

ISSN 0219-3213

2016 no. 17

Trends in Southeast Asia

NEW CONTEXT OF VIETNAM'S
NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

NGUYEN MANH HUNG

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

Trends in Southeast Asia

*The **ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) was established in 1968. It is an autonomous regional research centre for scholars and specialists concerned with modern Southeast Asia. The Institute's research is structured under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) and Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and through country-based programmes. It also houses the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), Singapore's APEC Study Centre, as well as the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) and its Archaeology Unit.*

2016 no. 17

Trends in
Southeast Asia

NEW CONTEXT OF VIETNAM'S
NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

NGUYEN MANH HUNG

I SEAS YUSOF ISHAK
INSTITUTE

Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

© 2016 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission.

The author is wholly responsible for the views expressed in this book which do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.

ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Nguyen, Manh Hung.

New Context of Vietnam's National Security Challenges.

(Trends in Southeast Asia, 0219-3213 ; TRS 17/16)

1. National security—Vietnam.

2. Vietnam—Foreign relations.

I. Title.

II. Series: Trends in Southeast Asia ; TRS 17/16.

DS501 I59T no. 17(2016)

November 2016

ISBN 978-981-4311-14-4 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4311-15-1 (e-book, PDF)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The **Trends in Southeast Asia** series acts as a platform for serious analyses by selected authors who are experts in their fields. It is aimed at encouraging policy makers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.

THE EDITORS

Series Chairman:

Tan Chin Tiong

Series Editors:

Ooi Kee Beng

Lee Hock Guan

Editorial Committee:

Terence Chong

Francis E. Hutchinson

Daljit Singh

Copy Editors:

Veena Nair

Kenneth Poon Jian Li

New Context of Vietnam's National Security Challenges

By Nguyen Manh Hung

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Vietnam's concept of national security is based on "the survival of the ruling regime that acts in the name of the country". This is unlike in many countries where national security relates merely to the survival of the state.
- Because the challenges to Vietnam's national security are perceived as challenges and threats to the ruling regime, the concept of national security tends to focus on the internal dimension of national security.
- The Mid-term National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 1994 listed "four threats" facing the country, namely, the danger of falling behind neighbouring countries economically; the threat of "peaceful evolution"; deviation from socialism; and corruption and bureaucratism. None of them, except for peaceful evolution, comes from outside.
- Today, these threats remain but are now joined by the threat of "self-evolution" or "self-transformation" leading to socialist deviation and peaceful evolution, as well as the threat to national sovereignty and territorial integrity resulting from the conflict in the South China Sea.
- Consequently, the military is tasked not only with the mission of protecting the fatherland but also protecting "the party, state, people and the socialist regime".
- The Twelfth National Congress of the CPV in 2016 attempted to re-establish the control of the party over the state; to launch a renewed effort to combat corruption and purge the party of those who exhibited signs of degeneration in morality, political thinking and lifestyle; and earn the people's trust.

- Today, China is the only external threat to Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the focal point of that threat is the South China Sea.
- Vietnam has responded to this threat with a three-point policy: accommodating China's security interests; building up self-defence capability; and mobilizing international support.
- The strategy to mobilize international support is based on three elements: reliance on diplomacy and international law; mobilizing international support through integration in the regional and international system and a policy of "openness, multilateralization and diversification of foreign relations"; and soft balancing between the major powers.
- Recent serious challenges to Vietnam's national security policy include: the unpredictable politics of the United States over ratification of the TPP and uncertainty over its "pivot" to Asia strategy; President Rodrigo Duterte's tilt towards China, his country's "separation" from the United States, and the uncertain future of the U.S.-Philippines military alliance; China's strong reaction to the July ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favour of the Philippines, and a divided and weakened ASEAN.

New Context of Vietnam's National Security Challenges

By Nguyen Manh Hung¹

CONCEPT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Vietnam has a distinctive concept of national security. Unlike most countries where national security relates to the survival of the state, to Vietnam it is, according to a senior Vietnamese diplomat, “the survival of the ruling regime that acts in the name of [the] country”.²

Its latest defence White Paper, “Vietnam’s Defence Policy at the beginning of the 21st Century,” while declaring that the country was ready to defend itself against “all aggression, threat against national security, infringement on its national interests”, insisted that the “preservation of a peaceful and stable environment for economic and social development, the achievement of industrialization and modernization under *socialist orientation are the highest national interests*”.³

¹ Nguyen Manh Hung is Professor Emeritus of Government & International Affairs, George Mason University, USA, and Visiting Senior Fellow, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He would like to thank the editing team for their excellent work and the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute for its assistance and support without which his research would not have been possible.

² Tung Nguyen Vu, “Vietnam’s Security Challenges: Hanoi’s New Approach to National Security and Implications to Defense and Foreign Policies”, in *Asia Pacific Countries Security Outlook and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*. The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, NDIS Joint Research Studies No. 5, 2011, p. 107.

³ Interestingly, the White Paper was announced and summarized by the Embassy of Vietnam in Hungary on 12 September 2016, and reported by Vietnam Press, Thong Tan Xa Viet Nam (Vietnam Press), “Cong bo sach trang ve quoc phong Viet Nam” [Public release of Vietnam’s Defense White Paper] <<http://www.vietnamembassyhungary.org/vnemb.vn/tinkhac/ns041210084441>>. Author’s translation and italics. Today, this link has been removed. The author was told that the White Paper had been completed but not yet publicly distributed.

A major architect of Vietnam's defence diplomacy, Vice-Minister of Defence Senior General Nguyen Chi Vinh insisted that defence diplomacy is only an "important part of, and an instrument to implement the [broader] foreign policy of the Party and State in defence matters". While asserting that defence diplomacy must contribute, and has contributed, to "the defence of the country's independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and national interests", he linked this traditional mission of the military to the mission of protecting the party and socialism. According to him:

Defence diplomacy contributes to the struggle against peaceful evolution and subversive violence, *protects the Party and socialism* and political stability to develop the country, and plays an important role in the mission of providing solid protection for the country's independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity.⁴

His superior, former Defence Minister Phung Quang Thanh, made clear that: "Today, [the task of] protecting the fatherland does not only mean maintaining the country's independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, but also *protecting the Party, state, people and the socialist regime ...*"⁵

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) which prides itself for having led the successful struggle for the country's independence finds it impossible to separate the protection of national sovereignty and territorial

⁴ Nguyen Chi Vinh, "Doi ngoai quoc phong — Thanh tuu va nhung van de da ra trong thoi ky hoi nhap va phat trien" [Defense Diplomacy — Achievements and Problems in an era of global integration and development], *Bien Phong Viet Nam*, 14 May 2015 <<http://bienphongvietnam.vn/cong-tac-bien-phong/doi-ngoai-bien-phong/1501-dd.html>>. Translation and italics mine.

⁵ Phung Quang Thanh, "Toan dan, toan quan quyet tam thuc hien tot chien luoc bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình moi" [The entire people, entire army resolutely determine to implement effectively the strategy of protecting the Fatherland in the new situation], *Tap Chi Cong San*, No. 854 (12/2013), pp. 7–10. Author's translation and italics.

integrity from the leadership of the party. Resolution No. 28-NQ/TW of the party Central Committee on 25 October 2013 stressed that “In both wars of resistance against France and the United States, our party always fought under two banners: national independence and socialism and have achieved complete victory. Realities have also demonstrated that [it was] only by *persistently linking national independence to socialism* that our country won true independence.”⁶

NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION-MAKING MECHANISM

From this perspective, it is understandable that Vietnamese national security involves two closely interlinked tasks: national defence and the protection of the party and socialist regime; and regime survival takes precedence. It is this that shapes the country’s national security decision-making process.

Vietnam’s Constitution provides for a National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) under the chairmanship of the state president which, in addition to him, currently includes the prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of defence, and the minister of public security. Unlike the United States National Security Council, the NDSC of Vietnam does not make decisions. On the important matters of war and peace and the use of the military, NDSC power is limited to “*proposing* to the National Assembly to decide on a state of war and in case the National Assembly cannot meet, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly to decide on a state of war; mobilising all forces and potentialities of the country to defend the Fatherland; performing special tasks and exercising special powers entrusted by the National Assembly

⁶ General Tran Thai Binh, “Mot so noi dung co ban cua Chien Luoc bao ve To quoc trong tinh hình moi” [Key points of the Strategy to Protect the Fatherland in the new situation]. *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, 10 June 2014 <<http://tapchiquotphong.vn/vi/nghien-cuu-thuc-hien-nghi-quyet/mot-so-noi-dung-co-ban-cua-chien-luoc-bao-ve-to-quoc-trong-tinh-hinh-moi/5731.html>>. Italics added.

in case of war and deciding on the participation of the people's armed forces in peacekeeping operations in the region and around the world."⁷

The party's Central Military Committee (CMC) is another and perhaps more powerful organization dealing with Vietnam's defence and security matters; its current members are overwhelmingly military. It is chaired by the party's General Secretary, reflecting the principle of the party's "absolute, direct, and comprehensive leadership" of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Other committee members include the defence minister serving as its vice-chairman, the state president, the prime minister, eighteen generals and one rear admiral.⁸ In principle, the CMC does not make decisions. Instead it "*studies and recommends ... issues related to military and defence guidelines and missions, national defence strategy ...*" to the party Central Committee, the Politburo, and the Secretariat.⁹

The power to make national security decisions for Vietnam, therefore, rests with the party's Central Committee and, ultimately, the Politburo. Since the Politburo operates on the consensus principle and, without a dominant leader, there are frequent disagreements and struggle for power among its top members, the process of decision-making on important matters tends to be slow. This has, at times, deprived the politburo of the capacity to make quick, decisive, and timely decisions to take advantage of favourable opportunities to improve the country's power and strategic position. Some top Vietnamese leaders (such as the late Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Tran Quang Co and the late Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet) and many analysts have expressed regrets over the failure of Vietnam to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States in 1978 and to sign

⁷ Article 89, section 2 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. English version published by *Vietnam News*, 15 January 2014. Italics added <<http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/250222/the-constitution-of-the-socialist-republic-of-viet-nam.html#epdODUqKGJdxAYSF.97>>.

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Military_Commission_of_the_Communist_Party_of_Vietnam>.

⁹ <https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qu%C3%A2n_%E1%BB%A7y_Trung_%C6%B0%C6%A1ng_Vi%E1%BB%87t_Nam>. Author's translation and italics.

a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with the United States in 1999 before China did, with deplorable consequences.¹⁰

Politburo consensus on important national security matters are reflected in Politburo and/or Central Committee resolutions made public from time to time. Every fifth year, the National Party Congress can also pass resolutions under the direction of top party leaders, to set policy guidelines for the next five years.

CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL SECURITY

In Vietnam, challenges to national security are perceived as “challenges and threats to the ruling regime”. The concept of national security is thus broad and tends to focus on the internal dimension of national security.¹¹ The definition of what constitutes challenges and threats to the regime are vested in the party leaders who sit on the Politburo.

“Falling Behind” as Threat to National Security and Regime Survival

“Reform or die”, the famous dictum of the late General Secretary of the CPV Truong Chinh in 1986 reflected the concern of top party leaders over the survival of the CPV following the 1979–86 severe economic crisis. Bad management and the cost of wars (the war in Cambodia from 1978 and the Sino-Vietnam border war in 1979), aggravated by

¹⁰ Dinh Hoang Thang, “Ông Trần Quang Co: Người thúc đẩy bình thường hóa bang giao Việt-Mỹ” [Mr Tran Quang Co: The man who pushed for normalization of relations between Vietnam and the United States], *Dan Tri*, 1 July 2015 <<http://dantri.com.vn/the-gioi/ong-tran-quang-co-nguoi-thuc-day-binh-thuong-hoa-viet-my-1436400121.htm>>; Huynh Phan, “Hai niem dau cuoi cung cua ong Sau Dan,”The last two burning concerns of Mr. Sau Dan”, *VietnamNet*, 20 November 2012 <<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/97525/hai-niem-dau-dau-cuoi-cung-cua-ong-sau-dan.html>>. See also Nguyen Manh Hung, *The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 21/2015 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015), p. 22.

¹¹ Tung, “Vietnam’s Security Challenges”, p. 108.

diplomatic and economic isolation, brought Vietnam's economy to the brink of collapse. To avert this danger, the CPV Sixth National Congress in 1986 launched *doi moi*, a major reform campaign patterned upon Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*: a move towards market economy (*doi moi kinh te*) accompanied by cultural liberalization (*coi troi van nghe*). The goal of *doi moi* was to liberate the country's "productive forces" in order to increase national production "while remaining within the orbit of socialism".¹²

Resolution No. 13 adopted by the CPV Politburo on 20 May 1988 marked a strategic transformation of party thinking about international relations and national security. For these top leaders, the focus on war and struggle must be replaced by an emphasis on peace and cooperation and they concluded that "economic weaknesses, political isolation, and economic blockade are major threats to our country's security and independence". To maintain independence and "successfully construct socialism", party leaders pledged to build "a strong economy, just enough national defence capability, and expanded international relations". This new concept of comprehensive security, according to Nguyen Vu Tung, "no longer gives priority to military affairs but allows the conduct of a new foreign policy to play a bigger role in ensuring national security and supporting the economic development of Vietnam".¹³

After making the necessary concessions to end the Cambodia War, Vietnam focused on economic development as the highest "strategic objective". Its military was winding down, and foreign policy would need to play an important role in making peace with former enemies and neighbouring countries, attracting foreign aid and investment, and securing a peaceful, stable environment for economic reform and development.

¹² For more details, see Nguyen Manh Hung, "Doi Moi: The Interplay between Economic and Politics", in *Southeast Asia on the Growth Path*, edited by Ahmad Mahdzan (Serang, Selangor Darul Ehsan: Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, 1997), pp. 37–40.

¹³ Tung, "Vietnam's Security Challenges", p. 109.

Once economic collapse was averted, diplomatic relations expanded. The benefits of international trade and cooperation were now proven, and party leaders decided to move a step further towards regional and international integration. Politburo Resolution No. 7-NQ/TW of 27 November 2001 on “International Economic Integration” opened the door to negotiations and eventual accession of Vietnam to the WTO and the signing of many market-opening trade agreements with major economies and groups.

Gaining confidence, the Tenth National Party Congress in 2006 reaffirmed the policy of “proactive, active international economic integration together with the expansion of international cooperation in other fields.”

The Eleventh Party Congress in 2011 resolved to move from “international economic integration” to “proactive and active international integration”. This move towards total “international integration” was, in the words of Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Bui Thanh Son, “an important development in the foreign policy thinking of our party ...”.¹⁴

The decision to step up the process of international integration in all aspects is in line with the broader policy of having “more friends, less enemy” through the “multilateralization and diversification” of Vietnam’s foreign relations. While the benefits of international economic integration are primarily economic; total international integration, especially integration in the political, defence and security areas are designed to serve the country’s security interests.

The “Strategy of Total International Integration until 2020, Vision toward 2030” issued on 1 July 2016 by the prime minister’s decision No. 40/QĐ-TTg viewed international integration in those areas as “a new means to carry out the mission of protecting national security in the context of globalization and international integration as well

¹⁴ Bui Thanh Son, “Nhin lai mot nam trien khai thuc hien Nghi quyet 22-NQ/TW cua Bo Chinh tri vve hoi nhap quoc te” [A one-year retrospective look at the development and implementation of Politburo Resolution 22-NQ/TW on international integration], *The Gioi Viet Nam*, 19 April 2014.

as supporting the process of international economic integration and international integration in other areas”.

At the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, party leaders had set the goal of turning Vietnam into an “industrial country with modern physical and technical foundations by 2020”. Today, twenty years later, this ambitious goal cannot be realistically achieved. The political report to the Twelfth National Party Congress in 2016 admitted that due to “many objective and subjective reasons ... many criteria and targets on the road of building Vietnam into a modernity-oriented industrial country by 2020” have not been achieved.

The fact is, five years after the Eleventh Party Congress decided to carry out a campaign of “economic restructuring” and implement a “new development model” to increase the nation’s competitive capacity and avoid the middle-income trap, progress has been slow, and the country had faced serious budget deficit and rapidly rising public debt. At the Vietnam Economic Forum on “Economic Restructuring: Challenges and Prospects”, held on 12 October 2016, Dr Tran Dinh Thien, President of the Vietnam Economic Institute warned that the country was “falling behind and kept falling further behind, turning a potential threat into a real and bigger threat” damaging the prosperity of the nation.¹⁵

Serious economic and financial problems forced the Twelfth Party Congress to revisit the threat of “falling economically further behind other countries in the region and in the world”.¹⁶ The election to the new

¹⁵ Hanh Nguyen, “Sau 5 nam tai co cau: Ngan sach tram trong, no cong tang nhanh” [After 5 years of economic restructuring: Serious budget deficit, rapidly rising public debt], *Vietnam Plus*, 13 October 2016 <<http://www.vietnamplus.vn/sau-5-nam-tai-co-cau-ngan-sach-tram-trong-no-cong-tang-nhanh/410514.vnp>>.

¹⁶ *Van Kien dai hoi dai bieu toan quoc lan thu XII* [Documents of the Twelfth National Party Congress] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2016), pp. 13–15, 21–22. Hereafter *Van Kien*. See also Chu Van Cap, “Ve he tieu chi nuoc cong nghiep theo huong hien dai trong Du thao cac van kien trinh Dai hoi XII cua Dang” [On the criteria for a modernity-oriented industrial country in the documents presented to the XII national party congress], *Tap Chi Quoc Phong Toan Dan*, 11 September 2015 <<http://tapchiqptd.vn/zh/tien-toi-dai-hoi-xii-cua-dang/ve-he-tieu-chi-nuoc-cong-nghiep-theo-huong-hien-dai-trong-du-thao-cac-van-kien-trinh-dai-h/8274.html>>.

politburo of 7 out of 19 members who either had academic training and/or practical experience with economics and management was perhaps an indication that the new leadership took this economic threat seriously.¹⁷ In Vietnam today, there is talk about the search for a new development model and the creation of an “enabling government” (*chinh phu kien tao*) that facilitates growth through guidance and incentives to entrepreneurs rather than one that burdens them with obstructive regulations.¹⁸ There are also discussions on plans to divest state capitals from SOEs, cut down regulations drastically, and facilitate small and middle as well as start-up private enterprises.¹⁹

Minister of Planning and Investment Nguyen Chi Dung told the National Assembly on 20 October 2016 that the government was considering setting up an Action Committee to supervise economic restructuring for the 2016–20 period. He estimated expenditures totalling US\$480 billion, close to 2½ times the country’s GDP, but was vague on how to mobilize such “extremely high” amount of money.²⁰

In a roundtable discussion at the Diplomatic Academy on 4 October 2016, General Le Van Cuong, former Director of the Ministry of Public Security’s Institute of Strategic Studies, stressed that the threat to Vietnam’s security today did not come mainly from outside, but from the country falling further behind others. According to him, “If we lose economically, we lose politically and security-wise; the more we fall behind, the greater the threat to our security.”²¹

¹⁷ Nguyen Manh Hung, “Continuity and Change under Vietnam’s New Leadership”, *ISEAS Perspective*, Issue No. 50 of 2016, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 13 September 2016.

¹⁸ Notes from a Hanoi field trip, 3–9 October 2016. Hereafter referred as Notes.

¹⁹ *Notes*.

²⁰ *Thoi Bao Kinh Te Saigon*, 23 October 2016 <<http://mobile.thesaigontimes.vn/tinbaichitiet/152928/>>. The article reported that the cost of reform was twice the value of VN’s GDP. But the website of Trading Economic estimated it at US\$193 billion in 2015, so it should be higher, at 2½ times.

²¹ *Notes*.

Peaceful Evolution as a Threat to National Security and Regime Survivability

The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and of the former Soviet Union in 1989–91 undermined the legitimacy of socialist ideology as represented by the Party. Under these circumstances, economic development presented an alternative source of legitimacy for the CPV. But the move towards a market economy and opening the country to foreign aid and investment especially from the West also had their drawbacks. Party conservatives complained about the danger of deviation from socialism and the threat of “peaceful evolution”.²²

The fear of “peaceful evolution” and the prevalence of the “Washington consensus” (market economy and democratization) underlined Vietnam’s failed attempt in 1990 to form a “socialist alliance” with China to stop Western plots of peaceful evolution to overthrow the remaining communist regimes in the world. In 1991, the CPV Seventh National Congress decided to abandon Gorbachev-style reform where the move towards market economy was accompanied by political reform (*perestroika* and *glasnost*). It decided to continue economic reform (*doi moi*) but put a brake on political reform, and instead resolved to achieve “two strategic missions [which are] to build socialism and protect the Fatherland.”

Three years later, at the Mid-term Party Congress in January 1994, the party introduced a new list of “Four Threats” to national security: (1) poverty and lagging behind [other countries in the region]; (2) deviation from socialism; (3) corruption and bureaucratism; and (4) plots of peaceful evolution by hostile forces.

²² According to General Nguyen Dinh Minh, peaceful evolution is “a global anti-revolutionary strategy carried out by imperialism and hostile forces to attack and eventually overthrow ... socialist regimes from inside by non-military means.” Nguyen Dinh Minh, *Hay canh giac voi dien bien hoa binh chong pha Viet Nam* [Beware of peaceful evolution against Vietnam] (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản chính trị quốc gia, 2016). Author’s translation.

The concern with these threats continued through the Tenth Party Congress in 2006 to the Twelfth Party Congress in 2016.²³ The latest congress added that deviation from socialism can take place through the “self-evolution” or “self-transformation” of party cadres and government officials, hence the need to “speed up the process of building and consolidating the party, push back the degeneration of political thinking, morality, and life-style exhibiting ‘self-evolution’ within the party.”²⁴

In this sense, party leaders seemed equally concerned about the threat to socialism from within (self-evolution) as with the threat from without (peaceful evolution), and with the combination of both. To avoid lagging behind, Vietnam had to speed up economic reform, open up the economy to trade and investment, and participate in international economic integration; and this exposed the country to foreign influence and “poisonous” ideas.

The Ninth Party Congress in 2001 emphasized the need to develop relations with “big powers and major power centres” and pledged that “Vietnam sought to become a trusted partner of every country in the international community”. To combat possible negative impact from broad engagement with the West, the eighth plenum of the CPV in July 2003 formulated the “Strategy to Protect the Fatherland in the New Situation” pushing for a policy of “more friends, less enemies” in order to “isolate hostile forces and win the support of progressive peoples in the world”. In Vietnam’s relations with the big powers, the plenum distinguished partners/targets of cooperation (*doi tac*) which included “those who respected Vietnam’s independence and sovereignty, and who

²³ See Nguyen Manh Hung, “Continuity and Change under Vietnam’s New Leadership”, *ISEAS Perspective*, 13 September 2016.

²⁴ *Van Kien*, p. 47. At the fourth plenum of the Twelfth Congress meeting on 8 October 2016, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong worried about the “failure to push back social-political degeneration, self-evolution and self-transformation, allowing them to mutate into more subtle and complex forms, could lead to unforeseen consequences”. Author’s translation; *Dan Tri*, 9/10/16 <<http://dantri.com.vn/chinh-tri/tong-bi-thu-suy-thoai-tu-chuyen-hoa-trong-noi-bo-gay-hau-qua-khon-luong-20161009123143814.htm>>.

sought to establish and expand friendly relations with our country on the basis of equality and mutual benefits” from adversaries/targets of struggle (*doi tuong*) which included “any power who plots to undermine our goals of building and protecting the nation”, before concluding that it was possible to find “areas of cooperation even in an adversarial relationship.”²⁵

This strategy sought to balance the need to engage with the need for caution. It applied particularly to relations between Vietnam and the United States. While Vietnam needed the United States for both economic (trade and investment) and security reasons (potential counterweight to China), it remained deeply suspicious of U.S. intention, especially over human rights issues. Vietnam constantly talked about the need to build “strategic trust” between the two countries and demanded that the United States respect its independence and sovereignty. It was only after Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung had, during his visit to the United States in 2008, received an official pledge from President George W. Bush that the United States supported “Vietnam’s national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity” that the first U.S.-Vietnam political, security, and defence dialogue could take place in Hanoi in October 2008. Most recently, on his first visit to Vietnam, President Obama found it necessary to assure his counterpart, President Quang, in a joint press conference on 23 May 2016 that, despite the need for the United States to speak out on human rights, it “does not seek to impose our form of government on Vietnam or any nation. We respect Vietnam’s sovereignty and independence”.

The threat of peaceful evolution was taken seriously by party leaders. The oil rig incident in 2014 led Defence Vice-Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh

²⁵ Mai Xuan Ba, “Van de doi tac-doi tuong trong chien luoc bao ve to quoc” [The issue of target of the cooperation and the target of struggle in the strategy to defend the Fatherland] *Tap Chi Cong San*, 31 January 2015 <<http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Quan-triet-thuc-hien-nghi-quyet-dai-hoi-dang-XI/2015/31759/Van-de-doi-tac-doi-tuong-trong-chien-luoc-bao-ve.aspx>>; See also Nguyen Manh Hung, *The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century*, pp. 14–15.

to consider the China threat to be “one of the most important problems in the maintenance of independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the fatherland” and specifically alluded to “Chinese activities in violation of Vietnam’s EEZ and continental shelf”. He said he would not take his eyes off the “intensified and wicked schemes” of “peaceful evolution” carried out by hostile forces to speed up the process of “self-evolution” within Vietnam, leading to “economic and political deviation” with the ultimate goal of “eliminating socialism and the leadership of the CPV”.²⁶

The perceived gravity of this threat was manifested in the joint publication in April 2016 in the wake of the Twelfth National Party Congress, by the party’s National Political Publishing House and the Ministry of Defence’s Institute of Politics, of a book by its director, Lt. General Nguyen Dinh Minh, titled *Beware of “Peaceful Evolution” against Vietnam*, possibly as a veiled warning to those who advocated leaning towards the West.²⁷

The task of the military, particularly of defence diplomacy, is made more complicated by the trend towards globalization and international integration. How to balance independence and self-reliance with international integration; manage expanded defence relations, particularly with the West; and prevent political penetration and peaceful evolution; are challenging tasks in defence diplomacy.

The People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) through defence diplomacy is tasked to expand relations with other countries, particularly with big powers. But it needs also to be weary of attempts to push for peaceful evolution through military ties, and to “create favourable conditions for other areas to integrate into the global system in order to build and develop a socialist-orientated country”.²⁸

²⁶ Nguyen Chi Vinh, “Doi ngoai quoc phong”.

²⁷ Nguyen Dinh Minh, *Hay canh giac voi dien bien hoa binh chong pha Viet Nam*.

²⁸ Khieu Linh, “Hoi nhap quoc te va doi ngoai quoc phong trong tinh hình hiện nay” [International Integration and defense diplomacy in the current situation], *Tap chi Cong San*, 25 March 2015 <<http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/ky-niem-40-nam-giai-phong-mien-nam/2015/32586/Hoi-nhap-quoc-te-va-doi-ngoai-quoc-phong-trong-tinh-hinh.aspx>>.

For the PAVN, Vietnam's national security policy must achieve a dual goal. On the one hand, it has to defeat "all schemes and plots to violate national sovereignty and national interests". On the other, it has to neutralize "all schemes and plots of hostile forces which take advantage of military and defence cooperation to spread ideas, and arguments against socialism, the people's armed forces, especially plots to push the process of 'self-evolution', and 'self-transformation' in the military".²⁹

Corruption, Bureaucratism and Moral Degeneration of Party Cadres and Members

In 1992, the Third Plenum of the Central Committee warned that "corruption, bribery, spending and wasting the people's money have become serious and prolonged". This was deemed to be having a negative impact on the "prestige of the Party".

Two years later, when the Mid-term Party Congress in January 1994 identified four threats to the nation and political system, "bureaucratism, corruption and moral degeneration of a 'body of party cadres and members'" was highlighted as one that could "weaken the party and state mechanism, and erode the people's trust in the Party and the regime".

From having "negative impact" on the prestige of the party and on the "people's trust" in the party, the continuation of this vice came eventually to be seen by party leaders as a threat to the "survival of the communist regime".

Since 1994, national party congresses, party plenums, and politburo resolutions repeatedly warned about the gravity and continued existence of corruption and the "degeneration of morality, political thinking, and life style" of cadres and officials which have become "more prevalent and complex in many areas". Party leaders worried that this phenomenon

²⁹ Senior Colonel Ngo Van Thai, "Doi Ngoai Quoc Phong voi nhien vu bao ve to quoc trong tinh hình moi" [Defense Diplomacy and the Mission of Protecting the Fatherland in the New Situation], Hoc Vien Chinh Tri, Bo Quoc Phong, 23 March 2015. Author's translation.

caused “resentment in the people” and became “a great danger threatening the survival of our regime”.³⁰

Politburo Resolution No. 14 on 15 May 1996 on leadership of anti-corruption campaign further linked this danger to the threat of peaceful evolution. It warned that “corruption has and is causing serious consequences which undermine the nature of the party and state, leading to the degeneration of cadres and party members, providing opportunities for hostile forces to attack us and threaten the survival of our regime.”

Ten years later, this perceived threat to regime survival persisted. Central Committee’s resolution No. 04/NQ-TW on 21 August 2006 admitted that “corruption and wastage continue to take place in more aggravated manner in several branches, several levels, several areas [of government], in larger scope and complexity causing damaging consequences in many aspects, eroding the people’s trust, and becoming a major threat to the Party and regime.”

During the Fourth Plenum of the Twelfth Party Congress in October 2016, VietnamNet featured prominently an article pointing out that despite the fact that each and every congress in the past had resolved to build, strengthen, and purge the party of degeneration in political thinking, morality and lifestyle, the number of party members committing these vices kept increasing, “from a number of degenerated party members to a body of party members, then a not small number of party members, including high-ranking cadres”. The author warned that “the people’s trust is the most important foundation of a regime and government, and breaking that trust would make the regime unstable and the failure to get rid of these vices would eventually lead to the collapse of regime.”³¹

³⁰ Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van kien Dai hoi Dai bieu toan quoc lan thu IX* [Documents of the IX National Party Congress], NXB Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001, pp. 50, 67. Author’s translation.

³¹ Vu Ngoc Hoang, “Hay nghe dan va dang vien khong chuc quyen noi ve suy thoai” [Listen to the people and party members without official positions talk about degeneration] <<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/tieudiem/333367/lang-nghe-dan-va-dang-vien-khong-chuc-quyen-noi-ve-suy-thoai.html>>. Author’s translation.

Corruption was seen as an inside threat to regime survival tantamount to “internal aggression” (*noi xam*).

The first serious campaign against corruption was launched under General Secretary Le Kha Phieu. In May 1999, the Politburo convened the second session of the sixth plenum which lasted nine days to focus on only one topic — the “urgent task” of building the party to combat “the degeneration in political thinking, corruption, bureaucratism, and the wastage of cadres and party members”. A two-year campaign termed “a decisive offensive” with full fanfare to purge the party of corrupt cadres, and reinvigorate the party with collective ideals, was launched.³² Thousands of party cadres and government officials were expelled and disciplined, mostly from the lower levels.³³

The fight against corruption proceeded at a snail’s pace and without much success after that campaign. According to Transparency International, in 2002, Vietnam scored 24 of 100 points on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), but by 2015, this score had risen to 31 points.³⁴

The Tenth Party Congress in 2006 affirmed that “the struggle to prevent and fight corruption is a focal point in the task of party building, a direct and permanent mission of the entire political system and society.” Following the Congress, the Third Plenum meeting in August 2006 issued Resolution No. 4-NQ/TW on strengthening the party’s leadership in the prevention of and fight against corruption, wastage. It also analysed systemic weaknesses and set guidelines for the task.

³² Nghia Nhan, “Nghị quyết 6 (2) — cuộc ra quan quyết liệt” [Resolution of the 6th plenum (session 2) — A decisive offensive], *Phap Luat*, 18 April 2012 <<http://plo.vn/plo/nghi-quyet-6-2-cuoc-ra-quan-quyet-liet-380253.html>>. Author’s translation.

³³ Zachary Abuza, “The Lessons of Le Kha Phieu: Changing Rules in Vietnamese Politics”, Conference on Prospects for the Constituencies of Vietnam in Changing Times, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 16 November 2001, p. 15.

³⁴ <<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/vietnam/corruption-index>>.

The Eleventh Party Congress in 2011 again raised the issue of corruption and wastage. The Fourth Plenum of the Congress meeting in January 2012 admitted that the task of party building suffered from weaknesses and ineffectiveness “over several party congresses”. Its Resolution No. 12 NQ/TW pointed out that “a not small number of cadres and party members, including those at the leadership and management level, and high-ranking cadres have exhibited degeneration in political thinking, morality, lifestyle reflecting the erosion of ideals, selfish individualism, opportunism, pragmatism, pursuit of money and power, corruption, wastage, irregularity, unprincipled behaviour ...” and then warned that if those weaknesses were not corrected, they would challenge “the leadership of the party and the survival of the [socialist] regime”. In an unprecedented move, the resolution also required “members of the politburo, the secretariat, and the central committee” to go through the process of self-criticism to “find out the reasons why they have not been able to solve the urgent problems identified in the resolution”.³⁵

During the term of the Eleventh Party Congress, conflict between the party and the state and resistance by powerful vested interests, had undermined the work of the Central Steering Committee on Corruption Prevention and Control headed by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. His earlier attempt to take over the control of the anti-corruption campaign from the Prime Minister’s office by appointing the hard-hitting and straight-talking Nguyen Ba Thanh to the chairmanship of the Party’s Central Internal Affairs Committee and then getting him elected to the Politburo was thwarted.

After being re-elected General Secretary in 2016, Trong moved rapidly to restart the anti-corruption campaign. In March, he strengthened the Central Committee on Corruption Prevention and Control by appointing

³⁵ Ha The Luc, “Nghị quyết Hội nghị Trung ương 4: Một số vấn đề cấp bách về xây dựng Đảng hiện nay” [Resolution of the fourth plenum: A number of pressing issues in party building today], *VGP News* <<http://baochinhphu.vn/Tin-noi-bat/Nghi-quyet-Hoi-nghi-Trung-uong-4-Mot-so-van-de-cap-bach-ve-xay-dung-Dang-hien-nay/125067.vgp>>. Author’s translation.

new members who included the heads of the most powerful central party committees.³⁶

At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Steering Committee on Corruption Prevention and Control on 18 April 2016, Trong instructed it to focus on giving instructions and guidance to concerned offices to bring to trial a number of “serious corruption cases” that had commanded the “attention of public opinion”.

One month later, he set up seven inspection teams headed by leading party members to look into local authorized agencies’ detection and settlement of “serious and complicated corruption cases drawing public attention”. These teams were instructed to report to the Central Internal Affairs Committee between 20 August and 20 October this year.

In a separate development, the Third Plenum of the new Central Committee meeting in July 2016 decided to give the Central Inspection Committee the power to “audit and supervise the declaration of properties of cadres under the management of the Politburo and the Secretariat”. This was the first time that the Committee was given such a mandate.

Once these innovations were in place, Trong moved decisively against the Vietnam Construction Joint Stock Commercial Bank, the “biggest case” of economic corruption, where the bank’s CEO Pham Cong Danh and his associates were charged with embezzlement and loss totalling hundreds of millions of dollars. The General Secretary urged party leaders in the Ministry of Public Security, the Supreme People’s Court, and the Supreme People’s Procuracy to take a leading role and coordinate with concerned offices to “urgently investigate and quickly bring to trial” those charged with violating the law. He insisted that the investigators “resist pressure coming from any organization or individual to ensure that justice is done”.³⁷

³⁶ Newly appointed members of the Central Committee on Corruption Prevention and Control include: Permanent Party Secretary Dinh The Huynh, Chairman of the Central Inspection Committee Tran Quốc Vuong, Chairman of the Central Organization Committee Pham Minh Chinh, Chairman of the Central Internal Committee Phan Dinh Trac, and Chairman of the Central Propaganda and Training Committee Vo Van Thuong.

³⁷ “Tong Bi Thu yeu cau xu nghiem vu an Pham Cong Danh”, Vietnamnet, 30 June 2016 <<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/phap-luat/tong-bi-thu-chi-dao-som-xu-vu-an-pham-cong-danh-313132.html>>.

This “biggest case” was soon followed by a potentially bigger case. Initially, it was against Trinh Xuan Thanh, former Chairman of the Board of the PetroVietnam Joint Stock Company (PVC) who was accused of corruption and committing economic crime causing the loss of over VND3,200 trillion (equivalent to US\$143.5 million). After Thanh disappeared, reportedly going abroad to avoid arrest, and lashed back at General Secretary Trong, the PVC former director general and three other directors were arrested and charged with the same crime.³⁸

This case provides a field day for government-owned newspapers, “independent” journalists, and bloggers. In the days leading to the Twelfth Party Congress, bloggers who supported Prime Minister Dung had painted him as a leader who stood up to China and pro-U.S., while depicting General Secretary Trong and his supporters as China’s puppets. This time, Mr Trong gained the upper hand. He ordered the investigation of a number of prominent officials associated with Mr Dung for corruption. Bloggers siding with Mr Dung accused Mr Trong for following Chinese instructions to weed out the pro-American faction in the party, and depicted Trinh Xuan Thanh merely as a sacrificial lamb.³⁹ Another popular blogger laid out the case for investigation and indictment hinting at a powerful politburo member and beyond.⁴⁰

Among these heated exchanges, the website of the government inspectorate cautioned that “The fight against corruption is a long-term duty, it must proceed determinedly, persistently and cautiously, with patience and objectivity, with specific strategy to move firmly step-by-step using several measures in which education is the basis, and law is the guarantee.”⁴¹

³⁸ <<http://laodong.com.vn/lao-dong-doi-song/duoi-thoi-trinh-xuan-thanh-vu-duc-thuan-pvc-ngap-ngua-trong-no-xau-594203.bld>>; <<https://anhbasam.wordpress.com/2016/09/16/10-031-vuot-trinh-xuan-thanh-bat-vu-duc-thuan/>>.

³⁹ <<http://nguoibuongio1972.blogspot.sg/2016/09/hau-trinh-xuan-thanh.html>>.

⁴⁰ <www.facebook.com/Osinhuyduc/posts/1075757289126118>; <<http://www.tintuchangngayonline.com/2016/10/huy-uc-cac-thuong-vu-khuat-tat-inh-la.html>>.

⁴¹ <http://thantra.gov.vn/ct137/Lists/LTaiLieu/View_Detail.aspx?CatID=-1&ItemId=42&>. Author’s translation.

The anti-corruption campaign of the Twelfth Party Congress has thus begun in earnest. But entrenched corruption is a tough nut to crack. Trong himself admitted as much when he said, that “preventing and fighting corruption is an especially importantly mission but also an extremely difficult and complicated task”.⁴² He took care to avoid comparing the fight against corruption in Vietnam to the intense campaign in China. Recently, in a meeting with his constituencies in Hanoi on 6 October 2016, Trong cautioned that “It takes wisdom and a long-term strategy to fight corruption. The country needs stability to develop, unrest would be dangerous,” and added: “You have to find ways to kill the rat hiding in the vase without breaking it.”⁴³

Strong resistance by entrenched vested interests and their allies, along with Mr Trong’s fear of disruptive internal conflict, disorder and instability, and his cautious approach to political reform, make it difficult to imagine that the fight against corruption this time could reduce corruption sufficiently to restore the people’s trust in the system. Unless drastic measures of political reform are taken, it is likely that corruption as well as moral and political degeneration will remain a latent threat to the survival of the party and regime.

The Emergence of External Threats

After the conclusion of the Cambodian War and the normalization of relations with China, Vietnam enjoyed for the first time a relatively long period of peace to concentrate on economic development. This lasted until problems began to arise over the South China Sea.

The White Paper on National Defence in December 2009 continued to highlight the increased gravity of the constant threat of peaceful evolution by saying: “Democratic freedom, religious freedom, and human rights have been abused by hostile forces in order to undermine the great

⁴² <<http://vov.vn/chinh-tri/tong-bi-thu-phong-chong-tham-nhung-dac-biet-quan-trong-vo-cung-kho-khan-505002.vov>>. Author’s translation.

⁴³ <<http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/200746/tong-bi-thu-diet-chuot-dung-de-vo-binh.html>>. Author’s translation.

national solidarity, and to incite violence and separatism in some areas of the country.” But it also added two new challenges, mostly external: “disputes over sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the territories in the East Sea [South China Sea], and non-traditional security issues such as illegal trafficking of weapons and drugs, piracy, organized transnational crimes, terrorism, illegal migration and immigration, environmental degradation, climate change, and epidemics.”⁴⁴

It is apparent that of these two new threats, the threat to territorial integrity in the South China Sea was much more serious than the non-traditional security threat. Dealing with non-traditional issues probably serves as a pretext for Vietnam to cooperate with other countries, particularly big countries, without antagonizing China, in conducting joint exercises for search and rescue, and with ship visits crowding sea lanes and preventing Chinese navy from dominating the South China Sea.

While the South China Sea disputes are recent, tensions between the two countries go back hundreds of years. If the United States is perceived as a threat to regime survival through “peaceful evolution”, China constantly presents a direct threat to Vietnam’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Vietnam’s long history has seen her always facing the threat of Han expansionism, and Sino-Vietnam relations are characterized by mistrust. The brief golden age of Sino-Vietnam relations began with the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 and the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

In the early years of their revolutions, relations between the two were firmly based on a shared ideology, a common struggle against Western imperialism, a sense of international revolutionary duty, and the similar state of economic underdevelopment.

⁴⁴ *Quoc Phong Viet Nam* [Vietnam’s National Defence] (Hanoi: Ministry of National Defence, December 2009). Author’s translation. <<http://www.mod.gov.vn/wps/wcm/connect/e1c352c1-0fb5-4107-8642-ae500e70dd7b/2009vie.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=e1c352c1-0fb5-4107-8642-ae500e70dd7b>>.

This golden age came to an end after Vietnam was reunified at the end of the Second Indochina War. The Cambodian War in 1978 and the Sino-Vietnamese border war in 1979 marked the beginning of a period of hostility between China and Vietnam. This hostility was further aggravated by the 1988 naval battle during which Chinese troops took over the Johnson South Reef, establishing China's first foothold in the Spratly Islands chain.

As the twenty-first century began, China's economic, political, and military power grew substantially. Increased capability, a sense of big power entitlement, and the need for resources engineered an increasingly assertive Chinese policy in the South China Sea; and Vietnam and the Philippines had had to bear the brunt of this assertiveness.⁴⁵

In 2009, as the deadline for submitting claims over the outer continental shelf under UNCLOS approached, China submitted a map with a nine-dash line claiming close to 80 per cent of the South China Sea and all of the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Since then, China has intensified its activities to enforce this claim — imposing unilateral fishing bans, seizing Vietnamese fishing vessels, mistreating Vietnamese fishermen, cutting cables of ships conducting explorations in disputed waters, and issuing bids for oil exploration in areas Vietnam considered its own, etc. In 2014, China further restricted fishing activities by Vietnam and other countries by having Hainan province enact new measures requiring all foreign ships to obtain approval from the Chinese government before entering “maritime areas” within Hainan's claimed jurisdiction which covered approximately 770,000 square miles of the South China Sea, including the contested Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, Macclesfield Bank, and Scarborough Reef.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For a full discussion on Sino-Vietnam relations, see Nguyen Manh Hung, *The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century*.

⁴⁶ “China New Fishing Regulations Seek to Justify and Control in the South China Sea”, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report*, 27 January 2014 <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/USCC%20Staff%20Report_China%27s%20New%20Fishing%20Regulations%20Seek%20to%20Justify%20and%20Consolidate%20Control%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea_01%2027%202014.pdf>.

A major escalation occurred when, in May 2014, China placed its huge exploratory oil rig, the HD 981, into Vietnam's EEZ, prompting protest and violence against Chinese businesses in Vietnam, and confrontation between Chinese ships and Vietnamese fishing vessels at sea, in the disputed area. Vietnamese leaders' numerous attempts to talk to Chinese leaders were rebuffed.

After China withdrew its oil rig, a period of calm returned, then flared up again in 2015 as China sped up the process of building submerged reefs into man-made islands, with potential military implications, radically changing the "fact on the ground" and the strategic balance in the South China Sea in favour of China. China gradually became a grave threat to Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity. If China were able to realize its dream of controlling the South China Sea, it would effectively end Vietnam's historic aspiration to be the "balcony looking into the Pacific Ocean". From this perspective, realization of the China dream would seriously limit Vietnam's potential to develop a maritime economy as envisaged by the Eleventh Party Congress in 2011.⁴⁷ Disputes in the South China Sea have thus become a major bone of contention between the two countries.

As a result of the oil rig incident, Vietnam's Vice-Minister of Defence Nguyen Chi Vinh raised the conflict in the South China Sea to the level of "one of the most important problems in the maintenance of independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the fatherland" and specifically alluded to "Chinese activities in violation of Vietnam's EEZ and continental shelf".

The incident marked a turning point in Vietnam's foreign policy and signalled a slight pivot towards the United States. When General

⁴⁷ "Nhung dinh huong phat trien kinh te bien" [Directions in the development of a maritime economy], *Tin Tuc*, 15 October 2015 <<http://baotintuc.vn/bien-dao-viet-nam/nhung-dinh-huong-phat-trien-kinh-te-bien-20151015162256855.htm>>; see also Bo Giao Thong Van Tai, "Phat trien kinh te bien, dao gan lien voi bao dam quoc phong, an ninh" [Development of sea and island economy linked to national defence and security] <<http://www.vms-south.vn/tin-tong-hop/phat-trien-kinh-te-bien-dao-gan-voi-bao-dam-quoc-phong-an-ninh>>.

Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong visited the United States in July 2015, he declared the United States “the utmost important area of operations of Vietnam diplomacy”.⁴⁸

The New Context of Vietnam’s External Security Challenge

After the Twelfth Party Congress, Vietnam elected a new team of leaders who wanted to focus on two urgent tasks: finding a new development model to stop the country from falling further behind economically, and purging the party of corruption and political degeneration to ensure the survival of the party and prevent deviation from socialism. They needed a stable and peaceful international environment. But new developments forced them to face the issue of external threat.

First, the turmoil of the U.S. presidential election and opposition to the TPP by both parties’ presidential candidates can put a brake on Vietnam’s efforts to gain the support of a U.S.-led trade group to reduce its overdependence on China, restructure its economy, and complete its transition toward a market economy.⁴⁹

Second, the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in favour of the Philippines declaring invalid China’s nine-dash line map and setting clear legal limits to maritime claims in the Spratly Islands also favoured Vietnam. But instead of using the PCA ruling as an off ramp from confrontation, China rejected the PCA decision as “worthless paper” and doubled down on its position by defining for the first time since the founding of the PRC the legal meaning of China’s nine-dash line. It affirmed that all islets within this line were China’s sovereign territory, together with all adjacent waters of these islets as China’s

⁴⁸ <<http://vov.vn/chinh-tri/dang/tbt-nguyen-phu-trong-hoa-ky-la-dia-ban-cuc-ky-quan-trong-ve-doi-ngoai-412875.vov>>. For more details, see Nguyen Manh Hung, *The Politics of the United States-China-Vietnam Triangle in the 21st Century*.

⁴⁹ In an interview in Hanoi last December, General Le Van Cuong, former Director of the Institute of Strategic Study, Ministry of Public Security, argued that TPP would help “loosen China’s grip” on Vietnam. He said, “The TPP is not just economic. It is also a political and security deal”, *Washington Post*, 8 December 2015.

territorial water; the rest of the South China Sea within this line was all China's EEZ.⁵⁰ By asserting its claims as "historic" it also brushed aside all other legal arguments and evidences about sovereignty.⁵¹ This clear affirmation of China's expanded concept of maritime sovereignty constitutes a serious challenge to Vietnam's territorial integrity.

Third, uncertainty over U.S. policy and commitment in the face of China's hardened position puts in limbo ASEAN policy, and that of Vietnam as well, of relying on the United States as a "stabilizing force" in the South China Sea.

Fourth, increased cooperation between China and Russia against the United States and Russian support of the Chinese position in the South China Sea deprive Vietnam of the support of a traditional ally.

Fifth, the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president of the Philippines, his antagonism towards the United States, his declared wish to seek partnership with China and Russia, the erosion of U.S.-Philippines military alliance, and his willingness to negotiate bilaterally with China, added another element of uncertainty to the equation, and further weakened ASEAN unity and centrality.

Vietnam's Response

Today, China is the only external threat to Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the focal point of that threat is the South China Sea. While China's policy in the South China Sea is proactive and offensive, Vietnam's is reactive and defensive.

⁵⁰ Shu Yinhong, ISEAS lecture on "China's Asia Strategy: Opportunities and Challenges", 20 October 2016.

⁵¹ China's statement on "China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in South China Sea", issued a few hours after the PCA ruling on 12 July 2016, made clear that: (1) China has sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao (the South China Sea Islands), consisting of Dongsha Qundao [Pratas Islands], Xisha Qundao [Paracel Islands], Zhongsha Qundao [Zhongsha Islands] and Nansha Qundao [Spratly Islands]; (2) China has internal waters, territorial sea and contiguous zone based on Nanhai Zhudao; (3) China has exclusive economic zone and continental shelf based on Nanhai Zhudao; and (4) China has historic rights in the South China Sea.

Vietnamese leaders make clear that they merely want a stable and peaceful environment for economic development and political stability. As a small country living next to a huge power, Vietnam must accommodate China but not to the point of losing sovereignty and territorial integrity. Its need to manage its relations with China is a cornerstone of its national security policy, and all other relations are derivative of this policy.

Vietnam's policy in the South China Sea is designed basically to maintain the status quo and prevent further Chinese encroachments through a three-pronged strategy: accommodating China's security interests, building its self-defence capacity, and seeking regional and international support.

ACCOMMODATING CHINA'S SECURITY INTEREST

Having a big country with regional and global ambitions as a neighbour, Vietnam's leaders have always been well aware of China's strategic interests and their own predicament. They have every reason to accommodate and cooperate with China, not to antagonize and confront it.

To allay China's fear of encirclement, Vietnam pursues a "three-no policy" — no military alliance, no siding with one country against another, no foreign base. Vietnam has recently opened its new facility at Cam Ranh Bay to visits by foreign ships, but has categorically snuffed out any speculation about it being a military base for the United States or for Russia.⁵²

To allay China's concern over the possibility of Vietnam making common cause with a hostile power. Vietnam speaks of a policy of "independence and self-reliance". On the other hand, Vietnam relies on

⁵² After Russian Deputy Defence Minister Nikolai A. Pankov told Parliament, on 7 October 2016, that Russia was working to re-establish its former military bases in Vietnam and Cuba, Vietnam's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Le Hai Binh reaffirmed, three days later, that Vietnam would not allow other countries to set up a military base in Cam Ranh. *The Indian Express*, 13 October 2016.

ideological affinity, party-to-party and military-to-military relations with China to promote cooperation and understanding, build mutual trust, avoid conflict, and restrain Chinese aggressive behaviour.

As an indication of China's special place in Vietnam's foreign policy, it was the first foreign country that Vietnam's new Defence Minister General Ngo Xuan Lich and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited in August and September, respectively.

BUILDING UP SELF-DEFENCE CAPACITY

Vietnam does not want to antagonize China, but neither does it accept excessive Chinese encroachment or desire for total control of the South China Sea since that would result in a subservient status for Vietnam. Vietnamese leaders have all spoken about their determination to “forbid anyone from encroaching on our land and sea borders”, and to defend “every inch of our territory”. They talk of the need to cooperate and struggle at the same time (*vua hop tac vua dau tranh*). While insisting on “peaceful diplomacy” to resolve the South China Sea conflict, they also have to prepare for the worst. Responding to the concerns of his constituencies in Hanoi, General Nguyen Doan Anh, Commander of the Capital Region, assured them on 5 June 2016, that while Vietnam tried to avoid war, “the military has made preparations and is ready to exercise our right of self-defence”.⁵³

Vietnam has embarked on a campaign to purchase weapons to upgrade its capability to conduct sea denial operations off its coast and at military installations around the disputed Spratly Islands. Between 2004 and 2013, Vietnam's military spending rose 113 per cent, “the largest increase among Southeast Asian countries”. It was also the world's eighth largest arms importer in 2011–15.

Currently, Russia is Vietnam's major arms supplier, but it also bought arms from India, Japan, and the Netherlands. The United States has lifted

⁵³ Soha News, 5 June 2016 <<http://soha.vn/tuong-doan-anh-neu-quan-diem-giai-quyet-tranh-chap-o-bien-dong-20160506122449086.htm>>.

its arms embargo against Vietnam and has provided it with six patrol boats.⁵⁴

Because of Vietnam's limited resources, the Twelfth National Party Congress decided to keep defence spending to a minimum, and rely on the development of an "entire-people defence" strategy instead where every citizen is a soldier in the fight against foreign invasion. This strategy is based on a combination of "the strength of the nation with that of the times", defined as the global trend towards peace, cooperation, and development which delegitimizes the use of force and aggression.⁵⁵

MOBILIZING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Vietnam's strategy to mobilize international support for its cause is based on three elements:

1. Reliance on Diplomacy and International Law

Vietnam has called for diplomatic negotiations based on international law to resolve South China Sea dispute. It supports UNCLOS and the ruling of the Arbitral tribunal of 12 July 2016. To manage dispute and avoid military confrontation, it has called for the full implementation of the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and the Code of Unintended Encounters at Sea (CUES), and pressed for an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct (COC).

While Vietnam has not brought the dispute to court, it has not ruled out that possibility. During the oil rig crisis of May 2014, Defence

⁵⁴ Murray Hiebert and Phuong Nguyen, "Vietnam Ramps up Defense Spending but its Challenges remain", *Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 18 March 2015 <<https://amti.csis.org/vietnam-ramps-up-defense-spending-but-its-challenges-remain/>>; *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2016. For additional information about Vietnam's military purchases, see Sophia Yan, "Vietnam's defense spending is \$5 billion and rising fast", *CNNMoney*, 23 May 2016 <<http://money.cnn.com/2016/05/23/news/vietnam-military-spending/>>.

⁵⁵ Vice-Minister of Defence Nguyen Chi Vinh's interviews with *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 8 June 2011 <<http://en.qdnd.vn/news/defence-official-no-one-wins-if-conflict-happens/150476.html>>, and VNExpress, 6 June 2011 <<http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/viet-nam-se-lam-tat-ca-de-bao-ve-chu-quyen-2196912.html>>.

Minister Phung Quang Thanh confirmed at the Shangri-La Dialogue that should diplomatic negotiations with China fail, Vietnam would bring the issue to court. Director of the Prime Minister's Office Nguyen Van Nen also said Vietnam "has prepared the case for litigation for a long time", but we must act with caution.⁵⁶ Recently, President Tran Dai Quang, in his speech made at the Singapore Lecture organized on 30 August 2016, by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute alluded to it by stating that "Vietnam sought to settle disputes by peaceful means through the political, diplomatic and *legal process* on the basis of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea."⁵⁷

It is believed in Vietnam that the government would contest China's occupation of the Paracel Islands in the court of law before the fifty-year prescriptive occupation rule expires.⁵⁸

2. Mobilization of International Support

Vietnam seeks friendship and support from the international community through a policy of "openness, multilateralization and diversification along the principle that Vietnam wishes to be a friend and credible partner of all nations". It has used various international fora (such as the Shangri-La dialogue, the ASEAN Summit, ADMM, and ADMM+, ARF, etc.) to air its view, highlight Chinese aggressive behaviour, and solicit international support for its cause.

Another venue for drawing international attention and support for a peaceful solution to the South China Sea dispute is through the organization of academic conferences at home and abroad to exchange ideas on the issue. Government and academic institutions in Vietnam have been doing this for several years.

⁵⁶ *Nguoi Lao Dong*, 29 and 31 May 2014.

⁵⁷ <<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/event-highlights/item/3859-38th-singapore-lecture-strengthening-partnership-for-regional-sustainable-development-by-he-tran-dai-quang>>. Italics added.

⁵⁸ *Notes*. China took over the Paracel Islands from Vietnam after a naval battle in 1974.

3. Soft Balancing

Vietnam seeks to build a counterweight to Chinese pressure through a soft balancing strategy. Regionally, it actively participates in the ASEAN system. Promoting ASEAN unity and centrality gives Vietnam the benefits of collective bargaining power, strengthens its position in dealing with China and, hopefully, restrains the latter's excessive pressures. ASEAN unity may also attract and serve as an anchor for U.S. presence and commitment in the region as a counterweight to China.

The Scarborough Shoal incident and the failure of the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh in 2012 to agree on a joint statement in support of the Philippines signalled a breakdown of ASEAN unity. Chinese machinations continued to undermine ASEAN unity in the South China Sea issue at the June 2016 ASEAN-China meeting of foreign ministers in Kunming and the July 2016 ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Vientiane. At this last meeting, the joint communique took note of “the concerns expressed by some ministers on the land reclamations and escalation of activities in the area, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security, stability, and safety in the region.”

This formula softens the rigidity of the ASEAN consensus principle and can prevent a total breakdown of ASEAN unity. The search for consensus and coordination at least among some core players may be what President Quang referred to when he stated in response to queries during his Singapore Lecture that “In order to ensure flexibility and effectiveness of handling of issues within the ASEAN community, we believe that it is possible for countries of ASEAN to consider a number of other principles as a supplementary to the principle of consensus in ASEAN.”⁵⁹

To select Singapore as the first foreign country for him to visit and deliver a major speech signals that Vietnam considers Singapore a key state among small countries that it can find solidarity and group support.

⁵⁹ *Straits Times*, 30 August 2016.

Internationally, Vietnam has succeeded in raising its profile by hosting and chairing several international conferences, serving as a non-permanent member on the United Nations Security Council, and participating in UN peacekeeping missions.

The real task of balancing, however, is to form strategic partnership with major powers that have the capacity and willingness to serve as a counterweight to China, namely India, Japan, and the United States. Under this rubric, Vietnam has expanded military cooperation with these countries through the exchange of military visits, defence consultation and dialogue, arms purchases, and participation in joint exercises and ship visits, including to the strategic Cam Ranh Bay. In India, Vietnam has a long-time loyal supporter and provider of arms on generous terms, which recently included a US\$500 million loan “for defence purposes”, the sale of the deadly Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles, and an agreement to design and build vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard and to transfer shipbuilding technologies to Vietnam. Vietnam particularly appreciates the fact that even after years of making no profits, Indian oil companies still wished to renew their contract to exploit energy in disputed waters between Vietnam and China.⁶⁰

From Japan, Vietnam gets quality investment, the largest donations of official development assistance (ODA), patrol boats for its coast guards, a link to the U.S. defence system, and a strong voice in persuading the United States to remain engaged in the South China Sea.⁶¹ Vietnamese-U.S. relations, including defence relations have improved dramatically and Vietnam views the United States as the most if not only credible

⁶⁰ Notes.

⁶¹ Nguyen Manh Hung, “Shared concerns about China bring Vietnam and Japan closer”, *East Asia Forum*, 2 June 2016 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/06/02/shared-concerns-about-china-bring-vietnam-and-japan-closer/>>; See also “Japan to beef up defense cooperation with Vietnam”, *Tuoi Tre News*, 8 October 2016 <<http://tuoitrenews.vn/politics/36414/japan-to-enhance-defense-cooperation-with-vietnam>>.

counterweight to China in the emerging security structure in the Asia Pacific region.⁶²

Vietnam has played its balancing act skilfully. Vietnamese leaders' visits to the United States have always been preceded or followed (or both) by their visits to China. On the same day that Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Hanoi on 5 November 2015, Vietnam also welcomed Japanese Defence Minister General Nakatani to Cam Ranh Bay where in a meeting with Vietnam's defence minister, it was agreed that Japanese warships would visit Cam Ranh Bay and that the two countries would hold their first ever joint naval exercise. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit to China in mid-September 2016 was scheduled immediately after a warm reception for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Hanoi.

After the Twelfth Party Congress in January 2016, Vietnam's new leaders visited important countries in a well-calibrated manner. Defence Minister Ngo Xuan Lich and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc went to China in August and September, respectively. At the end of August, President Tran Dai Quang visited Singapore, a small but strategically important member of ASEAN where he advanced the concept of "supplementary principle" to complement ASEAN's consensus principle that has frequently paralysed ASEAN decisions over the South China Sea issue. Quang's visit was followed seven weeks later by Defence Minister Ngo Xuan Lich's meeting in Singapore with Defence Minister Ng Eng Heng. They agreed to strengthen bilateral relations and to "coordinate, consult, and support each other in multilateral fora, especially within the framework of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM+."⁶³ CPV Executive Secretary Dinh The Huynh's visit to the

⁶² Hai Van-Le Tho Binh, "Cuu Dai su Le Van Bang: My co the giup can bang luc luong Bien Dong" [Former Ambassador Le Van Bang: the United States can help keep the balance of power in the East Sea], *Viet Times*, 14 May 2016 <<http://viettimes.net.vn/cuu-dai-su-le-van-bang-my-co-the-giup-can-bang-luc-luong-bien-dong-55820.html>>.

⁶³ VNExpress, 25 October 2016 <<http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/the-gioi/viet-nam-singapore-tang-cuong-hop-tac-quoc-phong-3488837.html>>.

United States was sandwiched between two notable events: the kick-off of the seventh naval engagement activities between the United States and Vietnam in Da Nang in late September (followed by visits to Cam Ranh Bay by two U.S. warships in early October) and his visit to China on 19–21 October, before arriving in the United States for a longer trip on 23–31 October.

A senior Vietnamese diplomat compared Vietnam to a resilient bamboo tree; if China pushes, it will bend away from China, and when China stops pushing the tree will snap back. This is national security policy as seen from the state's perspective. From the regime's perspective, it might be said that for the bamboo tree to have the capacity to snap back to its original position, it needs two conditions: one, its roots must be strong enough to prevent the tree from being toppled; two, it needs outside support to stop the tree from having to bend the point of no return. The root is the support of the people and the legitimacy of the regime; the outside support comes from major powers such as India, Japan, and particularly the United States, without whose engagement there would be no balancing game for Vietnam and for ASEAN.

That is why the normally cautious Le Van Bang, the first Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States, stated just before President Obama's visit to Vietnam last May, that the United States is "the only country that could effectively help us".⁶⁴ Most recently, Senior General Nguyen Chi Vinh, Vietnam's Vice Minister of Defence told visiting U.S. Deputy Assistant Defence Secretary for South and Southeast Asia Cara Abercrombie "that Vietnam will support the U.S. and other partners to intervene in the region as long as it brings peace, stability and prosperity."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Hai Van-Le Tho Binh, "Cuu Dai su Le Van Bang: My co the giup can bang luc luong Bien Dong".

⁶⁵ Reuters, 18 October 2016 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-usa-idUSKCN12I1BR>>.

ISEAS
PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

TRS17/16s

ISBN 978-981-4311-14-4

