

VIETNAM'S RENOVATED FOREIGN POLICY

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1. Rationale

In the beginning of the 21st century the international politics witnesses three different sometime controversial phenomena, namely globalism, regionalism, and nationalism. The complexity of coping with these phenomena is daunting in itself. The features of the new world order can be summarized in four following points: *first*, the strength of each country is determined not by military means but by economical one and “soft power”; *second*, the world is much more interdependent; *third*, the number of actors in international politics is increasing, including state, non-governmental organizations, MNC, political parties, and *fourth*, market economy and democracy have been gaining more and more recognition over the world. The new world order creates new opportunities and challenges for every country. In this context, each nation has to find an appropriate approach for its own development. This paper try to examine how Vietnamese foreign policy was made in the context of a changing world.

2. Vietnam's Foreign Policy before Renovation

On September 2, 1945 President Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam, founding the Democratic

Republic of Vietnam. In this historical document, Ho Chi Minh realized that the major powers would play an important role in the fate of his nation. Therefore he called them to recognize the independence of Vietnam and defend its sovereignty:

“We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Teheran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.”[2]

On the following days of September and October 1945, when the British arrived in Saigon and the Chinese Nationalist troops came to Hanoi, pursuant to the agreement at Potsdam to disarm the defeated Japanese forces, but in fact to assist the French in resuming control over Indochina, the independence that Vietnamese just declared became threatened. Facing with this complicated situation, the Provisional Government of the DRV made public the Communique on the Foreign policy on October 3rd, 1945. In the first official statement on its foreign policy the Provisional Government emphasized *“the main object of (Vietnam's) foreign policy is to ensure the victory of the nation by peaceable or forcible means, according to the attitude evinced by the foreign powers, but always*

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in accordance with the Atlantic Charter.”[3] The very complicated development and the emergence of new conditions over the past 50 years have caused Vietnam, like other countries, to make adjustments to its foreign policy. However, the October 3rd 1945 statement remains the fundamental orientation and the ideological foundation of the foreign policy of contemporary Vietnam.

In a series of letters later sent to President Truman (dated October 17, 1945) and to the secretary of States Byrnes (dated October 22 and November 1, 1945) [7] Ho Chi Minh again and again appealed to the US to support Vietnam's independence, and requested that a large group of Vietnamese youth come to the US to be trained in various fields. These letters were never answered.

Influenced by the confronted ideology during the Cold War followed in the next decades, Vietnam became a battlefield between major powers. The year 1950 made a turning point in the history of Vietnam's foreign relations. After four years of fighting in the siege against the French during the First Indochina War (1946-1954), the DRV was recognized by PRC, the Soviet Union and other socialist countries in the spring of 1950. Since then, Vietnam became a conflict with real complicated international character. Reflected the balance of powers, the Geneva accords of 1954 ended the First Indochina War, but seated for the new conflict. Therefore, the followed Second Indochina War was a logical continuation of the conflict that

started even during the First Indochina War. During this period Vietnam accepted the two camp theses that the world was divided between the forces of socialism and capitalism. In the late 1960s Vietnam adopted a framework known as the “three revolutionary currents”: the strength of the socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union, the strength of the workers movement in advanced industrial countries and the strength of the forces of national liberation in the Third World. [1; p.1-2]

Thanks to an independent foreign policy, and the support from socialist countries, especially from China and the Soviet Union, Vietnam could achieve the final victory over the Republic of Vietnam supported by the Americans in 1975. However, it was also the starting point for a decade long of a socio-economic crisis of Vietnam. Explaining the roots of these crises, William Duiker argued:

“Rather than accepting the reality that their success was primarily the consequence of a combination of local factors and the indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese people, they interpreted it more broadly as a demonstration of the superiority of Marxist-Leninist doctrine over the values and institutions of the capitalist world led by the United States, and as the first step in the collapse of world imperialism.”[8]

3. Vietnam's renovated foreign policy

It was not until the mid-to late 1980s that the Communist Party of Vietnam

transformed its foreign policy. The roots of this transformation were as follows. Firstly, they lay in domestic circumstances arising from the socio-economic crisis, which confronted Vietnam at the time. And secondly, they also lay in external influences arising from the “new political thinking” and perestroika campaign proclaimed by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 in the Soviet Union. Vietnam turned from a foreign policy model heavily structured by ideological considerations to a foreign policy model, which placed greater emphasis on national interest.[1; p.1]

In December 1986, at the sixth national party congress, Vietnam officially adopted the policy *Đổi mới* or renovation. This policy was mainly concerned with overcoming a domestic economic crisis by the adoption of socio-economic reforms whose centerpiece was the dismantling of the central planning apparatus in favor of a market-orientated economy.

However, it was clear that *Đổi mới* could not be accomplished without a comprehensive settlement of the Cambodian conflict. Therefore in May 1988, the Politburo of the Vietnam Communist Party adopted Resolution No 13, which set in motion a strategic readjustment in Vietnam’s national security policy. Vietnam made decision to withdraw from Cambodia and to reduce its large standing army. The Resolution No 13 also stressed a “*multi-directional foreign policy*” orientation, and the importance “*to maintain peace, take advantage of favorable world condition*” to stabilize the domestic

situation and set the base for economic development over the next ten to fifteen years.”[4]

Following the failure of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the seventh national party congress in June 1991 declared that Vietnam wants “*to be friends with all countries*”, and would “*diversify and multilateralise economic relations with all countries and economic organizations.*”[6]

Vietnam’s remarkable opening to the outside world politically, economically and militarily has provoked expression of deep-seated anxiety if not fear that the very process of opening could also undermine Vietnam’s one-party system. The Political Report of the eight national party congress in June-July 1996 warned: “*to prevent and foil all designs and activities attempting social-political destabilization, encroachment on independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and detriment to our national construction and development.*”[5]

The following ninth (2001) and tenth (2006) national party congresses did not provide much new idea from previous ones in term of foreign policy making. However, there was a small adjustment in defining threats and challenges that the country is facing. The tenth national party congress suggested that instead of “threat” an appropriate notion would be “challenges” because those “threats” ready became realities. In addition, the order of the challenges also was changing. If the Ninth National Party congress put four threats in a following order starting with falling behind in

economic development, then deviation from socialist orientation, corruption, and ends with peaceful evolution, the tenth national party congress remade a new order as follow: falling behind in economic development, corruption, deviation from socialist orientation, and peaceful evolution. It means corruption became a national challenge that country cannot solve overnight.

In fact, after the Cambodian settlement, Vietnam moved rapidly to normalize its relations with all countries: 1991 Vietnam normalized its relations with China; 1995 normalized its relations with the US, became member of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) and signed a framework agreement with the EU; 1996 Vietnam became a member of Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM); 1998 member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); 2000 Vietnam signed BTA; On November 7, 2006 Vietnam officially became the 150th member of WTO. Nowadays Vietnam's overall diplomatic relations expanded to include diplomatic ties with more than 180 countries. In 1989, Vietnam had diplomatic relations with only 23 non-communist states.

4. Some Remarks

In general, from the mid-1980s, facing with globalization and domestic pressure Vietnam's foreign policy underwent a profound transformation characterized multilateralism and diversity. Based on what have been done since *Đổi mới*, in term of Vietnam's foreign policy, one can make following points.

First, although Vietnam is a member of ASEAN and is developing a market-oriented economy, ideology still plays an important role in the conceptualization of Vietnamese foreign policy. Despite the fact that the role of ideology has been depreciated but nevertheless Marxism-Leninism and the Thoughts of Ho Chi Minh provide the ideological basis for all policy. The fears that opening up will lead to the introduction of political and economic forces which will undermine one-party rule, is expressed as the threat of peaceful evolution.

Second, Vietnam's most important foreign policy goal is the maintenance of a peaceful regional and international environment so that it can develop its economy and engage in co-operative relations with other states. This has taken many forms: ODA, FDI, participation in UN, ASEAN, APEC, ASEM, development loan from ADB, IMF, WB, seeking membership in WTO. Thus domestic economic factors weigh heavily in Vietnam's foreign policy orientation, and have played a direct role in the development of bilateral relations.

Third, Vietnam's programme of economic and political renovation has led to the emergence of new institutional actors. Since 1986 informal groups, the National Assembly, different associations began to play an important role in political life. The discussions in mass media before the Tenth Party Congress showed how people motivated by what happened in political life of the country.

Fourth, not all of Vietnam's foreign policy elite fully embrace multilateralism. There is a suspicion that Vietnam might be taken advantage of by ASEAN's richer and more developed members, an influx of cheaper ASEAN goods could undermine local industries, economic integration could lead to a loss of sovereignty, undermine one-party role. *Fifth*, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and domestic instability in the region serve to challenge liberal assumptions about the benefits of economic interdependence. Current terrorist attacks in the world and region, and economic instability in China will further reinforce such thinking and could have negative implications for

regional economy as well as the Vietnamese one. The security concern, especially nuclear issue in Iran and Korea serve to remind regional states that realist assumptions about the nature of the new international order have not passed entirely into history. Vietnam prefers seeing a situation in which powers are balanced, and small and medium states can play an important role. For the future Vietnam will follow its main strategy in order to safeguard national independence, maintain political stability, develop a socialist market economy, and integrate with the global economy. Right now, Vietnam is ready to be a friend and reliable partner to all nations.

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