

Vietnam's Balancing Act Between Biden and Trump

Hanoi has had to tread carefully during a fraught period of transition in Washington.

By Du Nhat Dang

On November 30, Vietnamese leaders officially sent a note of congratulations to Joe Biden for becoming U.S. president-elect, nearly a month after his tense electoral tussle with incumbent President Donald Trump. In a carefully calculated diplomatic move, Party General Secretary and State President Nguyen Phu Trong and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc together expressed their belief that relations would continue to improve once the Biden administration takes office.

“On the basis of bilateral relations built over the last 25 years,” the two leaders declared in their letter to Biden, “the Vietnam-U.S. comprehensive partnership will continue developing in a result-oriented, effective, and sustainable manner, benefiting the two peoples as well as peace, security, stability, cooperation, and development in the region and the world.”

The timing of the congratulation reflects the common dilemma of small and middle powers seeking how to respond to the U.S. elections, given that President Trump still refuses to concede defeat. In Southeast Asia, Singapore came first with its message of congratulation on November 8. China sent its congratulations more than two weeks later, while Russia's Vladimir Putin said that he would wait until the U.S. election results were finalized before weighing in. How does one then explain the timing chosen by Vietnam?

First, Vietnam's leaders determined that they should not leap too early, because Vietnam has had some recent experience in dealing with surprises from Washington. In 2016, Vietnam, like the rest of the world, witnessed the surprising election of Trump as the U.S. president, despite the fact that Hillary Clinton had widely been predicted as the winner. The same thing happened with regard to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement, which was negotiated by President Obama before both Trump and Clinton turned against the agreement during the 2016 election. Trump withdrew from the TPP during his first days in office.

Moreover, Vietnam had little to gain from congratulating Biden before the results were officially announced or otherwise in doubt. In recent years, Vietnam's foreign policy and that of the Trump administration have been roughly complementary. Vietnam's diplomatic messaging regarding the U.S. election also had to take into account the surprise visits by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien to Hanoi in November. Therefore, Vietnam has had to take into account the fact that the Trump administration is still capable of making decisions that affect its interests, such as the upcoming hearings related to Section 301 investigations into Vietnam's alleged manipulation of its currency and import of illegally felled timber. At the same time, Vietnam sees the Democratic Party as an institution that will act moderately and will not blame Vietnam for looking before it leaps. A not-so-late recognition of Biden's win, in this case, will keep Hanoi on track with the potential new administration whose foreign policy, especially towards the Indo-Pacific region, remains to be seen.

In other words, the Democrats would not be too upset by Vietnam's delayed message of congratulation, while the Trump side might have been piqued if Vietnam chose to act early.

Second, Vietnam's pursuit of an independent and autonomous foreign policy, especially as regards China, helps explain why Vietnam did not act immediately after Chinese President Xi Jinping sent his congratulation message to Biden on November 8. Considering the current U.S.-China tensions, Vietnam's Foreign Ministry wanted to avoid the congratulatory message being seen as any reflection of U.S.-China or Vietnam-China relations. As a result, Hanoi made a point of not "following" China's action in congratulating Biden.

Another thing to be considered is that Vietnam's leaders have many calculations to make before the 13th National Party Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in January, which will select the four highest ranking officials and set Vietnam's policy path for the next five-year term. After years of success in international integration, Vietnam's leadership sees foreign affairs as one of the top priorities, and will focus on ways of diminishing the impact of mounting U.S.-China competition.

Given that the outcome of the VCP Congress is widely perceived in Hanoi to be very "competitive" and "unpredictable," it remains to be seen whether Trong will keep his post as the party's general secretary, or whether he will be succeeded by Tran Quoc Vuong, a standing member of the Central Committee's Secretariat. Another possible candidate is incumbent Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, who has been credited for his contribution to Vietnam's recent economic performance.

The most obvious example is the fact that Vietnam is one of the few countries in the world – and the only one in Southeast Asia – to avoid a recession after the coronavirus pandemic. On Phuc's watch, Vietnam has also signed an important free trade agreement with the European Union and most recently, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) trade mega-deal. Meanwhile, with Trong as its general secretary, the VCP has for the first time has issued a specific decree which focuses on foreign affairs. The Party Central Committee's Decree No.25 CT/TW underlines Vietnam's commitment to the pursuit and promotion of multilateral diplomacy.

Whoever comes to power will keep foreign affairs at the forefront of their mind and face the challenges arising from the current state of U.S.-China tensions. And in a rocky period of transition in Washington, Vietnam has been preparing to respond to every eventuality, as reflected in the remarks by Trong at the opening ceremony of the 37th ASEAN Summit, which he hosted last month: "It is Vietnam's consistent policy to engage in diversification and multilateralization of its external relations, to be a reliable friend and partner, and an active and responsible member of the international community, striving for peace, cooperation, and development," he told his Southeast Asian counterparts. "Such spirit has guided Vietnam to go from strength to strength over the past 75 years, and will continue to be the guiding compass for our foreign policy, particularly given complex and unpredictable developments are taking place in the world."

Du Nhat Dang is a Vietnamese reporter who works for Tuoi Tre newspaper in Vietnam. He graduated from the Faculty of Journalism and Communication, University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. He is a fellow at the Reporting ASEAN program, which supports articles about ASEAN.