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**Chinese Co-opting of Vietnamese Elites: An Analysis in  
the Exercise of Influence to Achieve Geopolitical Ends**

中國收編越南菁英—運用影響力以達地緣政治目的之分析

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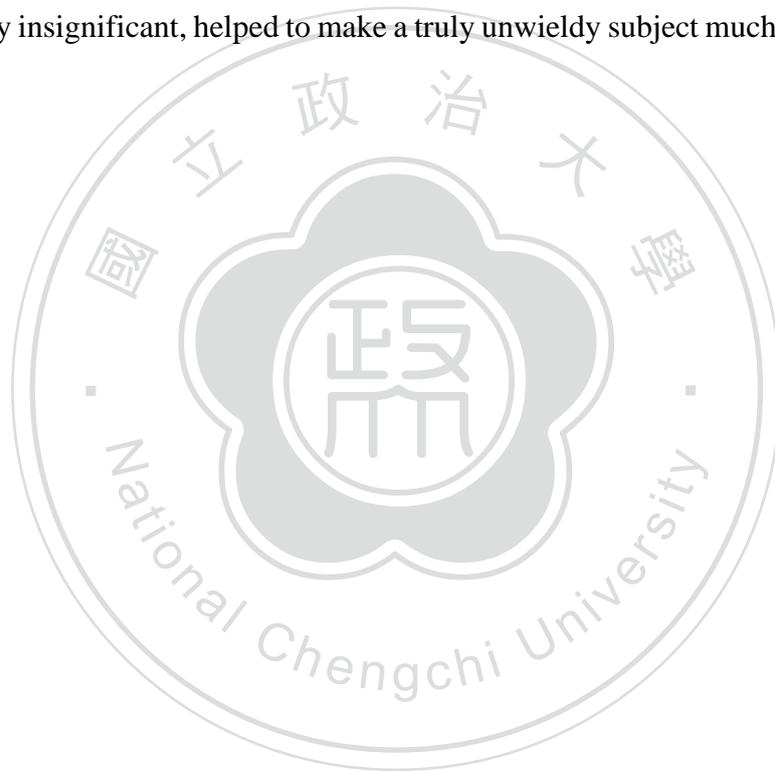


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## Abstract

As the People's Republic of China has become an increasingly powerful global player, the Chinese Communist Party has substantially increased its attempts to influence elites in countries around the world. Though this is a well-documented phenomenon, there are some countries in which this tactic has been less researched. Vietnam, despite being one of the few other nominally communist countries in existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and despite having a long intertwining history with its powerful northern neighbour, is one such country where there is a dearth of research into whether and how Chinese actors are seeking to gain influence among elites.

This paper seeks to correct this gap in the research. It does so, firstly by analysing case studies of Chinese influence of elites in Southeast Asian countries that have moved into China's sphere of influence. Through this, the research establishes patterns of behaviour, both on the part of the influencer and the influenced, which can be used to analyse the situation in the opaque realm of Vietnamese politics and business. From here, the research analyses several case studies of interactions between Chinese entities and Vietnamese figures in the fields of government, business, and state-owned enterprises. The research finds that there is considerable overlap in patterns of elite influence in the Southeast Asian case studies, and in the patterns of behaviour exhibited by potential purveyors and targets of influence in the Vietnamese context. Given the frequently fraught nature of the ties between these two countries, this paper hypothesises that ongoing Chinese influence of elites in Vietnam could have substantial ramifications for the Southeast Asian nation's political stability in the future.

隨著中華人民共和國成為一個日益強大的全球參與者，中國共產黨大幅增加了其影響世界各國菁英的企圖。儘管這是一個有據可查的現象，但有些國家仍對此策略的研究較少。越南儘管是 21 世紀少數幾個名義上屬共產主義的國家之一，且與其強大的北方鄰國有著悠久的交織歷史，越南對於中國是否試著以及如何在此國菁英階級中獲得影響力，仍缺乏相關研究。

本文旨在彌補研究中的此一空白。本文首先透過案例研究，分析中國對於進入其勢力範圍的東南亞國家菁英的影響力。透過這一點，研究建立了影響者和受影響者的行為模式，可用於分析越南政治和商業不透明領域的情況。接著本文分析了中國與越南政府、企業和國有企業領域之間互動的幾個案例研究。研究發現，在東南亞的案

例中，菁英階級對於越南背景下潛在持有者和目標的影響力，所表現出的行為模式存在相當大的重疊。鑑於兩國之間的來往關係密切，本文假設在中國對越南菁英日積月累的影響下，可能會對這個東南亞國家未來的政治穩定產生重大影響。



## List of Acronyms

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CCCC – China Communications Construction Company

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CCSEZR – China Centre for Special Economic Zones Research

CHALCO – China Aluminum Company

CMH – China Merchant Holdings

CNOOC – China National Offshore Oil Corporation

CPP – Cambodian People’s Party

CPV – Communist Party of Vietnam

EEZ – Exclusive Economic Zone

EVN – Vietnam Electricity

HUI – Hong Kong United Investors Holding

JMSU – Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking

MPS – Vietnam Ministry of Public Security

PAV – People’s Army of Vietnam

PLA – People’s Liberation Army of China

PRC – People’s Republic of China

PVN – PetroVietnam

VICP – Vung Tau International Container Port Joint Stock Company

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the Research

### *1.1.1 Motivation*

Vietnam and China<sup>1</sup> have, for a long time, had a complex relationship with one another. A millennia of Chinese occupation indelibly shaped Vietnamese society and culture, but in more recent history, the two countries have gone from being Communist allies, to combatants in a brief but bloody border war in 1979, to neighbours who, in the present day, have a relationship which is at times close, and at times highly volatile.

The contentiousness of the relationship is complicated. The aforementioned colonial history and 1979 border war, but more recently, clashes over maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea—where China and Vietnam have heavily overlapping claims—combine to create an anxiety about Vietnam’s northern neighbour that is as deeply rooted in historical national identity as much as it is in concerns of the present day. This sense of historical identity can be seen, for example, in the continued Vietnamese celebration of figures such as the Trung sisters, who led a rebellion against Han Chinese colonialists some two millennia ago.

Though we will look further into Vietnamese public opinion towards China, it’s worth noting here at the outset that in the last poll by Pew Research (2017) where Vietnamese respondents were questioned on this topic, only 10% indicated they had a favourable view of China—the lowest of any country surveyed that year.

Though the relationship between Vietnam and China is well documented (more on this in section “1.2.2 Review of Literature Regarding Sino-Vietnamese Relations and Vietnamese Politics”), much of this takes either a historiographical approach, or it seeks to analyse the geopolitical ramifications of specific events—for instance, the Hai Yang Shi You crisis in 2014, in which a large Chinese oil rig was parked just south of the Paracel Islands, sparking anger across Vietnam. There is little evidence of scholarly work that looks at China’s more subtle actions towards Vietnam over the course of recent history and how or whether this has affected the behaviour of Vietnam. This is an interesting absence, given that a great deal of attention—both scholarly and journalistic—has been given to Chinese influence efforts in countries around the world. A key part of these influence campaigns has been the co-opting of elites in

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, “China” will refer specifically to the People’s Republic of China, given that this research largely focuses on the modern relationship between Vietnam and the PRC.

different societies around the world in order to help China—more specifically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—achieve its power projection goals.

While focusing on this particular aspect of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship may seem niche—one where perhaps there isn't an obvious need for scholarly attention—this paper seeks to reframe this relationship as one with major implications for the region, and for perhaps the world. This research will look to establish clear patterns and methods of Chinese influence of Vietnamese elites, in part by analysing case studies of other countries where China has sought to gain influence, and then use this to develop a rubric to analyse whether and to what degree similar actions have been taken in Vietnam.

### *1.1.2 Significance of the Study*

As mentioned, the relationship between China and Vietnam is one that has major implications for regional and global geopolitics—but why is this so? Of course, China's rise as a superpower has gained deserved attention, but Vietnam is ultimately a middle-sized power in Asia, albeit a middle power with one of the largest active militaries in the region.

Perhaps one of the areas where the implications are the most evident are in the South China Sea, where the People's Republic of China's (PRC) so-called “nine-dash line” maritime boundary overlaps heavily with the maritime claims of the Vietnamese. Even though the Philippines took China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013 to contest what it saw as Chinese intrusions into its maritime zone, it's the Vietnamese with whom the Chinese have had the most violent interactions in this part of the sea. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), like virtually every other intergovernmental organisation in the world, has been the frequent subject of criticism, but its inability to effectively deal with tensions in the South China Sea has been a constant focal point for the bloc's detractors (Huong, 2019). This particular shortcoming was brought into sharp focus in 2012, when Cambodia, the host of that year's regional meeting, opted out of signing a joint statement which was to be a declaration denouncing China's incursions into the maritime boundaries of several of the bloc's member states. This marked the first time in the bloc's history that it failed to issue a joint statement at the conclusion of a meeting (BBC News, 2012). Cambodia's relationship with China has grown substantially closer in recent years, to the point that the countries' considerable political and economic linkages have led some to coin Cambodia a “client state” of China (Ciorciari, 2015).

While many ASEAN states have been cautious in their language around the South China Sea, this was the first incident of a member state outright refusing to join a collective statement regarding this contentious maritime issue. Conversely, Vietnam has frequently been a major thorn in the side of China when it comes to its expansionism in the South China Sea. The indignance of the Vietnamese on this issue is such that, instead of referring to the body of water as the South China Sea, it's commonly called the "East Sea" by Vietnamese.

While it doesn't appear Vietnam is heading the way of Cambodia any time soon, it's geopolitically significant to gain an understanding as to whether Vietnam is in a position to be swayed in its obstinance over issues of maritime sovereignty, as this could have major implications for the rest of the ASEAN bloc and their respective claims.

Vietnam's concerns about China have led it to develop stronger ties with, in what may be something of a historical irony, the United States (US). The US has major interests in the Asia Pacific region, in particular the maintenance of open shipping lanes, as well as ensuring that it's in a position to stand by its defence treaty partners. Recognising Vietnam's anxieties about an increasingly assertive China, the US has been cultivating a closer relationship with Vietnam, with recent years seeing unprecedented events such as the Obama administration lifting its embargo on the selling of lethal arms to Vietnam, and the visiting of the USS Carl Vinson navy aircraft carrier in 2018.

Though these moves don't elevate Vietnam to the same level of partnership as a country such as Japan, it does demonstrate the US's recognition of Vietnam as a potentially useful ally in the region. It also forms a piece of a broader narrative that runs across the region—one in which countries find themselves balancing between the superpowers on both sides of the Pacific. Though different countries balance in different ways and to different degrees, the fact that Vietnam—a former ally of China, a fellow authoritarian state, one of but a few nominally communist governments left in the world, and a country which presents major obstacles to China gaining maritime supremacy in the region—is partnering with the US on security matters is deeply troubling to Beijing.

Again, this is significant because it has major implications for the potential ability of the US to project power in the region. Gaining a greater understanding of the degree to which Vietnam is willing to strengthen its relationship with the US in the context of a more influential China can reveal broader insights about the nature of the geopolitical tug of war between the world's two superpowers.

Vietnam has made concessions to China in the past, but not in the obvious ways that other countries in the region have, such as Cambodia or the Philippines. In the case of the latter, this has been particularly conspicuous under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, who for instance, has vacillated on the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea decision which ruled against Chinese maritime claims under its “nine-dash line” formulation. There is substantial risk, on a domestic political level, of the Vietnamese government being perceived as getting too close to China (Thayer C. A., 2017). Though modern Vietnam is not renowned for a culture of protest, incidents of civil unrest do occur, and some of the most notable examples in recent years have revolved around the relationship between the two countries. The aforementioned Hai Yang Shi You oil rig crisis in 2014 sparked massive protests across the country that resulted in Chinese factories being damaged or destroyed. In 2018, protests raged again in response to the government’s proposal to set up Special Economic Zones across the country—zones which many feared would be dominated by Chinese interests and threaten the country’s sovereignty (BBC News, 2018). Meanwhile, small demonstrations are held regularly to commemorate the brief-but-bloody skirmish between Chinese and Vietnamese forces at Johnson South Reef in 1988—a conflict the memory of which the government has sought to tamp down (Deutsche Welle, 2016). As such, the Vietnamese government walks a tightrope here. On the one hand, it wants to maintain reasonable relations with its northern neighbour—relations which could help to provide some of the investment which stimulates the growth government relies on for regime legitimacy. On the other hand, public backlash from what’s seen as excessive closeness or obeisance vis-à-vis China could be enough to spark the kind of movement that would imperil the Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) grip on power.

And yet, a more pliant Vietnam is so heavily within China’s interests, that it stands to reason that the CCP would be seeking means of achieving this. What makes this a compelling area of research is that we are dealing with two opaque systems of government, and perhaps more importantly in terms of this endeavour, two countries that lack a free press. In countries with less authoritarian systems, journalists might undertake the job of uncovering extensive foreign influence operations, such as in Australia, where investigations by the public broadcaster in 2017 revealed to the public the extent of Chinese penetration into government, educational institutions, and business circles. The shockwaves from this reporting fundamentally changed the course of Sino-Australian relations, which, at the time of writing have declined to what may be their lowest point in decades.

The PRC, too, is undertaking a careful balancing act in its dealings with Vietnam. First and foremost, if it can't get a pliant ASEAN member state in Vietnam, it at least hopes to have one which is not outwardly hostile—both when it comes to its actions within the bloc, and its actions in the South China Sea. As such, it will want to deploy its use of sticks and carrots with great caution. China is also likely wary of the possibility of directly or indirectly disrupting the domestic status quo too much in Vietnam, as an aggressive stance could result in destabilising protest movements with the capacity to open the door for regime change. It is certainly not in China's interests to have a destabilised Vietnam, much less a democratic one, lest the region see a kind of democratic inversion of the Cold War “domino effect”.

These tensions, and how they influence the respective parties, are what drives this research and makes it of significance to the existing body of literature.

### *1.1.3 Research Questions*

This piece of research seeks to answer the following question: “Has the government of the People's Republic of China actively sought to influence the opinion of elites in Vietnam for its own ends, and if so, how is it doing this and to what extent is it succeeding?” This single question contains many facets, touching upon the nature of influence, degrees of behavioural change, and the interests of states. In order to set some clear boundaries for how this research was to be conducted, the following questions have been formulated to provide structure to what could otherwise be an unwieldy topic.

1. How has the Chinese government sought to gain influence among elites in other parts of the world?
  - a. Who have they tended to target?
  - b. What methods have they used to try and drive influence?
2. Have these tools of influence been used in the context of Vietnam? If so, how?
3. Are there cases where forms of elite influence that have been uniquely wielded in Vietnam?
4. Has the use of these tools of influence impacted the behaviour of Vietnamese elites?
5. Given the nature of Chinese influence in Vietnam, and its attendant effects on the behaviour of Vietnamese elites, what can be said as to the effectiveness of these tools of influence?
6. What does this potentially say about the future of China-Vietnam relations?

## 1.2 Literature Review

### *1.2.1 Review of Literature Regarding Chinese Elite Influence*

Recent years have seen a significant uptick in the amount of academic and journalistic attention given to China's influence in the world, and with good reason: the country is now an economic powerhouse, and has become the only country able to challenge the US's role as global hegemon since the end of the Cold War. However, because of China's weakness in its exercise of soft power, it's sometimes been said that the country doesn't have allies as much as it has "clients". One of the ways the CCP has sought to correct for this has been through the use of elite influence tactics.

Australian academic and commentator Clive Hamilton has been one of the leading critics of China's influence in Australia. In 2020, he turned his attention outwards from Australia's domestic concerns with the publication of the book "Hidden Hand": a heavily sourced work that built on the patterns of influence he'd seen deployed by China against Australian politicians, academics, and businesspeople, in order to identify similar activities elsewhere in the world (Hamilton & Ohlberg, 2020). Though intended to be read outside of purely academic circles, the book offers deep insights into the tactics, and the lengths, that the CCP will go to in order to strengthen its influence among elites in a society. Hamilton frequently refers to the CCP's modern day influence campaigns as using Mao Zedong's tactic of "using the countryside to encircle the cities" (農村包圍城市). This tactic, although now more in a metaphorical sense, can be seen in the way in which China bypassed the German federal government's cautiousness on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by instead making connections with city governments and local business groups, many of whom have spoken out in support of the BRI.

Very similar research can be seen in a paper entitled "Uncovering China's Influence In Europe: How Friendship Groups Co-opt European Elites" from the thinktank Center for Strategic And Budgetary Assessments (2020). Authored by Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, both of whom are fellows at the thinktank, this report focuses on the use of "friendship groups" as platforms through which the CCP can run its United Front campaigns—specifically, the EU-China Friendship Group, the Italy-China Friendship Association, and the Czech-China Chamber of Collaboration. Throughout their analysis of these groups and the elites employed by them, the authors note a pattern of behaviour: "Co-optees parrot the Party's talking points, deflect narratives harmful to Beijing's image, host public events that showcase the Party's

virtues, promote trade and investment, encourage technology transfers, and voice support for changes in European policies favorable to China” (Yoshihara & Bianchi, 2020). For example, the authors note that the president of the Italy-China Friendship Association, Irene Pivetti, has become a vocal advocate of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as playing down concerns about the nature of China’s human rights abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Though the authors don’t explicitly link Pivetti’s actions to any major political wins for China in Italy, it is interesting to note that Italian Prime Minister Guiseppe Conte in 2019 travelled to China to sign a memorandum of understanding regarding Italy’s willingness to participate in the BRI—despite the fact that, in 2018, the Italians joined other prominent EU states in calling for measures to restrict China’s influence in Europe (Tartar, Rojanasakul, & Diamond, 2018).

Anne-Marie Brady (2017) is another academic who has been vocal in her criticism of China’s influence operations, and in her paper “Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping”, she draws a clear connecting line between the CCP’s historical approach to influence operations, and the kinds of activities the CCP engages in today through the use of its United Front Work Department—a party apparatus specifically tasked with gathering intelligence and building relations with important external actors in order to achieve desired outcomes and guide the broader discourse. While she covers similar ground to that discussed in the two aforementioned pieces of research—particularly focusing on the nature of Chinese influence in her home country of New Zealand—some of the background she provides into the strategic methods of United Front work serve as useful guides to our own research here. For example, her succinct summary of political influence operations under Xi Jinping is as follows: “A strengthening of efforts to manage and guide overseas Chinese communities and utilize them as agents of Chinese foreign policy; A re-emphasis on people-to-people, party-to-party, plus PRC enterprise-to-foreign enterprise relations with the aim of co-opting foreigners to support and promote CCP’s foreign policy goals; The roll-out of a global, multi-platform, strategic communication strategy; The formation of a China-centred economic and strategic bloc”. Of particular note here is the emphasis on the use of overseas Chinese and Chinese-affiliated groups. She notes that over the course of the last three decades, a majority of Chinese affiliated organisations, such as business groups, cultural institutions, and so on, have either been established with the express purpose of driving influence, or have themselves been co-opted for the purposes of the CCP. Even groups that are antithetical to Chinese interests, such as pro-Taiwan organisations, are themselves often the targets of infiltration.

The aforementioned researchers set some broad parameters for the study of Chinese influence of elites, but what of Chinese influence on a more regional level?

In the book “Rising China’s Influence in Developing Asia,” (2016), editor Evelyn Goh and her contributing authors look at China’s influence from two different perspectives: firstly, they investigate over the course of a number of chapters the nature of the relationship between China and smaller states in Southeast Asia, and this is then followed by a broader look at China’s role in exerting pressure on key issues (such as the South China Sea dispute) and institutions (such as the UN Human Rights Council). Methodologically, Goh’s work harnesses a kind of process tracing which seeks to draw a connecting line between attempts at coercion, inducement, and persuasion, and resulting behaviours which are in line with CCP interests. As discussed in the section of this paper entitled “1.3.1 Analytical Framework”, Goh’s work offers foundations for the development of a methodology which will be used in our research.

Goh’s work doesn’t explicitly focus on elites—for example, the book’s chapter on China’s historical influence over Vietnam takes a much more high-level approach to state-to-state relations, and will be discussed in the following section of the literature review. However, Aileen S.P. Baviera’s chapter entitled “The Domestic Mediations of China’s Influence in the Philippines”, while paying attention to the broader geopolitical considerations the Philippines makes around issues like its relationship with the US, also delves into some of the individuals who appear to have been co-opted by Chinese actors. One of the most salient examples here is the case of the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JMSU), an agreement undertaken in 2004 by the administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the Philippines and the Chinese government<sup>2</sup> to explore hydrocarbon deposits in the disputed areas around the Spratlys. Given the considerable concern around maritime sovereignty in the Philippines, the deal was an astonishing move for the administration to make—and was controversial for its lack of transparency with the public. However, according to the research of Baviera, rather than consulting relevant experts from the security or defence departments, the deal was driven largely by two individuals—one of whom was a man by the name of Eduardo Manalac. Manalac is an industry expert in oil geology, and had had a nearly three decade-long role with Philips Petroleum, where he developed very close ties with the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC). Baviera notes that Manalac’s CV touts that he has been the recipient of a “Friendship Award” from China, as well as CNOOC’s Model Worker Award. While

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<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese, after objecting initially, also agreed to take part in the joint venture.

accusations of graft also surrounded the deal, the case of Manalac as outlined by Baviera serves as an instructive example of how individuals can be cultivated—often over long periods of time—by China to encourage governments to act in ways that are seemingly against their national interests.

Though not focusing specifically on individuals, Huong Le Thu’s paper “China’s dual strategy of coercion and inducement towards ASEAN” (2019) offers us some insights as to how the CCP directs its relationships with states within the region. Huong analyses how China has used a combination of tactics in order to prevent members of the bloc from discussing sensitive issues publicly—first and foremost the South China Sea. One of the examples laid out in the paper is the way in which Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte was reportedly threatened with war if he pursued the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling any further; whether or not this threat actually had any substance to it, it was sufficient to drive a kind of self-censorship in the region. While it’s possible that Duterte has been subject to more individualised forms of coercion, inducement, or persuasion, what this does demonstrate is how the actions of a single head of state, acting under some form of duress, can in fact shape the behaviours of other states.

One of the most instructive—and extreme—case studies regarding the nature of Chinese elite influence in a single country comes from John D. Ciorciari, with this paper “A Chinese model for patron–client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership” (2015). This research traces the beginnings of the relationship between Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen and China—first as enemies on account of the fact that Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) had played a major role in toppling the Chinese Communist-backed Khmer Rouge, then as partners when, in 1997, the CPP effectively ran a coup against the other party with whom it shared power. The international outcry this incident caused created a diplomatic vacuum for Cambodia, into which China poured millions of dollars’ worth of loans and military equipment. For this show of support, Ciorciari notes, the CPP followed by enacting the closure of Taipei’s de jure embassy in the Cambodian capital, and barred officials from visiting Taiwan. As the relationship has progressed, Hun Sen has taken actions that align with Beijing’s interests regionally, such as by repatriating Uyghur refugees in Cambodia, and offering vocal support for China’s building of dams throughout the Mekong.

Since the warming of relations between these two states, China has become the biggest investor in Cambodia. Part of Hun Sen’s power stems from the fact that he sits at the top of a

pyramid of elite patronage networks, encompassing the military, prominent businesspeople, and politicians—many of whom share familial connections. As Ciociari reveals, much of the investment and financial support provided by China flows through a complicated network of private companies and military and police forces, where large chunks are siphoned off to support the CPP, or to provide kickbacks. Given this, it's not surprising that Chinese interests have been able—with the tacit or active support of Cambodian officials—to engage in massive landgrabs that have displaced countless Cambodian citizens. In some cases, those who have opposed these moves have been subject to punishment, with some activists having been killed for the opposition. Though in this piece of research Ciociari doesn't conduct the kind of process tracing which would reveal the ways in which particular individuals specifically benefited from their acquiescence to or support of Chinese interests, his work does demonstrate one of the more clear-cut examples of how China can use its co-opting powers to benefit its interests—both in terms of the bilateral relationship, and in terms of Cambodia's support for China's goals within the ASEAN bloc. The case of Cambodia's absorption into China's orbit will be looked at in greater detail in section “2.1.1 An Enemy Turned Ally: Cambodia Under Prime Minister Hun Sen”.

### *1.2.2 Review of Literature Regarding Sino-Vietnamese Relations and Vietnamese Politics*

Looking more specifically towards Vietnam, noted Vietnam scholar Alexander L. Vuving's paper “Strategy and Evolution of Vietnam's China Policy: A Changing Mixture of Pathways” (2006) offers some interesting insights into the changing nature of the relationship between these neighbouring countries. His work looks specifically at the evolution of Vietnam's approach to dealing with China through the lens of the Vietnamese politicians and decisionmakers, taking into account the various ideologies, factions, and strategic ideas contained within the CPV. In what is a useful way for contextualising the relationship in terms of why China may seek to use elite influence to create an alignment of interests, Vuving regards the Vietnamese approach to China as being defined by “solidarity, deference, balancing, and enmeshment”. According to his research, decision makers in Vietnamese rely on both military force, coupled with diplomatic deference, in order to conduct the careful balancing act needed to engage with their powerful neighbour. One of the interesting tensions highlighted by this piece of work is the fact that there have, for a long time, been elements within the CPV who have sought to retain an ideological solidarity with China—despite a history of animosity

which is still ongoing to this day. For example, Vuving notes that in 1990, CPV Party Chief Nguyen Van Linh sought an alliance with China, based on a perception that in the post-Cold War era the West would seek to continue in its efforts to erase socialism from the world. Later, in 2000, CPV General Secretary Le Kha Phieu worked to establish regular dialogues between Vietnam and China on ideology—although the Chinese didn't respond to the initiative with enthusiasm. At the time of writing, Vuving stated that the CPV leadership was essentially broken up into two camps: the anti-imperialists, who sought to preserve the purity of their socialist system and to resist Western overtures; and the integrationists, who prioritised economic development.

Vuving further outlines some of the contours of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship in his book chapter “Vietnam between China and Japan in the Asian Security Complex” (Vuving & Do, 2017). One of the more interesting observations in this piece are the parallels between the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA), and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAV), given that both forces are effectively branches of their respective parties. As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Tiananmen Square uprising, a kind of kinship has developed between the two militaries—so much so that the PAV has become one of most strident supporters of closer ties with Beijing. To this end, Vuving notes that political means seem to be China's preferred method of driving influence with the CPV by “...play[ing] on the Vietnamese ruling elite's pervasive fear of regime change after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.”

This fear is a theme which is explicitly highlighted in Phuong Hoang's paper “Domestic Protests and Foreign Policy: An Examination of Anti-China Protests in Vietnam and Vietnamese Policy Towards China Regarding the South China Sea” (2019). In this analysis of Vietnamese protests around conflicts in the South China Sea, it was found that the CPV engaged in a strategy of “cooperation and struggle”, wherein it allowed some protests to take place in order to allow nationalist fervour to blow off steam and to signal their displeasure, while at the same time either suppressing or controlling protests such that they don't cause major diplomatic rifts or threaten the legitimacy of the party. While ultimately Hoang did not find evidence that the protests had changed Vietnam's long-term policy towards China of “balancing, international integration and hedging through cooperation”, the research further underscores the dilemma at the heart of Sino-Vietnamese relations for the CPV. Given the asymmetry between the two countries, taking a wholly offensive posture against China is unrealistic—both because the PLA's military might far outweighs that of the PAV, but also

because of the extensive economic links between the two countries. Yet at the same time, public sentiment in Vietnam towards China is so volatile that the Vietnamese regime is essentially forced to acknowledge this anger and to allow for its display in controlled ways. In the context of our research, the constraints placed on the CPV in terms of its ability to strengthen its relationship with China (which the Chinese may, themselves, be cognisant of), does open the door for more subtle forms of influence to be actioned by the CCP.

In his paper entitled “Vietnam’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-US Competition and Increasing Domestic Political Influence” (2017), Carlyle A. Thayer, unpacks the complexities of Vietnam’s foreign relations while looking at the changing nature of civil society (limited though civil society may be in authoritarian Vietnam). Recognising the perils that the China relationship poses to the CPV, Thayer argues that presently there are no “pro-China factions” in the party—though there are divisions within the party regarding how best to manage the relationship. He rejects the realist balance of power theory when assessing Vietnam’s management of its international relations, arguing that if this theory were applicable in this case, then the country would have likely sided with the US. Rather, Vietnam has opted to develop and balance a diverse range of strategic partnerships, while never seeking to tie itself to the fortunes of a single state. Specifically, he identifies Russia, India, Japan, China, and the US as being the major powers that Vietnam has chosen to work with—though he also notes that Chinese officials regularly warn Vietnam against allowing any other relationship to harm the Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relationship. Thayer is one of the scholars who has identified the CPV’s rejection of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung (who had helped to build US-Vietnam relations during his tenure), and subsequent consolidation of power by the conservative General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, as an attempt to perhaps allay Chinese fears of Vietnam moving too far from Beijing’s orbit (Bathke, 2018).

Where Thayer’s paper is particularly pertinent in the context of our research is the way in which it observes the emergence of a kind of civil society in the 1990s following the enactment in 1986 of the policy of *đổi mới* (literally, “renovation”, resembling the glasnost and perestroika reforms in the Soviet Union). In the mid-2000s, a number of non-government groups entered the scene, with many demanding action on a range of issues—some of which related to China. Similarly, retired party cadres and military veterans also became more outspoken on the country’s affairs. This changing nature of the relationship between the society and the party is exemplified in a case study Thayer provides regarding a proposal for China Aluminum Company (CHALCO) to build bauxite mining facilities in Vietnam’s central

highlands. After the company won a tender for the project in 2006, there was a public outcry; notably, famed war hero General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote a series of open letters warning against the project on environmental and national security grounds. Other prominent party members joined the condemnation, and a petition was signed by 135 scholars and delivered to the National Assembly. In the next few years, a range of public voices also expressed their concerns publicly about the project. Despite the vocal concern, the CPV sought to clamp down on these dissenting voices, and ultimately chose to move ahead with the project. While on its face, this unpopular decision may have been made purely on economic grounds, or for the benefit of bilateral relations, it's also not outside of the realm of possibility that some political players or businesspeople stood to personally gain significantly from this project—though Thayer doesn't go this deep in his analysis.

Thuy T Do, in her paper “‘Firm in principles, flexible in strategy and tactics’: Understanding the logic of Vietnam’s China policy” (2016), covers much of the territory outlined by other scholars mentioned here about the contentiousness of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, but places a great deal of emphasis on the diverse and complex range of international connections the Vietnamese have built. She quotes Vietnamese diplomat Vu Khoan as summarising this approach as “the more interdependent ties we can cultivate, the easier we can maintain our independence and self-reliance, like an ivory bamboo that will easily fall by standing alone but grow firmly in clumps”. Do also emphasises the rift that the 2014 Hai Yang Shi You oil rig crisis created, and that the resulting trauma led to some in the Vietnamese intelligentsia suggesting that the country should upgrade its partnership with the US to that of a “strategic partnership”—a move which would almost certainly result in the immediate deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese ties. Where Do’s research is valuable in the context of our study is highlighting the truly multipolar nature of Vietnam’s external relations, balancing the interests of a number of countries while never venturing too far into any one of their orbits. Given this, it gives greater plausibility to the idea that subtle exercises of elite influence—rather than overt intimidation or coercion that may cause alarm among the other states that Vietnam has built relationships with—is in the best interests of a China who may be looking to gently bend Vietnam towards its will.

### *1.2.3 Contribution of this Research to the Existing Literature*

As previously mentioned, there is currently a dearth of literature about the nature of Chinese influence of elites in Vietnam, despite this being an issue which has been widely analysed in other countries—both by academics and journalists. It's plausible that part of the reason for this lack of analysis in Vietnam is the fact that it is a very opaque government—even in a region which is not well known for its governmental transparency. Yet at the same time, this makes this particular area of research even more important: not only does it have the potential to reveal potential influence operations in a nation which is hugely consequential within ASEAN, but the nature of conducting research in a less transparent country means that we may be able to develop new methods for identifying and assessing Chinese influence.

As such, the intended contribution of this research is multifaceted. Firstly, it will seek to uncover insights about one of the most consequential bilateral relationships in the region. Secondly, it has the potential to unlock new ways of researching and identifying patterns of Chinese influence in target countries. Thirdly, it may offer a path forward for other researchers to consider how to approach the analysis of Chinese influence in less transparent authoritarian countries.

### **1.3 Analytical Framework**

Discussions of influence are often connected to concepts of power. However, for the purposes of this research, the conception of soft power as defined by Joseph Nye (1990) isn't sufficient, or even congruent, with what we're trying to assess here; China has certainly made attempts to export attractive elements of its culture around the world, or to use state-sponsored media organs to “tell China's story” elsewhere, but there's limited evidence of its effectiveness—particularly when compared to the soft power influence of a cultural juggernaut like the US. Similarly, while exercises in hard power are obviously salient when considering the influence one country may have over another—particularly in cases where there is a significant power imbalance—these tend to be actions intended to shift the calculus of entire governments or populations. Though these are useful lenses through which to view influence, and can be applied (and have been so, in the past) to the context of analysing the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, this research is looking at a more subtle kind of influence that seeks to co-opt elite individuals who may be willing to take actions that are favourable to Beijing, to

help sway the opinion of other elites, and to communicate messages that are favourable to the interests of China more broadly.

Here, influence does not refer to actions conducted broadly by the state that may have the blanket effect of influencing the country as a whole—rather, we’re looking at specific cases of what may be deemed “individualised sharp power”. Sharp power is a concept that was originally popularised by the National Endowment for Democracy, and it seeks to fill the gap between soft power’s reliance on attractiveness of culture and systems of government, and hard power’s reliance on the threat of force. It is less an instrument of blunt force, but rather, a highly targeted approach which seeks to “cut, razor-like, into the fabric of society” (Cardenal, Kucharczyk, Mesežnikov, & Pleschová, 2017). Here, we will seek evidence of the exercise of sharp power on Vietnamese elite, where the influence being wielded is intended to drive desired behaviours among individuals who can potentially shape the behaviour of Vietnam’s government, and more particularly, its approach to foreign policy. More specifically, in the interest of defining “elites”, the focus of our research will be on important figures in the realms of politics, business, and state-owned enterprises. While in other contexts, figures such as celebrities or academics could be relevant for consideration as elites, in Vietnam, where the party and its organs wield such vast power, and where economic stability and growth are essentially tools of regime preservation (as well as opportunities for graft and corruption), the three aforementioned categories are those with the greatest capacity to affect the contours of Vietnamese politics.

The direction of this research was inspired by the work of academics and journalists who have sought to better understand China’s influence in the world via analysing relationships with elites that have been fostered by the CCP or CCP-linked organisations and businesses. Relationship building is a normal part of statecraft, but this is particularly so in the case of China, where there is next to no separation between the CCP and the state itself; furthermore, the state and party are both intimately linked with seemingly non-governmental actors, such as financial institutions, businesses, business-oriented groups, and Chinese associations. As discussed previously, these bodies are frequently used as conduits through which to conduct influence activities.

This paper takes insights gained from these pieces of research regarding the changing nature of Chinese influence in the world, and applies it to a specific country—in this case Vietnam. It will take cues from the work of other academics who have conducted investigations

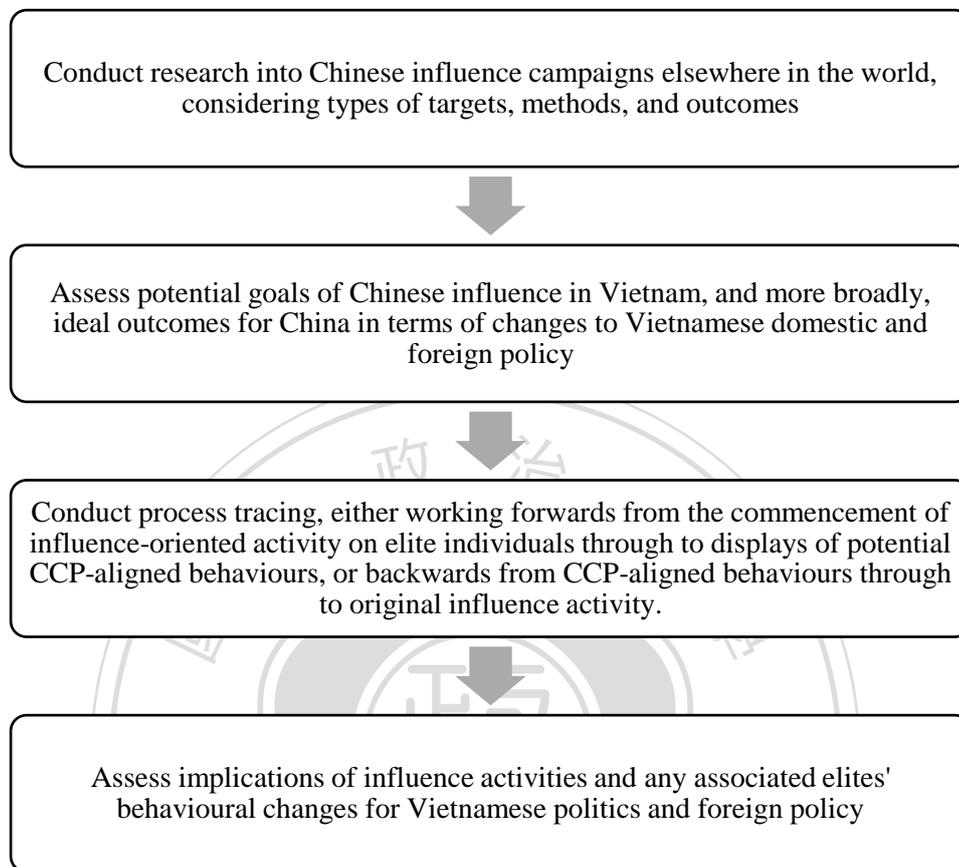
in this area, using influence patterns observed elsewhere as a starting point from which to discover similar relationship building in Vietnam. For the most part, this research utilises a qualitative approach to the data, as it involves collecting and synthesising multiple different types of information in order to develop narratives that allow for the kind of empirical analysis that would aid us in answering the overarching research question.

In the introduction to her book “Rising China’s Influence in Developing Asia,” Evelyn Goh (2016) lays out three widely recognised tools in the exercise of power: coercion, inducement, and persuasion. As Goh notes, while these are discrete concepts, they often overlap in how they are used in practice; for instance a successful businessperson who is put on the board of a Chinese company may be receiving economic inducements, might be subject to persuasion insofar as they are receiving a narrow or biased view of China’s intentions, and are experiencing coercion in the form of being subject to an implicit understanding that their holding of this position is contingent on them following the CCP party line. Though these three elements are investigated in her study in the broader context of state-to-state relations, they’re also applicable to studying how a state and its associated entities may co-opt elites.

While Goh’s research isn’t focused on the granular level of individual elites that we’re undertaking, the methodological framework that she tasked her contributing authors with using lays the groundwork for our work here. In brief, Goh’s framework is as follows:

1. Identify areas of interest or goals that China may have in its attempts to influence targets.
2. Identify whether targets had extant preferences that were either aligned with, opposed to, or neutral with regards to China’s interests.
3. Process trace targets’ behaviours in order to ascertain whether Chinese influence has been exerted on particular individuals.
4. Analyse the findings.

In order to develop a methodological approach which is suitable for the purpose of analysing the behaviours of individuals or elite groups—particularly where information may be scarce—we’ve opted to make some alterations to Goh’s framework.



*Figure 1: Methodological flow*

As can be seen, we’ve chosen to remove the step about “extant preferences”, as it may not be feasible to always gain clear insights into the views of targeted individuals and groups in this research. This is particularly so, given how poorly positive comments about China or Chinese-affiliated entities are likely to be received by the Vietnamese public. However, where possible, the research will seek to find prior statements or behaviours from the elites focused on in this work that may indicate any prior sentiments they had towards China. Furthermore, we’ve specified that our process tracing may be conducted in two different ways. The first will focus on identifying individuals who’ve developed links or had involvement or received inducements from CCP-affiliated entities, and moving chronologically forward from the point of first discernible contact, through to any potential behaviours that are aligned with Chinese interests. The second will revolve around looking for evidence of Vietnamese elites who’ve espoused pro-China views or have behaved in ways that are aligned with the CCP’s interests,

and working backwards from there to see if they may have been subject to any kind of coercion, inducement, or persuasion.

This paper will use a form of process tracing over the course of multiple case studies, where “*Chinese influence activity*” is the independent variable, and “*Behaviour of elites*” is the dependent variable. We will look at successful cases of Chinese elite influence within the region, establishing broad patterns from these cases, and comparing them to roughly congruent cases in Vietnam. These variables are broadly defined here, so as to allow for their application across a range of different contexts; for instance, the expected impact on elite behaviour of infrastructure investment in a Vietnamese village is likely to be different from the outcome of offering substantial state-bank loans to prominent Vietnamese businesspeople.

By looking at how these influence tactics have been used elsewhere and comparing them to how they’ve been deployed in Vietnam, we can both gain insights into the extent to which China is looking to influence the behaviour of its southern neighbour, as well as the extent to which it’s been *successful* in using these techniques in the Vietnamese context. In instances where a tactic seems have been applied in Vietnam, but it hasn’t yielded a clear result or it’s yielded a result that runs counter to China’s interests, it offers us an opportunity for further analysis into the other variables surrounding this particular case. In cases where individuals seem to have been subject to some attempts at Chinese influence, it may not always be possible to find evidence of behaviours that indicate the influence has resulted in outcomes that are aligned with CCP interests. Except for cases in which a target has displayed behaviours which are antithetical to CCP interests (which will also be analysed), the seeming absence of favourable behaviours doesn’t necessarily mean that the influence activity was a failure; rather, it gives us an opportunity to assess how that individual may form part of a broader strategy, or how the individual may be of use to Chinese interests in the future.

#### 1.4 Research Scope and Delimitations

The research will focus largely (but not exclusively) on the period 2010—2020, as this lines up roughly with the time during which the conservative Nguyen Phu Trong has held the position of General Secretary of the CPV. Rather than simply being an arbitrary choice so as to delimit the time of this study, his stewardship of the party offers us an interesting lens through which to analyse Vietnam. While this period is one during which Vietnam has seen substantial economic growth, it is significant due to the fact that in 2018, Phu Trong also took

on the role of President—a move which some likened to Xi Jinping’s own consolidation of power. This period also covers some part of Nguyen Tan Dung’s tenure as the Prime Minister of Vietnam. Tan Dung was broadly seen as a populist who at times stoked anti-China resentment (BBC News, 2016), and was a pivotal actor in helping to pull Vietnam into the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement<sup>3</sup>. However, his reputation as a reformer who was close to the West, as well as his likely corrupt entanglements, may have been what led to his ultimate removal from power in 2016, when he was looking to challenge the more conservative Phu Trong for the top job in the party (London, 2016). These battles between contrasting personalities give us an interesting backdrop against which to view Vietnam’s relationship with China—especially given the different leaders’ approaches.

The concept of “influence” is a broad one, and while this study seeks specifically to look at elite influence in Vietnam, even that could be a potentially unwieldy topic without some parameters in place. For the purposes of this study, we will be looking at cases where either Chinese state or state-affiliated businesses or organisations have coerced, offered inducements to, or sought to persuade (although this latter element is of less important focus) members of the Vietnamese elite in such a way that it provides benefits to either individuals or organisations, or where it assists in the consolidation of political power. As mentioned previously, our focus is to be individualised sharp power, where the focus is on affecting the behaviour of an individual or specific group of individuals.

There are some external restraints placed on the researcher’s ability to find necessary information in this context. One of the most pressing challenges in analysing the relationship between these two nations is the fact that they are both authoritarian (and nominally communist) regimes. It’s often been said of China that government figures (e.g. GDP, military spending) are unreliable—but that is in large part due to the fact that China’s economy and society are so consequential to the world. Vietnam’s is less so, and so is spoken of in these terms less often, but it, too, is a highly secretive, authoritarian regime, where the government’s success is highly contingent upon its being seen to perform for the people. Given this, it’s not always possible to be sure one is getting precise figures or information, and as such, this research won’t be relying solely upon state-issued information for its analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing the Trans-Pacific Partnership has been renamed the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, following the US’s withdrawal from the agreement and its subsequent renegotiation.

## 1.4 Outline of Thesis

The first chapter of this piece of research seeks to provide some historical context to the relationship between Vietnam and China, in particular, highlighting the oftentimes fraught nature of relations between these neighbouring states. Because of these fraught relations, and because of the domestic political risks for the CPV of appearing too close to China, we establish why the subtle tactic of “individualised sharp power” might be being deployed in Vietnam in order to achieve the CCP’s interests. This chapter also covers the questions this research seeks to answer, the methodology through which it intends to do this, and a review of existing literature which is relevant to both the nature of Chinese influence in the world, as well as Sino-Vietnamese relations and Vietnamese politics.

In the second chapter, we take a deeper look at some of the existing research into Chinese elite influence operations which have been conducted elsewhere in the region. By looking at two case studies that encompass different types of elites, different methods of influence, and different outcomes generated, we can establish a broader context in which to understand the types of activities that might be undertaken in Vietnam. This chapter will also use these case studies to outline some of the desired outcomes of Chinese influence, as well as some areas of geopolitical importance for the CCP vis-à-vis Vietnam. Finally, it will seek to establish some likely goals of Chinese influence in Vietnam.

The third chapter will look at several case studies of Vietnamese politicians, businesspeople, or state-owned enterprises that have demonstrable connections to the CCP, or PRC state-affiliated entities. Though not an exhaustive analysis of every interaction between Vietnamese and Chinese figures of significance, each case study will offer a different prism through which to view how Chinese interests may be attempting to influence their southern neighbour.

The fourth chapter of this research will look into the findings from the case studies and seek to establish what, if any, effect Chinese influence has had on Vietnamese elites, and whether this has translated into impacts on the country’s relations with China more broadly. Furthermore, it will take a broad view of the sum of the influence activities uncovered by the research, and seek to look at the implications this might have for the future of Vietnam and its relations with China.

## Chapter 2: Overview and Analysis of Chinese Influence of Elites in Southeast Asia

Based on research conducted during the literature review, it was ascertained that Cambodia and the Philippines are two of the clearest examples of countries in the region that appear to have moved into China's sphere of influence, and accordingly, have engaged in behaviours that appear to be geopolitically important to the CCP. The following chapter will outline and analyse case studies of Chinese influence in Cambodia and the Philippines to develop a clearer understanding of what tactics have been employed in this pursuit, and to give us a framework through which to analyse potentially similar tactics in the context of Vietnam.

### 2.1 Selected Case Studies of Chinese Elite Influence

#### 2.1.1 *Cambodia Under Prime Minister Hun Sen: An Enemy Turned Ally*

One of the most explicit examples of Chinese co-opting of elites is Cambodia under the leadership of Prime Minister Hun Sen—a former battalion commander with the communist Khmer Rouge who fled to Vietnam, and went on to become part of the rebel force that helped to topple the Democratic Kampuchea regime. He was appointed to the position of Deputy Prime Minister of the Vietnamese-sponsored government in 1979, then becoming Prime Minister in 1985 following the death of the incumbent leader. Of course, Cambodian history from 1979 through the 1990s is incredibly complicated and is rife with political tumult, but in the interests of brevity, what's important here is that Hun Sen remains Prime Minister of Cambodia to this day—and has amassed both a great deal of power and wealth in the process.

As discussed in Section 1.2.1 of this paper, the start of Hun Sen's consolidation of his grip on Cambodian politics can be traced back to the 1997 coup, in which he effectively ousted the party with which the CPP shared power. After the country's rocky process to democratisation following the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnam-installed regime, Hun Sen's flagrant disregard for the democratic process made him something of an international pariah. Cambodia was at the time a desperately poor country ravaged by war, but one in which much of the global community wanted to see democratic progress; as such, aid was often made conditional on certain liberalising reforms. China, on the other hand, made no such requests, and from that point on became one of the kingdom's most reliable donors, patrons, and business partners.

According to the American Enterprise Institute’s online resource, the “China Global Investment Tracker” (2021), between the years of 2005 and 2020, Chinese entities have made US\$17.7 billion worth of investments in Cambodia—a substantial figure, particularly when one considers that during the same period, the tracker indicates that neighbouring Myanmar saw US\$9.88 billion in investment, and the Philippines US\$13.65 billion, both of which are much more populous countries than Cambodia. China has also been exceptionally generous with its financial aid to Cambodia. In 2019, China pledged US\$588 million in development assistance for the next two years (Reuters, 2019)—meanwhile, preliminary reports at the time of writing from USAID show that the United States donated a total of US\$209 million in 2019 and 2020.

Of course, a high volume of aid or contracts alone isn’t necessarily cause for alarm. In the case of Cambodia, however, there is overwhelming evidence that these inflows of capital are essentially being used to prop up an authoritarian government that has routinely engaged in human rights abuses. According to Steve Heder (2011), Hun Sen has “linked his military control to economic dominance, formalizing and taking direct charge of a system where private companies provide material assistance to military and police forces”; complicit in helping to fund this is a number of powerful individuals with whom the prime minister has ties. Heder states that some of these individuals include Ly Yong Phat, Kith Meng, Choeung Sopheap, and Lao Meng Khin. These well-connected Cambodians are known as “oknha”—an honorary title given by the CPP to those who make financial contributions for the purpose of, ostensibly, national development (Verver & Dahles, 2015). For the purposes of demonstrating patterns of influence, rather than seeking to exhaustively expose connections between Cambodia’s elite cadres and China, we will background some of these oknha.

The first of these names, Ly Yong Phat, has been a sitting senator with the ruling CPP since 2006, is an advisor to Hun Sen, and is the president of the LYP Group, which has business interests across a range of vital sectors of the Cambodian economy. Further demonstrating the closeness of the senator to the Prime Minister, one of the country’s major power companies, Cambodia Electricity Private, is a joint venture between the families of Ly Yong Phat, Hun Sen, and former police chief Hok Lundy (Global Witness, 2016). One of the group’s biggest coups in recent years was the 2016 signing of a US\$1.5 billion deal with a subsidiary of China’s largest private investment group, China Minsheng Investment Group, for the development of a satellite city on the outskirts of Phnom Penh (Ting, 2016). Two years later, Hun Sen made a request during a meeting with Chinese premier Li Keqiang for the country to increase its

imports of Cambodian sugarcane; Phnom Penh Sugar, a wholly owned subsidiary of LYP Group and one of the biggest players in the local industry, would have likely been a major beneficiary of such a move (Chan, 2018).

In 2020, the government granted a concession of 600 hectares of state land in the province of Preah Sihanouk to the tycoon's family for tourism development (Narin, 2020). Of interest here is the fact that this particular province has become one of the nation's most concentrated hotspots for Chinese investment; of the US\$7 billion in construction investments made between 2017 and 2020, the vast majority had come from China (Bunthoeun, 2020). So intense was the level of investment that, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, roughly half of Preah Sihanouk's residents were Chinese nationals. The province has also gained some level of notoriety for its alleged connections to the Chinese military, with reports surfacing in 2019 that an agreement had been signed with the Cambodian government which would grant the Chinese navy exclusive partial use of a base located there (Page, Lubold, & Taylor, 2019).

Kith Meng is another prominent *oknha* who has been involved in dealings in Preah Sihanouk. He sits as the CEO of The Royal Group—a multifaceted company with investments spanning the Cambodian economy—and is renowned for his expansive use of joint ventures with foreign businesses (Verver & Dahles, 2014). The company was granted a 99-year lease by the Cambodian government in 2008 to develop on Koh Rong (an island offshore from but contained within Preah Sihanouk) in partnership with the Chinese-owned Royal Galaxy Group. Despite the fact that this is intended to be a resort development, the eventual announcement in 2019 of what the project would entail raises questions. For instance, the resort is expected to accommodate 6,000 people, even though Koh Rong has only ever hosted a fraction of this number of tourists at any one time, and an international airport is slated to be built with a runway roughly the size of the one in the capital city of Phnom Penh, despite the fact that there is already an international airport a short ferry ride away in the coastal town of Sihanoukville (Dunst & Savino, 2020). Similar concerns have been raised about the Dara Sakor tourism development in nearby Koh Kong province, which is being developed by China's Union Development Group, and would occupy 20% of the country's coastline and feature an airport with a 3-kilometre runway—the largest in Cambodia (Turton & Meta, 2020).

The development of the Lower Se San 2 (LS2) dam helps to further demonstrate the depth and breadth of Royal Group's reach in the Cambodian economy, and by extension, Kith Meng's influence. After originally signing an agreement with Electricity Vietnam International

in 2007 to develop the utility, Royal Group took a 49% share in the project in 2011 after the Vietnamese partner was unable to raise sufficient capital—despite the Cambodian conglomerate lacking any experience in power utilities. The following year, it was announced that the state-owned China Huaneng Group would take a 51% stake in the project, with Electricity Vietnam International's stake being reduced to 10%, and Royal Group's to 39% (Hameiri, 2019). During the construction of the dam, an article was uploaded to the National Police website in 2017 that accused Royal Group of conducting illegal logging in the area; the article was shortly thereafter taken down, with the website explaining that the publication had been a mistake (Seangly, 2017).

The last two *oknha* mentioned by Heder, Lao Meng Khin and Choeung Sopheap, are in fact husband and wife. Meng Khin former is a sitting senator with the CPP, the head of the development company Shukaku Inc., and a director of Pheapimex Group—a company which is owned by his wife, who herself has strong ties to Hun Sen's wife (Pye, 2014). These *oknhas* have undertaken a number of projects across key industries such as power production and mining—all in partnership with Chinese investors (Verver, 2019). One of the most controversial projects the couple has been involved with is the Boeung Kak Lake development. In 2007, the governor of Phnom Penh granted Shukaku a 99-year lease on this 133-hectare area which is home to over 4,000 people. At the time, little was known about Shukaku, but according to local news reports, Lao Meng Khin had in that same year signed an agreement with Kunming-based Yunnan International Economic and Technical Cooperation Corporation to develop the site (Strangio & Titthara, 2010). Residents who were to be displaced by the project were given a handful of compensation or relocation offers which many deemed unsatisfactory, resulting in widespread protests and unrest in the area (Po & Primiano, 2020). Resistance was dealt with aggressively. In 2010, Hun Sen announced a list of private companies that were granted official relationships with the Cambodian armed forces; Pheapimex was one of the companies named on this list (McInnes, 2015).

Cambodia has undoubtedly become a focal point for China's ambitions in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the first half of 2021 alone, Cambodia signed off on US\$2 billion worth of foreign direct investment from China, accounting for roughly two-thirds of all investment into Cambodia during this period (Vireak, 2021).

### *2.1.2 The Philippines: From International Courts, to Being Courted Internationally*

In Section 1.2.1, this paper discussed research by Baviera in Goh (2016), outlining how elites in the Philippines under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo had been co-opted by Chinese interests into the JMSU for exploitation of resources in the South China Sea. Following the end of the Arroyo presidency in 2010, the course of Sino-Philippine relations changed dramatically. In 2013, during the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, the Philippines filed a statement of claim with the Arbitral Tribunal of the UNCLOS against China. The claim, which revolved around what the Philippines saw as China's infringing on its 200-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ), came after a number of territorial issues in the contested region: the harassment of a Philippine ship conducting oil exploration in March 2011; Chinese demands that the Philippines acquire China's permission to explore for oil within the Philippine EEZ in June 2011; and a tense standoff at Scarborough Shoal in April 2012 between the Philippine Navy and Chinese surveillance ships. The use of legal mechanisms to push back on China's expansive maritime claims was, at the time, without precedent (Wiegand & Beuck, 2020).

The case against China in the Permanent Court of Arbitration had been one of the most closely-followed claims of its kind, so when the court handed down a virtually unanimous ruling in favour of the Philippines' claims in July 2016, the reaction from the newly-incumbent government under President Rodrigo Duterte was surprisingly subdued—especially surprising, given how well received the decision was within Philippine society (Castro, 2016). Despite Filipinos' overwhelming anxieties about territorial issues within the South China Sea, Duterte had spent much of his presidential campaign striking a more conciliatory tone with regard to China and its associated maritime claims—in somewhat stark contrast to President Aquino's attempts to balance against China through both legal mechanisms and by seeking international support. This more conciliatory tone wasn't fully indicative of how just strongly Duterte would pivot in the early days of his presidency. Attending a conference of businesspeople in Beijing in October 2016, having just come to office in June of that year, he announced: "In this venue, your honours, in this venue, I announce my separation from the United States... Both in military, not maybe social, but economics also... America has lost" (Blanchard, 2016). During this same meeting, Duterte's trade secretary announced the signing of US\$13.5 billion in deals.

Acquiescing to certain demands in order to develop closer economic ties with China is a calculation that many countries have made, to varying degrees. In 2015, during the Aquino government's last full year in power, Chinese investment in the Philippines was only US\$32 million; by October 2016, the Duterte government was announcing US\$15 billion in

investments from China (Remo, 2016). One could simply argue that Duterte had made an economic calculation in his pivot towards China, but analysing the motives of a figure like Duterte is at once both seemingly simple and complicated. His often-controversial public statements are typically quite blunt, and as a result his words often seem to carry a veneer of sincerity. During his various stints as mayor of Davao city between 1988 and 2016, he earned a reputation for his tough-on-crime approach; he was connected to a vigilante group known as the Davao Death Squad, which undertook summary executions of suspected criminals. Upon becoming president, Duterte announced that he would be bringing his uncompromising approach to his new role to tackle the nation's drug problem. To the shock of many, he proved to be as good as his word: according to investigations by the International Criminal Court, from July 2016 to March 2019, Duterte's encouragement of extrajudicial killing for suspected drug offenders has resulted in deaths ranging from 12,000 to 30,000 (Situation in the Republic of the Philippines, 2021). Given Duterte's seeming sincerity, when he announced in Beijing that "America has lost", or when, while travelling to the Boao Forum in 2018, he stated that he "...simply love(s) Xi Jinping" (Tomacruz, 2021), one might have concluded that he has a kind of affinity for the PRC and its authoritarian approach. However, even if he is somehow constitutionally predisposed to wanting closer ties to China, there's evidence that the improved relationship has been beneficial to him and those close to him.

In 2018, Philippine businessman Dennis Uy, through his holding company Udenna Corporation, launched a bid to turn the Mindanao Islamic Telephone Company (Mislattel) into a third major telecommunications player in what was, at the time, a duopoly between Philippine Long-Distance Telephone Company and Globe Telecom. To conduct his investment in Mislattel, Uy entered a consortium with China Telecommunications Corporation, a state-owned entity, who would provide both capital and technical expertise for growing Mislattel; prior to entering into this consortium, Udenna didn't have any significant experience operating telecommunications facilities (Heydarian, 2019). From the outset, this was a project beset by issues. Aside from the question of partial foreign ownership of critical infrastructure, which will be addressed later, Uy was one of the top donors to Duterte's presidential campaign (CNN Philippines, 2016). Upon Mislattel being granted status as the country's provisional third major telco in November 2018, several senators questioned why the consortium had been awarded the bid against other competitors, raising issues around favouritism, data privacy and security (Legaspi, 2018).

In 2019, Mislattel changed its name to Dito Telecommunity. By September 2020, Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana had announced that he had signed an agreement with Dito to allow the company to set up cell towers within the camps of the Armed Forces of the Philippines; this had been proposed a year earlier, but was delayed due to lawmakers' concerns around the potential security risks of such an arrangement (Lopez, 2020). Days after Lorenzana's announcement, a former Philippine Supreme Court Justice publicly stated that the move would be tantamount to installing a "listening device" on military soil, given Dito's heavy reliance on Chinese technology for their infrastructure (CNN Philippines, 2020). The move would form part of Dito's US\$5.15 billion market entry, and moving forward, the company has announced that it has plans for facilities at a total of 22 military locations (Lema, 2020). When this consortium between Udenna and China Telecommunications was initially put together, it was done so in a regulatory environment that prohibited full foreign ownership of public utilities. By 2020, this was loosened by a new policy that would effectively remove restrictions on telecommunications investment, opening the door for greater foreign ownership of utilities in this category (International Trade Administration, 2020). As such, in order to gain a foothold in the Philippine market in 2018, China Telecommunications was legally required to work with a local partner—hence their cooperation with Uy.

Uy would go on to form a consortium with China Harbour Engineering Company to undertake a 265-hectare land reclamation project in Manila Bay worth US\$1.2 billion. Again, this partnership raised concerns in the Philippines, given that China Harbour Engineering Company is a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company (CCCC)—one of the Chinese firms responsible for helping to build and militarise islands in the South China Sea. When asked if he had misgivings about working with a company that was involved in activities that infringe upon the Philippines' maritime sovereignty, a spokesperson for Uy stated that he "is not concerned" (Lema & Morales, 2020). In 2019, a consortium between CCCC and local airline service company MacroAsia Corporation won a bid for a US\$10 billion redevelopment of Sangley Point International Airport. The airport is located in Cavite City, which sits on a small archipelago in Manila Bay that is home to both Philippine air and naval bases, and as such is considered to be of great strategic importance (Mangosing, 2019). Despite winning the bid, the governor of Cavite cancelled the joint venture in 2021, citing "deficiencies" in the submission put forward by the partners. CCCC has since indicated its intent to bid again on the project.

While it's difficult to quantify how much Duterte has gained from the dealings of Uy (and potentially many others like him who have worked with Chinese partners in the Philippines), there is strong evidence that the CCP has looked favourably upon the direction of his administration, and provided support accordingly. In July 2021, former Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario claimed that he'd received intelligence from what he referred to as a "highly trustworthy international institution" that Chinese officials had bragged about helping to get Duterte elected in 2016 (Tomacruz, 2021). Though one could question the veracity of such a statement, reporting and events from his time in office, at the very least, indicate that his administration has been on the receiving end of external help. For example, July 2017 saw the emergence of reports that his party, Partido Demokratiko ng Pilipino-Lakas ng Bayan, had engaged in talks with the CCP to provide training to its members at a party school in Fujian province (Pazzibugan, 2017). By May of the following year, Duterte publicly announced that Xi Jinping would not allow him to be removed from office (Batino & Calonzo, 2018), and in September 2019, Duterte stated that Xi would offer the Philippines a controlling stake in an energy venture in the South China Sea—provided that Manila set aside the UNCLOS decision (Petty, 2019). By 2020, Facebook was announcing that it had removed hundreds of fake accounts connected to Chinese individuals and the Philippine military that had been spreading political propaganda in the Philippines; collectively, these accounts were reaching hundreds of thousands of people (Davidson & Fonbuena, 2020).

When del Rosario levelled the accusation that Duterte had had assistance from China in the 2016 election, Duterte of course objected. Even if his objections regarding the election were grounded in truth, it's almost impossible to say that the administration he's overseen since has been free of outside assistance.

## 2.2 Observations from the Case Studies Regarding the Nature of Chinese Elite Influence

The above case studies represent two of the most prominent instances in Southeast Asia of Chinese influence over elites. Both represent cases where the country's relationship with China appears to have been proactively changed by actions undertaken by entities from or directly related to the Chinese government, and both represent cases where this influence appears to be providing the CCP with geopolitical benefits. There's a substantial amount of

overlap between these two case studies, and this overlap offers us a useful rubric through which to view China's actions in Vietnam.

The most obvious factor in these case studies is the flow of Chinese money into these countries. In the case of Cambodia, it appears to have been the instigating factor for Hun Sen's change of heart vis-à-vis China, while in the Philippines, it's less obvious that there was any kind of Chinese financial commitment to Rodrigo Duterte prior to his winning of the election—though this clearly changed post-election with the sudden influx of money into a range of projects across the country. In both countries, a change of stance at the head of the government has resulted in the flow of Chinese money increasing dramatically.

Looking more closely at how these funds are directed, typically we see that they are directed towards the politically connected. This is plainly obvious in Cambodia, where Hun Sen's *oknha* appear to be among the main beneficiaries of these funds, but also apparent in the case of Dennis Uy in the Philippines, given that he was one of the leading financial supporters of Duterte's presidential campaign. Often, we see Chinese banks and firms going into partnership with companies run by these well-connected individuals; given the nature of political patronage in these countries, as well as the widespread existence of graft, it's not inconceivable that the political leaders and their allies that are greenlighting these projects are receiving kickbacks for doing so. This is compounded by the fact that Chinese loans tend to lack transparency, and are coming from an economy where the need for "additional payments" has often factored into the cost of doing business.

One point of divergence between Cambodia and the Philippines is how dissent to these China-linked projects is dealt with. In Cambodia, when citizens have protested developments that either result in land displacement, or environmental degradation, the country's security forces have tended to suppress them using extreme force. This appears to be less common in similar situations in the Philippines, but there is at least one common thread here: based on Facebook's deletion of fake accounts connected to Chinese individuals and the Philippine military, there does at least appear to be some level of collusion between Chinese actors and local security forces to suppress dissent, albeit in much less heavy-handed ways.

In both countries, once local partnerships and capital flows have been established, there is a pattern of seeking developments in sensitive or strategic geographic locations, such as coastal areas or military installations. As outlined in the case studies, often these partnerships are directed towards the development of critical infrastructure, such as airports, deep water

ports, or telecommunications facilities. To be sure, there is also a great deal of investment in seemingly more innocuous projects, such as real estate, hotels, and other tourism-oriented developments, however, at the same time, it's possible that the funnelling of capital into these projects offers an opportunity to direct funds through local political patronage networks.

Perhaps the most pressing question is how these activities have influenced the leaders of these nations. Is there some kind of a quid pro quo? The case of Cambodia is clear: Hun Sen, in accepting the assistance of China, has in turn acquiesced to the CCP's demands when it comes to handling ASEAN's attempts to deal with issues in the South China Sea. Funds from Chinese sources, whether coming through patronage networks, or going directly to Cambodia's security forces, has enabled Hun Sen to strengthen his control over the populace, and accordingly, bolster his own leadership.

As for Duterte, he has made concessions to China within the Philippines' maritime boundaries, and has chosen to pursue infrastructure projects that members of his own government and armed forces have questioned on national security grounds. Furthermore, he's taken these positions despite substantial opposition from the Philippine public. As mentioned in the case study, it's difficult to ascertain whether Duterte is coming from a place of genuine affinity for China, a place of geopolitical pragmatism, or of sheer self-interest—it may well be all of the above. However, as evidenced by the amount of money that's been poured into the Philippines by Chinese entities, by the use of fake social media accounts to direct public opinion, and by the possibility that China directly intervened in the 2016 election to hand Duterte the presidency, it's hard to argue against the likelihood that his pivot to China doesn't involve the repaying of some kind of favour.

The above case studies and analysis will be used as a lens through which to view the relationship between China and Vietnam's elites, but it's important to note that the same level of conclusiveness is unlikely to be possible: Vietnam's politics are notoriously opaque, and every media outlet that operates inside the country is, in effect, under the control of the state. While critical articles about Chinese activities in Vietnam do appear in the local media, one must also accept that the reporting we see has more or less been state sanctioned, and that a more robust journalistic environment could reveal a great deal more. Finally, given the extreme public sensitivity in Vietnam regarding China—sensitivity that has led to violent riots and protests in the past—the likelihood of Vietnamese political leaders publicly embracing China in the ways that Hun Sen or Duterte have is very low. Therefore, we need to rely on some level

of inference in analysing the relationships between China and Vietnamese elites, but it's possible to arrive at reasonable conclusions even in cases where some elements of the picture are obscured.



## Chapter 3. Case Studies of Chinese Influence of Elites in Vietnam

The following chapter is a selection of case studies that offer insights into how political and business elites in Vietnam have interacted with Chinese actors, process tracing forwards from either a clear starting point of contact or collaboration, or tracing backwards from noted examples of behaviours exhibited by Vietnamese actors that appear to benefit Chinese interests. Though there is some overlap between the case studies selected, each was chosen due to the significance of the evidence that was able to be unearthed, for the ways in which they demonstrate varying approaches to influence, and for the potential implications they may have for the future of Vietnam's domestic affairs and the future of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship more broadly.

### 3.1 The Vietnam Cybersecurity Law and Security Bureaucracy

On January 1, 2019, Vietnam's Law on Cybersecurity came into effect; according to the government's online news outlet, the new law "protects national security and ensures social order and safety on cyberspace, and responsibilities of agencies, organizations and individuals" (Loan, 2018). On the day the law came into effect, then-Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (later to become President) announced in a speech that the law was intended to help create "social consensus", and that "those abusing the freedom of information and free speech... would receive appropriate punishments" (McKirdy, 2019). From the moment the law was proposed in June 2017, it proved controversial among everyone from international human rights groups to local activists, many of whom were concerned about the sweeping nature of the law, particularly given the Vietnamese government's already harsh approach to dealing with dissidents.

As many feared, the Law on Cybersecurity put unprecedented pressure on online speech. In 2019, the year the law came into effect, online activists comprised 40% of all arrests for dissent-related crimes; in previous years, the vast majority of these types of arrests were of citizens involved in in-person protests or banned civil society groups (Thayer C. A., 2020). It is, of course, not unexpected that a draconian law regulating online speech would be enacted by an authoritarian, one-party government that has a long history of being hostile to opposing voices—Vietnam places 175<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2021 Press Freedom Ranking, two spots above China, and one below Iran (2021). What's of interest here is the content of the law itself, and the timeline of its proposal and enactment.

At the end of 2016, the National Assembly of China proposed its own Law on Cybersecurity that would come into effect on June 1, 2017. Within a week of the Chinese law coming into effect, Vietnam's own Ministry of Public Security (MPS) put forth its own proposal for a draft law for managing cybersecurity (Long, 2017). The timeline alone was enough to raise questions about the origins of the law, but the draft itself, according to Reporters Without Borders, was "largely a copy-and-paste version of the cybersecurity law that took effect in China" (2018). Vietnam's Law on Cybersecurity was passed in the national assembly by 432 votes to 15.

At the time, dissident blogger Manh Kim levelled a blunt, if unsubstantiated, accusation against the government that seemed to capture what many were suspicious of. He wrote: "We know that the Vietnamese cybersecurity police are trained in China... We cannot rule out that China has helped Vietnam to design and equip its cybersecurity infrastructure. This reflects Party Chief Trong's determination. Never before has the intention to push Vietnam into China's orbit been as clear as it is now" (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). The MPS is certainly no stranger to the use of repressive tactics, having effectively been trained and modernised by the East German Stasi from the mid-60s through to the fall of the Berlin Wall (Grossheim, 2021). Though Manh Kim didn't provide hard evidence in his post of collaboration between the MPS and its Chinese counterparts, a closer look at the ministry's activities and personnel seems to suggest a very close relationship with China's internal security apparatus.

Firstly, it's important to note that the current Minister of Public Security, To Lam, was appointed to his position in January 2016 during the CPV's 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress. This particular congress was seen by many observers as a win for the conservative faction of the party, with then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung (who was seen as more of a modernizer and closer to the US) stepping down after attempting to ascend to a role on the CPV's Central Committee—this would have given him an opportunity to challenge the party's General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (BBC News, 2016). It was also during this congress that a report was handed down that emphasised the role social media was playing in giving visibility to dissenting opinions. This led to the creation by the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) of "Task Force 47", a propaganda unit staffed by 10,000 personnel whose job it is to counter potentially anti-party or anti-state commentary online (Tran, 2020); by 2020, reports had emerged that this taskforce had come under the control of the MPS (Bemma, 2020). The unit bears more than a

passing resemblance to China's "Internet Commentators" (網絡評論員), the CCP's paid activists who are tasked with spreading patriotic messaging online.

According to public records from the MPS's own site, between the time that the Law on Cybersecurity was proposed and when it came into effect, representatives from the ministry met with Chinese government representatives at least six times. The following is a brief timeline of these meetings, along with direct quotations from the ministry's official statements:

- On September 29, 2017, the MPS's Senior Lieutenant General Bui Van Nam received a delegation from China's International Cooperation Department under the Ministry of State Security. The two sides "...agreed to soon reach a cooperation mechanism between the Ministry of Public Security of Vietnam and the Ministry of State Security of China as well as between functional units of the two ministries..." (Nguyen, 2017).
- On December 15, 2017, Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Thanh, Deputy Minister of Vietnam's MPS met with a delegation from China's Ministry of State Security, led by Deputy Director of the Liaoning Provincial Security Bureau, Liao Miaowen. During the meeting, Van Thanh noted that he intended for the two sides to "... continue to promote the exchange of delegations at all levels, particularly at the high level... (to) improve the quality of information exchange, especially strategic information... promote cooperation in the fields of cyber security, international terrorism, traditional security and non-traditional security" (Tien, 2017).
- On January 24, 2018, Minister of Public Security To Lam met with Chinese Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong, thanking the ambassador and the Chinese Embassy for their "...large contributions to the development of the relationship between the two countries in general, and intensive cooperation between the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security and Chinese law enforcement agencies..." (Nguyen, 2018).
- On October 11, 2018, Minister of Public Security To Lam met with several officials as part of a trip to China, including Secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee's Commission of Political and Legal Affairs Guo Shengkun, Chinese Minister of State Security Chen Wenqing, and Commander of Chinese People's Armed Police Wang Ning. During the meeting with the Ministry of State Security, the Vietnam MPS agreed to "...continue to support each other in training personnel and improving law enforcement capacity for police officers as well as investing in equipment and vehicles for ensuring security." Lam also visited the People's Police University of

China, where he met with members of the Vietnamese People's Police Academy who were training there (Anh, 2018).

- On November 29, 2018, Deputy Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Thanh received a delegation of the Party Committee of China's Public Security Ministry. Van Thanh "...emphasized that the cooperation between the Ministry of Public Security of Vietnam and the law enforcement agencies of China in ensuring security and order has achieved various good outcomes, contributing to stabilizing the political situation of each country..." (Anh H. , 2018).
- From December 16-21, 2018, Deputy Minister of Public Security Bui Van Nam led a delegation to join the to join the 4<sup>th</sup> Deputy Minister-level security dialogue in China, where the "...two sides agreed to further promote cooperation in a more profound manner under the directions of the two Public Security Ministers and in line with the common perceptions of the leaders of the two Parties..." (Bui, 2018).

Given that all of the above are based on accounts from the MPS's own mouthpiece, one would perhaps expect to see the articles littered with effusive praise for the relationships they've built with their guests or hosts. However, even in official statements, To Lam is open about how the MPS's cooperation with Chinese counterparts has enabled the CPV to further consolidate its power. During a video conference with China's Secretary of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs Guo Shengkun on September 16 2021, To Lam expressed that "cooperation between the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security and China's law enforcement agencies has *played a significant role in protecting the absolute leadership of the CCP and the CPV* [emphasis added] and socialist systems of the two countries..." (Nghiep, 2021).

If the CCP's security organs are helping to strengthen the capabilities of the MPS, it stands to reason that the CPV would be appreciative of this relationship—a relationship which ultimately may be helping the party to maintain its authority. When China's Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi visited Vietnam in early 2020, this appreciation appears to have been on full show from the highest levels of the party and government: he was hosted by Nguyen Phu Trong, who at the time held the positions of both General Secretary and President, as well as then-Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (Nhan Dan, 2021).

### 3.2 PetroVietnam's Conflict-of-Interest Loans

Established in 1975, PetroVietnam (PVN) is a state-owned enterprise whose operations revolve largely around the exploration, extraction, and production of petroleum and gas, as well as interests in products such as fertilizers and textiles (Petrovietnam, 2018). Currently, the company is led by Hoang Quoc Vuong, who holds the title of Chairman of the Board; formerly, he had been Vietnam's Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade (Minh, 2020). Quoc Vuong's direct appointment from the ranks of the government ministry is illustrative of a long history of extremely porous lines of division between the government and party on the one hand, and one of its most important SOEs.

To be sure, due to Vietnam's heavy reliance on fossil fuels, PVN plays a pivotal role in the country's developing economy—according to the company's website, in the first half of 2021 alone, it was responsible for the exploitation of 5.5 million tonnes of crude oil, and 4.16 billion cubic metres of gas (PetroVietnam, 2021). At the same time, the company has often found itself at loggerheads with China over issues in the South China Sea, given that Vietnam's claimed maritime areas contain large quantities of fossil fuels. Recent years have seen some dramatic developments in these tensions. In August 2017, Repsol, a Spanish energy company, announced that it had been ordered to suspend its drilling operations in Vietnam's Block 136-3 (Rodríguez, 2017), which is located in the stretch of ocean between southern Vietnam and the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Repsol, along with United Arab Emirates firm Mubadala Development, had been given drilling rights to this block by PVN. Then, in March 2018, Repsol announced that it was halting a separate drilling operation at the adjacent Block 07/03 (Hayton, 2018). According to the Spanish company's executives, they had received the order to stop from the very highest echelons of the Vietnamese government. By 2020, reports emerged that PVN would be paying Repsol roughly US\$1 billion in compensation for the cancellation of its drilling rights in these two projects (Hayton, 2020).

According to research conducted by the AidData research lab at the Global Research Institute at William & Mary's, in the decade or so before these incidents, PVN was the recipient of multiple loans or financial disbursements from Chinese state-backed institutions. These are outlined in the table below.

<b>Commitment Year</b>	<b>Receiving Party</b>	<b>Funding Party</b>	<b>Project and Loan Details</b>
2009	PetroVietnam	Bank of China	Contribution of unknown amount to US\$250 million syndicated loan for Dung Quat Oil Refinery Construction Project. AidData estimates BOC to have committed 10% of the project's funding.
2011	PetroVietnam Ca Mau Fertilizer Company Limited (PVCFC)	China Eximbank	Contribution of US\$154 million to a US\$220 million syndicated buyer's credit loan for Ca Mau Fertilizer Plant Construction Project
2011	PetroVietnam	China Development Bank	Contributed US\$673 million to buyer's credit loan of US\$844 million 1200MW Vung Ang 1 Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction Project
2013	PetroVietnam	China Development Bank	Contributed \$28 million to \$795.25 million syndicated loan for 1200MW Thai Binh 2 Coal-Fired Power Plant Construction Project

*Figure 2: Chinese funding flows to PetroVietnam and its subsidiaries (AidData, 2021)*

Of these four projects that received funding from Chinese entities, three of them—Dung Quat, Ca Mau, and Vung Ang—occurred under the watch of Dinh La Thang, who held the title of Chairman of PVN from October 2006 to August 2011, later becoming the Minister of Transport, and then the Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee. La Thang, who was widely viewed as an ally of the deposed former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, was sentenced to 13 years' jail in 2018 on account of his mismanagement of PVN, which had caused massive losses for the state (BBC News, 2018). According to Vietnam analyst Carlyle Thayer: “Thang failed to supervise his subordinates at PVN and he approved investment decisions that

with hindsight appear unwise... My understanding is that Secretary General Trong and a small group spent seven months studying this case before acting. The corruption and mismanagement issues at PVN were too big to ignore” (2017).

The project in Thai Binh had actually commenced construction during La Thang’s chairmanship of the company—the loan from China Development Bank (CDB) was only committed in 2013, after the end of his tenure—and so his mismanagement of this project also formed part of his prosecution. La Thang’s sentencing occurred during a raft of prosecutions of dozens of PVC management over issues around graft and embezzlement. One of the other high-profile cases was that of Trinh Xuan Thanh, the former Chairman of PetroVietnam Construction, who received a life sentence for corrupt practices regarding the building of both the Vung Ang and the Thai Binh power facilities (Vy, 2017).

The propriety of PVN and its subsidiaries taking loans from Chinese entities is, at the very least, questionable—especially in light of the incidents in 2017 and 2018 involving Repsol’s withdrawal from its operations in the area. However, these choices become far more difficult to defend when one considers that, as far back as 2008, China had forced Exxon Mobil to cancel a joint exploration deal with Vietnam in the South China Sea (Bergin, 2008). Then, on two separate occasions in 2011 and 2012, Chinese vessels severed the survey cables of ships being operated by PVN (Watts, 2011) (Page, 2012), at a time when PVN was actively taking loans from Chinese state-owned banks.

### 3.3 Special Economic Zones and Sovereignty Concerns

In June 2018, tens of thousands of Vietnamese citizens poured into the streets across six provinces to protest the government’s attempts to pass the Special Zone Act, a bill that would have allowed for the creation of three special economic zones (SEZ) in coastal areas of north, central, and southern Vietnam. The protests—rare events in Vietnam—gained global media coverage, with particular attention paid to the fact that the concerns about the law stemmed from Vietnamese fears of these SEZs essentially turning into concessions for Chinese interests. The bill was due to be voted on by the parliament on June 9, but the widespread unrest pushed lawmakers to delay the vote until October of that year; it was later postponed indefinitely.

In the years leading up to the proposal of the law and the ensuing protests, Chinese FDI into Vietnam had increased dramatically. Vietnamese fears of potential threats to their sovereignty from China run deep, given the history of colonialism, border conflict, and maritime issues in the South China Sea. Furthermore, it's not implausible that many in Vietnam looked to the experiences of neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, where some Chinese-dominated SEZs have essentially become autonomous administrative districts unto themselves, and where gambling, human trafficking, and environmental degradation are common. However, despite the overwhelming outpouring of anger that was covered in the international press, very little concrete evidence was given that these zones would indeed turn into pockets of Chinese influence. At the time of the unrest, Nguyen Chi Dung, the Minister of Planning and Investment, was quoted as saying: "Not one word of the special-zone bill draft bill mentions China" (Tomiyaama, 2018). This was a sentiment echoed by many other lawmakers.

Among one of the most controversial aspects of the bill was the ability it gave to foreign investors to lease land for up to 99 years—an inclusion which seemed unusual, given that investors in Vietnam's existing industrial parks and economic zones are typically offered leases of up to 70 years. The proposed cost of US\$70 billion also drove concerns (Chi, 2018), particularly given that Vietnam is already home to 366 industrial parks and 17 coastal economic zones which are still well below achieving full occupancy (Thuy N. , 2020). Opponents also questioned whether the SEZs would achieve their stated goals of encouraging investments in new eco-friendly and technologically advanced industries; according to economist Vu Quang Viet, who had previously been an advisor to Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, the draft law "...mainly focuses on property and casino markets" (Fawthrop, 2019).



*Figure 3: Map of proposed SEZs in Vietnam (Kuaycharoen, Longcharoen, Chotiwan, Sukin, & Researchers, 2020)*

Finally, the locations of the three proposed SEZs (noted above in Figure 3) were all seen as potentially advantageous to Chinese strategic interests: Van Don is located in Quang Ninh, which shares a land border with China’s Guangxi region; Bac Van Phong is situated near a major Vietnamese military port in Cam Ranh Bay; and Phu Quoc is an island that sits just 20 kilometres from a Chinese deep-water port in Cambodia (Luc, 2018). Potentially compounding these concerns, Chinese investors have for years been purchasing vast swathes of property in strategically sensitive coastal regions of Vietnam, often through the use of intermediary parties in order to get around legal restrictions—a fact about which the Ministry of Defence has publicly acknowledged its concern. This is exemplified in the central city of Da Nang, where

Chinese nationals were found to have purchased over 20 pieces of land around the Nuoc Man Airbase (Chinh, 2020).

Given the pre-existing suspicions of Vietnamese citizens about Chinese territorial encroachment, all of the above could simply be put down to coincidence rather than ulterior motives; indeed, the Vietnamese blogosphere and social media often descend into conspiratorial thinking when it comes to questions of Chinese involvement in the economy and politics. However, a closer look at the creation of this law, and the people behind it, does raise questions.

In a paper on the concept of legal transplants (i.e. where a donor state influences or shapes the legal and policymaking process in a recipient state), Erie and Ha (2021) analyse the process through which the Special Zone Act came to be. Despite the opaque nature of both parties involved, the authors noted that “...accessible data reveal that the Vietnamese government received extensive technical support from Chinese experts, particularly the China Centre for Special Economic Zones Research (CCSEZR) at Shenzhen University...”, with the Quang Ninh government having conducted at least eight meetings with the CCSEZR. Among these meetings, which included workshops and training programmes, a major conference was held in March 2014 that saw participation of hundreds of people, including CPV state leaders, national officials, and officials from Khanh Hoa and Kien Giang (Erie & Ha, 2021)—the two other provinces which were to become part of the SEZ plan.

Although the Special Zone Act was set to be voted on in mid-2018, a law on the creation of SEZs had been under development for a number of years prior. Two of the key players in pushing the Special Zone Act were Pham Minh Chinh, who at the time was a member of the CPV Politburo, and Nguyen Tan Dung, the Prime Minister who was deposed in 2016 (Vuving, 2019). One of Minh Chinh’s first major postings was as Secretary of the Party Committee of Quang Ninh in 2011, during which time he was actively seen as courting Chinese investors, as well as driving some of the aforementioned meetings between the Quang Ninh government and Chinese delegations. By 2018 he had been appointed to Vice-Chairperson of the National Steering Committee for the Establishment of Special Administrative-Economic Units, and while holding this position, he led another delegation to Shenzhen further look into the city’s SEZ model (Nguyen H. H., 2021). Minh Chinh ascended to the role of Prime Minister in 2021.

The other driving force behind this law, former Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, also had close connections to one of the three provinces slated for the creation of an SEZ. Tan

Dung's son, Nguyen Thanh Nghi, was appointed to the position of Deputy Party Secretary of Kien Giang in February 2014, and by 2015, was elevated to the role of provincial Party Secretary. While in this position, his father, in his role as Prime Minister, authorised the development of a casino exclusively for foreign patrons on Phu Quoc Island—a major tourist hub in Kien Giang province (Hoa, 2015). Though there's no clear evidence of Thanh Nghi's involvement with Chinese entities during his time in the Kien Giang government, given the starting date of his tenure, it appears more than likely that he took part in some of the meetings with CCSEZR. After Minh Chinh's ascendancy to the Prime Ministership, Thanh Nghi was appointed Minister of Construction in 2021 (Quy, 2021).

### 3.4 Geleximco Group's Infrastructure Ambitions

Tan Son Nhat International Airport is the largest airport servicing the south of Vietnam. Located close to the centre of Ho Chi Minh City, the site for the airport has its origins in the 1930s during the French colonial period. Despite many upgrades and expansions over the decades, the facility has struggled to keep up with the flow of passengers; at present, the airport's design can accommodate 25 million people per year, but by 2017, the airport was seeing annual arrivals close to 40 million (Minh & Tran, 2021). Given the airport's proximity to the city, continuing to expand its size had become unfeasible.

Tan Son Nhat's issues have been apparent to the government long before arrivals were seriously outstripping its capacity. In 2006, a master plan was approved for a new facility, Long Thanh International Airport, which would sit further outside of the city and offer passenger capacities quadruple that of Tan Son Nhat, as well as a cargo capacity of 5 million tonnes (Thuy, 2021). With Vietnam's economy having seen substantial growth in recent decades, due in part to both increased trade and tourism, Long Thanh would be one of the country's most important pieces of infrastructure in recent memory.

Among the proposals submitted by various enterprises and investors to build the airport, one in particular gained a great deal of attention due to the parties involved. In October 2016, a proposal was submitted to the Ministry of Transport by Geleximco Group, a Vietnamese conglomerate that was founded as an export-import company in the 1990s, but now has interests in the real estate, energy, and finance sectors. The proposal was jointly submitted with Hong Kong United Investors Holding (HUI), which has the backing of multiple financial institutions in the territory (Vy, 2017), and is a subsidiary of the Wuhan-based Sunshine Kaidi

New Energy Group, a construction and engineering firm that specialises in biomass energy—but one lacks any clear experience in constructing major airports (Vu, 2017). According to a statement by the consortium, the work could be completed within five years for the “lowest possible cost” (Nikkei Asia, 2017)—a fairly confident claim for what would be one of the country’s biggest and most expensive pieces of infrastructure in its history.

Geleximco was first established in 1993 with approval from the Prime Minister as the Hanoi General Import-Export Company. According to the company’s website, as of 2018, Geleximco employs roughly 10,000 people and owns assets with a total value of VND52 trillion—approximately US\$2.76 billion based on current exchange rates (Geleximco, 2018). Geleximco is also a strategic shareholder of ABBank, which is one of Vietnam’s biggest private commercial joint stock banks. The Chairman of Geleximco is a man by the name of Vu Van Tien, who also holds the position of Vice Chairman of ABBank. Given Geleximco’s myriad interests across a range of important sectors in Vietnam, and his central role in a major private bank, one may assume that Van Tien has some level of political connectedness; this is essentially confirmed by his professional profile in ABBank’s 2020 annual report, which states that Van Tien “...has been honoured with many awards by the Government and the State of Vietnam for his great contribution to Vietnam’s economic development such as the Second-class Labor Medal, Third-class Labor Medal; Medal of ‘Devotion for the Young Generation’; Certificate of Merit from the Prime Minister of Vietnam; Certificate of Merit from the People’s Committee of Hanoi; Red Star Award; 2015 Brilliant Citizen Award” (ABBank, 2021). Furthermore, while attending a Geleximco anniversary event, a Vietnamese reporter noted the presence of members from the highest ranks of the party and politburo (Hung, 2020).

According to research from AidData (2021), the relationship between Geleximco and Chinese entities appears to have begun in December 2011, when, during an official visit to Vietnam by the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee (which at the time included then-Vice President Xi Jinping), Chinese financial institutions signed off on a number of loans of undisclosed amounts to the company. Around this time, it was announced that the China Development Bank would lead the formation of a syndicate to provide US\$692 million in financing to Thang Long Thermo-Power Joint-Stock Company, whose parent company is Geleximco, for the building of a 600MW coal-fired power plant in Quang Ninh province. The company that would design and build the plant was Sunshine New Energy Group and one its subsidiaries (凯迪电力, 2011). By 2016, Geleximco, in partnership with HUI, was making proposals to the Ministry of Transport to make major investments in

Vietnam's North-South expressway and North-South high-speed railway, both of which would be crucial pieces of infrastructure to help foster economic growth (Minh T. , 2016). Geleximco then made an aggressive play in 2018 to take a 75% stake in the troubled Quynh Lap 1 power plant—again in partnership with HUI—with Chinese banks providing 80% of the investment capital (Vietnam Investment Review, 2018). Presently, Geleximco is developing a major tourism and leisure destination of the coast of the northern city of Hai Phong, which will include hotels, resorts, a golf course and amusement parks. Despite the company's page lacking any information about the investor behind the project, the records of the Hai Phong Department of Planning and Investment website indicates that officials from the city met with representatives from Geleximco and its Shanghai-based partners during planning for investment in the project (Hoa, Hung, & Cuong, n.d.).

### 3.5 Other Investment Activities of Interest

The following section contains four brief case studies that further contribute to the image of China's activities in Vietnam, but either lack sufficient information to build a larger case study, or where the involvement of particular Vietnamese elites is difficult to process trace. Nevertheless, these will help to better contextualise the preceding case studies, and will form part of the analysis in Chapter 4.

#### 3.5.1 *The Abandoned Port in Vung Tau*

Vung Tau is a coastal city to the southeast of Ho Chi Minh City which plays a major role in the country's offshore oil industry. Just offshore from the city is the Cuu Long Basin, a maritime area rich in fossil fuels that accounts for 65% of the petroleum contracts of state-owned oil and gas company PVN (see Figure 4 below).

## E&P: Vietnam Sedimentary Basins

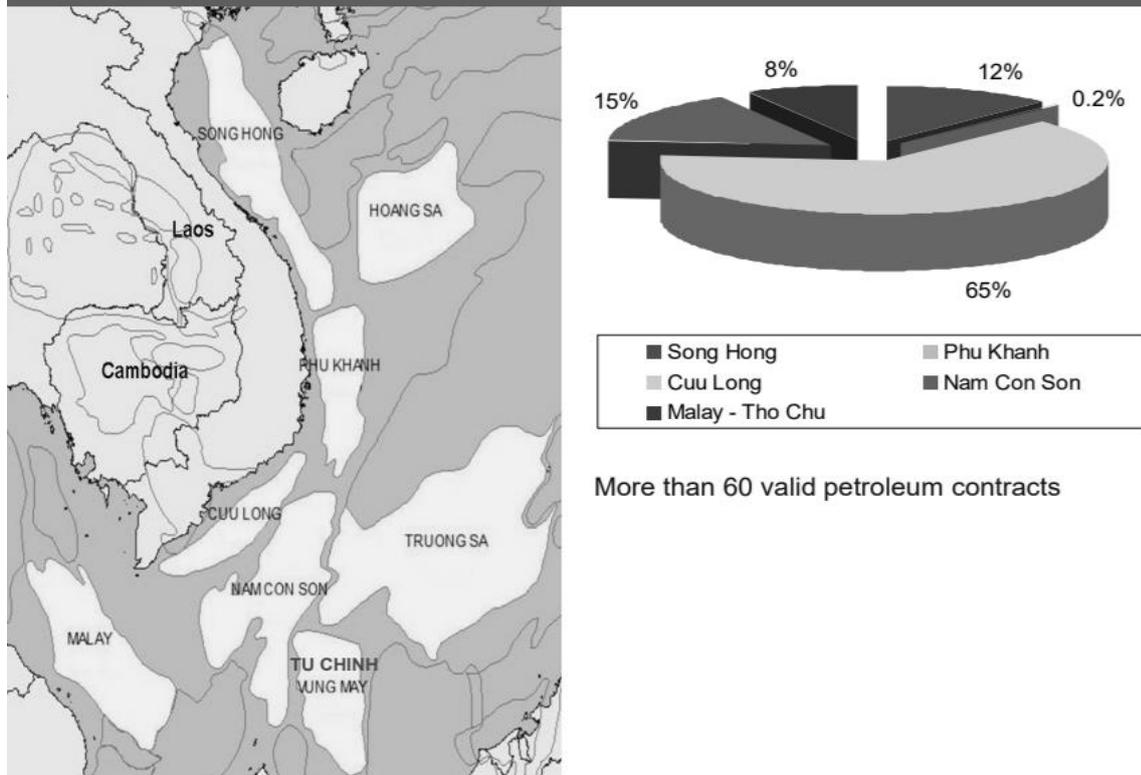


Figure 4: Map of PetroVietnam’s petroleum contracts (Corporate Planning Division, Vietnam Oil & Gas Group, 2018)

In April 2010, China Merchant Holdings (CMH) entered into a joint venture with two local entities, BSPD and PVS<sup>4</sup>, to create Vung Tau International Container Port Joint Stock Company (VICP), which would “construct, develop, and operate the Vung Tau International Container Port”. According to the joint venture documentation, the charter capital for the joint stock company would be VND1 trillion—US\$54 million at the time—of which CMH would commit roughly half (China Merchant Holdings (International) Company Limited, 2010).

The project, which would have had multiple berths capable of taking container ships and logistics facilities, was to be worth US\$1 billion, and would have transformed the city into

<sup>4</sup> The following definitions of the parties involved are taken directly from the joint venture agreement:

- “BSPD, a joint stock company established and operating under the laws of Vietnam in which Vinalines is a majority founding shareholder holding 41% of its charter capital. Vinalines is a leading shipping company in Vietnam. The remaining balance of BSPD’s charter capital is held by Phu An Thanh Joint Stock Company as to 39%, Saigon Port One Member Limited Liability Company (a subsidiary of Vinalines) as to 10% and An Phu Joint Stock Company as to 10%.”
- “PVS is a Vietnamese company engaged in the development of ports and related container terminals operations. Vietnam National Oil and Gas Group, a state-owned oil company incorporated and existing under the laws of Vietnam, is the single largest shareholder of PVS.”

a major entrepot. However, the joint venture was put on hold soon after due to rising territorial tensions between China and Vietnam in the South China Sea (Montlake, 2013). As it turns out, the collapse of the joint venture may have been a fortuitous turn of events for those on the Vietnamese side of the deal: in December 2017, Sri Lanka handed over the Hambantota Port Development Project on a 99-year lease to CMH after the government was unable to pay back its Chinese creditors for the project.

### *3.5.2 The Vinh Tan Power Plants*

Located in the coastal southern province of Binh Thuan, the Vinh Tan power complex is a facility comprising of four separate coal-fired power plants with a combined output of 6,225 megawatts. This would make it one of the highest output power facilities in the country, and thus one of the most critical pieces of infrastructure in Vietnam—especially given the growth of energy-intensive industries in the south. According to research from AidData (2021), since 2009, this facility has received close to US\$4 billion in investment from a consortium of Chinese banks, including Bank of China, Export-Import Bank of China, China Construction Bank, and China Development Bank. The amount of funds directed to the first plant alone, Vinh Tan 1, represented China’s biggest investment in Vietnam at the time (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2017).

The structuring of these investments has resulted in Chinese state-backed interests owning more than half of the complex’s overall shares, while estimates put the Vietnamese state’s ownership of the facility at no more than 30%. This ownership varies across the plants in the complex; Vinacomin, a state-owned Vietnamese mining company, only owns a 5% stake in Vinh Tan 1, while the rest of the shares are owned by Chinese interests (吳書嫻, 2018).

Granting what effectively amounts to Chinese control over the power supply of a large portion of southern Vietnam has caused significant public concern. Despite an expectation that the facility would help to provide local jobs, much of the operation is being run by Chinese nationals. Additionally, the nearby province of Khanh Hoa is home to a major series of military installations in Cam Ranh Bay, which are strategically important given their positioning with regard to the South China Sea. Pollution from the facility has had a detrimental effect on nearby communities, leading to protests in 2015; later, in 2019, a state audit outlined numerous environmental issues with the facility, including nitrous oxide emissions above the legal level, ash discharge, and disposal of wastewater into the ocean (Rosenzweig, 2019).

### *3.5.3 Hanoi's Troubled Rapid Transit Project*

The creation of a rapid transit system to help ease congestion in Hanoi has been proposed since the 1990s, however, it wasn't until 2010 that construction commenced on the first phase of the project, which consists of two lines: Line 2A from Cat Linh to Ha Dong, and Line 3 from Nhon to Hanoi Station. At the time of writing, only Line 2A was operational, having opened in November 2021, more than a decade after construction started.

To date, the project has almost entirely been funded by Chinese official development aid, and has been constructed by a subsidiary of China Railway Group with construction supervision by Beijing National Railway Research & Design Institute. Originally, work on the project was set to start in 2008 and finish in 2013, with US\$419 million of the total cost of US\$552 million to come from Chinese lenders. After delays in starting construction, the cost ballooned to US\$868 million in 2016, with a further US\$250 million being invested by Chinese banks (Nikkei Asia, 2017). In addition to the timeline and costs going far beyond what was originally expected, the project has suffered from a string of fatal accidents, engineering issues, and safety concerns.

Corruption is endemic at almost every level of government and bureaucracy in Vietnam, so it's not outside of the realm of possibility that some level of graft played a role in the troubled history of the construction of the Hanoi rapid transit system. However, three high-level officials involved in the project have either been charged with crimes came under investigation for their activities: Tran Van Luc, former Director of Railway Project Management Board, was suspended in 2014 for receiving kickbacks from a Japanese firm; Dinh La Tang, the former Minister of Transport, was arrested in 2017 for crimes related to his time at PVN (as outlined in Section 3.2); and Nguyen Hong Truong, the former Deputy Minister of Transport, was charged in 2020 "with violating provisions on the management and use of State assets that causes losses and wastefulness" (Vietnam Investment Review, 2020).

### *3.5.4 Vietnam Electricity and the Duyen Hai Power Complex*

The Duyen Hai power generation complex is situated on the coast of Tra Vinh province, which is directly south from Ho Chi Minh City where the Mekong Delta opens into the sea. The complex consists of three coal-fired power plants with a total capacity of 4,305 megawatts,

as well as the largest coal port in the Mekong Delta region. According to the project owner Vietnam Electricity (EVN), the entire facility has a total cost of US\$5 billion (VietnamPlus, 2016).

Based on research from AidData (AidData, 2021), the complex has received approximately US\$2.8 billion in funding from a range of Chinese banks, including Bank of China, China Development Bank, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, and Export-Import Bank of China. Furthermore, almost all of the construction on the project is being undertaken by Chinese companies: the construction contract for Duyen Hai 1 was awarded to Dongfang Group; Malaysian company Teknik Janakuasa, which was managing the development of Duyen Hai 2, awarded the construction contract to Huadian Engineering; and EVN awarded an engineering, procurement, and construction contract to a consortium consisting entirely of Chinese companies (Global Energy Monitor, 2020).

Perhaps one of the most consequential players in the development of the Duyen Hai complex is the company that won the contract for the development of the facility's port. In 2012, EVN signed a contract with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) for the engineering, procurement, and construction of the Duyen Hai seaport (Nhan Dan, 2012). CCCC is the company which, as discussed in Section 2.1.2 of this paper, had been actively attempting to invest in sensitive infrastructural developments in the Philippines; it has been blacklisted by the US Commerce Department for its involvement in militarising islands in the South China Sea (Whalen, 2020).

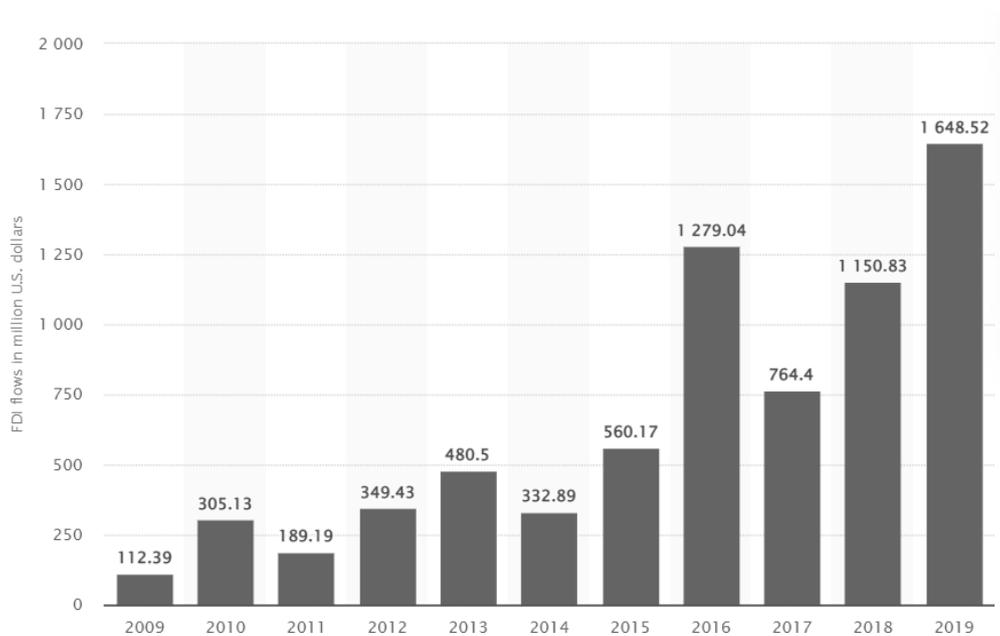
## Chapter 4. Analysis of Results and Implications

Based on the evidence outlined in the preceding case studies, this chapter will seek to assess the degree of influence activities that has been undertaken by Chinese actors with regard to Vietnamese elites, as well as the observable and potential impacts of this influence. It will then draw on these assessments to argue some potential implications for the future of Vietnamese politics.

### 4.1 Assessment of the Depth, Breadth, and Effectiveness of Chinese Elite Influence

It should be stated at the outset: General Secretary of the CPV, Nguyen Phu Trong, is no Hun Sen, nor is he Rodrigo Duterte. Despite the seemingly widespread belief that he is more aligned with the CCP, his public statements regarding the relationship with China have tended to follow a fairly normal diplomatic line. Phu Trong hasn't made the same kinds of maritime concessions that Duterte has in the Philippines, yet at the same time, if he were to do so, it would almost certainly result in public unrest on an unparalleled scale—the kind of unrest that could potentially threaten the entire CPV regime. During the Repsol crises in 2017 and 2018, when, under Chinese pressure, Vietnam demanded the Spanish company withdraw from its oil exploration activities in maritime blocs leased to it by PVN (see Section 3.2), the government imposed a blanket blackout of news reporting on the incident (Thayer C. A., 2019). These actions appear to be less about protecting China's reputation in the eyes of the Vietnamese public than they are about maintaining regime legitimacy.

As with the case studies in Chapter 2, a useful place to start is by looking at how funds have flowed between China and Vietnamese SOEs and businesses. Figure 5 below takes a macro view of the situation, looking simply at the levels of FDI from China to Vietnam over the course of a decade—a decade which largely overlaps with the period focused on by this study.



*Figure 5: FDI flows from China to Vietnam, 2009—2019 according to National Bureau of Statistics of China (Textor, 2020)*

It is striking that Chinese FDI flows more than doubled in 2016, and after a drop in the following year, continued to grow through to 2019. Though there could be any number of reasons for this sudden spike, it's impossible to ignore the fact that it coincides with the change of leadership that occurred in January 2016 during the CPV's 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress, where the ostensibly US-friendly Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung was ousted, and a more conservative faction of the party took hold of power.

If we look at the flow of state-backed Chinese money to PVN, one is forced to question the motivation behind taking these loans at a time when it was clear that Chinese ships were actively attempting to thwart the SOE's exploration operations within its (albeit disputed) maritime boundaries, and that more broadly Beijing was putting pressure on Vietnam to cease its activities in the area. The most significant of these transactions appears to have been China Development Bank's contribution of US\$673 million to a buyer's credit loan of US\$844 million for the development of the Vung Ang 1 power plant. In 2018, PVN publicly conceded, via a statement on the SOE's website, that "The East Sea is forecast to continue to have uncertainty this year... affecting the company's efforts to attract foreign investors to invest in its open offshore fields" (Vu K. , 2018). It seems unlikely that PVN's decisions whether or not to undertake its exploration and extraction activities in the South China Sea have been heavily influenced by their previous acceptance of Chinese loans, although without knowing the

amortisation levels of some of these loans, it's difficult to know the degree of leverage that some of these banks have over PVN. It could be argued, however, that the offering of these loans represent an attempt by Chinese state-backed entities to influence the decision-making calculus of the elites leading one of Vietnam's most important SEOs—if only by giving PVN the capital it needed to undertake important projects. However, given the corruption charges against several PVN executives that were active within the company at the time these loans were taken, it's possible that some of this money helped to enrich these individuals and their associates.

The PVN case certainly seems to represent the clearest conflict of interest in terms of the acceptance of Chinese funds, however, the ownership of the Vinh Tan power complex, and the financial and construction partnerships undertaken by EVN for the Duyen Hai power complex, also raise serious questions. Without being hyperbolic, it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to envisage a situation where a small skirmish in the South China Sea escalates rapidly into a bigger conflict. The Vinh Tan power complex is both majority Chinese owned, and some of the units are almost exclusively operated by Chinese nationals, while the infrastructure for the Duyen Hai power complex was built almost entirely by Chinese SOEs. A potential shutdown of multiple pieces of critical infrastructure would not be out of the question—after all, such a feat was achieved in 2015 and 2016 when Russian operatives remotely accessed and disrupted Ukrainian power stations. A similar shutdown in Vietnam is unlikely to require this same level of technical expertise, given that a number of these power stations were built by Chinese businesses using technology from China. Clearly, this is a worst-case scenario, but envisaging worst-case scenarios really is central to mapping out potential national security issues. Again, it's pertinent to question here whether the risks taken in the pursuit of these infrastructure projects outweigh the benefits provided by Chinese capital and technical input.

This brings us to consider the question of infrastructure more broadly. As was seen in both Cambodia and the Philippines, a great deal of Chinese investment seemed to go towards projects in areas that were either critical for these nations' national security, or seemed to offer a strategic foothold for Chinese interests. Here, we turn to the case study of Geleximco, and their desire to develop the country's largest airport with Chinese financial backing, and a Chinese construction partner with no clear experience building airports. Geleximco Chairman Vu Van Tien's acceptance of Chinese funds appears to go back to 2011, and to be sure, the company has had success both in its use of Chinese capital and Chinese construction partners;

the Thanh Long power plant, for example, was completed ahead of schedule and seemingly without any major controversy.

As with all of these case studies, ascribing motives is difficult. On the one hand, Geleximco's Chinese partners may simply see in the Long Thanh International Airport a financially feasible project, and it may present an opportunity to improve the image of Chinese businesses and funders with both the Vietnamese government and public. However, if we move away from more innocuous explanations for this action, having control over the development of Vietnam's most important air hub, and what is likely to become one of the most important air hubs in the region, does offer Geleximco's partners a high degree of leverage with the government. For Van Tien's part, he hasn't publicly announced any particular affinity for the PRC or CCP, but he does appear to have been emboldened by his successful relationships with Chinese partners to pursue major infrastructure projects that are important to the government.

The case of the Law on Special Economic Zones starts to move us away from pure financial incentivisation, and into the realm of interpersonal influence. Based on the available evidence, we know that the proposed law was developed after extensive consultation with Chinese partners in Shenzhen. We can also virtually say for certain that Pham Minh Chinh, during his time in the government in Quang Ninh, would have had extensive contact with Chinese businesses, due to the province's status as a gateway to southern China. He would then go on to become one of the main drivers of this law. Given what we know, Minh Chinh, along with others involved in the development of this law, were influenced by Chinese experts in its creation. This is a view espoused by Erie and Ha (2021), who noted in their paper that a report prepared by the law's Drafting Committee focused much more on the Chinese experience of developing SEZs than any other jurisdiction the committee studied.

Whether this law would have advanced China's interests in Vietnam—as many had feared—remains an open question, and a question that may not be answered unless the law is eventually revived and enacted. Given the rapid uptick in Chinese investment in Vietnam in recent years, the likelihood that these SEZs could have been dominated by Chinese interests is no doubt a possibility. Furthermore, it's not implausible that the recommendations offered by the CCSEZR to Vietnamese officials may have included terms that would have been beneficial to Chinese businesses or other entities that wanted to establish enclaves in the proposed SEZs, but again, with the law being shelved indefinitely, it's almost impossible to know what its effect would have been. Certainly, what can be said is that the experience of working with officials

in Shenzhen may have helped to form stronger bonds with important figures in the CPV—one of whom would go on to become Prime Minister.

Perhaps the most consequential case study in this research is that of the Law on Cybersecurity, and the links between the Vietnamese MPS and various facets of the CCP's security apparatus. Like most authoritarian, single party states, maintaining power and eliminating threats to its legitimacy are core interests of the CPV. To date, the CPV has been less successful than the CCP in developing the infrastructure needed to quash dissenting opinions, but with the passing of the Law on Cybersecurity, the Vietnamese government is moving closer to being able to exert a similar level of control over online opinion. As was noted in the case study, the enactment of the law has already seen a significant uptick in the number of people being arrested for online dissent.

The close relations between the MPS and its counterparts in China, particularly under Minister of Public Security To Lam, seem to indicate that Vietnam's security forces are seeking to move towards more extensive, sophisticated methods of surveillance. As mentioned earlier, having a destabilized, or potentially democratic, Vietnam on its doorstep is certainly not in Beijing's interests, and so by helping the CPV to bolster domestic control, it is pursuing a clear geopolitical goal. At the same time, this collaboration is of huge benefit to the cadres of the CPV in maintaining authority—so much so that it could influence the party's decision making at the highest levels.

If the analysis above points to a level of elite capture that is at least significant, if not total, some events in recent years also point towards the CPV's continued approach of “cooperation and struggle” in its relationship with China, as put forth by Hoang (2019).

In early 2020, Viettel, a state-owned telecommunications company operated by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence, announced that it was going to build its own 5G network using its own equipment, dealing a blow to Huawei who had been vying to supply the technology (Onishi, 2020). Though not expressly announced, it has been reported that national security concerns played a central role in the decision. Later in 2020, reporting emerged that CMH—the Chinese SOE that had attempted to develop a port in Vung Tau, and later went on to acquire the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka—was struggling to finalise a deal with a joint venture partner to take over a series of ports in a number of countries. The acquisition portfolio includes stakes in both the Vietnam International Container Terminals in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the Cai Mep-Thi Vai port in Vung Tau; Hanoi pushed back on the move, preventing

the acquisition from going ahead (Kawase, 2020). And then, in June 2021, the Airports Corporation of Vietnam announced that it was seeking to borrow US dollars to fund the development of the Long Thanh International Airport (VietnamPlus, 2021), in a move that doesn't necessarily bode well for the ambitions of Geleximco and its Chinese partners.

#### 4.2 Potential Implications for Vietnamese Politics in the Future

The case studies put forth in this paper could only ever scratch the surface of the nature of Chinese influence of elites in Vietnam. This is not to say that it is definitely more extensive than what these case studies reveal; after all, for every instance of elite capture that is completely hidden from public view, there may be many instances of CPV members, businesspeople, or other elites pushing back or rejecting potentially lucrative offers from Chinese state-backed entities. What the case studies do, however, is establish evidence of mechanisms through which Chinese entities may have sought to influence decision-making processes among these elites in such a way that it may be beneficial to the CCP's geopolitical goals.

As it stands, there are clear ways in which the CPV may have put itself in a compromising position with regard to its reliance on Chinese capital, construction companies, and technology for critical infrastructure. At the very least, the development of future projects has the potential to be used as a kind of bargaining chip to ensure Hanoi's compliance if tensions resurface. At worst, existing and future energy projects may present significant security threats in the event of a conflict; given the considerable amount of Chinese technology present in power plants across the country, Beijing almost certainly has the capabilities to deny electricity to large chunks of Vietnam.

However, such threats are largely hypothetical at this point in time. What is much more tangible is the threat that elite capture presents to elites themselves. The fears about Chinese encroachments upon Vietnamese sovereignty are incredibly strong among the public, and so for every piece of infrastructure that gets built using Chinese money, for every new casino that is built to cater to Chinese tourists, and for every collaboration with the CCP that strengthens the CPV's security apparatus, there is a price to be paid in terms of regime legitimacy. Whether the party can reduce its reliance on China, or whether it becomes better able to obscure or suppress evidence of this reliance, may well be what decides how long the CPV can hold on to power.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

Many potential leads were rejected in the development of this study. Further demonstrating the fears held by large sections of the population, Vietnam's social media and blogs are awash with rumours about various companies, politicians, and SOEs that may have links to China. Take for instance Van Think Phat Group, a property development company established by Truong My Lan, whose husband is a politically connected businessman from Hong Kong. The company seems to have access to vast quantities of capital, but there's little evidence of where it comes from, while My Lan and her husband appeared in the Panama Papers, where they were connected to offshore bank accounts. These factors—confirmed during the process of conducting this study—have driven wild speculation online about possible Chinese backing for the company. While this speculation may well turn out to be true, the nature of Vietnam's journalistic environment, and the highly opaque environment in which many businesses operate may prevent us from ever knowing. Several investigations along these lines led to inconclusive ends.

As such, this study has been an exercise in dealing with clear, available evidence to assess the degree to which China has worked to influence elites in Vietnam. This commenced with a review of the literature regarding both Chinese attempts to influence elites around the world, and literature that analyses various aspects of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. This study has sought to fill a gap in a field where a great deal of attention has been paid to how China has attempted to bend elite opinion to their benefit in many countries and institutions—except for in Vietnam.

The survey of the existing literature on Chinese influence led this research to select two countries, Cambodia and the Philippines, as example case studies which would provide a template for analysing the situation in Vietnam. In both of these countries, we have leaders who have sided with the PRC, with President Hun Sen and President Rodrigo Duterte having both openly declared their allegiance to Beijing. Furthermore, they have acted in ways that are of clear benefit to China's geopolitical interests, whether it's granting permission for the People's Liberation Army Navy exclusive rights to use a naval base in Cambodia, or the Philippines disregarding the UNCLOS decision and giving Chinese vessels greater latitude to operate in their EEZ.

Within these countries, and under these leaders, we've seen similar patterns emerge: the CCP offering direct injections of official development assistance or other funds to help the

state; Chinese entities partnering with local, well-connected individuals and businesses, often with promises of significant loans or investment; and attempts—often successful—to build important infrastructure in either sensitive or militarily strategic locations. In countries where institutions are less robust, activities such as these offer vast opportunities for corruption, and it would appear that elites in both Cambodia and the Philippines have made the most of this. Of these two case studies, Cambodia seems to have been drawn much further into China's orbit, and although the degree of influence China has obtained in the Philippines is quite astounding, there have still been instances of pushback on particular projects that may have constituted a national security threat. The patterns observed in these two case studies offered both a roadmap, as well as a kind of identification system, for unearthing and analysing the nature of Chinese influence among Vietnamese elites.

The initial research and selection process for the Vietnamese case studies in this paper relied very heavily on tracking flows of money into Vietnam, analysing domestic and international news reporting about relevant events in the country, and taking in perspectives from academics that specialise in Vietnamese and Southeast Asian affairs. Furthermore, the author was able to seek counsel from a Vietnamese public affairs analyst in terms of any potentially relevant lines of inquiry.

Some cases immediately stood out due to the involvement of Chinese capital, such as with PVN, and the Vinh Tan and Duyen Hai power complexes. Other potential case studies were investigated based on this criteria, but upon further research, the three aforementioned cases presented additional details that offered compelling narratives. For example, PVN's decision to accept multiple Chinese loans at a time when their operations in the South China Sea were being hindered by Chinese vessels was indicative of a potentially compromising relationship—especially given the fact that the company was helmed at this time by a number of individuals who were later tried on corruption (or similar) charges.

Other cases stood out for the attention they'd received from analysts and journalists, such as the cybersecurity and SEZ laws. Both had driven considerable anxiety among the Vietnamese public about Chinese involvement—particularly in the case of the SEZs, which were seen as a potential threat to the country's sovereignty. In both of these cases, CPV cadres appear to have received assistance from Chinese state-affiliated actors, however, the more tangible threat to the personal freedoms of Vietnamese citizens appears to come from the Law on Cybersecurity, and the close relationship between the Vietnamese MPS and the Chinese

state security apparatus. Though the proposed SEZs potentially posed security or sovereignty issues, based on the evidence assessed in this study, these threats are at best ambiguous or hypothetical.

The Geleximco case presents another compelling aspect of how Chinese state-affiliated actors may seek to use influence in order to achieve strategic goals. The company's Chairman, Vu Van Tien, appears to owe at least some of his success to financial support from, and partnership with, Chinese banks and businesses. That he has since sought to take control of or build critical infrastructure with these partners does follow similar patterns noted in Cambodia and the Philippines—patterns that have raised the concerns of both domestic and international observers.

Based on the evidence unearthed in the case studies, it's almost beyond doubt that Chinese actors have, at the very least, sought to achieve some level of influence among the country's decisionmakers. There are clear elements of overlap with strategies that been used in Cambodia and the Philippines, where the results of Chinese influence are much more nakedly obvious. What is most striking is that this influence appears to have, in some examples, led to decisions that may pose threats to national security. The fact that more caution wasn't exercised in the pursuit of some of these investments may, in and of itself, be the best evidence that the CCP's approach is bearing some fruit.

The findings of this research are significant enough that they strongly suggest a deeper, broader investigation is both possible and necessary. The case studies in this paper were largely limited to publicly available information in English, but with more resources, a great deal more information could be unearthed which would allow for a clearer picture of the extent and effectiveness of elite influence in Vietnam.

The most valuable resource for potential future investigations would be the involvement of Vietnamese and Chinese-speaking researchers. Unwinding some of the financial entanglements of Vietnamese SOEs, companies, and businesspeople would require extensive collection and analysis of documents such as financial records, annual reports, and memorandums of understanding for joint ventures. One would need to work on an assumption that a lot of this information would be incomplete or deliberately obscurantist, so by also looking at statements and records from relevant Chinese banks and SOEs, a more complete understanding of the involvement between certain Chinese and Vietnamese entities could be gained. Furthermore, these analysts would be able to look further into government records for

evidence of meetings that have taken place between CPV and CCP officials—these could offer patterns in the behaviour of political elites when transposed against significant events in the relationship between the two countries (e.g. maritime clashes, significant injections of Chinese official development assistance). The involvement of Vietnamese-speaking researchers would also allow us to look more deeply into the history of particular individuals of interest, including some of those discussed in this paper—such as General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. Particularly in the case of Minh Chinh, his time spent in the Quang Ninh government deserves greater scrutiny—a level of scrutiny which is beyond the capabilities of a researcher working largely with English sources.

On another front, having input from national security and cybersecurity analysts would allow for a clearer assessment of the potential threats posed by, for instance, the use of Chinese technology to build critical infrastructure. As it stands, the assessments in this study regarding some of these national security issues were made based on examples elsewhere in the world where critical infrastructure has been compromised by external actors; specialists in this field would be able to give a much deeper assessment of some of the risks that Vietnam faces. On an even more granular level, analysts with expertise in energy industry technology would be able to explicate exactly what vulnerabilities may exist in Vietnam's power generation infrastructure.

Undoubtedly, employing and coordinating the aforementioned experts would be a substantial undertaking in and of itself—not to mention the amount of work that would be required to go through all of the potential evidence in an expanded study on this topic. However, this is research that could uncover implications for the future of the South China Sea conflict, the stability of the CPV's regime, and of course, the nature and effectiveness more broadly of Chinese influence of elites in the pursuit of geopolitical goals. Any one of these matters would be an important standalone area of inquiry, but the fact that all of these matters could simultaneously have light shed upon them by extending the research outlined in this paper offers a compelling reason for doing so.

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