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Is Vietnam Torn Between Land and Sea in Its Defense?

Should Vietnam prioritize land or sea in its quest for security? This is not a straightforward question as it first appears.

By Alexander L. Vuving

Vietnam is a perfect country for land-sea dualism. Its territory stretches thin along the western coast of the South China Sea, placing most of its human activities in the interface between land and sea. The origin myth of its main ethnic group claims this community to be the descendants of a father who came from the sea and a mother who came from the mountains. The Vietnamese term for “country,” *dat nuoc*, combines the words “land” (*dat*) and “water” (*nuoc*). (This is not unique to the Vietnamese language, however. The Malay term for “country,” *tanah air*, also consists of the words for “land,” *tanah*, and “water,” *air*.)

To make sense of Vietnamese history, the late historian Tran Quoc Vuong attempted to frame it as a dialectic between continental and maritime orientations. A seminal work on Vietnamese history by Keith Taylor also depicts “the birth of Vietnam” as “a sea-oriented culture coming to terms with a continental environment,” although Taylor later distanced himself from this view. In the 1980s and 1990s, elements of a maritime orientation were in the forefront of the intellectual debate accompanying Vietnam’s opening to the world. Most recently, a land-sea binary has been resurrected to discuss some fundamental choices in Vietnam’s grand strategy and defense strategy.

Choosing the “continental” side of the debate, Khang Vu asserted that Vietnam “needs to pivot landward for its security.” This met with rebuttals from Euan Graham, Bich Tran, and Nguyen The Phuong, who argued that “a maritime focus is vital for Vietnam’s security.”

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The debate was confused (and confusing) because it lacked a critical distinction — one between grand strategy and defense strategy. Grand strategy sets the higher goals and general ways for defense strategy, which in turn identifies the specific ways and means to defend the interests and values defined by grand strategy. While grand strategy involves a country’s political, economic, and diplomatic orientation, defense strategy focuses on the development and organization of military and paramilitary forces.

The choice between maritime and continental orientations is a key question for Vietnam’s grand strategy, but it is misleading when the question is about Vietnam’s defense strategy. I will elaborate on these arguments in two articles.

The present article argues that, contrary to Khang Vu’s assertion, the choice between land and sea has never been a dilemma, nor has it been a real choice, in Vietnam’s defense, and it will not be so in the foreseeable future.

I will argue in the next article that, nevertheless, the land-sea duality can help to understand some long-term trends regarding Vietnam's strategic environment and the choices Vietnam's elites have historically made regarding their grand strategies. Thus, a grand strategic choice should not be mechanically translated into a defense strategic one.

Given Vietnam's geography, a successful military strategy must treat land and sea as two mutually complementary, not mutually exclusive, realms. Indeed, Dai Viet, the predecessor of modern Vietnam, when based in the Tonkin delta, had to defend against simultaneous attacks from both land and sea by either northerners (Chinese and Mongols) or southerners (Chams). As the sea provided the easier access to the Viet capital, Dai Viet's decisive battles against Chinese and Mongol invaders were mostly in the estuary of the Bach Dang River, but Dai Viet never neglected the land routes from the Chinese borders. When militarily conquering Champa, the territorial predecessor of today's Central Vietnam, Dai Viet almost always advanced simultaneously on land and at sea, with the maritime wing being the more decisive.

During the Vietnam War, contrary to Vu's suggestion, North Vietnamese strategists also realized the importance of the sea, though their offensives stayed mainly on land. Logistics provides half of the success for any military campaign, and North Vietnam supplied its forces in the South not only through the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" in the jungles but also through camouflaged "no-number" vessels that often sailed far from the shore.

It was no less a figure than General Vo Nguyen Giap – who was famous, among other things, for the view that Indochina was a single theater of war and a single strategic unit – who emphasized the military and economic value of the South China Sea and, in the spring of 1975, ordered North Vietnamese Special Operations Forces to land on the islands occupied by South Vietnam in the Spratlys before the Chinese could do so.

Today, as I've argued before at The Diplomat, "sea and land are now part of a single strategic terrain in Asia." Modern weapons, especially long-range precision fires, drones, and computer codes, have further rendered the land-sea divide obsolete.

For Vietnam, the most plausible military threat would come from China, but it is unlikely to be a full-scale ground attack along the land border (think the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year) or an amphibious attack along Vietnam's coast (think the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944). Such an all-out invasion would be reserved for Taiwan, not Vietnam.

China's primary purpose in attacking Vietnam, if it comes to a military attack, would not be to occupy a large swath of Vietnamese land but to "teach" Vietnam – and by extension, other Asian countries and the United States – a lesson. Secondarily, and if possible, China would aim to gain some strategic locations, most likely in the South China Sea.

The "lesson" may be delivered in the form of a blockade or invasion of some Vietnamese outposts in the South China Sea, a blockade of the main Vietnamese air and sea ports, or some surgical strikes. Even if it escalated into a full-blown war, it would be a multi-domain operation in which land, sea, air, space, and cyber forces would be employed in some integrated way to achieve the political objective.

In this modern way of war, Vietnam must avoid thinking with the land-sea binary. Rather, it must invest more in its air defenses, artillery and missiles, unmanned vehicles (aerial, surface, and underwater), and cyber and electronic warfare, besides the most important assets of all: morale and international support.

Land and sea define the geography and history of Vietnam, but the land-sea binary does not define real strategic choices in Vietnam's national defense, nor does it pose a genuine dilemma for Vietnam's strategists. There is a mutual relationship between defense strategy and grand strategy, but the connection must not be mechanical.

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