

Vietnam Draws Lines in the Sea

Hanoi's new defense white paper reflects fears of Chinese encroachment.

By Huong Le Thu

Defense is serious business in Vietnam, a country that has a history of fighting off foreign aggressors. Today, in the context of more contested strategic environment and increasing pressure from a more aggressive China, Vietnam needs an update to its defense policy.

The 2019 defense white paper released last month, Vietnam's first in 10 years, doesn't offer detailed updates on the force structure and organization of its military forces and makes only a passing reference to the defense budget spending in a footnote about the fluctuation in the percentage of the GDP for defense budget, which was at 2.36 percent in 2018. But it does—and this is arguably the most interesting part—elaborate on the strategic context and espouse the national strategy for protecting the homeland. It includes the elements of its strategic doctrine, based on the pillars of self-reliance and resilience, and national defense struggle to set all disputes peacefully.

Many long-term doctrines are reasserted in the white paper, including the much quoted “three no's”: no military alliances, no foreign bases and usage of the territory for military activities, and no siding with one country against another. Vietnam is sticking to nonreliance but emphasizes an important caveat: Any form of defense is acceptable with the nation under attack. As part of this, the white paper sharpens Vietnam's commitments to international integration, portraying commitment to international maritime legal principles as an important part of securing the country's prosperity and international role over the last three decades since the Doi Moi reforms that opened the country's economy up in 1986.

The defense white paper assesses that the global situation is rapidly evolving toward a multipolar order, and everyone, including the great powers, need to “adjust strategies to prioritize national interests above all values.” The Asia-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia, “continues to be a center for dynamic development and occupies an increasingly important geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geostrategic location.”

But it is also a battleground among the great powers. The white paper specifically names several foreign initiatives, including China's Belt and Road Initiative, the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, and India's Look East policy. Among the destabilizing elements that threaten regional stability, peace, and prosperity are the disputes in the South China Sea, referred to in Vietnam as the East Sea. The 2019 paper, while avoiding, as always, calling out any nation by name, is more explicit than its 2009 counterpart in referring to the challenges that have worsened over the last decade:

“New developments in the East Sea, including unilateral actions, power-based coercion, violation of international law, militarization, change in the status quo, and infringement upon Vietnam's sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction as provided in international law have undermined the interests of nations concerned and threatened peace, stability, security, safety, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the region.”

Vietnam has been at the forefront of challenges from China in the South China Sea, ranging from the threat of militarized artificial islands and Beijing's test deployments of capabilities from those facilities last year to more targeted provocations.

In the past couple of years, Vietnamese economic operations within its claimed exclusive economic zone and continental shelf have been a subject of repetitive challenges from Beijing, resulting in some withdrawal of oil and gas exploration projects, including demanding that the exploration operation with Repsol cease in 2017 and the recent standoff around the Vanguard Bank.

The white paper describes Vietnam as a maritime nation and so says that it pays special attention to the safety and protection of the seas, committing itself to freedom of navigation and overflight, free trade, and peaceful economic activities in accordance with international law.

An important new part of the white paper's language states: "Vietnam does not accept defense cooperation under pressure or any coercive conditions." This explicitly rejects any disadvantageous partnerships and asserts national autonomy in deciding its defense ties and security interests—while leaving itself open to friendly cooperation. The white paper declares Vietnam's willingness to cooperate on border protection, both land and maritime, which includes joint patrols and exchanges—an issue of particular importance given the tensions over the maritime disputes and threats to its sovereignty by China's incursion into Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in July. This position is also an implicit rejection of China's position in the South China Sea, which seeks to frame the disputes as purely bilateral and rejects multilateral arrangements and the involvement of third parties, such as the United States.

In a much more detailed fashion than past defense white papers, the 2019 version refers to the escalating nature of threats in the East Sea as well as Hanoi's position toward them. Hanoi explicitly declared support for innocent passage, congruent with the principle regularly invoked by the United States and its allies to justify freedom of navigation operations, as well as the security and safety of navigation and overflight on the East Sea.

This is one of the strongest forms of support expressed by Vietnam, particularly important given that other Southeast Asian claimants are increasingly reluctant to express such support for the freedom of navigation operations. The white paper calls for taking no actions that would complicate the situation or expand disputes, at the same time avoiding militarization, threat, or use of force. Clearly, Chinese military capacities in the disputed waters are of grave concern to Vietnam.

One especially notable paragraph reads: "Vietnam welcomes vessels of navies, coast guards, border guards, and international organizations to make courtesy or ordinary port visits or stop over in its ports to repair, replenish logistics and technical supplies." This sounds like a direct rejection of some of the propositions that suggest limiting regional actors' joint activities with external powers—something that China suggested be included in a dispute management mechanism between the Chinese and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that is currently under negotiation, the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The white paper reveals Hanoi's increasing divergence from Beijing over how to manage the South China Sea. It conveys Hanoi's perception of critical threats and declares Vietnam's commitment to cooperation with all nations and readiness to expand defense relations, regardless of political differences or economic disparity. It also signals Hanoi's red line—its sovereignty—

and reasserts the country's historical track record of resisting foreign invasion. This is a clear message to potential aggressors and resolutely asserts Vietnam's determination to protect its national sovereignty and economic maritime rights.

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