



Decoding Vietnam's Multilateral Diplomacy

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Abstract

This article explains Vietnam's recent proactive approach to multilateral diplomacy, defined as diplomatic performance in multilateral institutions. It argues that Hanoi's embrace of multilateral diplomacy is best explained through the lens of national interests. Vietnam has consistently placed its foreign policy in the broader dynamics of international politics. Since Ho Chi Minh, the founding father of the nation, started his struggle for the national liberation of Vietnam, multilateral institutions have been perceived as one important direction to raise Vietnam's voice and gather supports from the international community to serve the country's utmost interest of gaining national independence. After the independent state of Vietnam was established, Hanoi continued to pursue multilateral diplomacy to advance Vietnam's national interests of defending the country's security, advancing socio-economic development, and improving its role and stance in the international community. This approach is particularly hailed in recent years as a way to avoid becoming a proxy to big power competition, to mitigate significant security challenges, and to sustain economic development.

Keywords Multilateral diplomacy · National interests · Vietnam foreign policy · UN · ASEAN · APEC

Introduction

At the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in January 2021, multilateral diplomacy was elevated to a new level in Vietnam's overall foreign policy objectives. One of the major duties for Vietnam's foreign policy in the next 5 years as set out in the Political Report of the 13th Congress is to bring multilateral diplomacy in its foreign policy to a new height by proactively participating

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in and promoting Vietnam's role in multilateral mechanisms in the region and the world; proactively contributing to shape multilateral mechanisms; and proactively participating in multilateral defence and security mechanisms to protect the country [1]. This task actually replicates the 2018 Directive 25-CT/TW on promoting multilateral diplomacy in Vietnam's foreign policy until 2030, adopted on 08 August 2018 by the Central Committee's Secretariat of the CPV. Directive 25-CT/TW advocates for a pivotal, leading, or mediating role of Vietnam in international affairs corresponding to the capabilities and interests of Vietnam [2].

The two above-mentioned documents reflect momentous progress in Hanoi's view of multilateral diplomacy. Directive 25 in 2018 was the CPV's first stand-alone political document guiding the strategic shift of Hanoi's multilateral diplomacy. It advocated for a pivotal, leading, reconciling, or mediating role for Vietnam in multilateral organizations and forums of strategic importance for Hanoi. Meanwhile, the Political Report of CPV's 13th National Congress was the first of its kind stating the duty of bringing multilateral diplomacy in to a new height. In comparison, the Political Report of CPV's 12th National Congress set a more moderate target of improving the quality and efficiency of multilateral diplomacy and actively participating in the construction of multilateral mechanisms [3]. Experienced observers of Vietnamese politics know that the Political Report of each CPV's National Congress is among the most important political documents guiding the country's major policies in the following five years. Therefore, the current highlight of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy in these political documents is remarkable.

Hanoi's increasing embrace of multilateral diplomacy in its foreign policy in the period after the 2016 CPV's 12th National Congress represents an interesting phenomenon. During this period, the world has witnessed an alarming widespread of populism, nationalism, unilateralism, and protectionism and the declining role of multilateral mechanisms. EU struggled with the Brexit, NAFTA was abandoned, and TPP was significantly scaled down with the abandonment of the United States.

A closer examination of Vietnam's modern history also reveals a paradox. In the course of struggling for national independence and sovereignty, Hanoi has fought against a number of major powers, including France, Japan, the United States, and China, so realist views have been preponderant in Vietnam's approach to international relations [3]. Meanwhile, realists are not keen on multilateral diplomacy, believing that multilateral institutions are incapable of resolving the natural conflicts of interests between nations and are slow and inefficient [4, 5].

The puzzle in Hanoi's current focus on multilateral diplomacy leads to a question: Why does Vietnam increasingly uphold multilateral diplomacy in the past decade?

Existing literature of Vietnam's foreign policy may shed light on the mindset of Vietnamese leaders and their logics in multilateral diplomacy. Observers of Vietnam's diplomacy have long found that ideology is not the only determining factor in Vietnam's word view, even during the heightened Cold War period [6–10]. Instead, freedom and autonomy has been a key driver in the making of the country's foreign relations. Porter [7] believes that in order to understand the Vietnamese policy-making, it is important to place Vietnam at the centre of the world evolution and examined how Hanoi adapted its policy corresponding to the changes in world politics. He shared the same view with Thayer [10] in highlighting the interplay between

domestic and international factors in Vietnam's policy-making during the war-time and argued that the Vietnamese Government successfully mobilized material and political supports from both inside and outside of the country to win the wars against major powers [11]. In the latter half of 1980s, Hanoi started to shift its world view from struggle against imperialism to international economic integration [8]. Tinh [12] argued that while resembling other states of similar size, Vietnam had a unique history and strategic culture that helped explained Hanoi's being 'principled but realistic, firm but flexible'. This requires a multi-level approach to comprehend.

Concerning Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy, Quy et al. [13] argue that multilateral diplomacy has a long tradition in Vietnam's foreign relations. Multilateral diplomacy has enhanced Vietnam's international stance, contributed to deepen bilateral relations with major partners, opened up resources for development, promoted domestic reform, and built up national security. Trung [14] sees multilateral diplomacy as an instrument for Hanoi to take part in the process of international law making and norms building, strengthen Vietnam's national strengths, boost national position in the world, and maintain a peaceful external environment. Tung [15, 16], on the other hand, takes a constructivist approach, arguing that socialization and the interaction with international norms and values in the course of its international integration have contributed to the change in Vietnam's behaviour and attitude towards multilateral diplomacy.

While these accounts of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy are plausible, they fall short in conceptualizing a fundamental source of Vietnam's strong commitment to multilateral diplomacy. This article argues that Hanoi's long pursuit of multilateral diplomacy is fundamentally influenced by a pragmatic judgement of Vietnam's national interests, which, in a nutshell, comprises three interwoven factors, namely national security, economic development, and national position and influence in international affairs.

The article starts from a conceptualization of Vietnam's national interest. It is followed by an examination of how national interests are perceived in each period of time and how they are advanced by multilateral diplomacy and through multilateral mechanisms. The final section analyses the three case studies of Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy within multilateral frameworks, namely ASEAN, the UN, and APEC.

The Three Dimensions of Vietnam's National Interests: Security, Economic Development, and International Stance

Widely employed in international relations, the term national interest has invited significant scholarly efforts to define it [17–20]. Overall, national interest is a relatively loose concept, denoting different things from different perspectives, states, and time. There are three main perspectives. First, the normative approach sees the value of national interest as a standard for a country to justify its foreign policy, adding that this notion must be inclusive with regard to the nation, exclusive with regard to external groups, and externally relevant when it comes to international environment [18]. Second, the Realist approach associates national interests with the

struggle for power [21, 22]. Third, the enumerative approach emphasizes the objectives as the properties that define national interests [23]. From the perspective of super powers such as the United States, national interests may entail global influence and international security. For smaller states, national interests could primarily be maintaining autonomy and survival.

The concept of national interest was first used in an important political document of the CPV in 1988 when the Politburo issued Resolution 13 ‘On the tasks and foreign policy in the new situation’, stressing stabilizing the domestic situation and fostering economic development [24]. Although this notion was only officially mentioned from 1988, its substance had been seen as key driver in the making of Vietnam’s modern foreign policy since the first days of the country’s independence and even much earlier than that [25, 26].

National interest has not been publicly and thoroughly defined either by the CPV or the Vietnamese Government. Important political documents of the CPV even employ different variants of this notion in different period of time, reflecting the CPV’s evolving perception of this notion. The 3rd meeting of the CPV’s 7th Central Committee in June 1992 referred to national interest as ‘*lợi ích dân tộc*’ (literally the interest of the nation) [27]. By July 2003, the 8th meeting of the CPV’s 9th Central Committee introduced the term ‘*lợi ích cao nhất của Tổ quốc*’ (the highest interest of the Fatherland) [28]. Political Report of the CPV’s 11th National Congress in 2011 referred to national interests five times, of which three were ‘*lợi ích quốc gia*’ (interest of the state) and two were ‘*lợi ích quốc gia, dân tộc*’ (interest of the state and the nation, divided by a comma). This notion was subsequently and consistently termed as ‘*lợi ích quốc gia – dân tộc*’ (interest of the state and the nation, connected by a dash) in CPV’s 12th and 13th National Congresses in 2016 and 2021 respectively. The latest variant with a connecting dash arguably demonstrates the CPV’s view that the interests of the state are those of the nation and they are on par with each other.

According to a high-ranking official of Vietnam, the fundamental properties of national interest of all countries in the world are national unity and independence, territorial integrity, and the people being the owner of the country. In this connection, the fundamental substances of Vietnam’s national interests in this current period of time are national independence, territorial sovereignty and integrity, and protection of the socialist republic regime to build a strong, independent, prosperous, and democratic country with an equitable and civilized society [26].

Veterans of Vietnam’s foreign affairs see national interests as comprising three interwoven factors, namely protecting national security, advancing economic development, and enhancing national position and influence in international affairs [12, 29, 30]. National security is often perceived by Vietnamese leaders in a broad perspective, which include independence and sovereignty, territorial integrity, regime survival, and social stability. The economic development dimension in Vietnam’s national interests currently involves economic growth through different means of industrialization and modernization, acquiring advanced technology and management skills, and also financial and technical assistance. The notion of national position in the international arena from the perspective of Vietnamese policy-makers is more subtle than that in new realist perspective. It is a combination of different

factors including the confidence and trust of other states, political influence, and prestige. While this conception is heavily dependent on economic and military capabilities, it is one side of the combination between ‘*thế và lực*’ (position and strengths) that the Vietnamese strategists and policy-makers uphold [31].

While national security, economic development, and national position in international affairs are stable properties of Vietnam’s national interest, their priority order defines the latter in different period of time. Depending on specific external and internal contexts, a certain element may arise as the driving force in the making of Vietnam’s foreign policy. During the wartime, national independence is the utmost goal of Hanoi’s diplomacy. Serving economic development, however, becomes a credo of foreign policy during the peacetime.

Vietnam’s Multilateral Diplomacy: From Ho Chi Minh to Today

From an international relations perspective, the modern history of Vietnam can be divided into five broad periods. The first period is the struggle for the establishment of an independent Vietnam in 1945. The second period was from 1945 to 1975 when Vietnam had to fight against the France and then the intervention of the United States for independence and reunification. The third period was from 1975 to the end of the Cold War, when a united Vietnam belonged to the socialist bloc and was under political isolation and economic sanctions imposed by the United States and many Western countries. The fourth period was from the early 1990s to 2016, when Hanoi developed and expanded its relations with the majority of countries in the world and major international institutions. The fifth period is from 2016 until now when Vietnam is seen as a rising middle power in the region and is continuing its integration period. In each period, a certain dimension of national interests serves as the key driver for Vietnam’s multilateral diplomacy.

Ho Chi Minh in 1919–1945: The Interest of National Liberation

The late President Ho Chi Minh has long been regarded as the founding father of the CPV and modern Vietnam. His political thoughts continue to influence Vietnam’s politics today as top CPV leaders strongly believe that Ho Chi Minh managed to translate Marxism into action and successfully contextualized this ideology into particular Vietnamese circumstances. Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts have often been quoted by generations of top CPV leaders as a theoretical source guiding Vietnam’s foreign policy.

Ho Chi Minh was always keen on using multilateral mechanisms to serve Vietnam’s national interests, which, in the period after the First World War until 1945, emphasized on national freedom, independence, and sovereignty. He often mentioned freedom for the nation and independence for the country as the utmost goal of his political life [32]. Ho Chi Minh pursued national interests through multilateral mechanism from the early days of his political struggle to liberate the country. After the end of the World War I, the Paris Peace Conference, the most important meeting

between the war winners — including four major powers, namely the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and Italy — was held in France in January 1919 to establish the terms of the post-World War peace and the formation of the League of Nations. Ho Chi Minh understood the vital role of this multilateral gathering to world politics and the future of Vietnam. Using the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, Ho Chi Minh sent a letter to the Secretary of State of the United States, requesting Washington to support the Vietnamese people during the conference. The eight points mentioned in the letter focused on greater political rights for the Vietnamese people and were carefully presented in a way that showed Ho Chi Minh's support for the political values that the Allies, especially the United States and France, upheld [33]. This letter and the destination where it was sent demonstrated not only Ho Chi Minh's belief in defending national interests through multilateral mechanisms, but also his thoughts on the way to achieve the goals within a multilateral framework.

The United States was not keen on Ho Chi Minh's proposal largely because of the given international and Vietnamese context in that period. By the end of the First World War, national liberation was relatively new and most of the current independent countries in Southeast Asia and Africa were still colonies of major powers. In Vietnam, there was no prominent political force challenging the domination of the French, and Nguyen Ai Quoc was then a new name in international politics, having no strong political or military support. Ho Chi Minh's failure to persuade the United States, however, provided a new initiative for him. In order to liberate the country, Vietnam needed to gather support from other colonies worldwide to make multilateral efforts for national liberation.

In 1920, Ho Chi Minh joined the Communist Party of France, where he tried to mobilize people in the colonies around the world. He worked with patriots of French colonies in Latin America and Africa to establish the *Association des indigènes de toutes les colonies* (Association of natives of all colonies) in 1921. The purpose of the establishment of this Association was to connect and organize oppressed people of the colonies to stand up for their liberation [34]. In 1922, he and a number of revolutionaries from colonies established a newspaper entitled *Le Peria* (The Miserable) to make concerted efforts to denounce the policies and acts of persecution and the exploitation of imperialism and French colonialism [35]. In 1925, Ho Chi Minh published the *Proces de la colonisation française* (The case against French colonization) to condemn the brutal colonial policies of France and to speak about the people's movements in the colonies [36]. These efforts contributed to providing information to different nations to understand Vietnam's position and to support Vietnam's path towards independence.

1945–1975: The Interest of National Independence

Quickly after Vietnam formally declared its independence in 1945, Hanoi was faced with the immediate threat of external intervention. Around 200 thousand troops of Chiang Kai-shek from China penetrated the north of Vietnam, supposedly to disarm Japanese troops. At the same time, France was to reinstall its colonial regime in Vietnam, starting by invading the southern part [37–40]. In

that context, the most vital national interest of Vietnam evidently was to protect its newly gained sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. And as history has shown, this utmost goal lasted from 1945 until 1975 when Vietnam was finally united.

In order to achieve this goal of national independence from external threats, the diplomatic front was tasked to seek international recognition of the new Government. Following the tradition established by Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi saw multilateral mechanisms, especially the United Nations, as a proper channel to do so. On 14 January 1946, Hanoi sent a diplomatic note to the UN applying for a UN membership [41]. On 28 February 1946, Ho Chi Minh sent a telegram to US President Truman, citing the principles of the Atlantic and San Francisco Charters and insisting that the United States supports Vietnam's independence [42]. Totally, within 2 years since its independence, Hanoi sent nine of diplomatic notes and letters applying for UN membership and urging major powers to abide by the principles of the UN and other multilateral agreements concerning the situation in the Indochina peninsular [40, 43]. As UN membership was not feasible, Hanoi sought to be included in different bodies of the UN. Ho Chi Minh demanded that the Vietnam issue be included in the agenda of the Far East Advisory Commission of the UN and a delegation from Vietnam be allowed to attend and speak about the Government's position [44]. In March 1949, Hanoi also sent a delegation to attend a meeting of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok in March 1949 [45].

Vietnam's initial attempts to join the UN did not succeed at that time, mainly because of the particular international context after the Second World War. However, Ho Chi Minh's keenness on using the UN and other multilateral mechanisms to serve Vietnam's utmost interests of liberating the country and gaining the recognition of the international community provided a strong political foundation and guidance for Hanoi in other institutions and in the later periods of Vietnam's history.

Apart from approaching the UN system, Vietnam also looked at other multilateral platforms to expand its reach to major partners and seek recognition. It sent delegations to a number of events, such as the Southeast Asian Youth Conference in India in February 1948 and the Asian Australian Trade Union Conference in Beijing in November 1949 [46–48]. These attempts brought about significant results as the Soviet Union gradually showed its positive attitude towards Vietnam [47]. From 1950, Vietnam was progressively recognized by socialist countries and became a member of the socialist bloc.

Vietnam's armed struggle against the French and then the United States for independence and unity from 1946 until 1973, and the predominance of the Cold War at the global level were key drivers influencing Vietnam's approach to multilateral diplomacy in that period. Hanoi's participation in multilateral mechanisms was manifested mainly in the socialist bloc and with newly independent, underdeveloped countries. By 1962, Vietnam had joined 40 international institutions, compared with 21 in 1957. Among the 40 institutions, nine were of socialist countries, seven were of Afro-Asian countries and 24 were the general institutions and mechanisms struggling for peace [13]. They were an important part of Vietnam's strategy to gain political support and advance its narrative of being a peaceful nation fighting for self-determination and independence. In particular, Hanoi attached importance to

the socialist bloc in seeking political, military, and economic supports for its struggle for independence.

Apart from the socialist bloc, Hanoi continued the tradition set by Ho Chi Minh to work with many nations in the world to struggle for self-determination and sovereignty. Hanoi joined the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the first large-scale Afro-Asia Conference. It was also a founding member of the G77 group in 1964 and the Francophone in 1970 and joined the non-aligned movement from 1972. Most members of these multilateral mechanisms were newly independent and underdeveloped countries and they linked together to gain higher leverage in opposing colonialism and neo-colonialism at the global level.

From August 1964, US military forces directly intervened in Vietnam. Hanoi sought multilateral support from the international community for its national defence. In November that year, it organized a big international conference themed ‘Staying united with the Vietnamese People to fight against the invasion of the United States and preserve peace’. The event attracted 64 delegations from 52 countries and 12 international organizations and Ho Chi Minh asserted in his speech that this historic event showed the unity of the international community against imperialism [49]. This effort further reflects Hanoi’s view of multilateral mechanisms as one important diplomatic instrument for national defence and a crucial platform to attract the attention and seek greater support of the international community for Vietnam’s path towards independence.

1975–1990: The Interest of Reconstruction and International Recognition

After Vietnam’s unification in 1975, Hanoi faced with severe economic difficulties, amplified by the tightened sanctions from the United States and its allies. In the first years after unification, the utmost national interests of Vietnam were to reconstruct its war-shattered economy and improve people’s living standard. From 1977, small-scale armed conflicts started in the southwestern border of Vietnam as the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia frequently intruded into Vietnam’s territory. In 1979, the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict exploded, leading to protracted border clashes in the following decade. Gradually, Hanoi had to pay more attention to defend territorial sovereignty as tensions along its land borders in the north and southwestern parts intensified. The 4th CPV’s National Congress in 1976 laid out two priorities, namely (i) ensuring economic recovery and modernization and (ii) defending of territorial integrity and national security [50].

These priorities served as national interests guiding Hanoi’s foreign policy in the first years after national unification. Its foreign relations objectives were to expand its reach to gain international financial aids and at the same time gather support for national defence against external threats from the Khmer Rouge and China, which became increasingly imminent from 1977. In multilateral mechanisms, Hanoi attempted to advance traditional relations with the socialist bloc and to replace South Vietnam in mechanisms where the latter had membership. Two main developments in this period concerning Vietnam’s multilateral diplomacy were becoming a member of the UN in September 1977 and joining the Council of Mutual Economic

Assistance of the Socialist Bloc (Comecon) in 1978. As previously discussed, an UN membership had long been sought by Hanoi but it only managed to do so in 1977. Meanwhile, joining Comecon was another major step in Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy. Hanoi saw the Comecon as one keystone in its foreign relations in this period. Two major goals for Vietnam to join this grouping were to seek support to defend its national security from a looming threat from China and to get economic support for its post-war economic recovery and social development. This argument was confirmed by the then Deputy Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi, a Politburo member of the 3rd and 4th CPV National Congress when he explained the reason Vietnam joined Comecon [51]. Upon joining the Comecon, Hanoi requested Comecon to support economic reconstruction, including beginning work on seven industrial projects; speeding up mechanization of the agricultural sector in the northern delta; enlarging the railroad connecting Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City; assisting in construction and providing materials to complete 49 industrial projects that the Chinese had cut off aid; and providing raw materials and goods that Vietnam previously imported from China [51]. The Political Report of the 5th National Congress of the CPV also said Vietnam should 'make good use of the assistance of the Soviet Union and other countries in the Comecon', seeing this assistance as a fundamental factor to realize its goal of industrializing the country [52]. In this period, the CPV also reached out to the Non-alignment movement, seeing it as an arena for Vietnam to contribute to the building of a new international economic order [52].

1990–2016: The Interest of Regime Survival and Economic Development

The end of the Cold War was marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the socialist bloc, the main supporters of Vietnam in the previous decades. In Vietnam, over a decade after the unification, its national economy still faced serious problems. The grave challenges from both the external environment and internal economic situation put the CPV's leadership and regime's survival at risk. Two positive developments after the Cold War for Vietnam were that the Cambodia issue was resolved and Sino-Vietnamese border clashes were eliminated. Against this context, ensuring regime survival and promoting economic development were the key interests of Vietnam in its foreign policy.

Doi Moi (Renovation) paved the way for Vietnam to participate in a number of important multilateral mechanisms, previously seen by the CPV as pro-Western countries. The foreign policy guidance in the political document of the 6th National Congress of the CPV in 1986 says, *inter alia*, that Vietnam expands its relations with international organizations. This broadened Hanoi's approach to multilateral mechanisms outside of the socialist bloc. Vietnam's view of multilateral diplomacy was further developed at the CPV's 7th National Congress in 1991 as multilateral mechanisms were for the first time specifically referred to as one goal of foreign policy. The Political Report of the CPV's National Congress stated that Vietnam would 'contribute to gradually make the United Nations effectively serve the human goals of peace, friendship, cooperation and development' and would 'cooperate with international monetary and financial institutions as well as specialized organizations

of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations' [52]. To further promote its multilateral diplomacy, the 2nd meeting in 1991 of the 7th CPV's Central Committee laid out the task of making a breakthrough in Vietnam's relations with major financial and monetary institutions [52]. This effort was to attract more financial aids and investment and promote foreign trade to sustain Vietnam's economic growth.

This guidance facilitated Vietnam's active approach to regional multilateral mechanisms, leading to a booming period in Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy. In 1992, Vietnam took an important step towards ASEAN membership as it acceded to ASEAN's 1972 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and became an observer at ASEAN's Foreign Ministerial Meeting mechanism. Hanoi became a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, and it finally became a formal member of ASEAN in 1995. Joining ASEAN opened further opportunities and gave more confidence for Vietnam to gain membership in many regional and international multilateral institutions, including the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007.

Together with expanding its membership in multilateral institutions, Hanoi has also increased its role in these mechanisms. In the UN system, Vietnam first became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2008–2009, and a member of a number of UN bodies, such as the Human Rights Council in 2014–2016 and Executive Boards of UNESCO and ECOSOC in 2015–2019. Vietnam was also nominated as Chair of the Board of Governors of IAEA in 2013–2014.

2016–2021: Expanding Vietnam's National Interests in the New Context

The CPV's 12th National Congress in 2016 marked a new height in Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy. For the first time, the Political Report of a CPV National Congress referred to multilateral diplomacy as a strategy rather than a diplomatic instrument. The Political Report asserted the need for 'improving the quality and efficiency of multilateral diplomacy' and Vietnam's 'active participation and higher role in multilateral mechanisms, especially within ASEAN and the UN frameworks' [3].

Hanoi's increasing embrace of multilateral diplomacy was consolidated in the Directive 25-CT/TW of the CPV's Central Committee in 2018 on promoting and enhancing multilateral diplomacy in Vietnam's foreign policy until 2030. This is the first stand-alone political document of the CPV concerning multilateral diplomacy and it distinguishes itself from the CPV's previous guidance on multilateral diplomacy by promoting a proactive role of Vietnam as a mediator in international affairs [14]. This is a leap in Vietnam's strategy towards multilateral diplomacy, redefining Hanoi from simply accepting existing rules to contributing to construct international institutions.

By January 2021, the CPV cemented its support for multilateral diplomacy at its 13th National Congress. The Political Report of the Congress assigned foreign policy objectives in this regard as bringing multilateral foreign relations to a new height: proactively participating in and promoting the role of Vietnam in multilateral institutions, especially ASEAN, the UN, APEC, Mekong Subregion cooperation, and other regional and international mechanisms; and proactively

participating in multilateral frameworks on security and defence to protect national security and sovereignty. The Political Report also noted that Vietnam should only be proactive in multilateral mechanisms of strategic interests in accordance with the country's needs and capabilities [1].

In the reality, Hanoi has successfully hosted major multilateral events since 2016, such as APEC Summit in 2017 and WEF ASEAN in 2018. In 2019, it also actively participated in different multilateral mechanisms, such as the Belt and Road Summit in China in April, G-20 meeting in Japan in June, and the 40th AIPA in August.

Hanoi's endorsement of more proactive multilateral diplomacy since 2016 is best explained as serving national interests in the new context. By the time of the CPV's 12th National Congress, Vietnam had acquired new and significant strengths and at the same time was faced with new challenges for security protection and economic development. Domestically, sustained high economic growth over three decades following the Doi Moi in 1986 has resulted in Vietnam gaining considerable comprehensive strengths, qualifying as a middle power country in Asia [53]. This new position allowed Hanoi to pursue a broader agenda in international affairs. On the other hand, this position also means a certain reduction of financial assistance and a higher level of expectation of its contribution to the international community. At the same time, Hanoi encountered severe security challenges [54]. Its sovereignty in the Paracels and Spratlys and sovereign rights in different bodies of water in the South China Sea were challenged with China becoming increasingly assertive in this region in the past decade [55]. Vietnam also confronted non-traditional security issues in the Mekong Delta and a number of socio-political issues that challenges overall national security. Internationally, the increasing Sino-US confrontation since the Trump Presidency of the United States in 2016 put Hanoi at risk of being dragged into major power rivalry.

Against this backdrop, Hanoi believes that pursuing proactive multilateral diplomacy would benefit its national interests. On the security front, Hanoi strongly supports the rule of law and rules-based order to counter China's unilateralism and illegal actions that challenge Vietnam's security and sovereignty in the South China Sea. For Vietnam, the best way to avoid being trapped in Sino-US strategic competition is to adhere to the principles and gather support from smaller states in multilateral mechanisms. In the past decade, Hanoi often referred to the UNCLOS 1982 and other international laws and promoted the role of ASEAN and other multilateral mechanisms in managing disputes in the South China Sea. On economic issues, to sustain its growth rate through more equal-footing economic cooperation and to restructure the economy in the new context, Vietnam actively negotiated to join multilateral agreements, such as CPTPP, EVFTA, and RCEP, to attract more foreign investment and expand markets for Vietnamese products. Its eagerness to contribute to the building of rules and norms and its readiness to play a greater role within multilateral frameworks reflects Hanoi's ambition to advance its position in international affairs, which, in turn, will support Hanoi's efforts to enhance national security and economic development.

Vietnam in ASEAN, the UN, and APEC

The Political Report of the CPV's 13th National Congress in 2021 specifically named ASEAN, the UN, and APEC in the first place in the list of multilateral institutions where Vietnam should play a more active and greater role. This section will elaborate on Hanoi's view and approach in these institutions to shed more light on how they serve Vietnam's national interests.

Vietnam in ASEAN: From International Recognition to National Security

ASEAN was a crucial regional multilateral framework that Vietnam decided to join after the end of the Cold War. Hanoi's accession to this grouping in 1995 was mainly driven by its pragmatic calculations of national interests, although the decision to become an ASEAN member did not automatically receive overwhelming domestic support among CPV's top leaders in the first place [15, 16].

Vietnam was left stranded by the end of the Cold War. Its economy, shattered by a long period of wars, performed poorly in the late 1970s and 1980s. Politically, although Hanoi completed its withdrawal from Cambodia, Vietnam's relations with the ASEAN-6 countries were characterized by the lack of confidence. Adding to that, Hanoi was faced with sanctions from the United States and its allies, and its relations with China were still hostile after years of armed conflict both on land and at sea. At global level, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc threatened the survival of communist-led countries around the world, including Vietnam.

The top national security concerns of Vietnam in the post-Cold War context, therefore, were regime survival, self-determination, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Hanoi, therefore, looked to Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN as potential partners to diversify its foreign relations, increase its international recognition, gain leverage in relations with China, and overcome political isolation from the West [56]. This is because Southeast Asian countries are Vietnam's neighbours, posing no significant threat to Vietnam's sovereignty, and — to a certain extent — share similar concerns with Vietnam in dealing with major powers, most notably China. Vietnam's membership in ASEAN also gave Hanoi better leverage and more opportunities to improve its relations with the United States, EU, and other developed countries.

As a member of ASEAN, Vietnam is a signatory of important agreements, such as ASEAN's 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the 2002 Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea between ASEAN countries and China. It is also a part of ASEAN's extra-regional cooperation frameworks, such as ARF, ASEAN+, East Asia Summit, and ASEM, and currently joins with other ASEAN countries to negotiate with China a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. These mechanisms give Vietnam important channels to protect its security and interests and improve its leverage in relations with major powers. In particular cases, ASEAN serves as a stage for Hanoi to raise its concerns and gather support to protect national security. For example, in the 2014 oil rig crisis, when China illegally deployed the giant rig CNOOC981 inside Vietnam's EEZ and continental shelf,

Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung condemned China's unilateral action that violated Vietnam's sovereign rights and called for ASEAN's support. Similarly, when China sent a survey ship to illegally operate inside Vietnam's EEZ in July 2019, Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh used the 52nd ASEAN Foreign Minister Meeting to denounce China's escalating moves and violation of international law in the South China Sea, and he briefed the incident in details and requested China to withdraw its ships from Vietnamese waters. These pressures within the ASEAN framework assisted Hanoi's overall movement to push back China's violation of Vietnam's interests in the South China Sea.

From an economic perspective, ASEAN membership in 1995 encouraged confidence of foreign investors and allowed Hanoi to access wider markets, an important factor in a market-driven economy envisioned by the Doi Moi process. Vietnam later enjoyed the benefits of being a member of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and ASEAN's FTA with different partners, including ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2008, ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA in 2009, China-ASEAN FTA, ASEAN-Korea, and ASEAN-India FTA in 2010, and RCEP in 2020.

Hanoi gradually recognized the importance of ASEAN in its foreign relations and therefore paid greater attention to this grouping. The Political Report of the CPV's 8th National Congress in 1996, 1 year after Vietnam joined ASEAN, referred to ASEAN in vague terms as 'strengthening relations with ASEAN countries' without mentioning to the ASEAN as a group. In the CPV's 11th National Congress in 2011, the CPV expressed its determination to proactively, actively, and responsibly build a strong ASEAN Community. That was the first time ASEAN was referred to as a group. A decade later, ASEAN was referred to as being in the first place in Hanoi's multilateral diplomacy in the Political Report of the latest CPV's National Congress in 2021. This evolution reflects Vietnam's consistency in seeing the significant role of ASEAN in Vietnam's national interests.

Vietnam in the UN: National Recognition, Economic Benefits, and Enhancement of National Position and Security

As previously discussed, Vietnam's interest in joining the UN dates back to the early days of the newly independent state of Vietnam. Its sheer objective was to seek international recognition of the Vietnamese Government, which meant an acceptance of Vietnam's independence and sovereignty. However, Hanoi only managed to obtain a UN membership in 1977, becoming the 149th member of this largest international organization.

Having a membership of the UN allowed Vietnam to assert its position and expand its relations with other countries, given Vietnam was under sanctions from the United States and its allies. Equally important, economic assistance to rehabilitate the country's war-devastated economy was another critical target for Hanoi. When Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh led the first Vietnamese delegation to attend the 32nd meeting of the UN General Assembly in 1977, he was tasked

to gather support from the international community for the national construction of Vietnam [13].

In reality, Hanoi's efforts were paid off with a resolution on the assistance for the reconstruction of Vietnam, which expressed 'profound admiration to the courageous Vietnamese people in their struggle for independence and national reunification', recommended that Vietnam be included in the list of most seriously affected countries, and appealed to other countries and international institutions to help Vietnam in its reconstruction efforts with full respect for national sovereignty [59: Resolution A/RES/32/3]. Following this move, major UN bodies, such as the UNDP, WFP, UNICEF, and WHO, have contributed to assist Vietnam totally over 500 million dollars through a variety of socio-economic programs. By the end of 1980s, financial aid from the UN bodies accounted for roughly 60% of the total amount that Vietnam received from outside the Socialist bloc [57]. In the decade after the end of the Cold War, the UN continued to be a major financial donor of Vietnam, despite the fact that many countries and other international organizations started to provide aid to Vietnam. The UN then gradually switched its assistance for Vietnam to other areas, such as renovating the legal system, enhancing the quality of policy decision-making processes, restructuring the economy, and human resource development.

Vietnam bid for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC in 2008–2009 and 2020–2021, given that this position would require a greater exposure to the wider geopolitical conflicts — something Hanoi may feel reluctant — and reflects its broader perception and commitment to exert more substantial role in international security. A proactive performance would increase Vietnam's position and prestige of a responsible member in the UN. In turn, a greater influence in the UN naturally serves Hanoi's practical security and foreign policy purposes.

Vietnam's active contribution to the UN is demonstrated not only in its non-permanent seat in the UNSC. Since 2014, Hanoi has contributed to the UN peacekeeping operation by sending personnel to missions in South Sudan and the Central African Republic. In 2018, it first deployed a level-2 field hospital to South Sudan. Since then, it has made increasing contribution to the peacekeeping cooperation [58, 59]. Besides, Hanoi has skilfully used different mechanisms within the UN framework to defend its security and sovereignty. One area that Vietnam boldly employed UN mechanisms to protect its security is maritime disputes in the South China Sea, where China's assertiveness and unilateral actions have heightened tensions in the region, directly affecting Vietnam's national security and economic development [55]. During the 2014 oil-rig incident, Hanoi sent a letter to the UN Secretary General, requesting an official circulation of its protest as an official document of the 68th session of the General Assembly. In 2020 only, Hanoi also sent a number of diplomatic notes to different bodies of the UN to assert its position in the South China Sea [60].

APEC: From Economic Benefits to National Stance

Vietnam officially became an APEC member on 14 November 1998, making another milestone in its approach to multilateral mechanisms. APEC, comprising

regional states, including major powers, namely the United States, China, and Japan, is the leading economic cooperation mechanism in the Asia–Pacific. Hanoi’s top goal in joining this mechanism was to attract more investment, trade, and other economic activities to further develop its economy. Undoubtedly, enhanced economic cooperation would naturally foster political and security relations with other countries. An outstanding feature of APEC is that it provides important support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to expand their operation overseas through a number of practical measures, such as providing a favourable trade and investment environment, facilitating international travel of businessmen, and supporting them in approaching high technologies and management. This is important for Vietnam, given SMEs account for 98% of the country’s total registered businesses and roughly 40% of its GDP [61].

Hanoi’s assessment of its achievements in APEC has further justified the argument that Vietnam’s accession to this mechanism was mainly driven first by economic benefits and the country’s overall relations with important partners. In an editorial in *Nhan Dan Online*, the mouthpiece of the CPV, on the occasion of Vietnam’s 20 years of APEC membership, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh noted that APEC members account for 75% of Vietnam’s export turnover, 78% of total direct investment coming to Vietnam, and 79% of international tourists in Vietnam. Adding to that, 14 out of 16 FTAs that Vietnam has signed or is negotiating, concern APEC members. He also added that APEC membership has significantly enhanced Hanoi’s position in the international arena, strengthened its bilateral ties with major partners, and pushed domestic reforms [62]. Currently, this grouping is home of two out of three comprehensive strategic partners, eight out of 14 strategic partners, and four out of 13 comprehensive partners of Vietnam.

APEC also bolsters Vietnam’s economic development in terms of development model reform. This grouping has agreed to emphasize on physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity between member states. Its action plan on inclusive economic development and support of sustainable economic growth, economic structure reform, and assistance for small and super small enterprises are of Vietnam’s particular interests.

Economic benefits of joining APEC are often quantifiable and attract public’s attention. However, Vietnam also pays attention to the benefits of APEC in terms of its international position and national security. A closer look at the 2017 APEC Summit when it was hosted in Vietnam may shed light on how Hanoi cautiously and strategically took advantage of this opportunity. It intentionally put aside the South China Sea issues, Hanoi’s top security concern, in a series of high-level meetings of the Summit to create a favourable environment for fostering economic cooperation. On this occasion, Vietnam also hosted official visits of both Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump. These events show the consistency in Hanoi’s balanced and diversified relations with major powers. The success of the 2017 APEC Summit gives credit for Hanoi’s capacity to host major events. It, therefore, was an important factor for Vietnam to be selected as the host for the 2nd US–DPRK Summit in 2019.

Conclusion

Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy may be best explained in terms of its national interests. Since the establishment of the country in 1945, multilateral diplomacy has been seen as a foreign policy instrument to fulfil its overall national interests. The notion of national interests comprises protecting national security and sovereignty, fostering economic development, and enhancing its national position in the international arena. Subject to specific circumstances and organizations, some components may emerge more prominently than others in shaping its national interests.

Hanoi believes that Vietnam's legitimate national interests can be achieved within multilateral frameworks because multilateral institutions serve as good arenas for smaller states to raise gather international support and to have better leverage in dealing with more powerful states in security issues. In terms of economic cooperation, deepening cooperation in multilateral mechanisms provides opportunities to expand trade and investment and at the same time foster domestic reforms.

Hanoi's recent enhanced determination to expand its efforts and role in multilateral mechanisms largely reflects the evolution of Vietnam's national interests to cope with the changes in the international environment and Vietnam's newly acquired position in the international community. Vietnam's greater contribution to foster international security and to strengthen international rules and regulations indicate a far-reaching and strategic pick to protect its national interests.

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