

The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy After the 13th Party Congress

Buoyed by its successful handling of COVID-19, Vietnam is readying itself to play an increasingly proactive and confident regional role.

By Le Dinh Tinh and Lai Anh Tu

The 13th National Party Congress held in Hanoi from January 25 to February 1 was the biggest conference in the history of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). During the weeklong event, the incumbent VCP General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong was reelected Party chief for an unprecedented third term. Eighteen members of the Politburo, headed by the 76-year-old Trong, and supported by the 200 members of the Central Committee, have thus been tasked with leading Vietnam through a time of uncertainty.

Held once every five years, the VCP's National Congress is the biggest exercise of the collective policy-making in Vietnam. At the conclave, delegates help set Vietnam's national security, foreign policy, defense, and development strategies, as well as high-level personnel selection for the coming five-year term, and often beyond. The adoption of Vietnam's foreign policy at the congress, therefore, has consequential policy implications. The 13th Party Congress resolution on foreign policy, which emphasized the importance of diplomacy, was approved unanimously. More importantly, it demonstrated efforts to galvanize internal support for Vietnam's diplomatic strategy, given the involvement of 1,587 delegates representing all sectors, agencies, and levels of government. And for the first time in the last 15 years, four senior diplomats gained seats on the Central Committee, while the current deputy prime minister, Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh, won a seat on the Politburo. These above highlights will help Vietnam promote inter-agency coordination and a whole-of-government approach to foreign affairs.

The Political Report of the 13th Party Congress stressed that Vietnam would continue to implement its longstanding foreign policy doctrine of independence, self-reliance, diversification, and multilateralization. It also reaffirmed the "four nos" of the country's defense policy, with the highest priority given to the safeguarding of Vietnam's national interests on the basis of international law. Furthermore, the report reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to continue being a trusted friend and partner, and a responsible and proactive member of the international community. Those guiding principles not only remain unchanged from the 12th Party Congress of 2016; they also add more nuances to the implementation of Vietnam's foreign policy for the next five years, and demonstrate Vietnam's increasingly active and self-confident behavior in international affairs.

Within this broad framework, the recent congress introduced several new developments in Vietnam's foreign policy that are worth highlighting.

The first and most notable new development is the emphasis on the pioneering role of diplomacy in preserving a peaceful and stable international environment, in mobilizing external support for the course of national building, and in enhancing Vietnam's status and prestige. This new development has two main elements. It implies that diplomacy should play a more central and

proactive role in preserving Vietnam's sovereignty and territorial integrity, building its national capacities, and enhancing its global status. Similarly, it recognizes the importance and contribution of Vietnam's diplomatic service in designing a comprehensive national strategy for Vietnam. This new development also reflects the proposition that diplomacy should be on the "frontline" of national development and defense.

Second, the 13th Party Congress underlined the need to build a "modern and comprehensive" diplomacy consisting of three pillars – that of the Party, the state, and people-to-people diplomacy – and the seamless coordination thereof. By adding the "comprehensive" notion, Vietnam will unequivocally promote all forms of diplomacy: political, economic, defense, public, cultural, and parliamentary. Given its aim to develop a "modern" diplomatic strategy, it is expected that Vietnam will invest more in expanding its diplomatic service's personnel and infrastructure capacities and launch new initiatives such as digital diplomacy.

Third, if the political report of the 12th Congress mainly focused on identifying opportunities, that of the 13th Congress provided a broader, more dialectic assessment of the strategic environment for Vietnam, identifying the challenges that Vietnam could face in the next few decades. While maintaining that peace, independence, cooperation, development, and the "fourth industrial revolution" are among the key global trends, the Congress also pointed out that great power competition, local conflicts, the rise of nationalism, and the drawbacks of globalization and international integration, among other challenges, could threaten Vietnam's search for security and development.

Fourth, the 13th Party Congress made the decision to elevate Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy, placing a strong emphasis on ASEAN, the United Nations, APEC, the Greater Mekong Sub-region, and other international and regional institutions. In August 2018, the Secretariat of the 12th Central Committee issued the first strategic document, Decree No. 25, on promoting multilateral diplomacy. This tenet is a major theoretical development in Vietnam's foreign policy, given that multilateralism is a risk averse strategy aimed at avoiding over-reliance on certain partners while preserving the nation's strategic autonomy and expanding its network of friends and partners. However, it does not hint that Vietnam's foreign policy will only focus on multilateralism. Instead, it will seek a well-balanced combination of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts. Promoting and expanding bilateral relations with neighboring countries, strategic and comprehensive partners, and other important partners – in that order – remains the linchpin of Vietnam's foreign policy.

There are several key factors, both domestic and external, which may help to explain Vietnam's motivation for introducing these new policy initiatives.

First of all, the foreign policy shifts undertaken at the 13th Party Congress reflect a broader shift in the Vietnamese leadership's strategic thinking. According to Vu Khoan, one of Vietnam's most senior foreign policy gurus, security, development, and influence have long been Vietnam's three key long-term objectives. At previous Party congresses, development and security-driven strategies largely dominated the policy discussion. Vietnam's foreign policy was basically formed around the promotion of these two objectives. More recently, Vietnam's foreign policy has aimed at further enhancing the country's international standing. The interplay of those objectives has made Vietnam's foreign policy both a means and an end.

Vietnam's leadership also saw the need to increase the effectiveness of strategic planning by combining its foreign policy with different policies into an integrated, coherent, and unified

national strategy by 2030. Moreover, science and technology developments that are likely to change the rules of the game down the road will require any country to have a higher level of flexibility and adaptive capacity in its foreign relations. Once again, it has also emphasized the core values of independence, self-reliance, and having balanced relations with all major powers.

Second, since the 12th Party Congress, Vietnam has come to see itself differently. With more capabilities, Vietnam is seeking a more proactive role in preserving a peaceful and stable environment favorable for its security and development objectives. Last year, Vietnam ranked 12th in the Lowy Institute's 2020 Asia Power Index thanks to the improvement of its diplomatic influence, and second in the Institute's Covid Performance Index. Economically, Vietnam is now one of the fastest growing economies in the region, with a deep integration with the global economy and high degrees of economic openness, and is fully anchored within the world trading system, the signatory of 16 free trade agreements, including CPTPP and the RCEP, the region's two largest trading blocs.

Politically, Vietnam has now established strategic and comprehensive partnerships with 30 countries, including all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and all 10 ASEAN member states. In 2020, Vietnam successfully chaired ASEAN despite the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. During its non-permanent membership of the UNSC in 2020-2021, Vietnam authored the initiative of the International Day of Epidemic Preparedness (December 27), which was subsequently adopted by the U.N. General Assembly.

Third, the fast-changing international strategic environment has brought about new opportunities and challenges for Vietnam. For example, smaller Asian countries must scrutinize major powers' strategic adaptation in shaping their foreign policy, and Vietnam is no exception. In the Indo-Pacific, strategic competition between the United States and China is on the rise, putting Vietnam and other ASEAN countries at the risk of being forced to take sides. Similarly, territorial disputes and conflicts in the South China Sea have become more complicated. Other non-traditional security challenges, such as pandemics, climate change, and cyber security, are impossible for any individual country to address alone. Rather, international cooperation and diplomatic efforts are needed.

The growth of its national prestige and capacities has enabled Vietnam to pursue a more proactive foreign policy. Vietnam's foreign policy has benefited from the country's success in fighting COVID-19 and its constant economic growth through connectivity with the world and the region. The country has also benefited from its performance in dealing with international and regional issues through its recent leadership roles within ASEAN and the UNSC, the hosting of the second U.S.-North Korea Summit in 2019, and especially its enhanced engagement with U.N. peacekeeping operations.

Taken together, these explain why Vietnam has decided to take a few steps forward with its foreign policy. However, whether Vietnam will succeed with its new foreign policy depends not on Vietnam's efforts alone, but also on the support and collaboration of its network of friends and partners.

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