

## Domestic and Foreign Policy in Vietnam

### *The Future of Vietnamese Civil Society*

An Interview with Carlyle Thayer

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The government of Vietnam continues to monitor and repress non-registered ethnic-religious groups. While the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has made some changes in response to international attention, individuals continue to be imprisoned or detailed for reasons related to peaceful religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. Given the recent wave of persecution targeting ethnic minorities and indigenous communities, the *Journal* has invited Carlyle Thayer, Emeritus Professor at the Australian Defense Force Academy, University of New South Wales, Canberra and Director of Thayer Consultancy, to explain Vietnamese domestic politics and foreign policy.

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### Vietnam and Academic Interests

**Journal:** You first went to Vietnam in 1967 with the International Voluntary Service during the Vietnam War. What was it like? How has the experience shaped your professional interest since then? What has kept you interested in the region for so long?

**Thayer:** My intense interest in Vietnam pre-dated my employment with the International Voluntary Services (IVS). During my undergraduate years at Brown (1963-67) the Vietnam War was an existential fact of life. I majored in political science and took a course on Southeast Asia that set my academic orientation for life. During my senior year, I enrolled in an independent study project and wrote a thesis on the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (commonly referred to as the Viet Cong).

When I first arrived in South Vietnam in 1967, I spent three months in Saigon studying Vietnamese and practiced teaching at the School of the Holy Spirit, a Catholic girls' school. Saigon was a bustling city with streets crammed with Honda Vespa motorbikes and military vehicles. Armed soldiers guarded government office buildings, and military buses had screens over their windows to ward off any grenade attacks.

Otherwise, there was no sign the country was at war. At night, you could see artillery flashes in the distance from the rooftop of the Caravelle Hotel.

After my orientation, I was asked to open a new IVS Station in An Loc, the provincial capital of Binh Long province. Binh Long was dissected by Route 13 that went from Saigon to the Cambodian border. I taught English as a second language at the local high school to classes overflowing with students. I returned to Saigon in January 1968 for the extended Lunar New Year (Tet) holidays. I stayed at the IVS compound outside the central business district near Tan Son Nhat Airport. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, the communists launched the Tet Offensive and Tan Son Nhat was shelled by rockets. All of us at the IVS compound were evacuated to a billet in the center of town where there was sporadic gunfire.

When things settled down, I returned to the IVS compound and assisted in resettling Vietnamese displaced by the fighting. In May 1968, the communists launched another offensive. It soon became clear that the educational system was dysfunctional. IVS offered to assist volunteers in finding another job and I wound up teaching in Botswana with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

I never lost my interest in Vietnam. After a year in Africa, I won a U.S. National Defense Foreign Language Scholarship to study Vietnamese at Yale in its M.A. program in Southeast Asian Studies. In November 1971, I took up a Ph.D. scholarship in international relations at the Australian National University in Canberra. I wrote my dissertation on "The Origins of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, 1954-60." This was a study of communist decision-making employing three levels of analysis. It was published as *War By Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Vietnam*.

My move to Australia was fortuitous. In December 1972, the Australian Labor Party came to power. After the Paris Peace Agreements were signed in January 1973, the Labor Government treated South and North Vietnam equally. This opened opportunities for me to meet visiting delegations and students on scholarships studying in Canberra. After reunification, Vietnam established an Embassy in Canberra and I soon made contact with diplomats. In August 1981, I was invited to Hanoi to meet the Foreign Minister and the heads of a range of research institutes. I have returned almost annually ever since.

**Journal:** In February of this year, the U.S.-North Korea summit was held in Vietnam. What do you think is the role of Vietnam and of the region in denuclearization and nuclear nonproliferation? What do you think is the significance of the summit being held in Vietnam?

**Thayer:** A decade before the second Trump-Kim summit, Vietnam quietly hosted talks between Japan and North Korea on the family reunion issue. On various occasions, Vietnam has hosted delegations from North Korea interested in studying Vietnam's reform program or renovation (*doi moi*).

Vietnam has always supported nuclear nonproliferation and United Nations sanctions on North Korea while at the same time urging dialogue between the United States and North Korea. Vietnam was delighted to be asked to host the second summit because this would showcase to the world Vietnam's remarkable economic development and constructive foreign policy. While many observers pointed to the obvious symbolic significance of Vietnam hosting the summit – Vietnam had fought a war with the United States and later achieved reconciliation with them – the real significance of the summit was international recognition of Vietnam's constructive role in regional security as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN-related institutions.

Next year, Vietnam will become ASEAN Chair and the following year is highly likely to be elected a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. In sum, Vietnam will have a continuing diplomatic role in encouraging North Korea and the U.S. to continue their dialogue as well as share its experiences in reform and opening up with Pyongyang.

**Journal:** How would you describe the Sino-Vietnamese relationship and its place within the broader U.S.-China dynamic? As a mid-sized power, what do you think is Vietnam's best strategy for navigating contentious great power dynamics to maximize and advance its own interests?

**Thayer:** Vietnam has a declaratory policy of “diversifying and multilateralizing” its foreign relations and being a “reliable partner and friend to all.” Vietnam seeks to maintain an equilibrium in its relations with the major powers by offering each equity in Vietnam's development, such as trade, investment, and aid. In return, Vietnam offers to play a constructive and independent role in regional affairs. In other words, each major power is given an economic stake in Vietnam to counter-balance adversaries. Vietnam promises to maintain strategic autonomy by not aligning with any major power.

In 2003, Vietnam adopted a policy of “cooperating and struggling” in its relations with major powers. Vietnam will cooperate when its interests converge with another major power, and Vietnam will struggle against a major power when it threatens Vietnam's interests. It wants to avoid having to pick sides. It wants to convince each major power that it must support Vietnam or otherwise Vietnam might be forced into the orbit of a rival. Vietnam seeks to gain leverage off Sino-American tensions. One senior Vietnamese diplomat summed up this policy as the Goldilocks formula “not too hot (close), not too cold (confrontation), but just right.”

Vietnam has also developed a wide network of strategic partnerships with middle powers and regional states. Its strategy of “active, proactive international integration” keeps Vietnam participating in a web of multilateral institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum, and the East Asia Summit. Government leaders have their eyes wide open to ASEAN's deficiencies but believe strongly in multilateral diplomacy based on the legacy of their long struggle against

French colonialism and U.S. intervention. Maintaining this strategy will help Vietnam advance its interests internationally.

**Journal:** What do you think is Vietnam's most pressing geopolitical or foreign policy challenge? How do you think Vietnam should address China's influence in the South China Sea?

**Thayer:** Vietnam's most pressing geopolitical challenge is to avoid Chinese domination over Southeast Asia and its maritime heart, the South China Sea. Vietnam should build on its current program of force modernization by improving interoperability and networking among its Army, Navy, and Air Force. Vietnam should become even more active within ASEAN and ASEAN's Defense Ministers' Meeting to promote regional military interoperability. Vietnam should make clear that the legal option of using the compulsory dispute settlement mechanism in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is still on the table. Vietnam should overcome its reticence about engaging in military exercises with the United States, Japan, and other powers to increase its capacity to provide maritime security in the South China Sea.

### **Vietnam's Domestic Politics and Society**

**Journal:** The Vietnamese public views China's increased assertiveness negatively. However, the current President Nguyen Phu Trong and those closest to him in the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) are known to be more lenient with the People's Republic of China (PRC) than others in the party, for example former Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung. How much does public sentiment or discontent factor into the rhetoric and decision-making of the CPV?

**Thayer:** Vietnam shares a land and sea border with China. In population and economic terms, it ranks as a middle-sized Chinese province. The relationship is highly asymmetric. No one in Vietnam's leadership is necessarily "pro-China." Leaders differ over how to manage bilateral relations, how to stand up to China when Beijing's behavior affects Vietnamese interests, and how close to lean towards other major powers without arousing China's ire or undermining Vietnam's independence and autonomy.

Public opinion is now playing an increasing role on foreign policy decision-making in Vietnam. The first public anti-China demonstrations took place in 2007 and grew in intensity the following year over Chinese bauxite mining in Vietnam. A major turning point was reached in 2014 when China parked a mega-oil drilling rig in Vietnamese waters. The ensuing confrontation at sea witnessed the ramming of Vietnamese Coast Guard ships and the use of high-pressure water cannons. These actions provoked violent anti-China demonstrations across the country. Party leaders were assailed by a major petition from retired officials to "exit China's orbit" and to turn to the United States. It was clear that party leadership was divided when then Prime Minister Dung suggested possible legal action. China diffused the situation by removing the mega-oil rig.

In 2016, the divide in leadership approaches seemed to end when Dung lost his bid to become party leader at the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPV. Nguyen Phu Trong emerged as the first among equals in the nineteen-member Politburo. He restored collective leadership his powers were then enhanced with the loss of two Politburo members, Dinh The Huynh and Dinh La Thang, due to ill health and dismissal for mismanagement, respectively. In October 2018, in an unprecedented development, Trong concurrently assumed the presidency when Tran Dai Quang passed away.

Secretary General Trong faced a major challenge in 2017 and 2018, when China pressured Vietnam to halt oil exploration by Repsol of Spain in waters near Vanguard Bank in the South China Sea. Vietnam complied and halted oil exploration in the area. Expecting public backlash and in an effort to prevent public protests, Vietnam's one-party state imposed a complete news blackout. In March 2019, Tran Duc Anh Son, a historian on the South China Sea, was even expelled from the CPV for posting on Facebook a criticism of the government's inaction.

**Journal:** What methods have the CPV used to maintain party control? Do you believe that the CPV operates similarly to other authoritarian governments? Are there ways in which it operates differently from other authoritarian regimes?

**Thayer:** Vietnam's present-day Ministry of Public Security received training and support from the East German Stasi in its early days. Vietnam's security authorities also maintained fraternal ties with their counterparts in the Soviet Union and the PRC. Historically, Vietnam modeled itself on these communist states. Vietnam, however, has had to adjust to changes in society as a result of its domestic reforms and opening up.

The CPV has maintained power through a combination of institutional methods and repression. Vietnam is a one-party state that may be broadly characterized as a mono-organizational socialist state. That is, the party maintains dominance over the government, the legislature, the military, and mass organizations under the umbrella of the Vietnam Fatherland Front through a parallel system of party committees. The Fatherland Front comprises mass organizations for women, peasants, and workers as well as other authorized people's organizations.

The party pursues a mantra of "three no's" – no political opposition, no political pluralism, and no multi-party system. Unlike other authoritarian systems, Vietnam today is a soft-authoritarian state that permits a certain degree of freedom of expression with red lines. For example, those who make common cause with political activists abroad to promote democracy, religious freedom, and human rights are arrested, given perfunctory trials, and imprisoned.

**Journal:** Are there anti-CPV domestic movements that have civil support? If so, who are these groups and what attracts segments of the population to them? What methods does the CPV employ in order to make sure public political outrage does not foment into disorder?

**Thayer:** In 2006, when Vietnam hosted the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, a comparatively broad-based anti-government movement emerged known as Block 8406, named after its founding date April 8, 2006. It was heavily repressed after the summit.

In 2009, when the government announced plans to issue leases to Chinese companies for bauxite mining in the Central Highlands, a widespread protest movement broke out. Initially it was fueled by environmentalists and later joined by retired party cadres, government officials, and military officers, deputies in the National Assembly, and Catholic and Buddhist activists. No less than the legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap, who defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, came out in support on national security grounds. The protests were diffused when the National Assembly was charged with reviewing the matter.

Since that time, there have been a number of quite smaller groups that emerged to challenge the one-party state but there is no discernable evidence that they have widespread support from society at large. These groups included Catholic activists demanding the return of confiscated church land and property, human rights activists, and journalists. Generally, Vietnam's high rate of economic growth coupled with a growing private sector, tolerance of public expression that does not challenge one-party rule, widespread internet penetration, and a more proactive National Assembly, have served to dissipate pressures from below on the CPV.

In 2018, when the National Assembly simultaneously considered two laws, one law on cyber security and the other on Special Economic Zones (SEZ), widespread national protests erupted. The protestors mainly feared that China would dominate the SEZs and undermine national security; there were also protests that the Law on Cyber Security would undermine media expression. In one instance, the protests turned violent and government offices were burned to the ground. The government responded by passing the Law on Cyber Security and postponing the Law on SEZs. This law is scheduled to be re-introduced this year.

**Journal:** In response to the mass protests you have mentioned, has the CPV implemented systematic methods of adaptation to more efficiently manage and respond to public opinion?

**Thayer:** Vietnam's one-party state has been continually adapting to changes in society since renovation was initiated in 1986. In 1992, Vietnam adopted a new Constitution and Electoral Law that mandated that during an election each constituency must be contested by more than one candidate. Although the procedures for candidate selection are stringent, elections have produced some independent-minded deputies. Sessions of the National Assembly are broadcast on national television including the interruption of ministers by deputies. National Assembly deputies hold regular meetings with their constituents to discuss issues of concern. Government ministers occasionally hold live sessions with the public on the internet and respond to questions.

In addition, National Assembly deputies regularly participate in a “vote of confidence” on the performance of about fifty high-level government officials. Deputies are asked to express high confidence, confidence, or low confidence on each minister or equivalent. The results are broadcast on television and in the press. Members of the Central Committee conduct a similar “vote of confidence” in their top leaders which is not made public.

In the lead up to quinquennial national party congresses, key policy documents are issued in the press and the public is called upon to comment on them. This process of public consultation is paralleled by focus group discussions by specialists on particular issues.

Vietnam has a formal system whereby “letters of denunciation” can be submitted to investigate complaints by the public. Vietnam also tolerates – to a certain extent – petitions and open letters penned by retired party cadres, government officials, and the military on topical issues, such as bauxite mining, China’s actions in the South China Sea, and the massive poisoning of fish in 2016. In some cases, particularly disputes over land rights, senior party officials intervene when it becomes apparent that local governments exceed their authority.

In addition, the Vietnamese one-party system is flexible to a certain extent. Strikes in the garment industry, for example, are illegal by law. These strikes are resolved by dismissing strike leaders while at the same time forcing foreign owners to take remedial action to address workers’ complaints. Editors of newspapers are informed of central guidelines but given a degree of leeway in how to interpret these guidelines.

In sum, controlling public opinion and allowing public opinion a certain amount of latitude is a continual work in progress. Vietnam’s one-party state is responsive when mass protests break out on particular issues. At the same time, it is repressive towards groups and individuals who are critical of one-party rule or who transgress the “three no’s” redline.

### **Civil Society in Vietnam**

**Journal:** Although the Constitution formally allows for freedom of religion, the government of Vietnam limits which religions can be practiced and what ideas be advocated by religious leaders. What is the status of religious freedom in Vietnam?

**Thayer:** All major religions are permitted to practice their faith subject to the caveat that they are loyal to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For example, Buddhist and Catholic associations are members of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Religious sects such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, Islam, various Christian denominations including Evangelical Christians, and Protestant house churches, are permitted to practice their faith.

However, the regime takes a hardline against religious groups or individuals who refuse to come under government control and/or take what is perceived as an antagonistic stance towards the one-party state. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, established in

South Vietnam in 1964, is outlawed because of its refusal to come under government control. The government continues to crack down on Protestant groups comprised of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands that advocate separatism or fail to comply with government regulations. The government takes action against individual Catholic priests who are active in land protests.

**Journal:** In the beginning of this decade, there were several Hmong religious leaders persecuted or killed by Vietnamese police. Within the past few years, the government has made some progress regarding religious and ethnic rights to the point that the United States no longer considers Vietnam a 'country of particular concern.' Why do you believe the government has been slow to change despite international condemnation for human rights violations?

**Thayer:** The key issue among the Hmong minority was their conversion from animism to Christianity that brought them into conflict with local authorities. The conversion of some Hmong to Christianity resulted in the emergence of a small number of millennial cults who believed that a messiah would come. Local authorities have long viewed animism as superstition and were intolerant towards the Hmong. Their conversion to Christianity was viewed suspiciously by local officials as due to outside influence and a challenge to authority.

Vietnam's central government was responsive to international public opinion and pressure. A new law on religion was adopted. However, the implementation of the law was resisted at the local level due to entrenched negative attitudes by local officials against the Hmong. It took Vietnam some time to overcome this prejudice.

**Journal:** Despite an overwhelmingly negative public opinion towards LGBT people, the Vietnamese government has shown a willingness to work with and support the LGBT community. What do you think of this contradiction in Vietnam's human rights record?

**Thayer:** Human rights is a broad term that encapsulates civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. In other words, homosexuality and lesbianism is viewed by the government as a social issue not a social right. Since the first gay rights parade in Vietnam in 2012, the government has taken a lenient line towards the LGBT community.

Vietnam is overwhelmingly a Buddhist country. Vietnamese Buddhism does not contain the same pejorative moral sentiments against LGBT individuals as found in Christianity. Same-sex marriage is not necessarily illegal in Vietnam, but Vietnam lacks a legal system that affords the same rights to marriage for same-sex couples that it affords to heterosexual couples. Members of the LGBT community report violence against them and discrimination at the workplace. However, this discrimination does not come from the Vietnamese government, which is focused more on repressing advocates of international civil and political rights.



## Future for Vietnam

**Journal:** What are some major challenges to the future stability and prosperity of Vietnam? What are some key ways the CPV needs to change to manage these challenges?

**Thayer:** The major challenge to Vietnam's future stability lies in reform of Vietnam's Communist Party and its internal processes. The CPV has a membership of around only three percent of the total population. It has a hierarchical structure that places emphasis on orderly, generational change while privileging seniority. This system has become sclerotic at the top. At the last party congress in 2016, top leaders manipulated party rules to prevent delegates from nominating new candidates for the election to the Central Committee. The highest leadership positions are reserved for members of the Politburo who have served at least one five-year term. The CPV needs to give more power to party delegates and open up the process whereby men and women of talent can quickly rise to the top.

Vietnam's economic prosperity depends on continued high economic growth of over six percent annually. To achieve this target, the government needs to reform and privatize its state-owned enterprises to make them more competitive internationally. It also needs to build the regulatory framework and invest in training its workforce to take full advantage of digitization, artificial intelligence, and mega data. Additionally, while Vietnam ranks near the top in addressing climate activities, it still faces major challenges due to sea level rise and its slow progress on achieving the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. If Vietnam wishes to experience steady economic growth while continuing to address climate change, it should pay special attention to sustainability and environmentally-friendly business practices.

**Journal:** Given the openly competitive nature of U.S.-China relations, what do you think Vietnam's military and foreign policy future looks like? Will the more openly antagonistic Sino-U.S. dynamic have fundamental consequences for Vietnam's foreign and military posture?

**Thayer:** Vietnam is well-placed to deal with the Sino-American strategic rivalry. Vietnam currently allocates about two percent of GDP to defense spending, with Russia as the main supplier of modern military technology and equipment. As a proactive member of ASEAN, Vietnam goes out of its way to cultivate good relations with other middle and major powers through strategic partnerships. It continues to focus on developing depth and raising the level of its relationships with all members of ASEAN.

The idea of "three no's" translates to Vietnam's defense policy as well – no alliances, no foreign military bases, and no use of relations with one country directed at a third party. This conservative strategy means that Vietnam is unlikely to change the current trajectory of its foreign affairs and defense policies unless it is subject to coercion or an armed attack. In this case, Vietnam will cooperate with whomever lends support.

**Journal:** In February 2017, the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) proposed the establishment of three new Special Administrative and Economic Zones (SEZs) with the stated goals of supporting “green, high-tech, and knowledge-based” businesses and industries. Public sentiment and critics have noted holes in this logic due to fears of repeated government corruption and misuse, as seen in other SEZs across the country. Do you believe these new SEZs offer a way to achieve Vietnam’s economic goals?

**Thayer:** Vietnam has used SEZs to good effect in promoting industrial joint development, worker training, and technology transfer. In the past, they have contributed positively to the growth of Vietnam’s economy. MPI’s proposal to create three new SEZs was designed to achieve specific goals focused on sustainable economic development. For example, Van Phong in Quang Ninh province, one of Vietnam’s busiest transit seaports, could focus on logistic development; Van Don in Khanh Hoa province could focus on healthcare and education; and Phu Quoc Island off Kien Giang province could focus on tourism, including golf courses and casinos. Each of the three SEZs would incorporate a set of specific policies in its development guidelines relating to land use, immigration, finance-banking, and infrastructure development. The new SEZs do offer the prospect of contributing to economic growth due to streamlining their administrative structures and the grant of long-term leases. These features should attract stable long-term foreign investment.

There is concern, however, that the SEZs could perpetuate crony capitalism by privileging state-owned enterprises and lining the pockets of local government officials. According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, Vietnam ranked 117<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries and territories surveyed, a drop of ten places compared to 2017. The problem of corruption is not unique to SEZs as evidenced by a series of high-profile trials involving officials in Vietnamese banks and state-owned enterprises. Vietnam’s efforts to tackle large-scale corruption would be enhanced if the investigative agencies, courts, and media were permitted to exercise an independent role free from political interference by the CPV. This is unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future.

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