

Vietnam's Foreign Policy in an Era of Rising Sino-U.S.
Competition: Providing Equity to the Major Powers While
Pursuing Proactive International Integration

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Introduction

Vietnam is a semi-authoritarian one-party state ruled by the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP). Vietnam's political system parallels that of China and other Marxist-Leninist states that have now passed into history. Vietnam's political system is a mono-organizational socialist system.¹ This is a system in which the party exercises hegemonic control over state institutions, the armed forces and mass organizations in society through the penetration of these institutions by party cells and committees. Senior party members form the leadership nucleus of the state apparatus, National Assembly, the People's Armed Forces and the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF, Mat Tran To Quoc).

The VFF is an umbrella organization grouping twenty-nine registered mass organizations (women, workers, peasants, youth) and special interest groups (professional, religious etc.). The leaders of mass organizations normally serve on the party Central Committee. All organizations affiliated with the VFF are funded by the state.

In late 1986 Vietnam adopted a reform program known as *Đổi Mới* or renovation. Vietnam opened its doors to foreign investment and gradually transformed its Soviet-styled centrally planned economy into a "market economy with socialist characteristics." Vietnam's opening up resulted in an expansion of Vietnam's external relations beyond those of the socialist bloc and non-aligned movement to Japan, Australia, the United States and Europe.

As Vietnam began to integrate itself in the global economy it sought development assistance from its new partners and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Foreign aid agencies and INGOS attempted to apply their own model of development to Vietnam in the hopes of creating space for civil society by privileging the role of domestic "non-governmental organizations" (NGOs).² In practice this meant pursuing "bottom up" approaches that stressed participatory development and gender and ethnic equality.

This approach to development was problematic in the sense that there were no autonomous NGOs in Vietnam. All mass organizations and their affiliates were state-sponsored and funded and formed part of the VFF's organizational matrix.³ In other

¹ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Mono-Organizational Socialism and the State," in Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Doug J. Porter, eds., *Vietnam's Rural Transformation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 39-64.

² Oscar Saleminck, "Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam: A Tale of Calculated Misunderstandings," in David Lewis and David Mosse, eds, *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press Inc., 2006), 102.

³ Vietnamese officialdom shied away from using the term NGO for domestic organizations because, when

words Vietnam's mass organizations were not authentic representatives of civil society.

As the reforms ushered in by Đổi Mới began to take hold state-society relations began to alter. In the 1990s there was an upsurge of organizational activity at all levels in Vietnam.⁴ A plethora of networks and groups emerged. In particular, an explosive growth of non-government voluntary community-based associations (CBOs) took place at grassroots level. They took a leading role in managing natural resources, combating environmental pollution, promoting sustainable development, income generation, and disseminating knowledge. These new groups may be classified into nine categories: political, mass organization, business, commercial and professional, science and technology, arts and culture, social welfare/NGO, religious, friendly associations and public affairs.⁵

Vietnamese so-called NGOs and CBOs viewed their role quite differently from their foreign counterparts. First, they saw themselves as partners working on development projects in support of state policy. Second, they viewed themselves as advocates for improved state services. And finally, they viewed themselves as representative of marginalized groups and lobbied the state to change policy. In this role Vietnamese NGOs attempted to negotiate and educate state officials rather than confront them as a tactic to bring about change. In other words, the activities of Vietnamese "NGOs" were in direct support of existing government programs or in support of larger state-approved policy goals (national development or poverty alleviation). Over time, however, Vietnamese "NGOs" expanded their role to include advocacy for their constituents. They began to directly engage government agencies to advise them on new techniques and ways of achieving government objectives.

The growth of grassroots organizational activity outpaced Vietnam's ability to develop a regulatory framework that was relevant to such a diversity of groups. Some CBOs operated relatively independently of the state. Although their legal status was ambiguous they were generally tolerated. But they were always at risk if their activities touched on politically sensitive issues⁶

This effervescence in Vietnamese society led to the weakening of Vietnam's mono-

literally translated into Vietnamese (*to chuc phi chinh phu*) it sounded very much like the Vietnamese word for anarchy, *vo chinh phu*. In other words, in Vietnamese the term NGO implied estrangement if not opposition to the state.

⁴An empirical survey conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City recorded more than seven hundred "civic organizations" most of which had been established after 1986; Joerg Wischermann and Nguyen Quang Vinh, "The Relationship between Civic and Governmental Organizations in Vietnam: Selected Findings," in Ben J. Tria Kerkvliet, Russell H. K. Heng and David W. H. Koh, eds., *Getting Organized in Vietnam: Moving in and around the Socialist State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 186.

⁵Thayer, "Mono-Organizational Socialism and the State," 54.

⁶Key legal documents included: Decree 35/CP (1992) "On Some Measures to Encourage Scientific and Technological Activities," Decree 29/1998/ND-CP (May 11, 1998), Decree 71/1998/ND-CP (September 8, 1998), Decree 07/1999/ND-CP (February 13, 1999), Decree 177 (1999) On Charity and Social Funds, and Law on Science and Technology (2000).

organizational socialist system and opened space for individuals and small groups to challenge Vietnam's one-party system.⁷ In the mid-to late-1990s Vietnam witnessed public protests on such highly sensitive political issues as religious freedom, human rights and democratic reform. The introduction of the internet provided the means for individuals and groups to overcome their physical isolation and form networks in cyber space.⁸

By 2006 at least eleven identifiable organizations could be identified: Alliance for Democracy, Association of Former Political Prisoners, Committee for Human Rights, Democratic Party of Vietnam, Free Journalists Association of Vietnam, National Salvation Committee, People's Democratic Party of Vietnam, 21st Century Democracy Party, United Workers-Farmers Association, Vietnam Populist Party and the Vietnam Progress Party. Generally, these groups were small and lacked a large geographic footprint but they marked the first steps in the emergence of political civil society in Vietnam. Because these groups stood outside the legal framework for "NGOs" and CBOs and were considered illegal by the state.

In summary, the development of political civil society in Vietnam created a nexus between public opinion from below and the one-party state. As Vietnam opened up and integrated itself in the global economy Vietnamese political activists sought to influence foreign policy by enlisting public support on a number of issues ranging from religious freedom, human rights, democracy, environmental issues, and territorial disputes with China in the East Sea (South China Sea).

The linkage between domestic factors and foreign policy in Vietnam is discussed below in six parts. Part one provides an overview of the key elements of Vietnam's foreign policy framework. Part two discusses domestic factors that impact on foreign policy. Part three identifies key issues driving Vietnam's foreign policy. Part four reviews how Vietnam conducts its relations with the major power. Part five views Vietnam's efforts to promote international integration. Part six concludes the paper with an evaluation of the implications of these developments for the United States.

⁷ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Political Dissent and Political Reform in Vietnam, 1997-2002," in Claudia Derichs and Thomas Heberer, eds. *The Power of Ideas: Intellectual Input and Political Change in East and Southeast Asia* (Copenhagen S: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2006), 115-132.

⁸ In May 2007, it was estimated that there were 15.8 million Internet users in Vietnam or nineteen per cent of Vietnam's population. This figure was higher than the world average of 16.9% per cent. Since 1997 when connections were made to the global computer network, usage has risen at an annual rate of thirty-six per cent. Of Vietnam's 15.8 million users, 4.4 million were subscribers including 677,000 on broadband. The Ministry of Public Security did its best to block political sites that covered such issues as democracy, human rights, religious freedom and the China-Vietnam border. Curiously, sites featuring pornography were unaffected. In 2008 there were an estimated 1.1 million bloggers in Vietnam, according to Le Doan Hop, Minister of Information and Communications (*Thanh Nien*, August 7, 2008, 3).

Part 1 Foreign Policy Framework

This section discusses four major themes that form Vietnam's foreign policy framework: independence and self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification of external relations, struggle and cooperation, and proactive international integration.

The first major theme of Vietnam's current foreign policy is the stress on independence and self-reliance. This is based on three historical legacies (1) resistance to foreign intervention during the colonial and post-colonial era, (2) as a member of the socialist camp when Vietnam was caught in the crossfire of the Sino-Soviet dispute, and (3) as an ally of a declining Soviet Union during Vietnam's decade-long intervention in Cambodia. Vietnam was left isolated when the Soviet Union collapsed in late 1991. According to Vietnam's Defense White Paper, "Vietnam consistently realizes the foreign guideline of independence [and] self-reliance..."⁹ This is exemplified by its national defense policy of three no's: "Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances nor giving any other countries permission to have military bases or use its soil to carry out military activities against other countries."¹⁰

The second major theme of Vietnamese foreign policy is the multilateralization and diversification of external relations. On May 20, 1988, the VCP Politburo adopted a seminal policy document known as Resolution No. 13 entitled, "On the Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation." This policy document codified Vietnam's foreign policy objectives by giving priority to economic development and calling for a "multi-directional foreign policy" orientation with the goal of making "more friends, fewer enemies" (*them ban bot thu*). Specifically, Resolution 13 called for Vietnam's extrication from the conflict in Cambodia in order to normalize relations with China, develop relations with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, Europe and "step-by-step" normalize relations with the United States.¹¹

The next iteration of Vietnam's "multi-directional foreign policy" took place at the VCP's Seventh National Congress held from June 24-27, 1991. The Seventh Congress now

⁹ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Ministry of National Defence, *Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban The Gioi, December 2009), 23.

¹⁰ Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Vietnam National Defence*, 21-22.

¹¹ Gareth Porter, "The Transformation of Vietnam's Worldview: From Two Camps to Interdependence," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, June 1990, 12:1, 1-19; Carlyle A. Thayer, "Indochina," in Desmond Ball and Cathy Downes, eds., *Security and Defence: Pacific and Global Perspectives* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 403; Nguyen Huu Cat, "Viet Nam Hoi Nhap vao Khu Vuc vi Hoa Binh va Phat Trien," *Nghien Cuu Dong Nam A*, February 1996, 28-29; Chu Van Chuc, "Qua trinh doi moi tu duy doi ngoai va hinh thanh duong loi doi ngoai doi moi," *Nghien Cuu Quoc Te*, 2004, 3:58, 9, 3-11; Luu Doan Huynh, "Vietnam-ASEAN Relations in Retrospect: A Few Thoughts," *Dialogue + Cooperation*, 2004, 1, 23-31; Nguyen Dy Nien, "Chinh Sach Van Hoat Dong Doi Ngoai Trong Thoi Ky Doi Moi," *Tap Chi Cong San*, 17(740), September 2005, 31-37; Phan Doan Nam, "Ngoai Giao Viet Nam Sau 20 Nam Doi Moi," *Tap Chi Cong San*, July 2006, 14(760), 26-30; and Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnamese Foreign Policy: Multilateralism and the Threat of Peaceful Evolution," in Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 1-24

called for Vietnam to “diversify and multilateralize economic relations with all countries and economic organizations . . . regardless of different socio-political systems.”¹² The Political Report gave priority to relations with the Soviet Union, Laos, Cambodia, China, Cuba, other “communist and workers’ parties,” the “forces struggling for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress,” India, and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Significantly the Political Report called for the development of “relations of friendship” with Southeast Asia, mutually beneficial relations with northern and Western European countries, Japan, other developed countries and the normalization of relations with the United States.¹³ Vietnam achieved success in meeting these objectives. During the period from 1991-95 Vietnam normalized its relations China, Japan, Europe and the United States and became ASEAN’s seventh member.¹⁴ By 1995 Vietnam expanded the number of countries it had diplomatic relations with from twenty-three in 1989 to 163.

Vietnam’s policy of multilateralizing and diversifying its foreign relations was endorsed by all subsequent national party congresses from the eighth (1996) to the most recent. For example, the Political Report to the twelfth national congress held in January 2016 stated, “To ensure successful implementation of foreign policy and international integration... consistently carry out the foreign policy of independence, autonomy, peace, cooperation and development... [and] diversify and multilateralize external relations.”

The third major theme of Vietnam’s foreign policy is “cooperation and struggle.” Vietnam’s Resolution No. 13 on May 1988 introduced the concept of national interest (*loi ich dan toc*) for the first time. After relations with China were normalized in 1991 it soon became apparent that the two socialist states had differing national interests, particularly over the South China Sea (discussed below). After the normalization of relations with the United States in 1995, it also became apparent that socialist Vietnam and the U.S. had convergent national interests.

In July 2003, the VCP Central Committee issued Resolution No. 8, “On Defense of the Homeland in the New Situation.” This resolution noted that there were often instances of friction and disagreement with friendly countries and areas of cooperation and convergent interests with opposing countries. Resolution No. 8 adopted the twin

¹² Communist Party of Vietnam, *7th National Congress Documents* (Hanoi: Vietnam Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 134; Carlyle A. Thayer, “Indochina,” in Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer, eds., *Reshaping Regional Relations: Asia-Pacific and the Former Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 221; and Vu Khoan, “Mot so van de quoc te cua dai hoi VII quan,” in Bo Ngoai Giao, *Hoi nhap quoc te va giu vung ban sac* (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản chính trị quốc tế, 1995), 75.

¹³ Communist Party of Vietnam, *7th National Congress Documents*, 135.

¹⁴ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Internal Southeast Asian Dynamics: Vietnam’s Membership in ASEAN,” in Hadi Soesastro and Anthony Bergin, eds., *The Role of Security and Economic Cooperation Structures in the Asia Pacific Region: Indonesian and Australian Views* (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 1996), 78-88 and Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnamese Diplomacy, 1975-2015: From Member of the Socialist Camp to Proactive International Integration,” *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2015, 1(3), 194-214.

concepts of “objects or partners of cooperation” and “objects of struggle,” *doi tac* and *doi tuong*, respectively.¹⁵ Prior to the adoption of Resolution No. 8 China was classified as a friendly country because it was socialist and the United States was viewed as an opponent. Resolution No. 8 sanctioned cooperation with both friendly and opposing countries and struggling against any country that harmed Vietnam’s national interests.

In 2013, on the tenth anniversary of Resolution No. 8, the VCP Politburo conducted a review of the implementation of this resolution and reaffirmed the policy of “cooperation and struggle.”

The fourth major theme of Vietnam’s foreign policy is the promotion of international integration. As noted above, Vietnam first promoted economic integration and then extended this to political-economic integration. In 2011, the eleventh national party congress endorsed Vietnam’s proactive international integration. The Political Report to the twelfth and most recent national congress in 2016 stated, “To ensure successful implementation of foreign policy and international integration... [Vietnam must] be proactive and active in international integration; to be a friend, reliable partner, and a responsible member of the international community...”

Part 2 Domestic Factors

This section discusses three major factors that influence the foreign policy decision-making process in Vietnam: (1) the sources of political legitimacy of Vietnam’s one-party state, (2) elite factionalism within the VCP, and (3) new domestic actors

The origins of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) date back to establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1954 following the partition of Vietnam. In 1975 Vietnam was reunified. Since 1954 the VCP has based its claim to political legitimacy on three sources: patriotism and nationalism, legal-rational authority and performance legitimacy.

The VCP was founded in 1930 and successfully mobilized the Vietnamese people to resist and defeat successive foreign interventions, as noted above. The VCP appealed to patriotism and nationalism to overcome regional and religious differences. However, after reunification the VCP’s appeals to nationalism fell on deaf ears to Vietnamese both inside Vietnam and abroad who had supported the southern Republic of Vietnam (1955-75); they were denigrated as American puppets.¹⁶

¹⁵ Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 2011, 33(3), 348-369 and Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Strategy of ‘Cooperating and Struggling’ with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 2016, 3(2), 200-220.

¹⁶ Carlyle A. Thayer, “South China Sea: Memorializing the 1974 Battle of the Paracels,” *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, January 13, 2014.

In 1976 Le Duan, party leader from 1960-86, declared that, “this nation and socialism are one.”¹⁷ However, during the period from 1976-86 patriotism and nationalism, while still important sources of regime legitimacy, were overtaken by the VCP’s emphasis on legal-rational legitimacy. During this period the VCP imposed its mono-organizational socialist model on the south. This was exemplified by the adoption of Vietnam’s 2nd Five-Year Plan (1976-81) and the promulgation of a new state constitution in 1980.

After 1986, Marxist-Leninist ideology was watered down as the VCP began promoting “the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh” to undergird its legitimacy.¹⁸ The VCP’s emphasis on economic renovation soon became the regime’s prime source of legitimacy, performance legitimacy. During the 1990s Vietnam’s Gross Domestic Product grew at nearly seven percent a year and averaged 6.47 percent from 2000 until 2016.

The second factor influencing foreign policy is elite factionalism. Despite the alteration in state-society relations due to the explosive growth of grassroots-level organizations and the creation of a growing private sector as a result of high economic growth, the inner workings of Vietnam’s power structure remain opaque. Scholars and other analysts have used elite factionalism as a heuristic device to analyze policy changes.

During the Cold War scholars and analysts debated whether there were pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions in the VCP.¹⁹ After reunification, scholarly attention turned to discerning whether there were conservative or reformist factions within the VCP; one scholar posited three groups: ideologues, rent seekers and modernizers.²⁰ As Vietnam’s territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea took center stage (see below), scholars and analysts began debating how to characterize leadership alignments in Vietnam’s one-party state. Some argued that they discerned pro-China and pro-U.S. factions. This author has argued that there are no pro-China and pro-American factions in Vietnam rather the leadership is divided on how to manage relations with these two powers (see discussion on the HD 981 crisis below).

In the lead up to the VCP’s twelfth national congress it became clear that Vietnam’s leadership was divided over the issue of democratic centralism and collective leadership within the party itself. During the ten-year tenure of Politburo member and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, the Office of the Prime Minister (and the state apparatus)

¹⁷ Tran Van Dinh, ed., *This Nation and Socialism Are One: Selected Writings of Le Duan, First Secretary, Central Committee, Vietnam Workers’ Party* (Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1976).

¹⁸ Thaveeporn Vasavakul, “Vietnam: Changing Models of Legitimation,” in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 263-264. Vasavakul argues that legitimacy at this time was based on collective leadership in the party based on “power sharing among key personalities and political institutions.”

¹⁹ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnamese Perspectives on International Security: Three Revolutionary Currents,” in Donald H. McMillen, ed., *Asian Perspectives on International Security* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 57-76.

²⁰ Alexander L. Vuving, “Vietnam: A Tale of Four Players,” in Daljit Singh, ed., *Southeast Asian Affairs 2010* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 367-391.

emerged arguably as a more powerful institution than the VCP. The Prime Minister presided over a period of high economic growth and pushed a “Vietnam first policy” of building up huge state enterprises known as conglomerates. As a result a patron-client network emerged under Dung and some its beneficiaries became corrupt.

When Prime Minister Dung attempted to prolong his hold on office by seeking special exemptions to age restrictions and tenure limitations to become party Secretary General, an “anything but Dung” coalition formed behind the incumbent party leader Nguyen Phu Trong.²¹ Dung lost and retired. Trong was appointed for an unprecedented third term on the expectation that he would step down when a suitable replacement was found.

The third factor influencing foreign policy has been the emergence of new domestic actors including retired officials and members of what may be loosely termed political civil society.

Since reunification in 1976 the political role of retired party members, state cadres and military veterans has become more prominent especially as the sources of the VCP’s political legitimacy have altered.²² Increasingly retired cadres and networks of retired officials have become active writing petitions and open letters to the top party and state leaders on a number of hot button policy issues, including environmental issues and relations with China. As will be discussed in part three below, retired officials played a prominent role in opposing bauxite mining and Chinese violation of Vietnamese sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Between 2004-06, building on the effervescence of organizational activity discussed previously, an unprecedented number of political associations were formed consisting of little more than a handful of non-party individuals. These new political groupings promoted democracy, human rights, religious freedom and workers’ rights and confronted Vietnam’s one-party state.²³

In 2006, pro-democracy activists and political groups coalesced into an identifiable network, marking a new development in Vietnamese politics.²⁴ On April 6, 2006, one hundred and sixteen persons issued an Appeal for Freedom of Political Association that they distributed throughout Vietnam via the Internet. On April 8, one hundred and

²¹ This phrase was coined by David Brown a Vietnamese speaking former U.S. diplomat.

²² Thayer, “Political Dissent and Political Reform in Vietnam, 1997-2002,” 115-132.

²³ Carlyle A., Thayer, “Political Legitimacy of Vietnam’s One Party-State: Challenges and Responses,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* [Hamburg: Institute of Global and Area Studies], 2009, 28(4), 47-70 and Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, April 2009, 31(1), 1-27.

²⁴ Carlyle A. Thayer, “Vietnam’s Regional Integration: Domestic and External Challenges to State Sovereignty,” in Stephanie Balme and Mark Sidel, eds., *Vietnam’s New Order: International Perspectives on the State and Reform in Vietnam* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 31-50; Thayer, “Political Legitimacy of Vietnam’s One Party-State: Challenges and Responses,” and Thayer, “Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society.”

eighteen persons issued a Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam.²⁵ These statements called upon the Vietnamese state to respect basic human rights and religious freedom and to permit citizens to freely associate and form their own political parties.²⁶ These pro-democracy petitioners became known as Bloc 8406 after the date of their founding manifesto.

Bloc 8406 represented a diverse network of professionals primarily concentrated in urban centers throughout the country, particularly in Hue, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, Hanoi, Da Nang and Can Tho. Bloc 8406 produced a fortnightly publication, *Tu Do Ngon Luan* (Free Speech) in both hardcopy and electronic format. By year's end foreign observers reported that the support base for Bloc 8406 had expanded to over two thousand, many under the age of thirty.²⁷

In August 2006, Bloc 8406 publicly announced a four-phase program for democratization including the restoration of civil liberties, establishment of political parties, drafting of a new constitution and democratic elections for a representative National Assembly.²⁸ Next, in October 2016, Bloc 8406 issued an open letter to government leaders who were due to attend the annual summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Hanoi at the end of the year. This appeal asked for their help in promoting democracy in Vietnam. Shortly after Bloc 8406 formed a coalition with the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and the Vietnam Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights.

After the APEC Summit security authorities began cracking down on Bloc 8406 by arresting several of its high profile leaders. They were given perfunctory trials and imprisoned. As a result by 2009 Bloc 8406 was eviscerated.

In sum, Vietnam's Đổi Mới reform program shifted the main basis of VCP legitimacy from nationalism and legal-rational authority to performance legitimacy. This widened the scope for elite factionalism as the state apparatus gained control over more resources and weakened the hegemonic role of the VCP. Retired party members, state cadres and military veterans increasingly voiced their views on both domestic and foreign policies. In addition, voices from outside the traditional power structure began to agitate for democratic reforms, religious freedom and other concerns.

Part 3 Key Issues Driving Foreign Policy

Throughout the period of the Sino-Soviet dispute (1956-89) Vietnam's foreign policy was the province of political elites who made decisions without having to take into account public opinion. As noted above, in 2006 pro-democracy and human rights activists made

²⁵“Tuyen Ngon Tu Do Dan Chu Cho Viet-Nam Nam 2006,” April 8, 2006. One signatory to the April 6th appeal withdrew, and three new signatories were added for a total of 118.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Vietnam: Fledgling Democracy Movement Under Threat,” May 10, 2006.

²⁷ Matt Steinglass, “Dissident Numbers Grow in Vietnam,” Voice of America, October 16, 2006.

²⁸ Luisetta Mudie, “Vietnam Nervous Over Emerging Pro-Democracy Voices,” Radio Free Asia, September 29, 2006.

the first major attempt in post-1975 Vietnam to link domestic political reform with foreign policy when they petitioned government leaders in advance of the APEC summit in Hanoi.

This section reviews why relations with China have become the key domestic driver in Vietnam's current foreign policy. Domestic activists in Vietnam have seized on at least two major issues regarding relations with China, environmental concerns over resource extraction and China's threat to Vietnam's sovereignty in the South China Sea. As relations with China have assumed salience in domestic politics a number of lower order issues have become embedded in this controversy, such as China's huge trade surplus, shoddy Chinese goods, the low quality of infrastructure projects, and the importation of Chinese labor into Vietnam.

Public opinion regarding relations with China has become so toxic that it poses a serious challenge to the political legitimacy of Vietnam's one-party regime. Anti-China activists accuse their leaders of not standing up strongly enough to Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea. This undercuts the regime's claim to patriotism and nationalism as one of their main sources of political legitimacy.

Bauxite Mining Controversy. In 2009 Vietnam's leaders were confronted by a widespread elite coalition opposed to their plans to develop a bauxite mining industry in central Vietnam in collaboration with a Chinese company. Environmental issues related to toxic pollution of downstream waterways in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities became entwined with national security concerns about permitting a Chinese presence in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

In 2006 Vietnam issued a tender for bauxite mining. The bid was won by the China Aluminum Company (CHALCO) in partnership with the Vietnam National Coal Mineral Industries Group (VINACOMIN). A framework agreement between the two companies was signed in November 2006 on the sidelines of the APEC Summit and was witnessed by China's President Hu Jintao.²⁹ CHALCO agreed to build two alumina plants, one at Nhan Co, Dak Nong province and the other at Tan Rai, Lam Dong province.

During 2008 small numbers of Vietnamese environmentalists and scientists voiced disquiet over plans to develop bauxite mining in the absence of an environmental impact study. Their voices were largely brushed aside. Then, in January 2009, the bauxite issue suddenly became a national issue when General Vo Nguyen Giap issued the first of three open letters (January 5, April 9, 2009 and May 20, 2009). He argued that bauxite mining would ruin the environment, displace indigenous ethnic minorities and, most significantly, threaten national security with the influx of Chinese workers into the strategic Central Highlands and by providing China with economic leverage.

On April 30, 2009 an anti-bauxite petition signed by one hundred and thirty-five scholars and intellectuals was delivered to the National Assembly. The petition stated, "China has

²⁹ Reuters, "Vietnam, China in \$1.6 bln bauxite/alumina deal," November 22, 2006. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/sppage023-han216295-oisbi-idUKHAN21629520061122>.

been notorious in the modern world as a country causing the greatest pollution and other problems.”³⁰

On May 7, 2009 the fifty-fifth anniversary of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, General Giap told visiting leaders who came to wish him well, “I hope you pay attention to bauxite mining in the Central Highlands. This is a strategic site of the country, which is very important in defense and security, not only for Vietnam but for Indochina.”³¹ Giap was joined by retired General Nguyen Trong Vinh, former ambassador to China, who wrote an open letter calling on the Politburo to reconsider plans to let China establish a permanent presence in the Central Highlands.³²

According to one detailed study of the bauxite controversy:

The public debate on bauxite mining developed into a national and international controversy. The Prime Minister and other state authorities almost immediately set in motion processes to control and clamp down on the public debate. Their measures were both responsive and repressive. They included an injunction on the domestic press from further reporting on the topic of bauxite mining in January of 2009 and, later, arrests of bloggers and other more directly repressive measures in the last half of 2009. However, state response also included different types of dialogues with its critics, including a closed-door seminar organized by the central branch of the Vietnamese Communist Party and chaired by two Politburo members in February of 2009, a ‘Scientific Workshop’ co-organized by the government’s Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Associations and the Ministry of Industry and Trade in April 2009, and an explosive debate on bauxite mining in the bi-annual meeting of the National Assembly in May and June of 2009.³³

By mid-2009, the anti-bauxite network of the previous year had grown into a national coalition including environmentalists, local residents, scientists, economists, retired military officers and veterans, retired state officials, social scientists, other academics and intellectuals, elements of the media, and National Assembly deputies. These critics were all mainstream elite. They were joined by bloggers, political dissidents and religious leaders representing the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and Redemptorist priests involved in land disputes with local authorities in Hanoi the previous year.

On May 3, 2009, Cardinal Pham Minh Man, the Archbishop of Saigon, issued a Pastoral Letter condemning the exploitation of natural resources that damaged the environment and called on Catholics to protest such development plans.³⁴ In June, lawyer Cu Huy Ha

³⁰ Seth Mydans, “War Hero in Vietnam Forces Government to Listen,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/world/asia/29iht-viet.html>.

³¹ Agence France Presse, “Vietnamese war hero fires salvo over mining plan, May 7, 2009.

³² Nguyen Trong Vinh, “Kinh gui: Cac dong chi uy vien Bo Chinh Tri, dong kinh gui: Thu Tuong va cac Pho Thu Tuong China Phu” (To Comrade mem-bers of the Politburo, copy to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Ministers). <http://www.diendan.org/viet-nam/thu-cua-thieu-tuong-111ai-su-nguyen-trong-vinh/>.

³³ Jason Morris, “The Vietnamese Bauxite Mining Controversy: the Emergence of a New Oppositional Politics,” PhD Thesis, The University of California at Berkeley, 2013, 169.

³⁴ “Protecting environment is a Christian’s duty, Cardinal says,” *VietCatholicNews*, May 29, 2009 and “Harsh treatment of Vietnam government against Catholics, why?,” *VietCatholicNews*, August 3, 2009.

Vu filed a lawsuit against the prime minister in the Hanoi People's Court.³⁵ When the Court rejected this request on the grounds that it lacked competency in this matter, Cu Hay Ha Vu filed an appeal to the People's Supreme Court on July 3rd. This quixotic legal protest was similarly dismissed.³⁶

The anti-bauxite controversy of 2009 presented a novel public challenge to state authority. For the first time the competency of the government to decide on large-scale development projects was called into question by a broad national coalition of mainstream elites including environmentalists, scientists, economists, social scientists, and retired officials.³⁷ In addition domestic critics raised the politically sensitive allegation that China's involvement in bauxite mining was a national security issue.

In sum, the bauxite mining controversy represented a major challenge to the performance legitimacy of Vietnam's one-party state. As a result, the government was forced to modify its plans to take environmental concerns and the impact on ethnic minorities into account. The government agreed to permit the National Assembly, ministries and local authorities to conduct regular reviews of how bauxite mining was being implemented. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister and other government officials asserted that bauxite mining was "a major policy of the party and state" and would proceed.³⁸ In May, in a token gesture, six Chinese companies were fined for failing to obtain work permits for Chinese laborers at bauxite sites.³⁹

South China Sea Dispute. No foreign policy issue has raised such strong domestic public opinion as Vietnam's territorial dispute with China over the South China Sea. The South China Sea dispute emerged in 1992 shortly after Vietnam normalized relations with China following a decade-long estrangement during the Cambodian conflict.

In February 1992, China's National People's Congress passed the Law on Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone that claimed all islands in the South China Sea, including the Parcel and Spratly archipelagos. China's law now put it on a collision course with Vietnam regarding sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. This took the form of a series of maritime incidents in the 1990s precipitated by China's efforts to explore for oil in waters falling within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).⁴⁰

³⁵ Deutsche Presse Agentur, "Vietnamese court rejects lawsuit against prime minister," June 23, 2009.

³⁶ Deutsche Presse Agentur, "Vietnamese premier sued again over bauxite projects," July 4, 2009.

³⁷ Duy Hoang, "Vietnam bauxite plan opens pit of concern," *Asia Times*, March 16, 2009.

³⁸ Deutsche Press Agentur, "Vietnam prime minister back controversial aluminium project," August 19, 2009 and Vietnam News Agency, "PM asks bauxite mining to ensure sustainable development," August 19, 2009.

³⁹ Deutsche Press Agentur, "Authorities fined six Chinese companies for failing to obtain work permits for workers at controversial bauxite project," May 13, 2009.

⁴⁰ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014), 124-130.

It was not until 2007, however, that China's assertiveness in the South China Sea became a domestic issue. In late 2007 Vietnam witnessed the first of regular public protests in Hanoi and later in other metropolitan centers in response to Chinese actions in the South China Sea, such as harassment of Vietnamese fishermen. Generally the regime showed a degree of tolerance, allowing protesters to demonstrate outside the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi or China's Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City, before public security officials escorted them away.

From 2007 to the present, a number of bloggers have taken to the internet to criticize not only China but their own government for failing to stand up to China to protect Vietnam's sovereignty. During this period when China harassed Vietnamese fishermen or when Chinese fishermen intruded into Vietnam's EEZ, the government responded by issuing diplomatic protests. On occasion Vietnam would deploy its Maritime Police to chase Chinese fishermen out of Vietnamese waters and "muscle" Chinese maritime enforcement ships operating in Vietnam's EEZ.

HD 981 Crisis. No incident was more serious than the crisis that erupted in early May-mid-July 2014 when China deployed the mega-oil drilling rig the Hai Yang Shi You 981 (HD 981) in Vietnam's EEZ accompanied by an armada of warships, Coast Guard vessels, tug boats and fishing trawlers that reached over one hundred in number at the height of the crisis. China also dispatched military aircraft to over fly the area.

Vietnam responded by sending its much smaller Coast Guard ships and Fishery Surveillance Force vessels to confront the Chinese and order them out of Vietnam's EEZ. China responded aggressively by ramming Vietnamese ships and vessels and used high-powered water canons to de-mast radio communications antennae from the bridges of Vietnamese ships. Vietnamese maritime law enforcement vessels continued their unequal daily confrontation but added a new twist by embedding foreign journalists on its ships to film and report incidents at sea. Vietnam won a global propaganda war against China when film was broadcast showing large Chinese vessels deliberately ramming smaller Vietnamese boats.

The maritime crisis between Vietnam and China continued for six weeks. During this period Vietnam's adopted a defensive posture by keeping its warships well out of the area where the daily confrontation occurred. Vietnam also tried in vain to activate its hot line with China. Over thirty Vietnamese demarches in May alone went unanswered including a request that China receive a special envoy.

Nearly a week after China deployed the HD 981 the VCP Central Committee convened its long scheduled ninth plenum from May 8-14. Although the agenda included a number of domestic issues the meeting was overshadowed by the growing maritime crisis.⁴¹ A heated debate erupted about how Vietnam should respond to China's

⁴¹ The agenda included the review of the implementation of previous resolutions on developing an advanced culture and a vote of confidence on government ministers, the pilot project on holding direct elections to people's committees at ward level, and draft policy documents and electoral procedures for the forthcoming twelfth national party congress.

challenge to Vietnamese sovereignty. However, the final communiqué issued after the plenum resolved to closely monitor the maritime standoff and called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. This gave the impression that “it was business as usual” and gave no hint of internal party disagreements over South China Sea policy.

On May 11, while the Central Committee was in session, peaceful anti-China protests took place in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and other urban areas in response to graphic domestic TV coverage of the confrontation. More seriously, anti-China protests by Vietnamese workers on three industrial estates in Binh Duong, Dong Nai and Ha Tinh provinces turned violent on May 13-14. Nearly four hundred Chinese (and other foreign-owned) enterprises were severely damaged or burned to the ground. China responded by evacuating several thousand of its workers, demanded compensation and imposed economic sanctions. Chinese tourism to Vietnam plummeted.

After the ninth plenum, and in the face of Chinese diplomatic stonewalling, pressure continued to build up within Vietnamese party and society at large to take legal action against China. Prime Minister Dung became the most public advocate of this action but stated that timing was crucial. Defense Minister Phung Quang Thanh went on record at the Shangri-La Dialogue that legal action was “a last resort.” On June 18 China dispatched State Councilor Yang Jiechi to Hanoi for testy consultations with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh.

In early July the VCP Politburo reportedly voted overwhelmingly to hold a special meeting of the Central Committee to discuss the HD 981 crisis and to consider taking international legal action against China and, reportedly, consider dropping its defense policy of “three no’s.” On July 15, China announced that it was withdrawing the HD 981 from Vietnamese waters. This took the wind out of the sails of those calling for a special Central Committee meeting. Nevertheless, on July 28 sixty-one leading Vietnamese personalities signed an open letter criticizing the government for its handling of relations with Beijing and called for legal action and a lessening of Vietnam’s dependence on China by exiting China’s orbit (*thoat trung*).

China’s actions in withdrawing the HD 981 a month earlier than announced defused the crisis and led to the return to diplomacy and difficult efforts to restore political trust.⁴²

The 2014 HD 981 crisis demonstrated the efficacy of Vietnam’s policy of struggling and cooperating with China. The daily confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese maritime law enforcement vessels demonstrated that Vietnam was capable of “struggling against” China to demonstrate resolve in defending its national interests. However, Vietnam was also concerned to prevent any maritime incident from escalating to the point of an armed clash with superior Chinese military forces and/or provoking China to seize a feature that Vietnam presently occupies in the South China Sea. The response by Vietnam’s government of “cooperating and struggling” was carefully

⁴² Carl Thayer, “4 Reasons China Removed Oil Rig HYSY-981 Sooner Than Planned,” *The Diplomat*, July 22, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/4-reasons-china-removed-oil-rig-hysy-981-sooner-than-planned/>.

calibrated acts designed to underscore Vietnam's sovereignty without unduly provoking China.

The resolution of the HD 981 crisis did little to diffuse widespread anti-Chinese sentiment among the Vietnamese public. The Vietnamese party-state responded to public opinion by being more proactive in permitting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to issue protests in response to Chinese actions that were perceived as infringing Vietnamese sovereignty, territorial territory or peace and stability in the South China Sea. Vietnamese textbooks are being gradually revived to take the gloss off official historical accounts of Sino-Vietnamese relations. The Vietnamese media has been given greater leeway to publish news that is critical of China.

Part 4 Providing Equity to the Major Powers

Vietnam's policy of "multilateralizing and diversifying" its foreign relations took the strategy of negotiating strategic partnership agreements with a range of countries. Between 2001 and 2016 Vietnam succeeded in reaching strategic partnership agreements with sixteen countries and agreements on comprehensive partnerships with ten others, including Australia and the United States. These agreements were broad in scope and included, among other things, provisions for cooperation in foreign affairs and defense and security. These agreements also included a joint mechanism to manage bilateral relations and they were often accompanied by multi-year Action Plans.

Vietnam sought to avoid being caught in the middle of strategic rivalry between a rising China and the United States by pursuing a multi-polar balance among five major powers – Russia, India, Japan, China and the United States. The purpose of strategic partnerships was to give each country equity in Vietnam to prevent Vietnam from being pulled into a rival's orbit and to enable Vietnam to maintain its strategic autonomy. The sections below briefly examine Vietnam's strategic partnerships with the major powers.

Russia. Vietnam negotiated its first strategic partnership agreement with the Russian Federation in March 2001 during the visit of President Vladimir Putin to Hanoi.⁴³ This agreement set out broad-ranging cooperation in eight major areas: political-diplomatic, military equipment and technology, oil and gas cooperation, energy cooperation for hydro and nuclear power, trade and investment, science and technology, education and training, and culture and tourism. In July 2012, Vietnam and Russia raised their strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership on the occasion of a state visit to Moscow by President Truong Tan Sang.⁴⁴

⁴³ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam On the Road to Global Integration: Forging Strategic Partnerships Through International Security Cooperation," in *Vietnam on the Road to Integration and Sustainable Development, The Fourth International Conference on Vietnamese Studies*. Hanoi: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and Vietnam National University, 2012. 206-214.

⁴⁴ Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Russia-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership," *East Asia Forum*, October 9, 2012. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/10/09/the-russia-vietnam-comprehensive-partnership/>.

The breadth of Vietnam-Russia relations was illustrated in April 2015 when Vietnam and Russia signed eight cooperation agreements in the fields of energy (oil, gas, and nuclear), investment, banking (use of national currencies to promote bilateral trade), health care, transport (aviation and rail) and agriculture.⁴⁵

Russian arms sales to Vietnam are the largest and most significant component of the strategic partnership, followed by energy (oil, gas, hydropower and nuclear). The Russian Federation is Vietnam's largest provider of military equipment and technology. This assistance enables Vietnam modernize its armed forces and enhance its capacity to defend Vietnam's sovereignty.⁴⁶

Japan. In October 2006, Prime Ministers Shinzo Abe and Nguyen Tan Dung issued a Joint Statement Toward a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia.⁴⁷ A year later during an official visit by Vietnam's president, Japan and Vietnam issued a Joint Statement that included a forty-four point Agenda Toward a Strategic Partnership. This was divided into seven substantive areas: exchanges, cooperation in policy dialogue, security and defence; comprehensive economic partnership; improvement of the legal system and administrative reforms; science and technology; climate change, environment, natural resources and technology; mutual understanding between the peoples of the two countries; and cooperation in the international arena.⁴⁸

In March 2014, Vietnam and Japan raised their bilateral relations to an Extensive Strategic Partnership.

India. In July 2007, India and Vietnam adopted a 33-point Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership that mapped out cooperation in five major areas: political, defense and security cooperation; closer economic cooperation and commercial engagement;

⁴⁵ Tran Van Minh, "Medvedev: Vietnam Close to Deal with Russian-Led Trade Area," Associated Press, April 6, 2015; Truong Son, "Vietnam, Russia set to enhance cooperation in all fields," *Thanh Nien Daily*, April 7, 2015; "Vietnam, Russia agree to deepen all-around ties, especially in trade, energy," *Tuoi Tre News*, April 7, 2015; "Medvedev Says Time for Russia, Vietnam to Use National Currencies in Trade," *Sputnik*, April 7, 2015; Paddy Harris, "Gazprom Neft and Petrovietnam ink upstream and downstream collaboration," *Oil & Gas Technology*, April 7, 2015; Andrew Tully, "Russia Reaches Oil and Gas Agreement With Vietnam," *Oil Price*, April 7, 2015; Yury Slyusar, "Vietnam Is a Launch Pad to Enter the Aviation Market in South-East Asia," *B Aviation*, April 7, 2015; Prensa Latina, "Russian Prime Minister concludes visit to Vietnam," April 7, 2015; and Vietnam News Agency, "Russian PM advocates advancing bilateral ties," *VietnamNet*, April 8, 2015.

⁴⁶ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Russia-Vietnam Relations," *Global Insider*, *World Politics Review*, June, 8, 2011. <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/9099/global-insider-russia-vietnam-relations>; Carlyle A. Thayer, "Russian Subs in Vietnam," U.S. Naval Institute, August 21, 2012. <http://news.usni.org/news-analysis/news/russian-subs-vietnam>; Carl Thayer, "With Russia's Help, Vietnam Adopts A2/AD Strategy," *The Diplomat*, October 8, 2013. <http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2013/10/08/with-russias-help-vietnam-adopts-a2ad-strategy/>.

⁴⁷ Carl Thayer "Vietnam's Extensive Strategic Partnership with Japan," *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/vietnams-extensive-strategic-partnership-with-japan/>.

⁴⁸ Point four of the Agenda addressed defence cooperation including exchanges of military delegations, high-level defence officials' visits, and goodwill ship port calls by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

science and technology cooperation, cultural and technical cooperation and multilateral and regional cooperation.⁴⁹

The Vietnam-India strategic partnership set out six areas for defense cooperation: (1) strategic dialogue at vice ministerial level; (2) defense supplies, joint projects, training cooperation and intelligence exchanges; (3) exchange visits between their defense and security establishments; (4) capacity building, technical assistance and information sharing with particular attention to security of sea lanes, anti-piracy, prevention of pollution and search and rescue; (5) counter terrorism and cyber security; and (6) non-traditional security.⁵⁰

In 2016, during the course of an official visit by Prime Minister Modi to Hanoi, Vietnam and India raised their bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

China. In June 2008, seventeen years after the normalization of relations, the leaders of Vietnam and China agreed to raise their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. A year later this was upgraded to a strategic cooperative partnership.⁵¹ In 2013 Vietnam and China raised their bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, the highest designation among all of Vietnam's strategic partners.

As strategic partners China and Vietnam have developed a dense network of party, state, defense and multilateral mechanisms to manage their bilateral relations including a Joint Steering Committee at deputy prime minister level. There was a hiatus in bilateral relations during the HD 981 crisis. After tensions were diffused the two sides resumed high-level political, diplomatic and military exchanges. The China-Vietnam Joint Steering Committee, the highest level coordination mechanism that oversees bilateral relations, has continued to meet.

United States. Between 2010 and 2013 officials from Vietnam and the United State mulled the idea of reaching an agreement on strategic partnership. In the end both sides stepped back from this commitment and decided instead to adopt a Joint Statement on Comprehensive Partnership during the state visit by President Truong Tan Sang to Washington in July 2013.⁵²

⁴⁹ Carl Thayer, "How Vietnam Woos China and India Simultaneously," *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/how-vietnam-woos-china-and-india-simultaneously/>; and Carl Thayer, "India and Vietnam Advance Their Strategic Partnership," *The Diplomat*, December 11, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/india-and-vietnam-advance-their-strategic-partnership/>.

⁵⁰ Since 2007, defense cooperation has included high-level visits, an annual Defense Strategy Dialogue, naval port visits and two lines of credit totaling US\$600 million for defense acquisitions including Offshore Patrol Vessels.

⁵¹ Thayer, "How Vietnam Woos China and India Simultaneously."

⁵² Carl Thayer, "The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's in a Name?," *The Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute Blog, July 31, 2013, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-us-vietnam-comprehensive-partnership-whats-in-a-name/> and Carl Thayer, "The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership: What's in a Name?," *cogitASIA*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 30, 2013. <http://cogitasia.com/the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-partnership-whats-in-a-name/>.

The Vietnam-US comprehensive partnership basically codified nine major areas of long-standing cooperation: political and diplomatic relations, trade and economic ties, science and technology, education and training, environment and health, war legacy issues, defence and security, protection and promotion of human rights, and culture, sports, and tourism.⁵³

The Joint Statement incorporated existing mechanisms for bilateral cooperation such as the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Council; the Joint Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation; the Defense Policy Dialogue; and the Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue, as well as a new political and diplomatic dialogue mechanism between the U.S. Secretary of State and Vietnam's Minister of Foreign Affairs. There was no accompanying multi-year Plan of Action.

Subsequently, Vietnam and the United States adopted three seminal documents that supplemented their comprehensive partnership: Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation (June 1, 2015) between their defense ministers,⁵⁴ Joint Vision Statement between President Barack Obama and Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong (July 7, 2015), and Joint Statement (May 23, 2016) between President Tran Dai Quang and President Obama. During Obama's visit to Vietnam in May 2016 he announced the lifting of all restrictions on the sale of weapons to Vietnam.

When taken as a whole, Vietnam's web of strategic and comprehensive partnerships serve to insulate Vietnam from Sino-US competition and provide Vietnam with the means to maneuver among the major powers in order to protect its independence and self-reliance.

Part 5 Proactive International Integration

Vietnam's foreign policy to promote international integration is long standing. For example, Vietnam joined APEC in 1998, the World Trade Organization in 2007 and was elected non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2008-09 term. In 2011, the eleventh national party congress endorsed Vietnam's "proactive, active international integration."

⁵³ In October 2011 Vietnam and the United States signed a Memorandum of Understanding Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation that covered main five areas: maritime security, search and rescue, United Nations peacekeeping operations; humanitarian and disaster relief, and exchanges between defense universities and research institutes.

⁵⁴ This statement included twelve areas of cooperation: enhancement of trust and mutual understanding; collaboration in multilateral fora and organizations for common interest (ASEAN); strengthening capabilities of defense institutions and militaries to enhance cooperation, promote security, and address non-traditional security threats; expand defense trade, potentially including cooperation in production of new technologies and equipment were possible under current law and restrictions; expand collaboration in maritime security and maritime domain awareness, port visits, voyage repair visits and facilities; expand training and educational opportunities at military academic institutions; search and rescue, and HA/DR; capacity building for UNPKO; and information exchanges and best practices, science and defense technology exchanges

On April 10, 2013, the VCP Politburo issued Resolution No. 22-NQ/TW on International Integration. It declared that, “Proactive and active international integration is a major strategic orientation of the Party aimed to successfully implement the task of building and protecting the socialist Fatherland of Viet Nam.”⁵⁵ Resolution No. 22 underscored the need for Vietnam to

Deliver on international commitments in parallel with proactive, positive participation in developing and making use of international rules and practices and participate in activities of the regional and international communities; proactively propose initiatives and cooperation mechanisms under the mutually beneficial principle; consolidate and enhance our country's position in the regional and international communities, actively contributing to the struggle for peace, national independence, democracy and social progress in the world.⁵⁶

After Politburo Resolution No. 22 was issued the Cabinet adopted an Action Plan and the Prime Minister issued Directive No. 15/CT-TTg. This led to the establishment of the National Steering Committee on International Integration headed by the prime minister. Two major inter-agency Steering Committees were set up, one on international integration in politics, security, and national defense, the second had responsibility for international integration in the areas of culture and society, science and technology and education and training.

Vietnam was a keen participant in the negotiations on the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) as well as ASEAN’s Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Vietnam recently joined the Eurasian Economic Union comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia.

In 2015, Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a *Diplomatic Bluebook* that reviewed Vietnam’s efforts at proactive international integration over the past year. As a member of the United Nations, Vietnam was elected to the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (2013-15), Human Rights Council (2014-16), the Executive Board of the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture or UNESCO (2015-19), and the UN’s Economic and Social Council (2016-18). Vietnam has also announced that it will be a candidate for non-permanent member of the Security Council for the 2020-21 term.

The center-piece of Vietnam’s regional integration is ASEAN and ASEAN-centered multilateral institutions. Vietnam became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994 and a full member of ASEAN the following year. Vietnam has actively participated in the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM), ADMM-Plus, the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), the Expanded AMF, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and the East Asia Summit. In 2010 Vietnam hosted the inaugural meeting of the ADMM-Plus. Vietnam was the coordinator for ASEAN-European Union relations for 2012-15 and is currently coordinator for ASEAN-India relations (2015-18).

⁵⁵ Communist Party of Vietnam, Central Executive Committee, Resolution of the Politburo on International Integration, No. 22-NQ/TW, Hanoi, April 10, 2013, 4.

⁵⁶ Communist Party of Vietnam, Resolution of the Politburo on International Integration, 5.

At the bilateral level Vietnam has signed strategic partnership agreements with five of ASEAN's ten members: Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia. After the election of new state leaders in May 2016, President Tran Dai Quang visited Brunei and Singapore.

Part 6 Implications for the United States

Since 1995 Vietnam has emerged as a key member of ASEAN and both Vietnam and the United States have shared interests in strengthening ASEAN as a regional association. Likewise, both Vietnam and the United States have shared interests in maritime security in the South China Sea, including freedom of navigation and overflight. Both share the same policy position that territorial disputes should be settled peacefully without the threat of use of force on the basis of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Vietnam and the United States share similar views on international issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, countering violent extremism, and mitigating the effects of climate change.

Both Vietnam and the United States share a common interest in Vietnam's stability and economic development. The United States is Vietnam's largest export market and Vietnam enjoys a massive trade surplus of U.S. \$30.9 billion (compared with a trade deficit with China of U.S. \$32.3 billion). Vietnam was a keen participant in TPP negotiations, a major goal of President Obama's rebalance to Asia policy.

Despite wide area of convergence U.S. and Vietnamese interests are not congruent.⁵⁷ For example, Vietnam wants the U.S. formally to designate Vietnam as a market economy so it can have greater access to the American market. The United States has not done so because it is concerned about the privileged role of state-owned enterprises in Vietnam's socialist market economy. The U.S. views the promotion of democratic values, human rights and religious freedom as reinforcing political stability and development. Vietnam, however, harbors suspicions that the United States seeks to overthrow Vietnam's one-party system through "peaceful evolution."

Even in the area of defence and security, where U.S. and Vietnamese strategic interests have increasingly converged in recent years, their interests are not congruent. Vietnam seeks to leverage its strategic partnerships with the major powers to bolster its foreign

⁵⁷ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam and the United States: Convergence but not Congruence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea," Keynote Address to The Fourth Engaging With Vietnam – An Interdisciplinary Dialogue Conference, Australian Night, co-sponsored by the Australian Consulate General, Monash University, and the East-West Center, Wailana Room, The Hawai'i Imin International Conference Center, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, November 8-9, 2012 and Carlyle Thayer, "Vietnam and the United States: Convergence but Not Congruence of Strategic Interests in the South China Sea," ISN ETZ Zurich, International Relations and Security Network, February 13, 2013. <http://isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Articles/Special-Feature/Detail/?lng=en&id=159647&contextid774=159647&contextid775=159646&tabid=1453526659>.

policy of independence and self-reliance. Vietnam generally has supported President Obama's policy of rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. Senior Vietnamese officials welcome the presence of the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea as long as it contributes, in Hanoi's view, to regional peace and security. However, Vietnam's defense policy of "three no's" restricts the extent to which it will cooperate with the United States to constrain China.

Vietnam and the United States are both wary of Sino-Russian collaboration in the Asia-Pacific. Vietnam, however, has good relations with Moscow while Washington does not. Russian naval vessels have been given special access to the military port at Cam Ranh Bay, while the other major powers are permitted to visit the Cam Ranh International Port and presently are restricted to one naval port visit a year. In 2015 Vietnam's defense policy of "three no's" was put under strain when Russian military refuelling aircraft at Cam Ranh Bay serviced Bear bombers that conducted provocative flights near U.S. military facilities on Guam.⁵⁸

The comprehensive partnership between Vietnam and the United States provides a firm foundation for the future development of bilateral relations under the next U.S. Administration. This was illustrated by the visit of Dinh The Huynh to Washington from October 24-30, 2016 at the invitation of Secretary of State John Kerry.⁵⁹ Huynh is the standing member of the VCP Central Committee's Secretariat and a likely candidate to become the next party Secretary General.

Huynh called on the United States to "foster comprehensive cooperation for development by increasing visits at all levels, expanding consultation mechanisms on issues of shared concern and boosting the effectiveness of existing cooperation mechanisms."⁶⁰ Huynh specifically called for the enhancement of "economic, trade and investment partnerships" and the strengthening of cooperation in "science, education, health care, environment, infrastructure connectivity, renewable energy, and climate change response... defence-security links... people-to-people exchanges, while prioritising the settlement of war consequences and humanitarian aid."⁶¹

Huynh noted that Vietnam's National Assembly was preparing to ratify the TPP and called on the United States to accelerate its ratification. Huynh also expressed the hope that the United States "will soon recognise Vietnam's economy as a market economy, open its market to more Vietnamese agricultural products, and reduce trade barriers."⁶²

⁵⁸ Carl Thayer, "Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay Caught in US-Russia Crossfire," *The Diplomat*, March 13, 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/vietnams-cam-ranh-bay-caught-in-us-russia-crossfire/>.

⁵⁹ Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam-US Relations: The Duterte Factor," Thayer Consultancy Background Brief, October 30, 2016.

⁶⁰ "Relations with CPV critical to boosting US-Vietnam ties: John Kerry," VietnamNet, October 26, 2016.

⁶¹ "Relations with CPV critical to boosting US-Vietnam ties: John Kerry."

⁶² "Relations with CPV critical to boosting US-Vietnam ties: John Kerry."

Huynh reiterated Vietnam's willingness "to work with the US and relevant countries to boost ASEAN's central role and build ASEAN-led mechanisms to form regional architecture in the 21st century."⁶³ Significantly Huynh welcomed "the active role of countries inside and outside the region, including the US, in keeping peace and stability in the East Sea" and urged the U.S. to continue its collaboration with countries in the Asia-Pacific region.⁶⁴ Finally, Huynh invited the next U.S. president to visit Vietnam in 2017 when Vietnam hosts the APEC Summit.

In sum, Vietnam and the United States share a convergence of strategic interests but these interests are not congruent. While Vietnam's policies towards the United States seem clear it is up to the next U.S. president to clarify whether there will be continuity or marked change in the U.S. policy of rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific.

⁶³ "Relations with CPV critical to boosting US-Vietnam ties: John Kerry."

⁶⁴ "Relations with CPV critical to boosting US-Vietnam ties: John Kerry."

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