.S. or China became hostile to Vietnam, Vietnam might have no alternative but to balance against its possible enemy. But the necessity to choose sides should be avoided since the long term trilateral and multilateral effects are so consequential and unpredictable.

In the course of ongoing diplomacy and the resolution of crises it is inevitable that Vietnam (and the many countries who are in similar situations) would sometimes lean to one side or the other. An extreme example would be the contrast in the Philippines between President Ramos's overtures to the U.S. and criticisms of China and President Duterte's subsequent criticism of the U.S. and approaches to China. Such policy shifts are not only the product of individual leaders and domestic politics, more fundamentally they are a response to the situation of needing a functional relationship with both big powers. Leaning to one side creates risks and hardships that eventually require rebalancing. However, wide swings in diplomacy undermine the credibility of the current diplomatic posture. More skillful diplomacy would seek to balance a positive

policy toward one side with a compensatory gesture to the other.

The asymmetry between the capabilities of the U.S. and China has a profound impact on Vietnam. Vietnam needs both the developmental dynamic of the regional political economy centered on China and the technology, capital, and high-end markets of the global economy centered on the U.S. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that Vietnam would be more cautious about China than about the U.S. The maritime sovereignty disputes with China provide an obvious reason, but there are other reasons as well. U.S. policy has been one of the gradual reduction of sanctions and of restrictions on its relations with Vietnam. By being friendly with the U.S. Vietnam is not exposing itself to a restricted special relationship, but rather moving toward a completely normal relationship. Moreover, the U.S. economy is not likely to be as dynamic as the Chinese economy, and U.S. development policy will not try to transform a global political economy that is centered on the developed world. By contrast, not only is the economic relationship with China of primary importance, but the various proposals for regional and bilateral infrastructural transformation require careful analysis. While the proposals are arguably win-win, any major change is at the same time risk-risk. In an asymmetric relationship both the wins and the risks are different for each side. Thus the United States is more predictable than China.

Because of the asymmetric rivalry of the U.S. and China Vietnam is receiving closer attention from each. This creates opportunities for leverage, and these opportunities have already benefitted Vietnam. Vietnam's balanced diplomacy between the U.S. and China has not only avoided the appearance of taking sides, it has also led to advances in each relationship. However, there are limits to Vietnam's leverage, and there are dangers in

appearing too clever. Vietnam is not the tipping point in the U.S.-China rivalry, it is one of many areas where each can see competitive advantages and risks. What seems very important from Hanoi's perspective may seem less important from the perspective of Beijing or Washington. Second, big powers become resentful of instrumental machinations by smaller powers. The mice move faster than the elephants, but the elephants have long memories. It is detrimental to the continuing reputation of small powers to be continually adjusting positions for small gains. A credible posture requires some policy stability.

6. Below and above the triangle

Perhaps the most useful means of coping with the uncertainties of multilateral interactions do not lie in direct diplomacy but rather in reducing the state's general exposure to the triangle. Rather than working within the simultaneous interactions of the triangle, the strategy is to limit the triangle. The two basic strategies for limiting the triangle are to shift the focus of diplomacy to concrete problems and to commit to transnational rules and associations. Focusing on problems can be seen as going beneath the triangle; adding transnational commitments can be seen as going above the triangle.

A basic technique in asymmetric bilateral diplomacy is to neutralize potentially divisive issues by formulating the problem in terms of common interests rather than in terms of exclusive, conflictual claims. A similar approach can be even more effective in a multilateral context. A bilateral face-off of conflicting claims can allow a third party to play the role of a pivot or a trigger. However, if a problem can be formulated on the basis of common principles, however differently understood by the parties, then face-off is evaded and the focus can shift to pragmatic questions of possible cooperation.

To give a current example, if the focus of maritime interaction between Vietnam and China is on conflicting sovereignty claims, then neither government can afford the domestic costs of compromise and both are vulnerable to public hypersensitivity to actions by the other. Moreover, the U.S. is not in a position to resolve the conflict, but it can utilize the opportunity of a continuing dispute to appear to be a pivot. However, the general maritime situation could be reformulated as a multi-dimensional security problem shared by all: food security in the case of seafood resources, non-traditional security in the case of smuggling and piracy, disaster security in the case of maritime traffic safety, naval security in the case of limiting the likelihood of unintended confrontations. These problems are not easily solved, but the main advantage of focusing on the problems is that they deflect the attention of all parties, including bystanders, away from win-lose confrontations. If focusing on common problems can be called going beneath the triangle, it is also possible to go above the triangle by means of shared commitments to larger frameworks. The two modes of multilateral commitments are transnational associations and commitment to rules and processes.

Vietnam is very fortunate to be a member of ASEAN in dealing with the Vietnam-China-U.S. triangle. Vietnam's good fortune can be illustrated by a quick contrast to Poland's relationship with Russia and the U.S. after joining NATO in 1997. Membership in NATO does reduce the uncertainty of Poland's posture, but it also reduces Poland's options. Since NATO is an alliance rather than simply a regional association, membership institutionalizes Poland's hedging relationship to Russia and its security dependence on the U.S. Poland would be extremely unlikely to want to ally with Russia against the U.S.; however, alliance with the U.S. probably limits its options for cooperation and tension-reduction with Russia. Meanwhile it increases Poland's security dependency on the U.S. as the leader of NATO, thereby increasing American leverage

on Poland in other fields. NATO institutionalizes a “friends and enemies” posture that does not prevent cooperation or cause hostility, but it biases against cooperation and encourages a competitive mentality. This is not to say that Poland made a bad choice in joining NATO, but rather that Vietnam is more fortunate in its regional options.

It may seem ironic that an association with an inclusive “Treaty of Amity” at its core would be more effective for triangular security than an alliance. But ASEAN creates a predisposition toward buffering individual relationships through multilateral exposure. Vietnam shares its exposure to large powers with other members in situations of common interest, and the U.S. and China dealing with ASEAN raises the profile of the relationship and reduces the asymmetry of individual bilateral relationships. For example, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area provides an overall policy that can frame individual trade arrangements and thereby limit exposure to uncertainty. Meanwhile ASEAN’s various institutional outreach efforts raise the regional profile and attract a higher level of American involvement. Thus ASEAN reduces Vietnam’s uncertainty in the triangle but increases its options. Likewise, memberships in APEC and in the UN have similar consequences, though the effects are fainter and more global.

The second category of going above the triangle to limit uncertainty is precommitment to transnational rules and regulations. The most obvious examples are UNCLOS and WTO. Transnational rule regimes do not necessarily resolve international disputes, as the recent ruling on the South China Sea illustrates, but they create frameworks of expectation, institutionalized procedures, and epistemic communities that reduce the uncertainty of multilateral interaction. Moreover, precommitments to rule regimes strengthens the hand of governments in explaining apparent

concessions and compromises to excited, demanding publics. Without a rule regime caution would still be prudent, but with a rule regime caution can be presented as necessary. To take a hypothetical example, if Donald Trump became president of the United States, some of his proposals that are in violation of international law and U.S. treaty commitments would be thereby less likely to be pursued.

7. Conclusion: success without victory or defeat

Managing uncertainty is the key task of multilateral diplomacy, and it is a frustrating one. It is more a game of kicking the ball down the road than of scoring goals. There is no final score. Successful diplomacy involves keeping the ball on the right road and building confidence that it will not leave the road no matter who kicks it.

Victory and defeat are not impossible in multilateral situations because conflict is possible. But especially in a multilateral situation win-lose conflict is the failure of diplomacy, not its natural state. And unless war is totally destructive, there is no conclusive peace. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles tried to end all war by eliminating the enemy, and it failed. On a smaller scale, international confrontations that are conceptualized as “either me or them,”--zero sum--are likely to result in stalemate, and if they are multilateral they can result in unforeseen consequences and greater uncertainty. The posture of friends and enemies tries to resolve uncertainty rather than to manage it successfully.

Vietnam’s trilateral diplomacy has been successful since 2008, and success is cumulative because it builds mutual expectations of predictable behavior. However, uncertainty cannot be eliminated, it can only be managed. The principles of prudent diplomacy remain the same, but every day brings new challenges.

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Quản lý tam giác ba nước Việt Nam-Trung Quốc-Hoa Kỳ

Brantly Womack

Khoa Chính trị Ngoại giao, Đại học Virginia, Hoa Kỳ

Tóm tắt: Quan hệ tam giác trong quan hệ quốc tế thường khó quản lý bởi vì mỗi hành động thường tạo ra những phản ứng đồng thời từ hai đối tác còn lại. Ngoài ra còn khó hơn khi phải dự báo về các phản ứng đồng thời và nếu một kết quả không mong đợi diễn ra thì sẽ còn khó điều chỉnh hơn. Trong khi mỗi một bên theo đuổi các lợi ích của mình, việc điều chỉnh sự bất thường trong quan hệ tam giác trở thành một mối quan tâm chủ yếu. Quan hệ tam giác Việt-Trung-Mỹ là quan hệ đặc biệt phức tạp vì sự bất cân xứng mặc dù nó có những điểm tương đồng cơ bản như trong tam giác bất đối

xúng $X > Y > Z$. Hoa Kỳ là quyền lực toàn cầu nhưng không còn là bá quyền, Trung Quốc đã trở thành quyền lực cơ bản ở khu vực châu Á, còn Việt Nam là một láng giềng quan trọng của Trung Quốc và thành viên của ASEAN.

Đối với Việt Nam, tam giác tạo cơ hội nâng cao vị thế, nhưng cũng là sự rủi ro nếu liên minh với một trong hai bên. Quá khứ tham gia của Việt Nam trong quan hệ tam giác cho thấy các kết quả đan xen, nhưng Việt Nam đã thành công trong việc quản lý quan hệ tam giác Việt-Mỹ-Trung từ năm 2002. Quan hệ kinh tế với cả hai được cải thiện. Những vấn đề an ninh và chủ quyền có sự căng thẳng, nhưng được giải quyết bằng sự điều chỉnh tam giác.

Tam giác không tồn tại cô lập với các quan hệ khác. Phụ thuộc vào vấn đề, căng thẳng trong một tam giác có thể được giải quyết bằng cách nhấn mạnh đến vấn đề đó và đem chia sẻ với nhiều quốc gia có liên quan đến vấn đề này. Những vấn đề an ninh phi truyền thống là ví dụ. ASEAN cũng có ích bởi vì trong nhiều khía cạnh nó có thể được sử dụng để giảm bớt áp lực từ căng thẳng trong quan hệ tam giác).

Từ khóa: Quan hệ tam giác; bất đối xứng; Trung Quốc; Hoa Kỳ; Quan hệ đối ngoại Việt Nam.