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목 차

Contents

- 개요 2
General Information

- 동아시아에서의 역학구도의 변화: 한반도 평화과정에 미치는 의미 . . . 7
Changing Power Configurations in North East Asia: It's
Implications for Peace on the Korean Peninsula
아키오 와타나베 박사

- 북한에서의 공동안보: 남북한 관계의 새로운 패러다임 연구 49
Common Security in North Korea: Quest for a New Paradigm
in Inter-Korean Relations
멜빈 거토브 박사

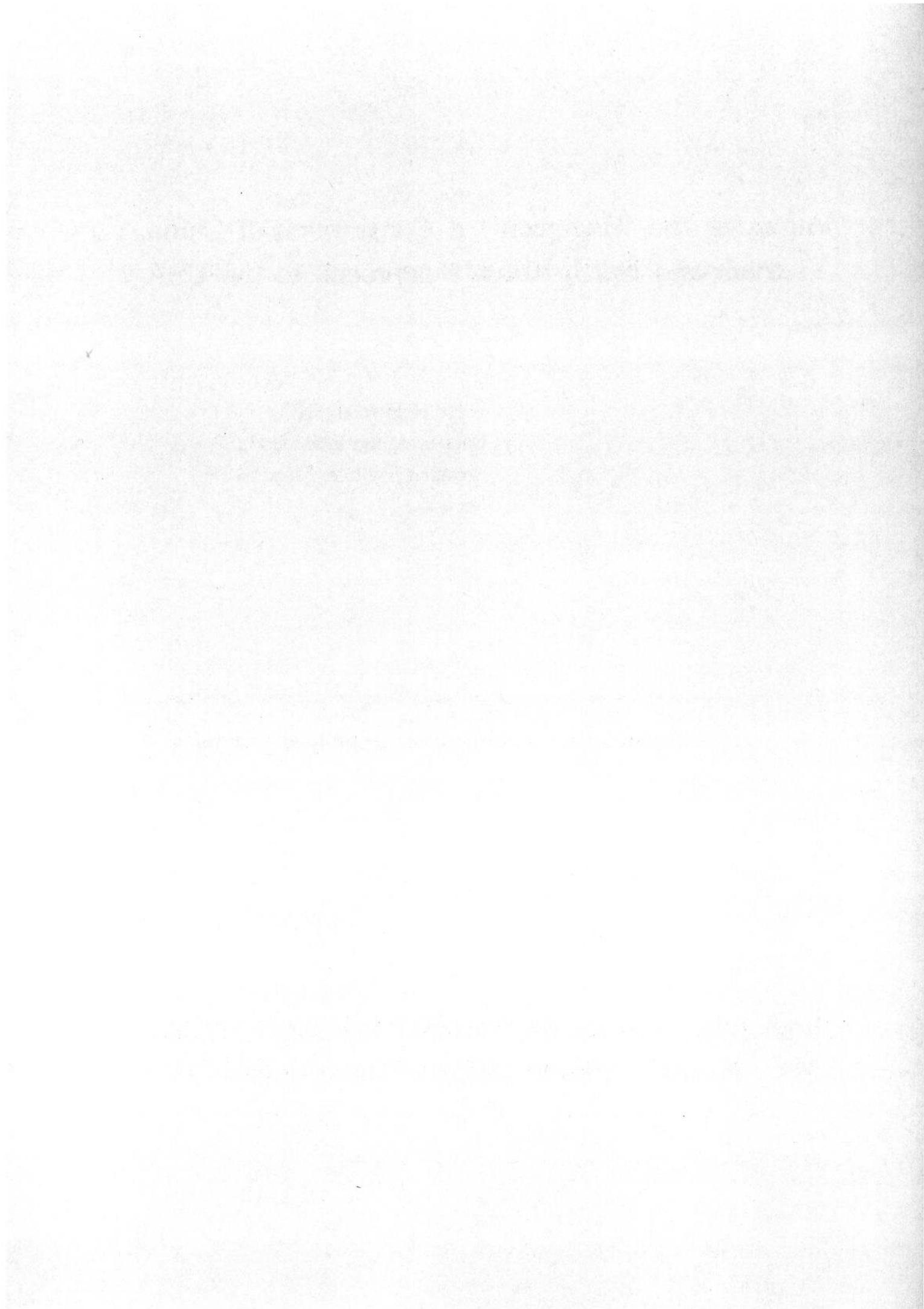
- 중국·베트남·북한의 대미 접근 비교 113
Engaging the 'Hegemon': A Comparison of China, Vietnam
and North Korea's approach to the USA
스타인 테네슨 박사

Engaging the 'Hegemon': A Comparison of China, Vietnam and North Korea's approach to the USA

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Abstract

This article compares the ways in which the three communist regimes of China, Vietnam and North Korea have tried to engage the United States since the end of the Cold War. It characterises China's relationship with the USA as successful, but fluctuating, Vietnam's as slow improvement from a low level, and North Korea's as crisis-ridden and highly unsuccessful. The article then asks why China was more successful than Vietnam, and Vietnam more successful than North Korea, in engaging the USA. The answers are found partly in the different historical legacies from the Cold War, the Korean and the Vietnam War, and partly in China, Vietnam's and North Korea's different geopolitical importance. The main conclusion, however, is that successful engagement depends on the quality of leadership and conscious political choice. The Chinese communist leaders were more able than the Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese than the North Korean, to adjust their foreign policy to a completely changed international environment.

Introduction

Five communist republics survived the end of the Cold War: The People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the Republic of Cuba. Despite their ideological affinity, shared destiny and multiple friendly mutual visits, they did not in the 1990s form a residual socialist camp. Instead they tried in various ways, and with variable success, to interact with the capitalist world and engage the world's leading power, or 'hegemon': the USA. When analysts talk of 'engagement', they normally see the USA in the active role: Washington can choose between 'containment' and 'engagement' in tackling illiberal states. This paper turns the perspective around, and discusses how three of the remaining communist states have tried to engage the feared 'hegemon'.¹⁾ The discussion is structured around two questions: Why was China more successful than Vietnam in engaging the USA? And why was North Korea less successful than Vietnam?

Success can be measured in various ways. We must assume that the Chinese, Vietnamese and North Korean leaders, in addition to regime survival and security from military attack, have pursued the following goals

1) When the term 'hegemon' is used in the title of this paper, the intention is not to negatively characterize the USA as a 'hegemonic power', but to reflect the fear that the Chinese, Vietnamese and North Korean leaders feel of it. A more neutral term, such as 'superpower' or 'hyperpower' could have been used instead. 'Superpower', however, has a Cold War ring to it, and does not sufficiently reflect the degree of paramountcy that the USA acquired in the 1990s. The term 'hyperpower' remains very French and has not gained widespread currency. Since the article tries to adopt the perspectives of Beijing, Hanoi and Pyongyang, it seems preferable to use the term that Beijing normally uses when issuing its (English language) warnings against a unipolar world.

in their relations with the USA:

- Membership in international organisations.
- Diplomatic relations and high level meetings.
- Market access.

All three regimes managed to survive the first post Cold War decade, while their ideology became increasingly irrelevant. The closest that any of the three states came to a process that might have led to a change of regime was during the Tian An Men square demonstrations in the Spring of 1989, and the closest that any of them came to being the victim of US military action was when two US carrier groups moved close to the Taiwan Strait in 1996 in response to Chinese threats against Taiwan. Despite these incidents, and the fact that many Americans see China as a likely future threat to US global leadership, it seems clear that Beijing was more successful than Hanoi in managing its diplomatic and economic relations with the global superpower. Hanoi, in turn was far more successful than Pyongyang. Before starting to explain these differences, let us have a look at the main criteria of success.

Membership in international organizations: Participation in the UN and other multilateral organisations is a significant criterion of recognition within the global family of nations. In order to become a member of such organisations, US acceptance is necessary. Acceptance by other major powers is also needed, but the US acceptance is key. During the Cold War, new states needed to be accepted by both camps in order to achieve UN membership, and this delayed the recognition this entailed for many nations, including all the three discussed here.

The Republic of China was a founding member of the United Nations in 1945, with membership and veto power in the Security Council, and when Chiang Kai-shek fled to China in 1949, he took the UN membership with him and kept it for more than twenty years. Only in 1971, after a round of Sino-US 'ping pong diplomacy' and while preparing for a sensational visit by President Nixon to Beijing, did the United States allow the People's Republic of China to take over the Chinese seat. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam became a UN member in 1977, after the fall of the South Vietnamese regime, and the reunification of North and South Vietnam. Until then, none of the two Vietnamese states had been members of the UN.

Korea's division kept it out of the UN even longer than Vietnam. It took until 1991 before a formula was found allowing the two Koreas to both become members. This provided North Korea with an opportunity to engage the USA, since its UN mission in New York could to some extent serve as a substitute for the lacking embassy in Washington.

China and Vietnam both also sought to achieve membership in the World Trade Organization. China achieved such membership, after 18 years of negotiations, in December 2001, at the prize of allowing Taiwan ('Chinese Taipei') membership at the same time. WTO membership was seen as a major victory for China's foreign policy. China will now have much greater access to foreign markets, and thus be able to continue its rapid economic growth, but the Chinese leaders are also very much aware of the great structural changes that will be needed in China itself, and that these will have serious social costs, leading to danger of social upheaval. Vietnam continues to negotiate for WTO membership.

Membership in regional organizations is also important. It was a significant step for Vietnam when it gained membership in the Association

of Southeast Asian Nations in 1995, and in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1998. China had joined APEC already in 1991. At the APEC summit in Brunei 2000, it was agreed that North Korea should be invited to join the organization, if it desired to do so. In October 2001, when APEC's latest meeting was held in Shanghai, North Korea still did not attend, but the host, Chinese president Jiang Zemin, declared that it would be welcome to join (Joong Ang Ilbo website, 22.10.01).²⁾

Thus we see that in terms of membership in international organizations, China was ahead of Vietnam in gaining US support for membership, whereas North Korea, although it became a UN member in 1991, remained outside many international organizations.

Diplomatic relations and high level meetings: China had already been recognized diplomatically by the USA in 1980, when the Carter administration cut off normal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and regulated its relationship with Taiwan by the "Taiwan Relations Act". Diplomatic relations were not broken off after the repression of the Tian An Men demonstration in June 1989. This was at least in part a result of the friendship that had been established by Deng Xiaoping and George Bush. The latter decided that although it might be unwise in terms of US domestic politics, he had to maintain the relationship with Beijing, so as to prevent the eventuality that China could be driven back into Soviet arms (Cohen 2000: 219). Relations were cooled down for a while, but Bush hastened to re-establish contact in 1990, before the break-up of the Soviet Union. Thus China did not have to strive for diplomatic normalisation with the US, but could continue to focus on other aims.

2) <http://english.joins.com/nk/article.asp?aid=20011022111220&sid=E00> (read 02.02.02).

A highlight in Sino-US relations was president Clinton's June 1998 visit to China, a visit that did much to repair the relationship after the 1996 military confrontation over the Taiwan issue. Beijing particularly appreciated Clinton's assurance that the US would not support Taiwanese independence or its admission to the United Nations or any other international organization which required statehood for membership.

Vietnam strove hard, after it had been diplomatically recognised by China in 1991, to also establish normal diplomatic relations with the USA. It succeeded in July 1995, and a US embassy was established in August. The first US ambassador, who had been a prisoner of war in Hanoi in the 1960s after his plane was shot down, became a popular figure in Vietnam who did much to heal the wounds of war. Vietnamese president Le Duc Anh visited the USA in connection with the 50th anniversary of the United Nations in October 1995, shortly after the USA had opened its embassy in Hanoi. In June 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Hanoi, but the highlight of the improved US-Vietnamese relations came in November 2000, when President Clinton paid the first visit to Vietnam of any US president since Richard Nixon was in South Vietnam in 1969.

North Korea also clearly saw it as a goal to establish diplomatic relations with the USA, and also to sign a bilateral peace treaty. Whereas the Korean War had ended in a 1953 armistice, without any peace treaty being signed, France withdrew its troops from North Vietnam in effect of the 1954 Geneva agreement, and the US later withdrew its troops from South Vietnam by virtue of a quadri-partite treaty signed in Paris in January 1973. Like Vietnam, North Korea first started to feel a need for rapprochement with the USA when the Soviet Union scaled down its commitment to support it in the late 1980s. Unlike Vietnam, however, this did not lead to any major reorientation of North Korea's internal and

foreign policies; there was no North Korean analogy to the perestroika or Doi Moi. North Korea's need for US recognition increased in 1992, when China, its only remaining ally, established normal diplomatic relations with South Korea. In 1993-94, North Korea finally managed to establish direct contacts with Washington, but the means used was not economic reform, but brinkmanship linked to a nuclear programme. A crisis, involving US lobbying to get the UN Security Council to impose sanctions, led to an agreement brokered by former US President Jimmy Carter in 1994. Since then, there has been much, albeit irregular contact between Pyongyang and Washington. The State Department has remained in touch with the North Korean UN mission in New York, and since December 1997 North Korea has taken part in unproductive four-party talks about Korean security in Geneva (with South Korea, China and the USA). A significant step opening up a possibility for normalisation of relations was taken in 1998, when President Clinton appointed a special coordinator for North Korean affairs, former defence secretary William Perry. On September 14, 1999 four years after the US recognition of Vietnam he submitted a report to the president proposing that the US eventually normalize relations with North Korea. This led to increased diplomatic contact, but although several European states established embassies in Pyongyang in 2000, under inspiration from South Korean president Kim Dae Jung's 'sunshine policy' and the inter-Korean summit in June of that year, and US foreign minister Margaret Albright paid a highly publicized visit to Pyongyang, the President did not follow suit, so no normalization occurred. Japan also withheld its recognition, although it had engaged in talks with North Korea about normalisation of relations already in 1990-91 and held new such talks during 1998-2000. In 2001-2002, George W. Bush's administration continued to see North Korea as a dangerous state, producing 'weapons of mass

destruction' and aiding terrorists, although South Korea tried to persuade the White House to adopt a more conciliatory stance towards Pyongyang. In his State of the Union speech on 29 January 2002, three weeks before a planned visit to Beijing and Seoul, President Bush did not support the 'sunshine policy', but branded North Korea as one of three countries constituting an "axis of evil" (the others were Iraq and Iran).

Market access: Because of its size and the long period of economic growth in the 1990s, the US market was the most attractive target for any country aiming to achieve export-driven economic growth. To have normal trade relations with the US for most of the period called 'Most Favored Nation' (MFN) status was therefore of crucial importance. The achievement of such status, and actual export figures, may therefore be used as criteria for successful engagement of the USA. Aid, loans and inward investments might also be used, but in order to prevent the amount of statistical evidence from distracting the analytical focus of this article, only market access and exports will be taken up. There can be no doubt that figures for loans and investments would confirm the general picture of China being more successful than Vietnam, and Vietnam being more successful than North Korea. Aid figures might give another picture, but since the substantial amount of humanitarian aid and oil that the US provided to North Korea in the 1990s was an effect of famine and nuclear brinkmanship, this can hardly be seen as a criterion for successful long-term engagement.

China obtained normal trade relations with the United States already when diplomatic relations were established in 1980, and has kept this advantage throughout its long period of rapid economic growth. However, because China was a communist country, the US president had to seek

annual approval from Congress for China's MFN status. China's human rights record and other shortcomings (from the US viewpoint) were thus for many years subjected to an annual debate in the US Congress. Beijing felt this as humiliating, and the more Chinese exports to the US grew, the more costly it became to alienate US public opinion (Cohen 2000: 223, 227). This led China to adopt policies focusing not only on the US executive, but on public opinion as well. In 2000, the US Congress finally cleared the way for awarding China permanent normal trade relations, as part of preparations for its WTO membership.

North Vietnam was subjected to a total US embargo from 1964 which, after its conquest of Saigon in 1975, was widened to all of Vietnam. A roadmap for gradually lifting the embargo was presented by Washington in October 1991. It was somewhat eased in 1992, further eased in 1993, when the USA also allowed the IMF to refinance Vietnam's foreign debt, so it could again receive international financial aid. In 1994 the embargo was finally lifted. After the establishment of normal diplomatic relations in 1995, negotiations started for a trade agreement. A barrier was removed when president Clinton in 1998 granted a waiver to Vietnam that excluded it from a congressional amendment barring full economic normalization with any communist state that does not allow freedom of expression. A comprehensive agreement, with terms that were quite hard for Vietnam to swallow, was reached in 1999. The intention of both sides was to sign it that autumn, but a few elderly communist leaders in Hanoi, fearing that foreign companies would take over the Vietnamese market, at first prevented the agreement from being signed. It thus took until July 2000, when a few cosmetic changes had been made, before Hanoi was ready to sign. The agreement was ratified by the US Senate (with 88 to 12 votes) in October 2001, and by the Vietnamese National Assembly (unanimously)

in November, so it could finally enter into force on 10 December 2001. Thus Vietnam had to wait two decades to obtain the same access to the US market as China, and at a much higher cost in terms of allowing US access to the Vietnamese market. (China was obliged to make similar concessions in connection with its entry into the WTO in December 2001.)

North Korea had been the target of US economic sanctions all since the 1950–53 Korean War when, in 1988, President Reagan allowed certain exports on a case-by-case basis (Kang 2001: 32). This had little or no effect on bilateral trade. In 1996, a widened permission was given to American companies to import North Korean products, but they still needed specific licenses.³⁾ In September 1999, President Clinton finally eased the embargo in return for Pyongyang's agreement not to test fire a long-range missile it had been developing. The September 1999 decision led to the publication, on 19 June 2000, of revised US regulations easing the restrictions on exports, imports, financial transactions and transportation involving North Korea.⁴⁾ The result of this was that North Korea in 2000, for the first time, exported a noticeable amount of goods to the USA (worth USD 150,000).

Although North Korea did increase its exports to some other markets, notably the Japanese, its lack of penetration of capitalist markets represents a failure to compensate for the lost cold war barter trade with China and Russia. In 1991, as an effect of the Soviet decision to abandon barter agreements, and conduct trade with North Korea in convertible currency at world market prices, the total volume of North Korean foreign trade declined by one quarter. Thus objectively, North Korea should have felt the same need as Vietnam to drastically reorient its foreign economic policy.

3) http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk/051th_issue/98071506.htm

4) <http://www.gdclaw.com/publications/Uploads/NKorea.asp>

However, whereas Vietnam started the reorientation with the adoption of a foreign investment law in 1987, North Korea's economic reforms never really got off the ground. In 1995, North Korea's total exports were reported to be only 0.6 billion USD. About one third of these exports went to Japan. India and some European nations also imported North Korean goods, but US import statistics have the figure '0' for North Korea every year in the period 1989-2001, except the year 2000.

Based on US import statistics, and population figures for the year 2000, we have calculated Chinese, Vietnamese and North Korean exports to the US per inhabitant from 1989 to 2001. This confirms the general picture of an impressive Chinese success story, a delayed Vietnamese follow-up if not catch-up, and a North Korea that stays out in the cold. (Please note that we concentrate here on exports to the USA. Both Vietnam and North Korea have made significant hard currency earnings from their exports to Japan.)

[Figure 1 in here]⁵⁾

The present article analyses bilateral relations between independent, sovereign states, but none of these relations are based on equality in real terms. Since each relationship involves the world's paramount power, the other party enjoys much less leverage. North Korea and Vietnam are small states, China a great power, but it remains far behind the USA both economically and militarily. Thus the question to be discussed here is how three communist survivor states have handled their relations with the global 'hegemon'. This includes how they have managed the dilemmas

5) I would like to thank Karen Hostens for collecting the statistical information and producing this graph.

between insisting on equality in the relationship, and de facto accepting an inferior position in the global power hierarchy. Two of the states in question, Vietnam and North Korea, feel the same dilemma in their relationship to China. Should they insist on genuine equality, or accept to be part of what Zbigniew Brzezinski suggests to call a Chinese "sphere of deference" (Brzezinski 1997: 166)?

Why was China more successful than Vietnam?

We have seen how successfully China handled its relations with the USA both in the period of Deng Xiaoping, and after Jiang Zemin consolidated his grasp on the leadership in Beijing. Still Sino-US relations were fluctuating all the time, with crises at the beginning of each US presidential term, then followed by rapprochement. Fluctuation accurately characterizes the relationship (Huang 2000: 293). Sino-US relations were no better or worse in 2001-02 than they were in 1991-92, but had gone through several ups and downs in the meantime.

By contrast, Vietnam's relations with the USA followed a steady upward trend, and are now infinitely much better than they were ten years ago. The development of US-Vietnamese relations over the last 15 years may be characterized as slow, uneasy improvement. Now, why did it take so long for Vietnam to establish a similarly favorable relationship with the USA as the one enjoyed by China?

The reason is not Vietnam's lack of democracy or violation of human rights, since China has the same problem. In this respect the two countries are similar. They have both moved from a situation with a very high degree of social control and repression of dissent to a more open society, where human rights violations become more visible simply because they

are noticed and reported. While both regimes have introduced a certain degree of electoral democracy on the local level, and have allowed their parliaments to move somewhat beyond the 'rubber stamp' function, they have not dared to allow opposition parties or to have genuine electoral processes on the regional or national level. Both China and Vietnam are frequent targets of criticism from US-based human rights groups, and also from the US State Department. Such attacks invariably lead to an angry response from the governments in Beijing and Hanoi.

We shall explore four sets of explanations for the difference between the Chinese and the Vietnamese performance:

- Historical legacy.
- Geopolitical exposure.
- National unity and political stability.
- Leadership and diplomatic skills.

Historical legacy: Until 1989, China was a de facto ally of the USA in its contest with the Soviet Union, whereas Vietnam was a Soviet ally. China switched sides in 1969-72, after border skirmishes with the Soviets and a crisis involving fear of a preventive Soviet attack against China's nuclear forces (Yang 2000). The Sino-Chinese partnership was sealed by president Nixon's historic visit in 1972. After the end of the Vietnam War, in 1977-78, Hanoi missed a chance to normalize its relations with the USA and instead sought to resolve its national security by permanently occupying Cambodia. This provoked Chinese military retaliation, isolated Vietnam internationally and forced it to depend completely on its alliance with the Soviet Union (Tnnesson 1992).

In the second half of the 1980s, Gorbachev's policy of glasnost and

perestroika, and the Chinese repression of the demonstrations on Tian An Men square, removed much of the advantage China had gained from siding with the United States. The Soviet Union improved its standing in the West, while China lost status. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations had ignored human rights violations in China while severely criticizing the Soviet Union for the same (Cohen 2000: 212 calls this 'merely hypocrisy'). With the improvement of the human rights situation in the Soviet Union, and the violent clampdown in Beijing just after Gorbachev's visit in June 1989, China became the prime target for human rights based criticism internationally. This provided the Soviet Union's allies in the region with a chance to follow suit, liberalize their regimes, and play up to the United States and Europe. There was one leading communist in Vietnam who wanted to use this opportunity (Tran Xuan Bach), but he was soon removed from his functions and expelled from the Vietnamese Communist Party. Thus, in order to secure the Communist Party's monopoly on power (and perhaps pave the way for improving Vietnam's relationship with China) the Vietnamese leaders decided to let go of a chance to rid itself of the legacy from the Vietnam War and the alliance with the Soviet Union, and get the upper hand in the contest with China for Western goodwill.

The historical legacy thus continued to play its role. China's relations with the USA were soon repaired after Tian An Men, while matters related to the Vietnam War were allowed to prevent normalization of US-Vietnamese ties. The main such matter was the Missing in Action (MIAs). Once the Vietnamese understood how important this question was for the Americans, Hanoi put a major effort into accounting for all remaining MIAs, and got high marks from the US for its cooperation in this field. This paved the way for normalization in 1995, and for the establishment of normal trade relations in 2001, but the legacy of the

Vietnam War certainly delayed the process.

Geopolitical exposure: There may be some good geopolitical reasons for arguing that Vietnam could not after all have capitalized on the situation in 1989-90 to quickly normalize its ties with the USA, and compete with China for American investments and access to the US market. Such reasons played a role both in Hanoi and Washington. Hanoi had for more than ten years lived in constant fear of its northern communist neighbor, and depended on an alliance with a distant power, the Soviet Union. By 1989-90 it might have a chance to start replacing that distant power with another distant power, the USA. This might be economically advantageous, but would entail risks of political destabilization since the Americans would be likely to push not only for economic but also political reforms. The other option for Hanoi was to instead heal the wounds of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and re-establish some of the close cooperation that had once existed between the two communist parties. Hanoi chose to do a little of both, and to open up to a wider world, but to mainly emphasize security through normalization with China. This happened already in 1991, four years before the US normalization, and at the prize of dropping the pro-Western foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach from power.

Strong geopolitical reasons also led the USA to prioritize its relationship with China. With well over one billion inhabitants, as compared to Vietnam's 70today 85million, China evidently loomed much larger than Vietnam in any country's foreign relations, and certainly the USA's. The only countries whose relations with Vietnam are as important as their relations with China, are Laos and Cambodia. By 1989-90, China had also become economically important to the USA, whereas Vietnam remained an insignificant player in the international market place. China

was economically important because it already exported a significant quantity of goods to the USA, and enjoyed a substantial surplus in its bilateral trade. This was a major source of income for the Chinese treasury, but politically of course a liability. China's need to placate the USA in order to maintain normal trade relations also weakened its hand throughout the 1990s, and gave the USA some leverage. China, however, was also economically important for the USA as a market, or notably a potential market, and as a target for US investments. This was a source of political strength for China, and in the 1990s Beijing learned to play on US business leaders to influence the White House. The American aircraft industry, and other key businesses, formed a significant lobby group for China-friendly policies in Washington (Cohen 2000: 231).

Back in 1989-90, the Soviet Union was still in existence, and this meant that China, even after Tian An Men, was seen by the US as a strategic ally. President Bush did not want to risk pushing it back into the arms of the Soviet Union by reacting too strongly to Tian An Men. Thus he resisted demands from public opinion for breaking off diplomatic ties. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, China lost much of its attraction as a strategic partner for the USA: 'In the 1990s, with no apparent threat to the security of the United States, it was much more difficult to provide a compelling case for paying court to the "Butchers of Beijing."' (Cohen 2000: 239). American analysts now instead started to see China as a future threat, or strategic competitor. In this context Vietnam became interesting as a possible counter-balancing force. When Vietnam became a member of ASEAN in 1995, some commentators saw this as a move to counter-balance Chinese influence. However, China in no way opposed Vietnam's joining ASEAN. China did not seek a privileged relationship with Vietnam, but sought to improve its relations with all of

the Southeast Asian states. For this reason, China looked with sympathy on the widening of ASEAN to include Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Together with Singapore and Malaysia, these nations could be expected to prevent ASEAN from becoming a regional bridgehead for liberal democracy and insistence on individual human rights. There was much discussion throughout the 1990s of what Vietnam was likely to do with its naval base facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, which had been utilized successively by the French, Japanese, American and Soviet navies. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russians were expected to leave the base. The Cam Ranh Bay question became a focus for speculation about Vietnam's position between China and the USA. Vietnam never actually chose one over the other. The Russian navy kept up its presence in Cam Ranh Bay until 2002, and then the speculation went that the most likely nation to be invited to use the facilities, if any, would be neither China nor the USA, but India (Storey & Thayer 2002: 470).⁶⁾

Because of its size, China will always of course be far more important for the United States than Vietnam. But geopolitical importance does not always translate into good relations. In the period when the Soviet Union was the main opponent of the USA, there was no way Vietnam could compete with China for US benevolence. This changed in the 1990s, however, with Vietnam occupying a position as a possible counterweight to China. This could have been utilized by the Vietnamese leaders to move closer to the USA. When this did not happen, it most probably resulted from a conscious choice in Hanoi. Meanwhile, Beijing worked hard to continue its engagement of the United States through trade and

6) However, in February 2002, it was reported that the US had persuaded Vietnam to provide access for the US Navy to Cam Ranh Bay. Michael Richardson in the *International Herald Tribune* 8 Feb. 2002.

investments, high level meetings and mutual visits, and co-operation in international organizations. The fact that China succeeded in doing this, despite of its authoritarian political system and persistent repression of political and religious dissent, cannot be ascribed just to China's geopolitical importance, but resulted from a conscious Chinese choice to desist from provocative international behavior. However, one of the conditions that an authoritarian regime must fulfill in order to maintain smooth relations with the USA is to maintain a certain degree of national cohesion and political stability. If China or Vietnam had been exposed to more forceful movements of opposition, with sympathy for Western democracy, then it would have been far more difficult for the two regimes to engage Washington. Thus they had some reason to fear what both regimes called 'peaceful evolution', an expression denoting a gradual contamination of popular sentiments through foreign influences.

National unity and political stability: In terms of national unity, Vietnam enjoyed a clear advantage over China. Vietnam's national question was resolved by the victory of North Vietnam in 1975, and the formal unification of the two Vietnams in 1976. After this, three problems remained as far as the national question was concerned. One was the relationship to Laos and Cambodia. They had been part of the French Indochinese state, and the Vietnamese communists had waged their war against the French and Americans within the whole Indochinese theatre and wanted to establish a 'special relationship' among the three Indochinese nations. Vietnam's Indochinese ambition contributed to the fateful decision to maintain troops in Cambodia even after the ousting of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, instead of seeking an internationally negotiated solution. Only when this policy was reversed in 1989-91, and Vietnam accepted an

internationally negotiated solution for Cambodia, did this problem cease to damage Vietnam's foreign relations.

The second problem concerned Vietnam's own ethnic minorities, including the ethnic Chinese (Hoa). This also caused great problems during the 1970s-80s, but in the 1990s, the Chinese minority was again allowed to play a greater economic role, and with the improvement of Sino-Vietnamese relations, the problem became more manageable.

The third problem was the relationship to the Overseas Vietnamese, mainly refugees who left Vietnam after the fall of South Vietnam. Some of them formed lobbies opposing normalization of US-Vietnamese relations, but when Vietnam opened up its economy from 1987 onwards, remittances and investments from Overseas Vietnamese became increasingly important. We must also remember that the anti-communist organizations in exile do not seek to revive a separate South Vietnam. They also cherish national unity, as the South Vietnamese regime did in principle, and want political change in all of Vietnam.

The situation is very different in China. The issues of Tibet and of Uighur opposition in Xinjiang remain significant, and the Taiwan issue forms a big obstacle in Sino-US relations. China scored national successes in 1997 and 1999, with the peaceful unification with Hong Kong and Macao, but meanwhile the Taiwan issue became increasingly difficult. Taiwan democratized, thus forming an attractive political alternative to the political system in the mainland. Moreover, the government on Taiwan allowed a separate Taiwanese identity to express itself politically and in March 2000, Chen Hsui-bian, the leader of the Democratic Progress Party, which for a long time had worked for Taiwanese independence, was elected president. In 1992, President George Bush had enraged the Chinese leaders by selling advanced fighter jets to Taiwan, during the electoral campaign that he lost

to Bill Clinton. The greatest crisis in Sino-US relations during the 1990s came in 1995-96, as an effect of then Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui's visit to the USA, and the PRC's missile tests and military exercises before Taiwan's first free presidential elections. Clinton reacted by sending a carrier force (Garver 1997). The Taiwan issue again came to the forefront of Sino-US relations when President George W. Bush in 2001 announced a new package of arms sales to Taipei, and declared that the USA would be unable to look passively at a Chinese attack on the island.

Like the USA and almost every country in the world, Vietnam supports the 'one China' principle, but from a geopolitical perspective, Vietnam has every interest in the survival of a separate state in Taiwan. Once China and Taiwan are unified, Vietnam will face an even stronger northern neighbor, and thus be even more obliged to defer to Beijing. Vietnam has tried to compete with China for Taiwanese and other overseas Chinese investments. Economically, Taiwan, Singapore and the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia are playing a highly significant role. Their networks and investments are crucial to regional development and integration, across the divide between China and the nations of ASEAN. Thus, both for China and Vietnam, the diasporas established in effect of the ideological divisions in the Cold War period, have been turned into economic advantage. This is also part of what makes the region interesting as a market for American technology.

In terms of internal political stability, Vietnam also enjoyed a slight advantage over China. There were never any demonstrations in Hanoi comparable to those on Tian An Men square in 1989. In 1998, there was serious unrest among peasants in two Vietnamese provinces, but China has had similar problems in some of its provinces. Despite such incidents, it is impossible not to be impressed by the ability of both the Chinese and the

Vietnamese regimes to steer their countries through remarkable economic and social change without being exposed to more serious threats to their political systems. Nostalgic Russian communists see them as models for what the Soviet Union could have achieved if Gorbachev had acted differently. It remains to be seen if stability can also be maintained in China and Vietnam if they run into an economic recession.

The fact that China remained so far ahead of Vietnam throughout the 1989-2002 period in its relationship to the USA cannot be ascribed to greater national unity or political stability in China. In these respects it is rather Vietnam that carries the advantage. We must therefore now look at what political scientists call 'agency'.

Leadership and diplomacy: In the 1990s, there were two main differences between the pattern of political leadership in China and Vietnam. Firstly, in China everyone knew that the ultimate power remained with one person. Throughout his lifetime this was Deng Xiaoping, and after his death in 1997, Jiang Zemin soon established himself as the paramount leader. By contrast, in Vietnam there were frequent changes in the leadership, and no individual ever enjoyed the same kind of authority as Deng or Jiang. Decisions had to be negotiated among leaders representing Vietnam's three main regions, the various branches of government, and the main factions within the Communist Party. The second difference stems from the first. Whereas China acted decisively and boldly, accepting great risks, Vietnam was more hesitant and probing in its handling of reforms, and always studied Chinese experiences before carrying out new reforms. The difference was also visible in the field of foreign policy. Deng skillfully played on his friendship with President George Bush in 1989-90, and got China quickly out of its post-Tian An Men crisis by actively contributing

to the Cambodian solution, sharing information with Washington about what was going on in North Korea, and refraining from vetoing the use of force against Iraq in the UN Security Council (Cohen 2000: 223-4). Towards the end of the decade, Jiang Zemin seemed to place the establishment of permanent normal trade relations with the USA, and WTO membership, above most other foreign policy goals. He thus made sure that crises following the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the spyplane incident off Hainan in April 2001, did not lead to full-scale rupture between the two nations. He skillfully maneuvered in order to prevent China from becoming the target of George W. Bush's patriotic rhetoric, and played down Chinese military leaders' apprehension of being encircled by the US in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2001. Both Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Zhu Rongji were able to use personal charm in managing their relations with the US leaders, and playing up to Western public opinion. The Vietnamese leaders were always more hesitant, and certainly had no leader who could match Bill Clinton's charm when he visited Vietnam in 2000. To the contrary, Clinton's outblending of the Vietnamese leaders seemed to contribute to the replacement of Le Kha Phieu with Nong Duc Manh as Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 2001. On the other hand, there was a kind of stubborn decisiveness in Vietnam's pursuance of those goals for which there was consensus in the leadership, such as the widening of diplomatic ties to include as many nations as possible.

China was far ahead of Vietnam in establishing knowledge and familiarity with US affairs. The leading Chinese families sent their children to study in American universities, and allowed some of their researchers to engage in a cross-Pacific community of scholarly foreign policy analysis. A

similar intellectual opening has only just began in Vietnam, whose leaders remain highly secretive in their handling of recent history and foreign policy debate. In the early 1990s, and particularly after Congress had pressured President Clinton to accept that Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui be given a visa to visit the University of Cornell, Beijing realized that it had to broaden its relations with the US, and no longer just concentrate on the executive branch (Huang 2000: 279). China took a series of steps to broaden its engagement through high-level military visits, business deals, contact with significant politicians in the US Congress, and also scholarly exchange. Beijing learned (by failing) to influence American politics and society, and were much better at this than Hanoi (although less effective than Taipei). The 1990s saw a considerable growth in foreign policy debate in China. There was a rapid increase in the number of research institutions, both public and private, and in publications arguing diverging views. A tension emerged between those who favored a collaborative approach towards the US, and those who wanted a China that could 'say no' (Huang 2000: 283). Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji came increasingly to be seen as 'pro-US', and Jiang's change in status to becoming an effective national leader, coincided with a dramatic improvement of Sino-US ties, leading to the Clinton visit in 1998 (Huang 2000: 289-90). A backlash occurred in 1999 during the Kosovo War, when the US (presumably accidentally) bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. This forced Jiang Zemin to tolerate and give expression to an upsurge of anti-US emotions.

It seems that the difference between the Chinese and Vietnamese performance in engaging the USA must to a great extent be ascribed to leadership. The Chinese leaders were bold, accepted risks, and put great and increasing emphasis on managing their relations with the USA. This

led to crises, and fluctuation, but mainly to success. The top leaders in Beijing would never let their relations with Washington deteriorate through inactivity, or adopt a too defensive posture based on past humiliations and fear of encirclement, although some military leaders seemed to push in this direction. The Vietnamese leaders were more cautious in their approach, but they gave the same priority to economic development as the Chinese, and understood that this required engagement of the USA. There was less fluctuation, less crisis, in the Vietnamese-US relationship, but also much slower progress.

Why was North Korea less successful than Vietnam?

While Vietnamese relations with the USA went through steady, but slow improvement throughout the period 1989-2002, North Korea enjoyed two brief periods of rapprochement, interrupted by crises. Meanwhile, the country went through a dismal economic development, with widespread famine, and at the end of the period its relationship was no better than it had been at the beginning (Natsios 2001). In President George W. Bush's State of the Union speech on 29 January 2002, North Korea was included together with Iran and Iraq in something he called an 'axis of evil'.

The first two crises in the North Korean-US relationship were in 1993, when Pyongyang announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in 1994, when it began replacing spent fuel rods at its nuclear energy plants, without proper supervision. The Clinton administration reacted by lobbying the UN Security Council for imposing sanctions against North Korea, but instead a deal was brokered by former president Jimmy Carter in 1994, whereby North Korea would return to the NPT, allow international inspections, and

obtain provisions of oil and aid in constructing nuclear energy plants. The stage thus seemed to be set for further improvement. Pyongyang's goal in this period was no doubt to establish high-level talks with the US, in view of concluding a peace treaty (Han 2000: 44). However, the process was interrupted by Kim Il Sung's death, and the fact that his son Kim Jong Il did not immediately assume power, at least not publicly. An interregnum followed, where not much seemed to happen, except a deepening of North Korea's economic and social crisis.

The second diplomatic crisis came in 1998, when North Korea conducted a failed test with a long range missile that landed in the sea off Japan. However, shortly after this episode, the election of the former dissident Kim Dae Jung to the presidency in South Korea led to a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations. Stimulated by Kim Dae Jung's 'sunshine policy' and his summit with Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in June 2000, new links were established also between Washington and Pyongyang. However, this time the rapprochement was interrupted by the election of George W. Bush to the US presidency. He at once adopted a highly critical attitude to the North Korean regime, and refused to play along with Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy. It remains to be seen what happens when president Bush visits Beijing and Seoul in late February 2002, only three weeks after he said publicly that North Korea belonged to an 'axis of evil'. It does seem unlikely that Bush is heading for a direct confrontation with Pyongyang. This would not be in the US interest since it could easily entail serious problems in the US relationship not only with China, but with Japan and South Korea as well (Cha 2002). What seems most likely is that George W. Bush's strong rhetoric will lead to a continuation of status quo, interrupting the rapprochement between the two Koreas, with the tragic consequences that this is bound to have for the isolated,

suffering and aid-dependent North Koreans. Another possibility, that Bush may be counting on, is that his hard-line policy provokes the same kind of reactions as Reagan's confrontational policy towards the Soviet Union did in the early 1980s, i.e., a war scare that forces Pyongyang to radically alter its policies, thus setting off a process of reform that may ultimately lead to regime change.

Due mainly to its failed economic policy, but also to its international isolation, the North Korean regime is today in a very bad shape, whereas Vietnam has managed to achieve significant economic growth and break out of its international isolation. A key element in this difference is their divergent policies towards the United States. Why is there such a big difference in the accomplishment of these two communist states, who both waged armed struggles against American forces during the Cold War, and who both have had a chance to seek inspiration from their Chinese neighbor?

In the comparison of China and Vietnam above, the point was made initially that there was no major difference between the degree of democracy and respect for human rights in the two countries, and that such difference could therefore not explain the different trajectories of their relations with the USA. The same is not the case when we compare Vietnam with North Korea. The latter is, and has always been, a far more repressive regime than the Vietnamese, with a much worse human rights record, although the country's isolation long prevented this from becoming an important issue in international relations. North Korea is clearly at a disadvantage in its relations with the USA by the fact that many Americans see it as despotic.

Here again, however, we shall concentrate on the same four sets of possible explanations as above:

- Historical legacy.
- Geopolitical exposure.
- National unity and political stability.
- Leadership and diplomatic skill.

Historical legacy: Whereas the Korean War ended in status quo, with no victory to either side, the Vietnam War ended in US withdrawal and outright defeat for the US client regime in Saigon. This meant that the United States lost its foothold in Vietnam, and in the 1990s could be invited back in a new role, also involving a historical reexamination, inspired and led by former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara of the mistakes that led to the ill-fated US intervention (McNamara 1999). Although the Korean War ended 22 years earlier than the war in Vietnam, its legacy was far more divisive. No peace treaty was ever signed, only an armistice agreement, and US forces maintained a presence in South Korea while North Korea kept a massive army ready just north of the DMZ, ready to overrun Seoul. The danger of renewed warfare was therefore far more acute in the Korean peninsula than in Vietnam, particularly after Vietnam's 1989 withdrawal from Cambodia, where the US, China and Thailand for a period of ten years had sustained the insurgency of the Khmer Rouge and its royalist allies.

The legacies of the Korean and Vietnam wars also involved a significant role for China, who had intervened militarily to save North Korea in 1950, and had given highly substantial support to Vietnam during the wars against France and the United States. Still China's role was different, since it remained an ally of North Korea while turning against Vietnam in 1979. When losing most of their Soviet support in the late 1980s, North Korea could therefore to some extent rely on China, whereas

Vietnam had to reorient its policy in order to repair its relationship both with China and the United States. Only when China recognized South Korea in 1992 did North Korea start to feel the same degree of isolation that Vietnam had felt acutely by 1988. One reason why North Korea was so slow to reorient its foreign policy, and never really dared to scale down its military expenditure, may therefore be the different outcomes of the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

Geopolitical exposure: Both Korea and Vietnam are situated in a dangerous geopolitical environment between China and other regional powers. However, Korea's position is more dangerous than Vietnam's. While the Korean peninsula is squeezed between no less than three major powers, China, Russia and Japan, and with a presence of US troops in South Korea, Vietnam is situated between China and a group of much lesser powers, and with US forces at a safer distance. Moreover, Vietnam was able in 1995 to become a member of ASEAN, the regional grouping that includes all the lesser regional powers. North Korea's more exposed geopolitical position no doubt contributed to making Pyongyang feel insecure. North Korea also suffered from the fact that other states, regardless of ideology, were interested in economic relations with South Korea. In the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea benefited greatly from its support to the US side in the Cold War, enjoyed unrestricted access to the US market, and became one of the most successful Asian tiger economies. North Korea remained extremely backward, and depended on Chinese and Soviet aid and barter trade. In order not to become too heavily involved economically in China, capital exporting countries such as Japan, Taiwan and Singapore sometimes looked for other places to invest than China. This benefited Vietnam, whose main foreign investors in the 1990s were Taiwan

and Singapore. North Korea was not in a position to attract such investments.

As long as Vietnam occupied Cambodia, the US needed Chinese support to put pressure on Hanoi, but once Vietnam had withdrawn from Cambodia in 1989, and a Cambodian settlement was reached in 1991, the USA no longer needed its de facto alliance with China for any purpose in Indochina. This strengthened Vietnam's leverage in Washington. American analysts started once more, as they had in the 1950s-60s, to see a need for a Vietnamese counter-balance to China. In Korea, however, China maintained its leverage. Reducing tensions in the Korean peninsula, or moderating the behavior of Pyongyang, requires Chinese support (Huang 2000: 280).

For geopolitical reasons, there is a certain logic leading to status quo in US-North Korean relations. On the one hand, the US has little incentive to improve its relations with North Korea, whose status as a 'rogue state' or member of the so-called 'axis of evil' provides Washington with a reason for keeping up its military presence in the region, and perhaps develop a Theatre Missile Defense. On the other hand, the US will tend to avoid open conflict with North Korea because this would both heighten Japan's fear of being drawn into a war through the US-Japan alliance, and aggravate China's fear of US aggression (Kang 2001: 32). What we have seen here is that both Vietnam and North Korea are situated in a difficult geopolitical position, but North Korea's position is far more difficult than Vietnam's. It is not evident, however, that this should have made it impossible for North Korea to engage the USA. Precisely because of its exposed position, Pyongyang might have perceived a need for a more accommodating approach to the USA, and for seeking security through cooperation rather than brinkmanship.

National unity and political stability: We saw above that Vietnam enjoyed an advantage vis--vis China in that it did achieve national unification in 1975, while the Chinese civil war continued for many decades as a 'cold' contest between the People's Republic (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. Vietnam's advantage in this respect is even more pronounced when it is compared with North Korea. Both Vietnam and Korea are historically divided in three main regions, who have formed the basis of different historical dynasties or states. Since 1976, all three Vietnamese regions have been represented in the same political system, whereas North Korea represents just one of Korea's historical regions. The other two are in South Korea. The continued division of Korea, and the ever present danger that a new Korean War could break out contributed to making it more difficult for North Korea than for Vietnam to engage the United States. Whereas Hanoi could drastically reduce its army after the withdrawal from Cambodia without having to worry that this might tempt the United States to intervene once more, Pyongyang felt it had to condition any reduction in its army on withdrawal of US forces from the south. And whereas Vietnam could consider its rapprochement with the United States as a predominantly bilateral affair, North Korea always had to consider its relationship with Washington in light of its relationship with Seoul. It's more difficult to run a trilateral than a bilateral peace process. In 1993-94, North Korea tried to sideline the South while dealing directly with Washington (Han 2000: 45). In 2000, North Korea instead tried to use improved relations with the South as a means to get the US President to visit Pyongyang. On several occasions, North Korea seemed to entertain false expectations of being able to successfully play South Korea and the US out against each other (Han 2000: 49). This clearly shows how the legacy of a divided peninsula weakened North Korea's hand as compared to

Vietnam's.

The political systems of North Korea and Vietnam are also widely different. The North Korean system is based on the personal qualities of Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il, who are the focus of a national cult. Little is known outside of North Korea about how they delegate their powers, but their advisors do not seem to be secure in their positions. The real decisions are taken by the top leader himself. This resembles the situation in China more than the one in Vietnam, but even in China the top leader has not since Mao Zedong been as dominant as Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il. The system in Vietnam is more bureaucratic, more based on compromises between factions and interest groups, therefore also less flexible, but on the other hand more responsive to popular sentiments. Both kinds of system can be stable, but while the stability in one case depends on the popularity of the leader and on popular fears of repression, the stability in Vietnam is more due to an intricate system of checks and balances (Tnnesson 2000).

In terms of national unity, Vietnam enjoyed a clear advantage relative to North Korea. On the other hand, North Korea had a kind of political system that gave and still gives so much power to the top leader that he could have, if he wanted to, reoriented his policy towards the US far more quickly and radically than was possible in Vietnam. Again, this means that a good part of the explanation for diverging degree of success in engaging the USA must be ascribed to 'agency'.

Leadership and diplomatic skill: It is to some extent a paradox that the less flexible Vietnamese political system was able to produce a radical reorientation in foreign policy already in the late 1980s whereas the highly personalized North Korean regime remained stuck in a system of unproductive state-directed enterprises, militarism, and a foreign policy

based to a great extent on threats and military provocations. Despite its greater economic means, Vietnam never developed any nuclear or missile program, or tried to construct its own submarines.

Some of the explanation for North Korea's continued militarism and lack of flexibility may be found in the *juche* ideology, which highlights self-reliance. Self-reliance was certainly even more important to the North Korean state ideology than to the Vietnamese. In reality, both countries depended strongly on aid from China and/or the Soviet Union. When that aid disappeared, both regimes needed to readjust their foreign policies in order to gain support or investments from new quarters. Only Vietnam managed to carry out this transition. Perhaps a part of the explanation is that the *juche* ideology made it difficult to acknowledge the dependence on foreign support. Another reason may be that the Vietnamese communist leadership went through a generational shift precisely at the time when a reorientation was needed. The two veteran party leaders Le Duan and Truong Chinh died in 1986 and 1988 respectively, so the reformer Nguyen Van Linh could take over. During his time as party leader, which lasted only till 1991, he initiated the reforms that would slowly follow their course through the 1990s. Kim Il Sung did not do anything similar. Nor did Kim Jong Il, whose grip on power seemed for some time uncertain, at least to outside observers.

An important part of successful political leadership is to choose the methods best suited to attain one's ends. Whereas Vietnam chose to withdraw its military forces from Cambodia and Laos, scale down its huge army and invest in military modernization only after a successful industrial policy had provided it with increased revenue, North Korea maintained its enormous army during a period of economic decline, while also diverging resources to the development of new offensive arms. While Vietnam

effectively removed the perception of a Vietnamese threat, North Korea instead used missile tests and a nuclear program to force the US to engage in negotiations. Both methods were effective in achieving talks, but of a highly different kind. Whereas the US hostility towards Vietnam slowly melted away, its abhorrence of the regime in Pyongyang was repeatedly stimulated. This led to concessions in terms of food aid and provisions of oil, but not to any trust or permanent improvement of relations. The two main obstacles to normalization between North Korea and the USA were the continued presence of the North Korean army just north of the DMZ, and the missile program that led to fears of an effective threat against Japan. North Korea gained little from its brinkmanship, except some oil and money. It would no doubt have gained more by soft-pedaling its military capabilities and encouraging foreign investments at a much earlier stage. The reason why neither Kim Il Sung nor Kim Jong Il opened up the economy is probably their fear that the presence of foreigners would have negative effects on the North Korean population. Neither father nor son dared to unsettle the kind of social forces that transformed the Chinese and Vietnamese societies during the 1990s, although these transformations did not unravel these countries' political systems.

As far as diplomatic skill is concerned, we have seen that the Vietnamese lag behind the Chinese, but the North Koreans lag far behind the Vietnamese again. There are many reports of stiff and nervous behavior on the part of North Korean diplomats, whose lack of flexibility seems to stem from a need to frequently refer to Pyongyang for detailed instructions. The North Korean behavior was worse, however, in inter-Korean talks than in talks with US representatives (Han 2000: 49-50), although Kim Jong Il himself managed to achieve a diplomatic and international public breakthrough when receiving Kim Dae Jung in June 2000.

The key explanation for the difference between the Vietnamese and North Korean performances must be found in the reorientation that happened in Hanoi during the second half of the 1980s. This is accurately described by the Vietnamese foreign policy analyst Bui Thanh Son (1999: 203):

' . . . the Vietnamese leadership began to recognize the growing interdependence of the world economies, the trend of dtente among major powers, especially between the United States and USSR, the decreased possibility of world war, and the "economic race" replacing the "arms race" among countries. Based on these assessments, the leadership then came to a conclusion that Vietnam would have to concentrate efforts on economic development while expanding international co-operation in the spirit of "making more friends and reducing the [number of] enemies". Such new ideas produced concrete results.'

No similar reorientation happened in North Korea. To the extent that Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il developed similar ideas, they did not produce concrete results. Perhaps Vietnam might serve as a kind of model for North Korea today. The Vietnamese example seems to indicate that, at least in the short run, it is possible for a communist party to open up its economy and engage the USA without losing power.

Conclusions

The main reasons for China being more successful than Vietnam in engaging the USA seem to be, firstly, the clout of China as a great power and future market and, secondly, the boldness and skilled pragmatism of the main Chinese leaders, notably Deng Xiaoping. The main explanations

for Vietnam being more successful than North Korea seem to be, firstly, that North Vietnam achieved national unification in 1975 and thus could act on behalf of the whole Vietnamese nation and, secondly, that the Vietnamese leaders were more responsive to the economic and social crisis of the mid-1980s and reoriented their economic and foreign policies.

From these conclusions we may perhaps draw three general lessons:

1) Diplomacy based on trade and investments is more effective in engaging the USA than military brinkmanship. While Washington is likely to mobilize against authoritarian states who seem to constitute a military threat against important US allies, Washington is unlikely to enter into sharp conflict with states who concentrate on economic achievements, even if authoritarian.

2) A communist regime that wants to survive in a globalized, US-dominated world, needs a persistent long-term strategy of economic reform, in combination with a diplomacy aiming to mobilize foreign investments and aid.

3) All three nations were hampered in their engagement of the USA by their lack of democracy and respect for individual human rights. They could enhance their security from US interference by managing a peaceful transition to democracy.

The need to engage the USA was certainly not reduced by the changes that occurred in US foreign policy after the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. America's 'war on terrorism' generally led to a strengthening of state power vis--vis rebellious populations. The regimes in China, Vietnam and North Korea all tried to benefit from this by condemning terrorism, and Vietnam called on

the USA to clamp down on anti-communist Vietnamese 'terrorists' operating out of the USA. China also expressed support to the US war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. From the Chinese perspective it did not seem wise to defy the USA since the latter enjoyed the support of Japan, Russia and the dominant powers of the European Union. China does not want to stand alone.

When Vietnam and North Korea deal with the USA, they must at the same time think about their relations with China. They have no interest in a Sino-American conflict. To the contrary they are both strongly interested in a general improvement of the climate between the major powers in East Asia, since this is likely to provide more stability also for the smaller states. On this basis we may draw the conclusion that in spite of the Bush administration's strongly patriotic rhetoric and threats against evil states, China, Vietnam and North Korea are likely to continue their engagement policies, with strongly diverging degrees of success.

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