

The Problems With Vietnam's 'Bamboo Diplomacy'

Is the phrase, increasingly prominent in government communications, anything more than an update to a discredited policy of neutrality?

By Nguyen Quoc Tan Trung

*"It's straightforward, and it's fair. F**k them. What's there to be afraid of?"*

In May, during a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and other high-ranking officials raised national and international attention, but not for any productively diplomatic reason.

The loose-lipped Vietnamese delegation was caught on video discussing in somewhat crude and boastful terms their meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden. It appears that the negative remark referred to a warning from the U.S. President concerning Russia's unlawful invasion of Ukraine and why Vietnam should not trust Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The video has now been removed from the U.S. State Department's YouTube channel.

This story is far less remarkable than it has been made out to be by opponents of the Vietnamese communist regime. Many contemporary politicians employ crude language, and fewer and fewer people find it shocking or objectionable. After all, using this kind of blunt speaking helped former U.S. President Donald Trump gain the support of millions of Americans on his march to the White House in 2016.

Nevertheless, for a visiting delegation to speak so freely about the statesmen of the host country indicates a strong belief in their own foreign policy strategy, which Vietnamese officials are increasingly referring to as "bamboo diplomacy."

Is this term something that the international audience needs to understand as a unique Vietnamese contribution to the study of international relations and international law? Or is it just another version of the outdated and still controversial principle of neutrality?

"Bamboo Diplomacy": What Does It Mean in Vietnam?

As a matter of historical record, the phrase "bamboo diplomacy" was first coined by Nguyen Phu Trong, a Marxist theorist and three-term general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). Trong briefly mentioned the phrase during the VCP National Conference on Foreign Affairs in August 2016, but the secretary had another opportunity to explain the term at a similar conference held last year.

In that context, Trong referred to "bamboo diplomacy" as a unique and special foreign relations strategy from the Ho Chi Minh era. He described Vietnamese diplomacy as having strong roots, solid stems, and very flexible branches, like Vietnamese bamboo. The country's approach to the world is soft and clever but still persistent and resolute; creative but consistent; resilient but valiant. The theorist contends that at the "root" of Vietnamese diplomacy is honorable conduct, humanitarianism, peace, justice, and righteousness, all of which safeguard the national interest, national unity, and the happiness of the Vietnamese people.

The “root,” Trong argued, keeps the foundations of the socialist state of Vietnam safe and prosperous, while also playing a pivotal role in guiding Vietnam’s foreign policy along the right path of independence, international accommodationism, and multilateralism.

At the same time, the stems of the bamboo tree can be adaptable and flexible but, more importantly, are plain and humble. Trong asserts that Vietnamese diplomats must be proactive in working with foreign partners while being friendly and pliable in different cases and situations. They should display a modest attitude and avoid flamboyant conduct. However, when the interests of the Vietnamese people are at stake, the “bamboo hedges” – the diplomats, the domestic political system and the Vietnamese people – will withstand any challenges and difficulties.

This well-articulated and surprisingly practical (but also intentionally vague) foreign policy principle quickly re-emerged and took the spotlight in Vietnamese’s national discourse from February of this year, when Russia invaded Ukraine, initiating a fierce war between two countries with a tradition of brotherly relations with Vietnam.

In the slightly obsequious manner of contemporary Vietnamese academia, Secretary Trong’s hour-long address from 2021 has since spawned an entire literature on “bamboo diplomacy.” Studies on the topic have appeared in academic journals, including the prestigious Communist Review; the journal of the People’s Public Security Political Academy; the newspaper of the People’s Army, and many more. These studies are full of admiration, praise, and sometimes even downright political flattery of the general secretary.

Although these articles are peculiar phenomena by the standards of Western academia, we need to understand them as a confirmation that “bamboo diplomacy” has been officially sanctioned by the Vietnamese state and will be central to Vietnamese diplomacy for years to come.

Implementation in the Ukraine Conflict: A Sugar-Coated Pill

This highly opportune theory is principally intended to provide the Vietnamese people with a scientific and patriotic justification for the government’s inactivity with regard to the war in Ukraine.

For many years, Ukraine has hosted Vietnamese expatriates and given them a vehicle for their entrepreneurial spirit. According to the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese community in Ukraine is now 7,000-strong. This is not a very impressive number compared to the millions of Vietnamese who live in the U.S. or Canada. But if we put this number next to the Vietnamese community living and working in “big brother” Russia, which is officially estimated at around 70,000, the population concentration and the discrepancy in country size make them proportionally very similar.

Moreover, Pham Nhat Vuong, the leader of Vingroup and the richest man in Vietnam, was, in fact, an “expat” who initially operated in Ukraine and was nurtured by the Ukrainian market. For these reasons, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is more relevant to the Vietnamese people than the Russian war in Chechnya or Moscow’s intervention in Syria.

However, Russia is the nostalgic embodiment of the glorious old Soviet Union. Although Ukraine also played a vital role in the “Soviet imagination” of many Vietnamese minds, in contemporary discourse, Vietnam’s historical affinity with Russia appears unbreakable. More importantly, Vietnam’s traditional dependence on Russian arms, and the generous aid and

support that the former ally granted it during difficult times, have a history of almost one hundred years.

It seems that the rhetoric of “bamboo diplomacy” has been introduced and utilized to address this paradox.

Basically, the Vietnamese leadership refuses to pick a side. They refrain from voting against Russia or calling the “special military operation” an armed aggression in violation of Article 2 (4) of the United Nations Charter. During the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) emergency special session that was held on February 28-March 2022, the Vietnamese delegates refrained from voting against Russia, abstaining on UNGA Resolution ES-11/1, which strongly condemned the Russian action. While Vietnam did not support the resolution, it also did not vote against it like Russian allies Belarus, North Korea, and Syria.

At the same time, Ambassador Dang Hoang Giang, the head of Vietnam’s Permanent Mission to the U.N., has implicitly opposed the war by criticizing the “obsolete doctrines of power politics, the ambition of domination, and the imposition and the use of force in settling international disputes.” This was followed by the Vietnamese government’s commitment to provide \$500,000 in humanitarian aid to war-torn Ukraine. In an important meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, in which collective security in Ukraine and the South China Sea was discussed, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh affirmed Vietnam’s respect for the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state, although he avoided any mention of Russia.

All this seems to be very prudent and in accordance with the theoretical depiction of Trong’s “bamboo diplomacy.” The “root” of Vietnamese diplomacy is honorable behavior, humanitarianism, peace, and justice. If these principles are genuine, Vietnam could never lend support to an invasion like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Offering aid and some financial support to Ukrainian citizens affected by the war is also a reflection of the core values and spirit of “bamboo diplomacy.”

Commenting in the Communist Review, Dr. Phan Thi Thu Dung, a state scholar working for the Ministry of Public Security, contends that the Russia-Ukraine war can be explained as essentially either a geopolitical conflict or a clash between the Anglo-Saxon and Slavic civilizations. Each party involved in the conflict has only its own interests in mind. Consequently, Vietnam, with barely any direct connection to these grand interests, should not express an affiliation to any party. Its position will be “business as usual”: friendly relationships and normal cooperation will both sides will be maintained, and the bamboo stems will sway gently in the wind, as on any normal day. The repeated abstention votes, although criticized by many, are held to be the hallmark of Vietnam’s diplomatic success.

If one digs deep enough, however, one finds that there are limits to this noble-minded neutrality.

While insisting that “humanitarianism” and “humanity” are the core principles of “bamboo diplomacy,” Vietnam contradictorily abstained from Resolution ES-11/2 of March 24, concerning the humanitarian consequences of the war. This resolution focuses on demands for the protection of civilians and overall compliance with international humanitarian law by all warring parties. Vietnam then proceeded to vote against a later vote on suspending Russia’s membership of the U.N. Human Rights Council.

In another incident, a U.S. lawmaker accused the Chinese delegation of refusing to participate in a standing ovation and of walking out in protest after a powerful speech by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in May. However, the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged CNN and the lawmaker to correct what they claimed was a mistake. It turned out that the picture taken by the U.S. lawmaker was of Vietnam's vice prime minister and his subordinates.

Most interesting is what has happened inside Vietnam.

Vietnamese entertainment websites and key opinion leaders freely participated in an anti-Ukraine disinformation campaign and appeared to do so with the tacit approval of the authorities. These included the spreading of false information about the official view of the Ukrainian government concerning the founder of the modern Vietnamese State, Ho Chi Minh, which forced the Ukrainian Embassy in Vietnam to issue an official clarification; accusing the Ukrainian government of being a neo-Nazi institution; and mocking Ukraine's "comedian" president; and suggesting that Ukraine deserves to be annihilated for betraying the legacy of Lenin. The campaign, which sought to depict Ukraine as the guilty party in the conflict, successfully prejudiced the perceptions of the Vietnamese public regarding the righteousness of the Ukrainian struggle against Russia.

On the other hand, some activists and groups of Ukraine's supporters in Vietnam have complained that conferences on Ukrainian culture have been interrupted by electricity cuts at these venues. Several fundraising events held by the Ukrainian Embassy in Hanoi were also been restricted by the local authorities.

When we take into account these small, hidden, domestic details of the ways in which the Vietnamese government manages many aspects of its foreign policy, a more jaundiced view of "bamboo policy" comes into view. Just like Russian President Putin, the VCP has always feared the emergence of so-called "color revolutions" against its rule. Countless political and international relations studies produced by state scholars, such as this article in the journal of the Central Propaganda Department, have used Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004) and Maidan Revolution (2014) as textbook examples of "Western-led" regime change efforts aimed at destabilizing and seizing control of countries that are still outside the West's spheres of influence.

To the Vietnamese elites, Ukraine has long been a spurious political entity that does not represent the true will of the Ukrainian people. In this sense, "bamboo diplomacy" seems to be only a convenient sugar-coating of Vietnam's skepticism and tendency to reject the new generation of Ukrainian governments. This perspective accords completely with Russia's rhetoric. At the meeting of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) on February 17, just prior to the Russian invasion, Moscow's envoy hurled accusations that the Zelenskyy government was a "puppet government" controlled by the collective West.

If my observations are true, then "bamboo diplomacy" is not as impressive as it might sound in theory. The "roots" of the belief are not founded on "international justice," "humanitarian principles," or "peace", but rather on political bias and traditional regional groupings festooned with the old banner of neutrality.

"Neutral Bamboo": An interwar trap?

Neutrality sits uncomfortably within the 21st-century environment of diplomatic theories.

It is true that the “principle of neutrality” is now a fashionable term in international relations, but this was also the case before both the First and the Second World Wars. As old as international law itself and beginning in the 16th century, a state was legally entitled to neutrality when other states were involved in an armed conflict. It was also a normal tool in the dispute settlement arsenal of the international community. In a world where war was normal, a law of neutrality theoretically allowed the localization of war and the limitation of the impact of war. The system of ensuring state security through the law of neutrality, however, had major flaws and was unable to prevent the outbreak of World War I.

There came about a system of collective security whereby states agreed to outlaw war as an instrument of national policy. Neutrality was, therefore, incompatible with the new system, as related states are required to combine their collective might (either via armed intervention or sanctions) in the attempts to expel the aggressor and protect the victim state.

Unfortunately, the League of Nations also faced serious constraints to its institutional power. After its lackluster performance during the Manchurian crisis (1932-1933), and then its total failure to prevent the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1934-1936), a majority of states ignored their obligations under Article 16 of the League Covenant and decided to go back to the neutrality system, along with appeasement, the balance of power strategies, and regional groupings. This was a serious mistake, as it only led to more territorial demands, aggressive behavior, invasions, and finally, the outbreak of World War II.

The modern United Nations arguably restores the collective security system and augments a sense of justice through the new power of the UNSC. The UNSC has the authority to identify a specific State as an aggressor and can decide on enforcement action against the aggressor under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter. The Member States must comply with the decisions of the UNSC, even at the expense of their neutrality.

But as we can see, the “right” to neutrality could only be eliminated if the UNSC actively spells out who is the perpetrator and who is the victim of a war of aggression.

UNGA resolutions have a certain normative power, but they do not possess the institutional powers the Charter provides. With Russia holding a permanent seat in the UNSC, the chances of legally identifying the aggressor and setting up enforcement measures against the Kremlin are non-existent.

In short, then, Vietnam’s “bamboo diplomacy” and its neutrality rhetoric possess some value in the current legal and political climate. But this foreign relations strategy will only make sense if the Vietnamese government also observes its obligations under the law of state responsibility, such as not recognizing the unlawful situation in Ukraine (including Russia’s occupation of Crimea, the breakaway republics in the Donbas, and the regions occupied since February 2022). It must also maintain in good faith its relationship with the lawful Ukrainian government.

If Vietnam’s so-called “bamboo diplomacy” and the language of neutrality are in reality simply a means of refraining from condemning Russia and giving tacit acquiescence to the fait accompli created by the Russian invasion, then we are not so far removed in spirit from the lavish banquet that was held at the Italian embassy in Costa Rica on November 12, 1938, at which the Costa Rican president “toasted the health of the King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia,” officially recognizing the Italian conquest of Ethiopia.

This type of neutrality will not be viewed favorably by those who record the history of our times.

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