

Vietnam: Charting out its own Pathway

Việt Nam: Tìm một lối đi riêng

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Để biết thêm thông tin về bài viết này cũng như những bài viết đã qua bình duyệt của Trung tâm
An ninh Đông Á, hãy liên hệ với Tổng biên tập Jonathan H. Ping

Abstract: The rising assertiveness of China's foreign conduct and uncertainty, in part a response to the United States, has prompted a sense of insecurity on the part of Vietnam. Facing increased disorder on its eastern maritime doorstep and water-scarcity in the Mekong Delta, due to damming upstream, Hanoi is under mounting pressure to seek protection from great powers. However, despite limited capacity and capabilities, Vietnam has persisted in its strategic self-reliance, stood up to defend rules, worked to mobilize regional and international support for its legal stance, and is prepared to fight on its own for self-defense. Its foreign policy has thus been increasingly guided by *traditional* middle power diplomacy which allegedly puts a premium on defending a rules-based order through multilateralism, but Vietnam is developing its own form of post-behaviouralist middle power.

Trừu tượng: Trung Quốc trỗi dậy, hành động ngày một quyết đoán cộng với sự bất định trong chính sách của chính quyền Trump đã khiến Việt Nam lo ngại. Đối diện với bất ổn ngày càng lớn trên Biển Đông và nguy cơ mất an ninh về nguồn nước ở hạ lưu sông Mê Công, Việt Nam đứng trước áp lực ngày càng lớn phải tìm kiếm sự bảo trợ của các cường quốc. Tuy nhiên, bất chấp năng lực và khả năng còn hạn chế, Việt Nam kiên trì chính sách tự cường, sẵn sàng đứng lên bảo vệ quy tắc, chủ động vận động ủng hộ của khu vực và quốc tế với lập trường của mình, đồng thời chuẩn bị để tự vệ khi không còn lựa chọn khác. Chính sách đối ngoại của Việt Nam ngày càng phản ánh tư duy của một quốc gia tầm trung coi trọng trật tự dựa trên luật lệ và chủ nghĩa đa phương.

Keywords: Middle Power, Vietnam, China, US, ASEAN, South China Sea

Introduction

Over the last decade, Vietnam has attracted considerable attention in the international media as a country most exposed to a rising China. With its special geography, Vietnam is viewed as sitting on the fault line of a historic power shift underway in the Asia-Pacific region and as one of the major obstacles to China's expansions in the South China Sea, which has become a flashpoint in regional politics. Against that backdrop, how China behaves and how Vietnam responds should be observed closely, as it will be indicative for the nature of China's rise, whether peaceful or disorderly, and characterize the shift in the regional order and the nature of middle powers.

At the same time, there has been an increased interest in Vietnam in the theoretical concept of middle power diplomacy. The discourse on new identity-building is quite significant because it reflects changes both inside and outside the country. For a long time, Vietnam was viewed as a marginal socialist state in Southeast Asia. After three decades of Doi Moi, a series of structural reforms implemented since 1986, Vietnam has transformed itself into one of the world's most open economies. In 2019, the ratio of its trade to its GDP was more than 200 per cent.¹ As a result, there has been more desire on the part of Vietnam to influence its external environment in a way that fits its interests.

In terms of power capacity, it is a problem for Vietnam to position itself as a middle power. It lags far behind recognised middle powers such as Australia, Canada, India, Indonesia and South Korea. It ranks 67th in terms of size², 15th in terms of population³, and 45th in terms of economy⁴. Despite these physical constraints, Vietnam desires to perform the role of a middle power in its regional affairs, as, what the 16th century Italian philosopher Giovanni Botero defined as, one who "has sufficient strength and authority to stand on its own without the need of help from others".⁵

The question of Vietnam's middle power status is not about its own capacity, but Vietnam's ability to amass strengths from different sources to influence regional politics. In fact, Vietnam has proven to be an adept actor which can stand up and protect its rights in front of great powers and defend a rules-based order at times of distress. With these observations, Vietnam serves as

¹ "Vietnam Trade to GDP Ratio 1986-2020," *MacroTrends*, 2019, retrieved at <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/VNM/vietnam/trade-gdp-ratio> (accessed 30 July 2020)

² "Largest Countries in the World by Area," *Worldometer*, retrieved at <https://www.worldometers.info/geography/largest-countries-in-the-world/> (accessed 30 July 2020)

³ "Vietnam's Population Reaches over 96.2 Million, Ranking 15th in the World: 2019 Census," *Nhan Dan [Vietnamese People's Daily]*, 11 July 11 2019, retrieved at: <https://en.nhandan.org.vn/society/item/7680202-vietnam-s-population-reaches-over-96-2-million-ranking-15th-in-the-world-2019-census.html> (accessed 30 July 2020)

⁴ "Gross Domestic Product 2019," World Bank DataBank, 2020, retrieved at: <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf> (accessed 30 July 2020)

⁵ Chandra D. Bhatta, Emerging powers, soft power, and future of regional cooperation in South Asia, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 2018, p.4.

an interesting case study on how a country can navigate the rise of power politics and rivalry in its region.

Emerging strategic quandary

Since the initiation of Doi Moi, Vietnam's ultimate foreign policy goal, which is engraved in the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam's political documents, shifted to protect the country's sovereignty whilst creating a favourable environment for economic development. To this end, Vietnam adopted Former Foreign Minister's Nguyen Co Thach's advocacy of "fewer enemies, more friends", trying to settle "historical differences" and build up cooperative relations with all major powers and neighbors in the last decade of the 20th century.⁶

However, this policy is challenged by China's rise and adoption of an expansionist foreign policy agenda. Geographically speaking, Vietnam is a Southeast Asian country most exposed to a rising China. Therefore, China's forceful attempts to change the status quo in the South China Sea puts Vietnam into a strategic dilemma, where the country can either antagonize China to defend its sovereignty and legitimate rights or appease China to save cordial relations with its powerful neighbor. The pursuit of dual goals became increasingly difficult as China built up fortresses in the middle of the South China Sea and sent its flotillas to subdue any resistance.

China's expanding footprint across Southeast Asia also prompted a range of strategic anxieties. China's investments into infrastructural connectivity on the one hand offers huge potential opportunities for development, and on the other created fears about a "Trojan Horse" which undermines the unity of Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The dual use of some facilities in Vietnam's neighborhood stirred up concerns about the possibilities of Chinese military deployment in the future. Finally, the Vietnamese worried about China's cascade of dams in the upstream Mekong river, which would threaten their rice basket in the Cuu Long River delta (Mekong downstream).⁷

At the same time, uncertainties in the United States (US) is a different source of unease. Under the Obama administration, the US' half-hearted responses allowed China to strengthen its foothold in the South China Sea, especially through large-scale reclamation and base build-up in the Spratlys. However, in regional eyes, the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific vision is also a

⁶ See Nguyen Vu Tung, "Vietnam's Security Challenges: Hanoi's New Approach to National Security and Implications to Defense and Foreign Policies," In: Eiichi Katahara (ed), *Asia Pacific Countries' Security Outlook and its implications for the Defense Sector*, Tokyo: NIDS Joint Research Series No.5, 2010;

http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series5/pdf/5-8.pdf (accessed 30 July 2020)

⁷ David Brown, "Vietnam sweats bullets as China and Laos dam the Mekong," Mongabay, 6 October 2016, <https://news.mongabay.com/2016/10/vietnam-sweats-bullets-as-china-laos-dam-the-mekong/> (accessed 30 July 2020)

risky enterprise. Despite its rhetoric on rules-based order, the US under Donald Trump had yet countered unlawful activities and misconduct with meaningful measures. In the meantime, it showed aversion to multilateral forums and attempted to revise the security and trade terms of its relations with all key allies and partners to its own advantages. Washington's excessive focus on the show of presence and force along with its obsession with military and security strength equally rattles the nerve of Southeast Asian countries.

Self-Reliant Defense

Despite the reemergence of traditional challenges over the last decade, Vietnam has kept its independent and self-reliant foreign policy. The 2019 defense white paper reiterated a non-aligned strategic posture in the form of the three-no principles, which are no military alliance, no foreign military bases on its soil, and no collusion with one against another. Another "no" is added to this white paper, that is, no threat or use of force.⁸ The key signal here is to reassure its neighbors that Vietnam's military power is entirely defensive, and Hanoi does not want to join any camp in geopolitical rivalry. This reiteration is meaningful at a time when the US and China feud over rules and territorial disputes become intense.

Such a stance is rooted in Vietnam's strategic experience, which is bitter with alliance politics. Hanoi does not want to be a pawn on the big powers' grand chessboard. In the Second Indochina War, the Vietnamese felt betrayed when realizing that its close ideological ally, China, secretly dealt with US National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger in 1971 at a time of intensified fighting in the South Vietnamese battlefields. Even the world's strongest power, the US, did nothing when its South Vietnamese ally was attacked by China in the Paracels in 1974. The US' Seventh Fleet warships operating in the area were ordered to sail away when its ally was in distress, and in 1988, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy invaded Vietnam-held Spratly islets, the Soviet Union warships docked in Cam Ranh and were ordered to stay still.⁹

The Vietnamese learnt their lessons and consistently adopted an independent strategic posture in the post-Cold War. This policy later evolved into the 3-No principles that currently guide Vietnam's strategic behavior. Vietnam normalized relations and expanded military and security relations with all major powers. However, all the security cooperation did not amount to the establishment of a military alliance, even when tensions built up in the South China Sea, significantly during the Haiyang Shiyou 981 crisis in mid-2014.¹⁰ Generally, political elites in

⁸ Vietnam Ministry of Defense, *2019 National Defence White Paper*, Hanoi, 2019, retrieved at: <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/Viet-Nam-National-Defense-WHITE-PAPER-2019/201912/38323.vgp> (accessed 30 July 2020)

⁹ See Do Thanh Hai, *Vietnam and the South China Sea*, (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁰ Hoang Thuy, "Make friends, not enemies: Vietnam military strategy of non-alignment," *Vnexpress*, 17 December 2019, retrieved at <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/make-friends-not-enemies-vietnam-military-strategy-of-non-alignment-4028125.html> (accessed 30 July 2020)

Hanoi are under no illusion that the US, or other Western powers, would come to help them if conflicts broke out in the South China Sea. This precaution explains Vietnam's investment in substantial resources to develop a minimum maritime deterrence, including 6 Kilo-class submarines.¹¹

However, it is interesting to note that the 2019 Defense White Paper added some flexibility to Vietnam's foreign policy. While re-articulating the no-alliance principle, it added that "Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries".¹² Amidst its deteriorating security environment with China's repeated intrusions into its waters, it is quite reasonable to assess that this conditional clause would open up possibilities for Vietnam to upgrade its ties with major powers if its core national interests are under threat. Again, it is the key signal to all the great powers that Vietnam's independent strategic posture should not be taken for granted.¹³

Stand up on principles

The pursuit of strategic non-alignment does not mean that Hanoi is not concerned about the possibility of being attacked by great powers, especially in its eastern maritime domain which hosts a range of disputes with its neighbors. Vietnam's key security concern is the South China Sea, where Vietnam's capabilities are dwarfed by those of its main aggressor, China. However, the strategists in Hanoi understand that China is not yet ready for a high-intensity and prolonged armed conflict as it would be devastating to China's economic development. Also, when it comes to conflicts, Vietnam is often a quagmire for great powers.

Since the end of the Cold War, Hanoi has relied more on peaceful means to defend its sovereignty and interest. Vietnam joined a range of multilateral institutions, such as the ASEAN in 1995, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum in 1998, and gained membership of the World Trade Organization in 2007, and utilized these forums to advance its security interests.¹⁴ It has negotiated with all neighbors to find settlements for territorial and maritime disputes, which resulted in the signature of a land border agreement with China in 1999, the delimitation

¹¹ Greg Torode, "Vietnam building deterrent against China in disputed seas with submarines," *Reuters*, 8 September 2014; retrieved at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-submarines-china-insight-idUSKBN0H20SF20140907> (accessed July 30, 2020)

¹² Vietnam Ministry of Defense, *2019 National Defence White Paper*, Hanoi, 2019.

¹³ Derek Grossman and Christopher Sharman, "How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Great Powers," *War on the Rocks*, 31 December 2019, retrieved at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/how-to-read-vietnams-latest-defense-white-paper-a-message-to-great-powers/> (accessed July 30, 2020)

¹⁴ Dang Dinh Quy et al., *Chủ Nghĩa Đa Phương Trên Thế Giới và Đối Ngoại Đa Phương Của Việt Nam [Multilateralism in the world and Vietnamese multilateral diplomacy]* (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2019), 255-259.

of the boundary in the Gulf of Tonkin with China in 2000, a maritime boundary agreement in the Gulf of Thailand with Thailand in 1997, and the delimitation of the continental shelf with Indonesia in 2003.¹⁵

The disputes in the South China Sea, including the sovereignty disputes over the Paracels and Spratlys as well as disputes over maritime spaces, have proved to be the most intractable. The most difficult challenge is China's nine-dash line claim, which accounts for 80 percent of the South China Sea but overlaps with 50 percent of Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁶ What matters in this dispute is that China's claim is not based on UNCLOS, to which both Vietnam and China are parties. However, over the last decade, China has deployed overwhelming flotillas of warships, law enforcement vessels and fishing militia to enforce its *expansive* claim against the will of all Southeast Asian coastal states, including Vietnam. In many circumstances, though being short of shooting, the clashes were so intense that it resulted in ramming and water-cannon fights at sea.¹⁷

Given the power asymmetry between Southeast Asian claimants and China, the easiest choice for the formers is acquiesce to the latter's claims for other benefits, or for Vietnam to join China's joint exploitation proposal, which would help avoid clashes with the PLA Navy. However, Vietnam repeatedly stood stubbornly against any perceived Chinese encroachments. In 2014, Vietnam sent its law enforcement vessels to contest China's Haiyang Shiyu oil rig installed in an area that Vietnam regards as its Exclusive Economic Zone.¹⁸ In 2019, Vietnam also stood its ground against the intrusions of China's Haiyang Dizhi 08 escorted by dozens of big ships between July and October 2019.¹⁹ In both cases, China eventually had to withdraw its ships from Vietnamese waters.

Persist rules-based multilateralism

Multilateral diplomacy has gained importance in Vietnam's foreign policy. In the 30th Diplomatic Conference, an internal bi-annual gathering of top Vietnamese diplomats in 2018, it

¹⁵ See Nguyen Hong Thao & Ramses Amer, "Managing Vietnam's Maritime Boundary Disputes," *Ocean Development & International Law* 38, No.3, 2007, 305-324

¹⁶ Swiwo Pramono, "China's nine-dash line revisited," *The Jakarta Post*, 12 July 2016, retrieved at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2016/07/12/chinas-nine-dash-line-revisited.html> (accessed 30 July 2020)

¹⁷ Carl Thayer, "China's Oil Rig Gambit: South China Sea Game-Changer?" *The Diplomat*, 12 May 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/05/chinas-oil-rig-gambit-south-china-sea-game-changer/> (accessed 30 July 2020)

¹⁸ "Chinese Aircraft Intimidate Vietnamese Law Enforcement Vessels - Chinese Aircraft Intimidate Vietnamese Law Enforcement Vessels," *Vietnamese Government Portal News*, 20 June 2014, retrieved at <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/Chinese-aircraft-intimidate-Vietnamese-law-enforcement-vessels/20146/21564.vgp> (accessed 30 July 2020)

¹⁹ Viet Anh, "Remove Vessels from Vietnamese Waters, China Told Again," *VnExpress*, 12 September 2019, retrieved at <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/remove-vessels-from-vietnamese-waters-china-told-again-3981289.html> (accessed 30 July 2020)

was decided that Vietnam needed to upgrade its multilateral diplomacy “from active participation in, into pro-active contributions to regional, inter-regional and global multilateral mechanisms.”²⁰ To this end, Vietnam increased its presence in multiple multilateral forums and deployed its best diplomats and experts with the aim of building and shaping the rules and norms in a way that suits its security and economic interests.

The elevation of multilateral diplomacy reflects a shift in Vietnam’s foreign policy thinking, where the country’s international credibility gained importance compared with the country’s tangible economic and security interests. While it started as an isolated country, the more Vietnam engaged in multilateralism, the more it redefined itself towards a goal of “being a responsible member of the international community.”²¹ In 2011, the Vietnamese political elites considered international integration to be a priority in its foreign policy.

Vietnam invested much of its political capital to build up the ASEAN community. The political document of the Communist Party of Vietnam’s 11th National Congress set out the task of “playing an active and responsible role, together with other countries, to build a strong ASEAN community.”²² Even when ASEAN offered little help to address the South China Sea disputes, Hanoi continued to play a constructive role. In July 2012, when the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting failed to issue the joint-communique due to disagreement over the South China Sea spat, a disappointed Hanoi did not shy away from ASEAN. It later hailed the shuttle-diplomacy efforts by then Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa to iron out a 6-point joint statement on the South China Sea.

Vietnam has also been active in United Nations (UN) forums. Between 2013 and 2019, Vietnam was elected to a number of UN organs, such as UN Human Rights Council (2014-2016 tenure), UN Economic and Social Council (2016-2018 tenure, second time), the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (2013-2014 tenure), UNESCO Executive Board (2015-2019 tenure, fourth time) and most recently Security Council (tenure 2020-2021, second time).²³ Since 2014, Vietnam decided to send its troops for peace-keeping operations under the

²⁰ Nguyen Hong Diep, “Nâng Tầm Đối Ngoại Đa Phương Trong Bối Cảnh Hội Nhập Quốc Tế Sâu Rộng [Upgrading multilateral diplomacy in the context of deep and broad international integration,” *Bao Tin Tuc [News]*, 16 August 2018, retrieved at <https://baotintuc.vn/thoi-su/nang-tam-doi-ngoai-da-phuong-trong-boi-can-hoi-nhap-quoc-te-sau-rong-20180816213340948.htm> (accessed 30 July 2020)

²¹ Vietnam stays active and resolute in foreign affairs, *Hanoi Times*, 03 January 2015; retrieved at <http://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-stays-active-and-resolute-in-foreign-affairs-17221.html> (accessed 30 July 2020)

²² Pham Binh Minh, Chu dong, tinh cuc va co trach nhiem vi mot cong dong ASEAN doan ket, vung manh va thinh vuong [Being active and responsible for a united, strong and prosperous ASEAN], *Nhan Dan (People’s Daily)*, 07 August 2011.

²³ Thuy Minh, Doi ngoai da phuong Viet Nam nam 2019: Nhung thanh tuu an tuong [Vietnam’s multilateral diplomacy in 2019: Remarkable Achievements], *Tap Chi Cong San [Communist Review]*, 08 February 2020; retrieved at <http://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/guest/quoc-phong-an-ninh-oi-ngoai1/-/2018/815922/doi-ngoai-da-phuong-viet-nam-nam-2019--nhung-thanh-tuu-an-tuong.aspx> (accessed 30 July 2020)

UN auspices.²⁴ This represented a departure from its long-standing perception that peacekeeping operations would be a violation of the principle of non-interference. Despite frustrations in many places about the UN, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh on 28 September 2019 called upon all nations to “revitalize multilateralism and strengthen the United Nations”²⁵.

On the whole, these approaches indicate some level of maturity in Vietnam’s foreign policy, which has been guided in a larger part by self-reliance, common values, and international law than by narrowly defined national interests. While facing an acute sense of insecurity in its eastern maritime domain, Vietnam is not alarmed by seeking protection from counterweighing powers. Vietnam has also managed to handle most incidents and crises in a way that stands firmly against unlawful coercions, but not to the extent of escalating tensions. Most importantly, Vietnam has increasingly relied on and worked to promote multilateralism as a major avenue to cope with common challenges as the way middle powers prefer. From a behavioral standpoint, it can be observed that Vietnam is indeed a middle power in the making, and yet one that stands apart from the presumed prescribed meekness of the behavioural approach.

Note: The article contains the author’s own opinions, not necessarily reflecting those of his institutions and country. He is thankful to Ngoc Nguyen for her great help in improving the article.

²⁴ “Vietnam Active in Joining UN Peacekeeping Operations,” *People’s Army Newspaper*, 13 September 2018, retrieved at <https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/vietnam-active-in-joining-un-peacekeeping-operations-496815> (accessed 30 July 2020)

²⁵ “Vietnam Seeks Stronger UN through Revitalization of Multilateralism,” *Xinhua*, 29 September 2019, retrieved at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/29/c_138431898.htm (accessed 30 July 2020)