

Public Diplomacy: Why is it Rudimentary yet Relevant to Vietnam's Politics?

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There is such a rekindled interest in public diplomacy (PD) that elevates it to the status of a catchword among diplomacy practitioners. Yet mainstream literature in international relations has predominantly focused on PD in Western democracies, and to a lesser extent, in other emerging powers like China and India. To enrich the current scholarship on PD, this article analyzes the PD practice by Vietnam. This authoritarian state's distinctive political system has resulted in three defining characteristics of its rudimentary PD, namely, the domestication of PD, extensive interference of propaganda, and far-reaching control of the state. Since PD is domesticated, it has been utilized as part of the package solution to strengthening the regime's legitimacy. Therefore, as underdeveloped as it is in its state of affairs, the practice is more relevant to Vietnam than ever, considering the regime is facing both external and domestic pressure that warrants better coping mechanism.

Key words: cultural diplomacy, national image building, people-to-people diplomacy, public diplomacy, Vietnam

Introduction

In 2012, Vietnam won the supposedly ferocious bidding race to host the 2019 Asian Games (aka ASIAD 18). This news, however, was then received nonchalantly, and, in mid-2014, attracted overwhelming criticism by the domestic public, mainly for fear of the larger-than-expected expenses given Vietnam's serious economic recession and bad management ("Vietnam Backs Out," 2014). Planners and proponents of this event, on the contrary, argue that one of the biggest advantages ASIAD 18 can offer is that it will help raise Vietnam's international standing through sports diplomacy, and that this benefit looms large over apparent economic loss (Thanh Liem, 2014). Although it

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is hardly the first time such international events caused contradictory responses in Vietnam, this re-emerging heated debate induces an interesting question in relation to public diplomacy (PD), of which sports events are an essential channel. Inspired by this dispute, this article investigates the Vietnamese PD practice and discusses the relevance of PD in Vietnam's political arena.

The article presents three main discussions. The first one provides a brief overview of the evolution of PD. The second analytically depicts the state of affairs of Vietnam's PD. The last one is a reflection on the adeptness and relevance of Vietnamese PD.

Overview of Mainstream Literature About PD

PD has evolved over time and, thus, embraced relatively different concepts, including actors, dimensions, and channels. It can be argued that early on, PD was mainly influenced by realism, evidenced by the focus on the *state* as the principal actor, and on *power politics* and *national security* as the ultimate concern. Indeed, seminal works on PD surfacing at the final phase of the Cold War, such as ones by Malone (1988) and Tuch (1990), echo the impact of realism on PD. Tuch (1990, pp. 3–4), a diplomat at the United States Information Agency, defines PD as “a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies.” This definition specifies PD as a government-level cause.

Furthermore, concluding that PD had become an essential element of foreign policy [of the United States], Malone (1988, pp. 1–3) posits that the objective of PD is to “to influence the behavior of a foreign government by influencing the attitudes of its citizens.” That is to say, PD is a tool to hold sway over a state's foreign policy, by means of its populace.

Among other suppositions, realists assume that as the world is inherently anarchic and chaotic, states can only ensure their national security by maximizing their power. However, such action can render states prone to the security dilemma, which eventually may result in war—although no belligerents desire it in the first place (Herz, 1950). To gain an upper hand in war without resorting to force, realists find PD useful primarily in the form of propaganda and psychological warfare, aiming at destroying the morale of enemy soldiers and citizens (Kunczik, 1997). In other words, propaganda and psychological warfare were thought to be doppelgängers of PD in this era (Cull, 2009, p. 17).

At the turn of the 21st century, however, PD has shifted from statism to pluralism. Some argue that this new development is rooted in liberalism (Yun & Toth, 2009). Liberals propose that the state is not the single important actor in world politics, but rather first among its equals. While still emphasizing national security, liberalism does not see it as merely based on hard power—the ability to exert military or economic influence. Accordingly, the world has become more inter-reliant than competing, and international organizations are taking a bigger-than-ever share of world's politics. Therefore, PD

should now embrace a diversity of actors—state and nonstate—to keep up with a constantly evolving world.

Nowadays, while ministers of foreign affairs are often the most important state actors, PD also embraces nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business entities, and even individuals. Nye (2004, p. 127) notes that private actors may gain some comparative advantage over government actors, because “postmodern publics are generally skeptical of authority,” and some NGOs are regarded as more dependable than governments. Similarly, business actors can assume an important role in PD, because global business today is more and more engaged with international politics (Orlova, 2009, p. 86). International and regional associations, both at interstate and substate levels, have their share in communicating with people of different countries and cultures. Cases in point: both Kofi Annan’s United Nations and Barroso’s European Commission show their commitment to PD, the former with supranational activities, and the latter with “EU’s public communication strategy” (Melissen, 2005, p. 12).

As a result of this new and arguable development, it is said that PD has “entered the lexicon of 21st century diplomacy without clear definition of what it is or how the tools it offers might best be used” (Lane, 2006, p. 2). This remark is in line with an argument by Gilboa (2008, p. 56), that many scholars have mistaken PD for “propaganda, public relations, international public relations and psychological warfare, and public affairs.” Put the cogency of such contentions aside, and one can see that part of the disagreement on the essence of PD takes root in the long-standing and excessive concentration of studies on the United States, with little focus on other countries, or new actors like international organizations and individuals (e.g., Snow & Taylor, 2008, p. x).

With the increasing attention to nonstate actors, researchers have managed to compare and contrast a new (or renewed) PD with an old PD and other related concepts like propaganda, nation branding, and public relations (e.g., Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Szondi, 2008). Disputes regarding definitional focus notwithstanding, some common features of PD are present in mainstream studies. The essence of the new PD is that it involves different forms of communication a country, either at state or citizen levels, establishes with foreign audiences for the sake of relationship building. To gain mutual understandings and assistance, PD actors nowadays aim at long-term rapport and impact, rather than short-term informational purposes. This feature distinguishes the new PD with old one, since the latter spotlights one-way messaging (e.g., propaganda) and high-level lobbying, instead of interacting with the general public (Melissen, 2005, pp. 18–19).

In the contemporary context, PD is also considered as one of the key instruments of soft power. Soft power is a concept developed by Joseph Nye (1990) to denote the power to get what you want by attracting, rather than coercing others. A nation’s soft power, according to Nye (2004, p. 11), lies primarily in its culture, political values, and foreign policies. As Nye (2004, p. 105) argues, the conditions for soft power have dramatically improved since the end of the Cold War. Half of the world’s countries are now democratic, which has made the need for cooperation largely prevail over the need for competition as in the Cold War. There are cases where favorable image and reputation induced by

attraction and persuasion are more preferred to territory and access to markets and resources, which are gained via military and economic measures (Gilboa, 2008, p. 56). Since that is exactly what PD strives for, using its communicational channels, PD becomes a powerful tool to produce and project soft power.

In view of the complex and multifaceted nature of PD, researchers have endeavored to analyze and classify PD's principal dimensions, instruments, and activities. Zaharna (2008), for instance, provides a clear-cut taxonomy, by which PD is thought to function under two frameworks: informational and relational. The informational framework includes well-known instruments, such as propaganda, nation branding, media relations, and international broadcasts, while the relational framework encompasses cultural exchanges, development aids, language, and cultural institutes, to name a few. Cowan and Arsenault (2008), among others, propose that PD operates on three dimensions, namely, monologue, dialogue, and collaboration. It should be noted that such taxonomies are more reciprocal than contrary, in the sense that all posit a continuum from information delivery to relationship building. PD tools are versatile, as long as they aim at the public, instead of the government.

Remarkably, PD has long been associated with cultural diplomacy, for many similarities that both concepts share. Cultural diplomacy is generally understood as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, p. 1). Given its focus, Cull (2008, pp. 32–34) puts cultural diplomacy among the five elements of PD, besides listening, advocacy, international exchange, and international broadcasting. The U.S. Department of State further underlines that cultural diplomacy is the linchpin of PD because cultural activities best represent a nation's ideas of itself (Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 2005, p. 4).

In light of the intricacy of mainstream PD, the following sections delve into some unconventional forms that Vietnam's PD take on for the sake of international recognition and domestic stability.

Vietnam's PD After *doi moi*

After the reunification of the country in 1975, the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) was presented with an exhausted post-war economy and poor living standards, which quickly turned into a socioeconomic crisis due to a series of flawed policies. The regime's political legitimacy was waning. At the 6th National Congress of the CPV in 1986, Truong Chinh, Secretary General, admitted that economic downturn and the people's declining living conditions had caused the populace to lose its confidence in the Party's leadership and the managerial skills of state agencies (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2006a). With the adoption of the *doi moi* (renovation) policy in 1986, the CPV has undertaken important economic reform measures, such as agricultural decollectivization, openness to foreign investment and abolishment of central planning, to minimize the socioeconomic repercussions of long-term segregation and head toward the so-called "socialism-oriented market economy."

Considering ensuing socioeconomic improvements, one can see that *doi moi* has come to the nation's rescue, and the CPV's as well. Starting as low as

0.43% in 1986, Vietnam's gross domestic product (GDP) reached its peak at 7.76% in 1995, with an average of about 6.5% between 1986 and 2011—the second highest in Asia, after China (Index Mundi, 2015). Vietnam's GDP per capita has increased exponentially, from USD98 in 1990 to USD1,911 in 2014 (World Bank, 2015). As a result, Vietnam's poverty rate fell from nearly 60% in the early 1990s to 20.7% in 2010. Sociopolitically, except for several small-scale unrests, the CPV has successfully maintained stability in a quarter-century, and, thus, relatively secured its rule ever since.

Traditionally, the legitimization of the CPV's monopoly is based on its leadership in wartime victories, and its successful reconsolidation of the country ("The Party's Leadership," 2005). This historical legitimacy did not fare well in the context of economic stagnation and diplomatic isolation before *doi moi*. With economic achievements, the *doi moi* policy has brought about new sources of legitimacy for the CPV, all of which are linked to economic performance, measured by enhanced quality of life and poverty reduction, for instance (see Le, 2012). Admittedly, despite the various sources of political legitimacy, the regime still faced challenges mounted by people from all walks of life, most notably from inside the CPV's ranks (see Thayer, 2010).

Nonetheless, there is no denying that *doi moi* has had serious implications for both Vietnam's domestic and foreign policies in the following decades. Specifically, Vietnam's foreign policy entered a new stage of development since Resolution No. 13 dated May 1988 by the CPV on foreign-related policy and tasks in the new situation (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2006b). With the central theme of "maintaining peace and developing the economy," this resolution has underlined the motto of "more friends, fewer enemies" by outlining a foreign policy of "independence, self-reliance, openness, diversification, multi-lateralization" (D. N. Nguyen, 2005). Building on this policy, the 11th National Congress of the CPV in 2011 assigned Vietnam's diplomatic sector to promote the image of Vietnam as "a friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community, actively taking part in international and regional cooperation processes" (B. M. Pham, 2011).

National image building, since then, has become part and parcel of the renewed foreign policy. While none of the above developments precisely document the term "public diplomacy," PD is instilled in every activity of national image building that targets audiences abroad to create the image of a peaceful and friendly Vietnam. Specifically, the party-state has fostered the concept of "people-to-people diplomacy" (*ngoai giao nhan dan*) that shares many commonalities with the western concept of "PD." Arguably serving as a version of track 2 (and/or track 3) diplomacy, Vietnamese people-to-people diplomacy spotlights the role of ordinary people, besides state actors, in informal transnational dialogue, with the aim of trust and relationship building (Anh Huyen, 2012). However, Vietnamese people-to-people diplomacy and mainstream PD may just be look-alikes. While PD allows various actors space to act on their own, Vietnamese people-to-people diplomacy is subjected to CPV and, in practice, is considered a tool of the long arm of the CPV (Ngo, 2009).

By organization, Vietnam's diplomacy has three tiers in order of importance: the CPV's diplomacy, State diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy. People-to-people diplomacy is tasked to support the other two by

promoting Vietnam's soft power (T. H. Nguyen, 2011). In an online interview with Vietnamese audiences, Nye (2007) posits that Vietnam's cultural identity is its soft power arsenal. Nye's remark is in line with the status quo of PD in Vietnam, which is mainly culture-based. In today's Vietnam, researchers take for granted that people-to-people diplomacy and PD are interchangeable, and that cultural diplomacy is the cornerstone of Vietnamese people-to-people diplomacy (see Hoang, 2009; Thanh Thuy Nguyen, 2008).

In terms of dimension, Vietnam's PD is comprised of three interconnected pillars, namely, political diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. Among these, the political component forms the backbone, the economic component provides the physical infrastructure, while the cultural component lays the spiritual foundation for foreign-related activities (Vietnam Government, 2011). Again, while it appears that PD has not been codified, its components are diffused in these pillars, especially the cultural one. Vietnam's cultural diplomacy is set out to:

(...) strongly step up cultural diplomatic activities to make the world better understand the Vietnamese land, people and culture, further build confidence of other countries, make the relations between Vietnam and its partners more profound, stable and lasting, thereby raising the country's status in the international arena and facilitating its socio-economic development. (Vietnam Government, 2011)

With state agencies as supervising parties, both state and nonstate actors are encouraged, to a certain extent, to conduct diverse activities for the ultimate purpose of promoting a positive image of Vietnam and establishing harmonious and beneficial relationships between Vietnam and other nations. There is, however, a long distance from word to action when Vietnam's foreign affairs is governed by such a spiderweb of the party-state's agencies at all levels. In reality, citizen diplomacy is mainly limited to cultural activities, and subject to the deep-rooted propaganda system and other state management. Economic and political diplomacy is a top-tier practice meticulously monitored by the party-state; hence, participants are required to affiliate with the regime.

Notable Initiatives of Vietnam's PD

Vietnam's PD practice covers a wide spectrum of activities that work in either informational or relational dimension, with a view to benefiting the nation's foreign policy. The following two subsections try to recapitulate several notable remarkable activities that fall within the periphery of PD, although they may be named differently in the context of Vietnam.

Informational Dimension

By various measures, news management is the preeminent element of Vietnam's PD and foreign policy in general. This one-way messaging involves the role of the press in communicating domestic and foreign policy decisions to the outside world (Nye, 2004, p. 108). This component in Vietnam is heavily guarded by an orderly propaganda system that has been espoused since the dawn of the regime. On the CPV's side, the Department of Foreign Affairs assists the Politburo to superintend key foreign undertakings, and thus, is the

de jure authority in the field. This agency works closely with the Department of Propaganda and Education, which is in charge of news management and serves as the de facto legislator for both internal and external propaganda. Both agencies' mandates, however, are largely unknown to the public, and only subject to the CPV's internal rules. On the state's side, the National Assembly has its own Committee on Foreign Affairs that watches over the legislative procedures of foreign-related policies. The government has its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) whose main mission is to supervise the implementation of such policies. MOFA is also the central coordinator of Vietnam's cultural diplomacy, although it has not had a specialized unit for PD thus far (see Vietnam Government, 2011). Besides the four key players above, ministry-level organizations and provincial and municipal authorities have their own divisions of foreign affairs that also administer PD activities within their respective jurisdictions.

In effect, one of Vietnamese press's main missions is to perform propagandistic activities (*tuyen truyen*) to orient public opinion (Tan Tuan Nguyen, 2015). It should be noted that despite the negative connotation as perceived by the west, "propaganda" is an official entity in Vietnam's politics that bears little negativity. In a directive issued in 2000, Vietnam's government reconfirms the importance of international broadcasting, stating that,

External information is crucial to the foreign affairs of the Party and the State, aiming at bring other nations, foreigners (both Vietnam-based and abroad), and Vietnamese overseas an understanding of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people, our policies and achievements after the Renovation (...), so as to call for more support and contribution (...). (Vietnam Government, 2000)

Today, Vietnam's mass media has grown massively. As of December 2013, Vietnam had 838 news agencies with 1,111 publications, including 67 radio and television stations, 70 online newspapers, and 265 news aggregators (Ministry of Information and Communications, 2014). Many of these news agencies have established dedicated channels in foreign languages for international broadcasting. Notably, Vietnam Television, Vietnam's national television broadcaster, has VTV4 as a channel delivering highlighted news in five languages to foreigners and Vietnamese overseas. Voice of Vietnam, the national radio broadcaster, with its VOV5, disseminates external information in 12 languages with a total airtime of 52 hours/day. Vietnam News Agency, the official organ of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, has 28 stations overseas ("Agency Opens New Bureau," 2013). The introduction of Internet in Vietnam in 1997 has obviously changed the face of journalism. In addition to the exponential growth of Internet-based communication media like e-newspapers or weblogs, it is noticeable that most of top-level agencies and other authoritative organizations in Vietnam have designated foreign-language sections on their Web portals where officially approved messages can be retrieved anytime.

Apart from the press, included in this informational dimension are speeches, press releases, and proclamations by top leadership, and other government organs that purport to convey specific messages to foreign audiences, especially in critical times. This task closely links to a system of spokespersons, most

notably the spokespersons of MOFA. Nonetheless, it is the press that helps reinforce these instruments by spreading the news widely and deeply. The South China Sea dispute with China is a case in point, which will be discussed in the next section.

This monologic dimension also includes tourism promotion campaigns. This aspect is referred to as “strategic communication” (Nye, 2004, p. 108) in the sense that certain promotional plans are devised over a fix period of time to brand specific central themes or policies. In the case of Vietnam, while primarily serving the tourism industry—one of Vietnam’s key economic industries—such promotional initiatives also have the potential to introduce the world to an economically evolving and culturally rich Vietnam. Based on Vietnam’s distinctive cultural identity, this channel also helps to project Vietnam’s soft power. In the last few years, Vietnam’s relevant authorities have invested in advertising clips broadcasted on global broadcasting systems, like CNN, BBC, with the aim to attract more international arrivals (e.g., “Promoting Vietnam on CNN,” 2013). In a latest move, Vietnam National Administration of Tourism establishes a promotional channel on YouTube (“Vietnam Promotes Tourism on YouTube,” 2015). This is telling of the government’s approach to and recognition of social media.

Relational Dimension

While monologic communication is well targeted at foreign audiences to advocate a particular issue/policy, dialogue and collaboration are two-way messaging that aims at relationship building. They are not only involved with conveyance but also with engagement. This relational dimension may be comprised of multiple forms and levels of information and cultural exchange, either bilateral or multilateral, such as academic or professional conferences, talk shows, and other cross-national/cultural events.

One of the more noteworthy activities typical of this dimension—also of cultural diplomacy—is the hosting of Vietnam’s cultural festivals in many countries, also known as “Vietnam Cultural Week.” The annual festival series has come to Belgium, Germany, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia, among others, to spotlight the relationship between Vietnam and host countries (see “Cultural Week Highlights Vietnam-Japan Friendship,” 2013).

There are other events that accent mutual understandings and foster relationships by encouraging international exchange. Among this group are biannual Hue Festivals and annual Da Nang International Firework Competitions that have successfully invited international performers. Notwithstanding the intangible diplomatic values, the diverse and rich cultural content of such events has attracted tens of thousands of international arrivals on each occasion. In the same vein, increasing numbers of Vietnamese athletes also participate in regional and international sports events. Sports diplomacy has been proven as an integral part of relationship building, from ancient times. In this aspect, while generally low on global rankings, Vietnam is getting used to record-oriented sports, and has become a powerhouse in Southeast Asia in certain sports, such as football, shooting, and wushu (“Vietnam’s Top 10 Sports Stories,” 2014).

While popular cultural, artistic, and sport events usually stand out, there is still another essential PD channel that has evolved since 1945. Vietnamese

friendship organizations have dynamically orchestrated collaborative projects. Starting with the Vietnam–US Friendship Association in 1945, there are now more than 400 such people-to-people organizations under the management of Vietnam's Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO) (Anh Huyen, 2012). In coordination with international NGOs, VUFO members are in operation to facilitate and address perennial issues, such as capacity development, climate change, child rights, and Vietnam War MIA—all of which have built on and improved the long-standing friendships between citizens of Vietnam and many other countries.

Vietnam has also taken into account the potential impact of Vietnamese communities overseas in its people-to-people diplomacy. Consisting of more than 4 million people in 103 countries, the Vietnamese diaspora has long been a target group of the CPV's Great Unity policy, which aims at the unification and reconciliation of the Vietnamese people regardless of background. Vietnamese overseas are now recognized as important actors that can bridge the gap between Vietnam and their host countries. Vietnamese overseas are known to be a driving force behind the nation's economy, directly and indirectly via remittances and various forms of investment. In 2010, the total amount of remittances plus investment funds from the Vietnamese overseas reached \$20 billion, or 8% of Vietnam's GDP (Lam, 2013).

Characteristics of Vietnam's PD

The summary above shows that Vietnam's PD, either supported by cultural diplomacy or people-to-people diplomacy, has covered a wide range of activities. Yet the whole is not as promising as the sum of its parts. Still significantly influenced by a realist perspective, Vietnam's PD is characterized by the state's tight grip, the interlocking between PD and public affairs, and the extensive meddling of propaganda in PD. All of these features, in fact, are overlapping, and imbued deeply in both informational (i.e., news management) and relational (i.e., relationship building) dimensions.

News management is such a staple of Vietnam's PD and foreign policy that the press is put under the direct control of the CPV (Linh Thu, 2015). Practically overseen by the CPV's Department of Propaganda and Education, Vietnam's PD is intertwined with public affairs, which means PD is domesticated to deal with domestic opinion as much as international outlook. This application of PD in Vietnam is similar to that of China, where the official view is that PD and public affairs can be merged contextually (Li, 2005). This is explicable because of the long-standing view that foreign policy is an extension of domestic affairs. Having said that, even from a mainstream perspective, separating public affairs from PD is increasingly contrary to the interconnectedness of global relationships. With the Internet, messages directed at the domestic public can easily reach international audiences, and vice versa. Therefore, although maybe not as intensively as Vietnam or China, countries such as Canada, Chile, and Indonesia also engage with their own populace for the sake of foreign policy development and international image building (Melissen, 2005, p. 13).

On that note, PD may also be utilized to strengthen the political legitimacy of the ruling party, besides the traditional role of projecting soft power to

uplift Vietnam's global influence. International reputations, as manifested by diplomatic success or simply a remarkable appearance of government delegates, may be of little service to cultivating popular support for the CPV if the general public is not informed. Consequently, state-controlled press agencies are required to place high-level diplomatic events in the headlines, in which Vietnam's state leaders are often depicted as highly influential and admirable among their counterparts (see Kiet Linh, 2014).

Consider the case of the South China Sea (aka East Sea in Vietnamese) disputes that may best showcase the two-pronged application of PD to address both international and domestic audiences. The case at hand is an arena where sovereignty, nationalism, and legitimacy are at play, which is facilitated by PD channels. Accordingly, the clashes at sea with China in 2014 and 2011 elicited particularly strong and bold nationalistic responses from Vietnam. The press was given wide room to report these moves. In addition to the firm condemnation by MOFA spokespersons and subsequent international conferences, domestic press media, and local people have been allowed to express their objection to China's alleged violations of Vietnam's maritime sovereignty ("China Violates Sovereignty," 2011; "Undeniable History," 2014). In a rarely seen maneuver, Hanoi gave the green light to anti-China demonstrations that lasted for several uninterrupted weeks in 2011 ("Hanoi Orders End," 2011). At the peak of the Vietnamese protests against China were those arising from the HD-981 oil rig incident in 2014. Unprecedented nation-wide remonstrations had been reportedly backed by Hanoi until it turned violent and then faced an abrupt clampdown (Tiezzi, 2014).

Nationalist moves are afoot not only at the grassroots level but also among the top echelon as well. State leaders have started to make unusually assertive statements in defense of national sovereignty—never before seen since Sino-Vietnamese normalization in 1991. On June 8, 2011, President Nguyen Minh Triet, on his visit to Co To Island off Quang Ninh province, stated, "we are ready to dedicate all to defend our native villages and defend sea and island sovereignty" ("State President Visits," 2011). Afterward, in a National Assembly interpolation session on November 25, 2011, Prime Minister (PM) Nguyen Tan Dung confirmed Vietnam's undisputable sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, commenting that it was China who appropriated the Paracels from the Republic of Vietnam by force in 1974 (Duc Minh, 2011). This is reportedly the first time a high-level leader of Vietnam has publicly accused the Chinese of invasion. In a similar vein, in the wake of the HD-981 incident, PM Nguyen Tan Dung officially denounced China's reckless and threatening acts at the plenary session of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit 2014 ("China's Deployment of Oil Rig," 2014). Those nationalist sentiments may help the CPV attract significant popular support.

The above instances show that Vietnam's government has resorted to nationalism, when it encounters domestic and international instabilities. Combining PD and other measures appears to serve the government's best interest in times of crisis, when international turbulence is likely to trigger or otherwise worsen domestic dissatisfaction and opposition in regard to such issues as unstable economic performance (especially after the 2007–2008 global financial crisis) and rampant corruption. One may argue that the adoption of

nationalism is not merely to rally public support for the CPV's policy over the troubled waters. On a deeper level, nationalism may have become an additional legitimation tool for the CPV while economic performance-based legitimacy is withering (Le, 2012, p. 164). PD certainly plays a role in that grand strategy. As such, it is completely relevant to Vietnam's politics.

Furthermore, the complex propaganda infrastructure is a manifestation of the state's far-reaching control over PD instruments. The CPV has maintained a centralized management mechanism that is deep-rooted vertically and horizontally, which is similar to China's. One advantage of this mechanism is that it may allow the government to design and attune messages and actions carefully across the whole range of instruments, and guarantee absolute compliance in implementation (d'Hooghe, 2011, p. 29). However, the multiple layers of authority may impede rather than support greater citizen participation especially when there is a lack of coordination.

Vietnam's PD: Rudimentary Yet Relevant

One should be aware that it is challenging to evaluate the effectiveness of PD, partly because PD impact can only be perceived over the long term. None of PD activities, whether dialogic or collaborative, can hit a lightning-quick homerun. Furthermore, it is just as problematic to signpost the causation between PD programs and effects, given a host of exogenous variables (Banks, 2011, pp. 11–12). Whether a success story can be attributed to a specific PD program or some predetermined factors, like personal preference, is hard to decide.

However, if one looks at the big picture and takes *contribution* into account instead of *attribution*, then the improved profile of a nation may indicate that its PD practice has positively contributed to the cause. On that note, international polls can be as yet a consultative tool to evaluate the efficiency of a nation's PD. It should be noted that such polls per se are for reference only, as one may argue that an inbuilt feature of polls is the small and sporadic population sample, much less the reality that poll questions are rarely all-rounders so as to cover all the bases necessary (d'Hooghe, 2007, p. 36). Still, poll results can offer an additional indicator to, for example, press coverage or public response.

For the case of Vietnam, even gaining a tentative understanding of its PD effectiveness is not without difficulty. A large part of the problem is the fact that PD has not been an official designation yet. Most local studies pay attention to people-to-people or cultural diplomacy, while there is little in-depth and dedicated research into PD. Despite the fusion between these three concepts, PD should be a subject matter in its own right. Even for the former two models of diplomacy, there seem to be a lot of self-assessments, but few external metrics. For example, Vietnam has recently started to conduct international opinion polls, mainly for tourism (see "Over 70% of International Tourists," 2014). Yet such polls have limited sample sizes, hence weak statistical power.

One can argue that Vietnam's PD is currently in a fledgling stage, by various indicators, such as the quality and diversification of actors and activities.

On the surface, many PD instruments have been deployed with the participation of divergent actors. PD seems to touch on as many undertakings as possible. However, most investment is allocated to the monologic dimension of PD, and state actors, whose qualifications are in question. Consider the spokesperson system to see how these state officials are recruited or appointed. According to current law, a spokesperson must be either the head or designated senior official of a state agency (Vietnam Government, 2013). And just like with any other high-ranking positions, seniority, cronyism, and nepotism are the underlying selection criteria, as aptly noted in a separate-yet-relevant case (“Golden Arches,” 2013). Therefore, the professional qualifications of the current ranks of spokespersons are dubious, especially when it is alleged that more than 30% of civil servants are under performing and should be purged from the public sector (Vo, 2014). Staggeringly, even the top leadership of the CPV alleged that bribing for office (*chay chuc* in Vietnamese) has been a widespread practice, which tarnishes the image of government officials in the public eye (Chung Hoang, 2015).

The dominance of state actors and underestimation of the general public can do more harm than good. The case of ASIAD 18 proves that without popular support, state actors can hardly deliver on the promise of national pride or reputation. There is no denying the huge impact of sports to the mass public. International sports events have long been the foreground for national pride and diplomacy (Lal, 2012). For a people that love sports as much as the Vietnamese, rejecting the chance to host the ASIAD event might sound unthinkable. Yet the populace is too well informed to be blindsided by all the promises of success. They have learned that, for instance, international sports events, most notably the World Cup and the Olympics, usually have little positive impact on economic growth at best (Stewart, 2012). Worse still, they are able to cripple an otherwise-healthy economy, as with Montreal after the Summer Olympics 1976 (Newton, 2012). For fear of inefficient public investment and other negative issues, the Vietnamese public pressures the central government into backing out of hosting ASIAD 18. The PM’s approval of withdrawal is welcomed by 87% out of nearly 85,000 votes in an opinion poll by the online newspaper Vnexpress (“Vietnam Backs Out,” 2014).

PD, like soft power, builds on trust and credibility. That is why Leonard (2002, p. 50) compares PD to “selling the truth.” This is especially the case in the context of the information era, when information verification may be just one mouse click away. A nation or an organization can only establish rapport and increase its international influence by showcasing its true values and identity. For Vietnam, “credibility” applies domestically as well. Publics have been more wary of propaganda. Therefore, information that turns out to be mere propaganda can be counter-effective and can risk a nation’s reputation for credibility (Nye, 2004, p. 107). Britain and America both paid a costly price to their credibility after exaggerated claims around Saddam Hussein in the Iraq War. That is a good lesson for Vietnam, in that it should diversify its PD instruments, rather than predominantly rely on propaganda.

In the meantime, Vietnam’s perceived image may be riddled with the adverse effect of other institutional issues. Recently, Vietnam has hit international headlines, in large part thanks to widespread allegations about political

repression, human rights violations, and corruption (see "Confidence Tricks," 2013; Jannuzi, 2013). Obviously, external information about such issues can be retrieved at home through the World Wide Web, regardless of strict censorship. No matter how those allegations are interpreted, Vietnam is highly likely to face the problem of mixed signals, which can diminish the hard effort for national image building, as well as undermining the regime's legitimacy.

Vietnam's government recognizes the poor coordination among management agencies as one of the reasons behind the lackluster performance of cultural diplomacy (Vietnam Government, 2011). Besides, a lesson learned from China is that the heavy control of information, lack of transparency, and ineptitude of a majority of bureaucrats can obstruct all PD endeavors as well (Wang, 2011, p. 7; Zhang, 2011, p. 65). Yet reviewing the 65 years of Vietnam's diplomacy, Pham Gia Khiem, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, concluded that Vietnam's cultural diplomacy has helped Vietnam "build up its global foothold and promote the nation's soft power, which strengthens Vietnam's relations with its partners and provides the world with a better understanding of Vietnam" (G. K. Pham, 2010). Whether that recognition is merely rhetoric to promote the government's legitimacy or a factoid warrants further validation.

However, from the perspective of practitioners, the chorus that cultural diplomacy is one leg of Vietnam's diplomatic tripod, besides political and economic, is simply grandiloquent, as cultural diplomacy is currently serving as no more than a front for the other two (Hanh Diem, 2013). Cultural activities are still short of funding and strategic planning, which, to many, does not satisfy the complacency the Vietnamese people feel about their 4,000-year civilization (Huu Bac, 2013). Certainly, the Vietnamese culture has considerable potential as a source of soft power, partly evidenced by the growing numbers of international arrivals through years (UNWTO, 2013). Nevertheless, more effort is needed to realize this potential.

For Vietnam, as rudimentary as it is, PD is gaining in popularity as both an outbound and inbound publicity instrument. And for all the good reasons, PD is more and more relevant to Vietnam's politics. The first reason is that PD—or to be exact, its embodiment—has been the cornerstone of the CPV's foreign policy since *doi moi* at the latest. PD is essential to a foreign policy strategy that aims to attract international support and create a favorable national image. Second, PD can contribute to the legitimation process of the regime, because it is as resourceful in swaying the domestic public as it is in influencing international audiences. The fine line between PD and public affairs allows PD practitioners to bring into use all advantages PD initiatives possess.

Conclusion

PD has not been an official term in the fabric of Vietnam's politics. Yet since the *doi moi* policy its key components have been maintained and upheld, mainly under the umbrella of people-to-people diplomacy and cultural diplomacy, aiming at supporting Vietnam's grand foreign policy, building mutual trust, and enhancing Vietnam's international foothold. For that reason,

Vietnam's PD seems to have jumped on the bandwagon of mainstream practice, which sets PD initiatives as the front-line troops of soft power.

Yet Vietnam's PD is unconventional in many ways. Adopting a realist approach, it centers the role of state actors and invests extensively in propaganda. Thanks to the regime's dynamics of maintaining domestic legitimacy, PD can be used as an additional tool to address domestic publics. In this regard, PD and public affairs converge to serve the regime's interest. Besides, Vietnam's PD is also characterized by the impregnable position of propaganda, which in turn exhibits the centralization of authority over PD. For better or for worse, these features are evidence that PD is the mainstay of Vietnam's foreign affairs, and indispensable to its politics.

Vietnam possesses substantial resources for soft power and PD, most notable of which is its cultural identity. Economic development also creates favorable conditions for PD. How Vietnam brings such resources to its best advantage, to a certain extent, lies at how the regime deals with high-stakes issues like human rights and corruption.

Presently, Vietnam's PD is only at an incipient stage, and thus, has not lived up to its potential. The maturity of PD requires much more attention of both policymakers and academia. On the practical side, the disproportionate allocation of resources and the lack of a well-grounded grand strategy with proper focus are scattering and inhibiting the various PD initiatives embedded in cultural diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy. On the theoretical side, if PD is to be more instrumental, it should be granted the status of a subject matter, which will help advance more dedicated research. Only by formalizing the concept and streamlining the practice can PD thrive and be on the front line of Vietnam's foreign policy in the age of globalization.

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